Only several thousand Jewish inhabitants live in Morocco today, but in 1948, on the eve of Israeli statehood, it was the largest center of Jewish life in the Muslim world, numbering approximately 250,000. Most of those who left in the 1950s and 1960s made Israel their new home, for a variety of reasons; others migrated to the Americas and Europe. These momentous waves of immigration to Israel are considered a watershed in local ethnic history, particularly in the context of the “Mizrahî revival” during the 1970s and 1980s; that is, the ethnic counter-acculturation taking shape vis-à-vis the hegemonic Ashkenazi, European-oriented habitus in Israel during the nation’s formative years.

Since the early years of Israel’s statehood, scholarly works on—as well as the popular view of—the immigration of Jews from Morocco and other Muslim countries have focused on the role of the state in “redeeming” these Jews from their “backward, hostile” (non-Western, anti-Zionist) pre-immigration societies. By bringing them to their “fatherland,” this argument continues, the state enabled these Jews to undergo a slow, intricate, and desirable modernization process. In some cases, the Ashkenazi-dominated modern Zionist agencies were seen as responsible for rejuvenating these immigrants’ pre-modern “traditional-religious” concepts of Zionism after 1948.

By contrast, since the late 1970s, revisionist scholars influenced by the post-Zionist critique have depicted Jews from Arab and Muslim countries as victims of the Zionist venture which, in its intentions to redeem them, uprooted them from their “Eastern” environments. Subsequently, there is a notion that the Ashkenazi-dominated Zionist orientation in Israel silenced or twisted “authentic” Moroccan, Iraqi, Yemeni, and other Middle Eastern identities, causing these minorities to adopt a shared negative attitude toward their pasts in Arab lands. The politically oriented study of Jewish immigration to Israel from Morocco and other Muslim lands overshadows cases of Jewish migration to other destinations, both prior to and since Israel’s statehood. But migration did not just become accessible to these Jewish populations with the establishment of Israel. In fact, substantial “Moroccan ethnic traditions,” along with many other Middle Eastern identities,
have evolved among émigré communities worldwide, within the context of pre- and post–1948 modern global migration to the West: in France, the U.S., Canada, Brazil, Argentina, the Iberian Peninsula, and many other locations.

In the 19th century, for instance, Venezuela attracted Moroccan Jewish laborers into its evolving multiethnic society, and its appeal became even more pronounced after 1945 in the context of Venezuela’s “open door” immigration policy that helped fuel that petroleum-rich country. In certain years during the mid–20th century, groups of Jews from several cities and towns in northern Morocco chose to immigrate to Venezuela over Israel. Remarkably, Venezuela attracted primarily Jewish Moroccans, unlike France, Canada, and Spain, all of which attracted both Jewish and Muslim Moroccans.

A large proportion of those who chose Venezuela as their new home in the 1950 and 1960s took on ethnic, occasionally Zionist–oriented, identities, during and following their migration. A prominent Zionist narrative and a strong identification with Israel has served as the glue holding together Venezuelan Jewish society, which comprises Jews from European, Middle Eastern, and North African backgrounds.

The Moroccan community in Venezuela was primarily composed of several thousand Spanish–speaking Jews from the Spanish-dominated zone of northern Morocco. In Venezuela, these Moroccan Jews constituted the majority of the local Sephardic community and a large portion of the wider Jewish community. Since Moroccans in Venezuela came from a colonial Spanish–speaking environment to
another Spanish-speaking non-Jewish environment, their assimilation into that country was characterized by a much smoother socioeconomic mobility than was the case in Israel.

The Jewish immigrants from northern Morocco had another advantage over many other groups of immigrants: they had established historical kinship, and commercial and communal networks that eased their assimilation into the local political and economic elite class of that country after 1945. As a consequence, Moroccans in Venezuela were equally prominent in the formation of the shared Zionist approach among the local community, as attested by the long-lasting Sephardic mouthpiece Maguen-Escudo, which was dominated by local Moroccan immigrants since its inception in 1970.

Moroccan immigration to Venezuela challenges the familiar taxonomy that distinguishes a global migration of Jews to the Americas and Europe from a Zionist immigration to Israel. As was the case with Moroccan immigration to Israel, Moroccan immigration to Venezuela was almost solely composed of Jewish immigrants, even though it was not based on any state-supported agency that forced (or enabled) Jews to immigrate based on their unique ethnic identities. This raises the question of why this country, which had no bilateral relations with Morocco at the time of the significant waves of Jewish migration, became one of the most attractive destinations for Moroccan Jews. Moreover, why have Moroccan Jews adopted modern Zionist identities, even without being subjected to Israel’s melting pot strategy that post-Zionist scholars suggest was the main factor that led Moroccan Jews to adopt such identities while denouncing their Moroccan ones?

Evolving ethnic networks generated social factors that turned Venezuela, of all the countries in the Spanish-speaking world, into a central destination for Jews from the Spanish-dominated region of Morocco. The evolving ethnic pull factor enabled many “traditional” and Zionist Jews in Morocco to choose this destination later on in their lives, even if they had denounced migration to Venezuela before 1948. These networks were feeding, and fed by, discourses that fostered a sense of ethnicity among immigrants, often as part of a trans-regional web, encompassing links with Jews in Morocco, and Moroccan Jews worldwide, including in Israel.

The case of Moroccan Jewish immigration to Venezuela helps us question rigid binary divisions between “Westernized-modern” Jews who migrate to the West, and “Mizraḥi-traditional” Jews in Muslim lands, who were alternatively victimized by the state of Israel or innately Zionist ‘Olim. An exploration of additional historical cases—ranging from the Baghdadi merchant diaspora in India of the 19th century to Iranian Jews in Los Angeles in the 21st century—may reveal how, in the course of Jewish migration, “traditional-Oriental” identities can evolve along with, rather than in contrast to, modern (often Zionist) identities, thereby enabling a new global perspective from the Jewish diaspora on the local “Mizraḥi revival” in Israel.