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Bravely honoring the truth

Morocco's king bucked a trend in acknowledging the Holocaust's horror.

By Warren L. Miller

The leader of an Arab Muslim nation recently made some remarkable statements about the Holocaust — remarkable for their courage and respect for historical truth. In a largely unreported speech at the Royal Palace in Fez, Morocco's King Mohammed VI called the Holocaust "one of the blots, one of the most tragic chapters in modern history." The king added, "Amnesia has no bearing on my perception of the Holocaust, or on that of my people."

The remarks offer a stark contrast to the willful amnesia now commonplace in parts of the Muslim world, where denial and distortion of the Holocaust have become widespread.

Among the most notorious examples is Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who has called the systematic murder of six million Jews a "myth," and whose government sponsored a conference of Holocaust deniers in 2006. Meanwhile, through Arabic translations of revisionist literature and the indulgence of much of the state-sponsored Arab press, some Muslim Arab leaders have sought to make Holocaust denial a tool against Israel and the West.

But in a few places in the Islamic world, there is now a willingness to look truthfully at the past and comprehend what befell European Jewry more than six decades ago. Last year, the predominantly Muslim European nation of Albania

commemorated its first Holocaust Remembrance Day. And now King Mohammed has shown real leadership by publicly acknowledging the Holocaust. He should be emulated as well as applauded.

The federal commission I head works to preserve the memory of the Holocaust — both the cultural legacy of the thousands of communities that were destroyed and the historical record of what happened to them. We try to preserve the lessons as well as the evidence of the event, so modern societies will understand that allowing prejudice and hatred to flourish can only lead to barbarity.

In both of these areas, King Mohammed's speech presents an important opportunity. It provides a starting point for Morocco and its neighbors to explore more fully the fate of Jews across North Africa during World War II. Some officials in the region still maintain that the Holocaust did not affect their countries. Although Jews in North Africa largely avoided the genocide their people suffered in Europe, they faced painful persecution.

King Mohammed's grandfather, Mohammed V, managed to diminish application of the Vichy government's racist laws toward Moroccan citizens of Jewish faith. But thousands of Jewish refugees from Europe were placed in French-controlled detention and slave-labor camps in Morocco, as they were in Algeria and Tunisia. Many of these Jews, as well as some Arabs and Berbers, were forced to work under cruel circumstances, with insufficient food and in unbearable climatic conditions. The nations of North Africa must come to terms with this legacy.

The king's speech also offers an opportunity to leaders of other Muslim nations: They can choose historical truth over falsehood, and the respect of civilized nations over ostracism.

King Mohammed said "the duty of remembrance induced by the Holocaust ... imposes ethical, moral, and political standards." These standards are clear and separate from the question of how to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Muslim nations that have encouraged and engaged in Holocaust distortion and denial must reconsider. They must recognize that such irresponsible conduct makes them appear offensive and ignorant in the eyes of the world. They must acknowledge the Holocaust as historical fact and express sincere empathy for its victims.

Governments and people that deny the Holocaust condemn themselves to a path of perpetual mediocrity — a path on which no lessons are learned, no progress is made, and no promising future is possible. Such places will always remain dark and stunted. Everywhere history is denied, the future is denied as well.

By honoring historical truth, the king of Morocco has chosen progress and hope for his nation, and dignity for his people. Leaders of other Muslim nations should follow his example.

Warren L. Miller is chairman of the U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad, which works with foreign governments to preserve endangered sites of cultural and historical significance. For more information, see www.heritageabroad.gov.