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Fragment of the Month: March 2025

A Lost Manuscript, A Forgotten Tradition, and the Power of Modern Technology: T-S Ar.50.198

Zvi Stampfer

Our story begins in the late 18th century – specifically, in 1792 – when a young scholar stumbled upon an ancient manuscript in his father's library. This manuscript contained a collection of responsa (rabbinic legal rulings) that had been written by leading Jewish scholars, or geonim, from the central academies of Iraq mostly in the 9th to 11th centuries. It also contained responsa from Jewish scholars in Spain, North Africa, and Italy from the 11th century.

The scholar who made this discovery was Nissim Modi, the son of Rabbi Chaim Modi, who at the time served as the Chief Rabbi of Izmir. A year later, Rabbi Chaim moved to the city of Safed in the Land of Israel, where he passed away. Nissim, determined to preserve his father's legacy and the knowledge contained in the manuscript, published it in Salonica under the title *Sha'arei Tzedek* ('Gates of Justice'). The name reflected the structure of the work, which was divided into sections called 'gates.' Apparently, during the printing process, the responsa originally written in Judeo-Arabic were translated into Hebrew.

And then, at some point, the original manuscript vanished. No one knows what became of it.

How does a manuscript disappear?

It might seem puzzling that a document painstakingly copied for centuries – first compiled in the 11th century, printed in the 18th century – could simply be lost. But this phenomenon is not as rare as one might think.

Consider the case of vinyl records: for decades, people spent fortunes collecting them, treasuring them as cultural artifacts. Yet when CDs arrived, many saw vinyl as obsolete and discarded entire collections. Few anticipated that just a few decades later, nostalgia and a love for the 'warm' analogue sound would drive a vinyl revival.

A similar fate befell many manuscripts. Once their contents were printed, the physical copies were often discarded, as they were perceived to have served their purpose. Unfortunately, printing is never perfect – errors creep in, and more importantly, we lose access to the original text. In the case of *Sha'arei Tzedek*, the Hebrew translation replaced the original Judeo-Arabic, meaning that centuries later, scholars could no longer examine the original wording.

A Curious Case: A mysterious passage in *Sha'arei Tzedek*

While studying *Sha'arei Tzedek*, I came across a responsum written by Rav Hayya Gaon, the head of the Sura Academy in Baghdad in the 10th century. The responsum, found in Volume III, Gate V, Section 6, described the customs of Jewish *mohalim* (ritual circumcisers) in Babylonia. Interestingly, Rav Hayya strongly opposed a particular practice but it was unclear whom he was criticizing or why.

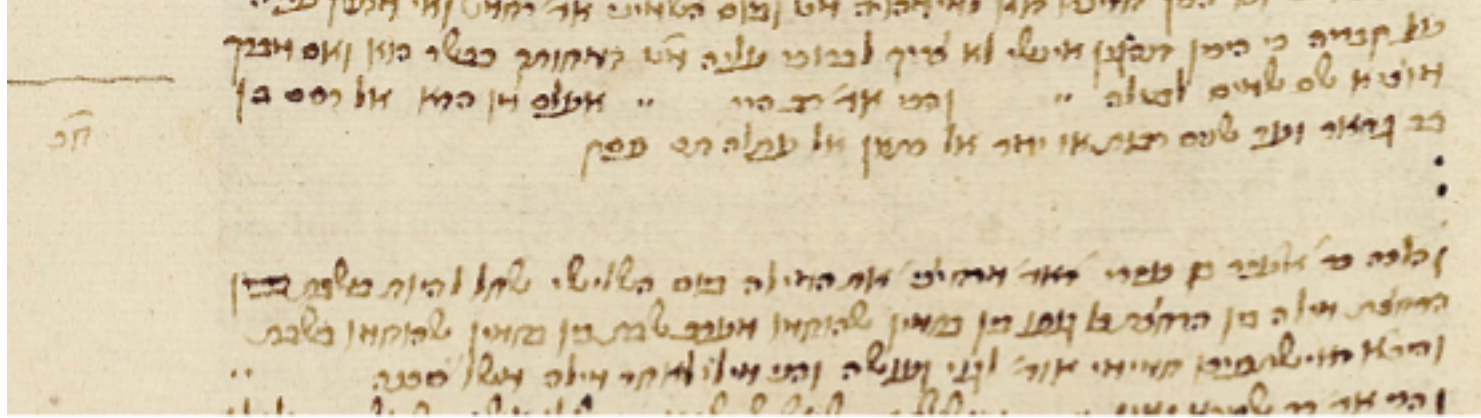
The editor of *Sha'arei Tzedek* noted that this responsum was translated from Judeo-Arabic. What caught my attention, however, was that the Hebrew text contained strange terminology unrelated to circumcision. Moreover, an Arabic word had been left in the text, seemingly out of place. This raised a red flag: was something lost – or altered – in translation?

For those interested in the technical details, I have included the original printed text along with an English translation below.

A Second Manuscript Emerges—but it too has a mystery

Fortunately, other manuscripts containing responsa from the *geonim* survive, and one of these might be expected to shed light on our question. This manuscript is not the lost one used for *Sha'arei Tzedek* but provides valuable parallels. It was copied in 14th-century Ashkenazic script and passed through various hands. It was once part of the collection of the Italian-Austrian Jewish scholar Samuel David Luzzatto and later belonged to the book collector Solomon Joachim Halberstam, who donated it to the Montefiore Collection in London. After several transfers, it was auctioned and acquired by the National Library of Israel in 2004, where it is catalogued as NLI Heb. 4*8859.

I hoped that this manuscript would help solve the mystery: what had Rav Hayya Gaon actually written? Whose practice was he opposing? But when I examined the text, I was disappointed.



Detail from manuscript NLI Heb. 4*8859 (formerly Montefiore Library MS. 98), courtesy of The National Library of Israel. 'Ktiv' Project

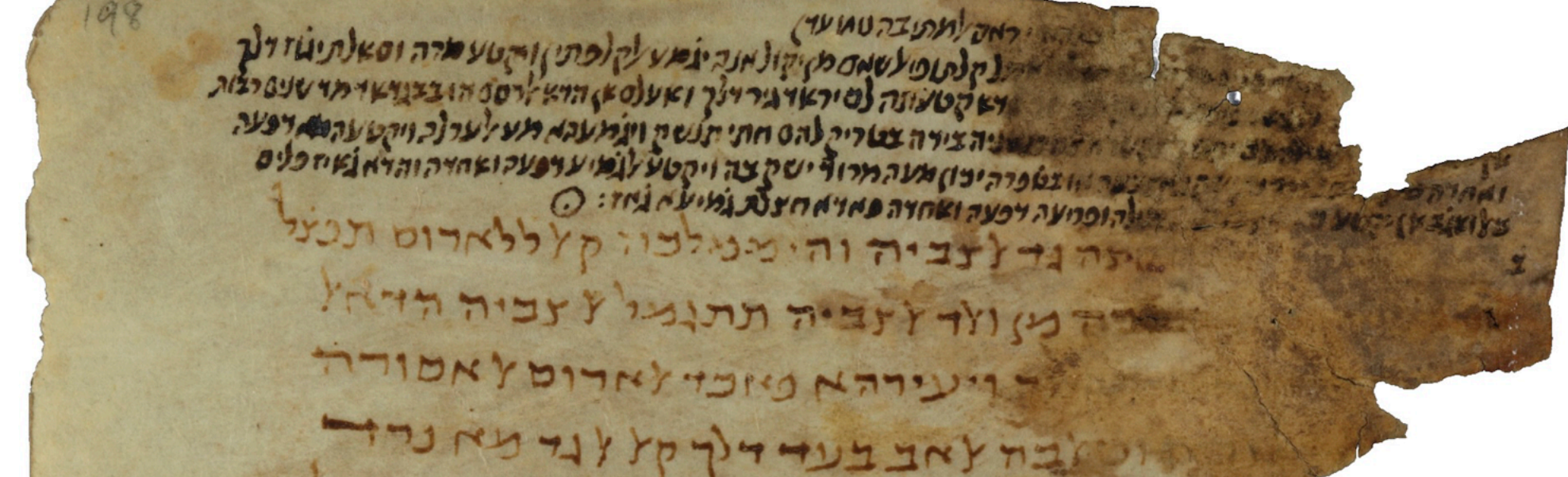
The scribe who copied this manuscript did not understand Judeo-Arabic. When he reached the responsum in question, he began copying words—only to realize that he was transcribing gibberish. At that point, he abandoned the task and skipped to the next responsum. He even left a blank space in the manuscript, possibly hoping that a future scribe fluent in Judeo-Arabic would fill in the missing text. In the margins, he wrote the Hebrew abbreviation כ"ח – short for *haser kan*, meaning 'missing here.'

A breakthrough in the Cairo Geniza

And then, fortune smiled upon us. The original Judeo-Arabic version of the responsum was discovered in the Cairo Geniza, in manuscript fragment T-S Ar.50.198.

This fragment survived thanks to a fascinating coincidence. It was copied by Rabbi Yosef Rosh ha-Seder, a 12/13th-century (d. ca. 1211) Jewish scholar of Iraqi origin who lived in Egypt. He left behind many Geniza fragments in his handwriting. Something about Rav Hayya's responsum must have caught his attention because he transcribed it into the margins of a manuscript in his possession.

At first, it seemed that fortune was toying with us – the text was nearly illegible. We had found the missing responsum, but we couldn't read it.

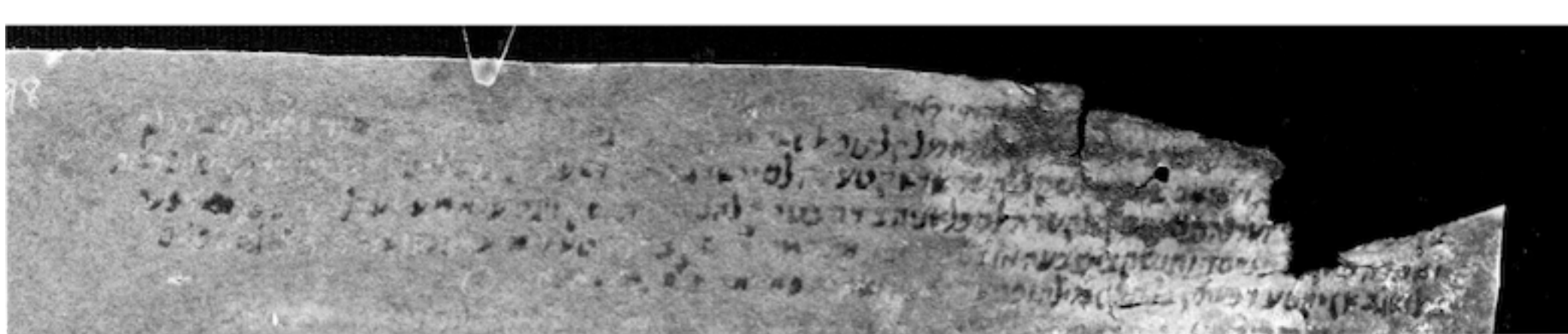


Detail from T-S Ar.50.198

Cutting-edge technology to the rescue

This is where modern technology came into play. Using multispectral imaging, a technique that allows text to be read under different wavelengths of light, we were able to decipher the faded writing. Different inks and parchments react differently to various light frequencies, revealing details invisible to the naked eye. This method has been successfully used to study palimpsests in the Geniza collection, and we applied it to our fragment.

The results were astonishing. The entire responsum became legible.



Details from CUL manuscript T-S Ar.50.198 with multispectral imaging

The lost words of Rav Hayya Gaon

The full Judeo-Arabic text revealed something remarkable: Rav Hayya Gaon had not only described the custom of *mohalim* in Baghdad (which had been translated as 'Babylonia' in *Sha'arei Tzedek*) but had also referenced a different tradition from the Land of Israel.

Crucially, in the original, Rav Hayya stated that both customs were valid – neither was superior to the other. However, in the *Sha'arei Tzedek* version, the description of the Palestinian custom had been omitted, presumably because it was of no interest to the copyist. Meanwhile, Rabbi Yosef Rosh ha-Seder, a scholar with a deep interest in the traditions of the Land of Israel, found it significant enough to copy it into his own manuscript.

Looking Ahead: The future of Gaonic Studies

This research was conducted as part of the ongoing *Project for the Study of Gaonic Responsa*, in collaboration with the Geniza Research Unit and *Machon Yerushalayim*.

A special session dedicated to the reconstruction of Gaonic literature using multispectral imaging will take place this summer at the World Congress of Jewish Studies. The session, chaired by Professor Ben Outhwaite, will feature presentations by leading scholars, including Professor Gideon Bohak, Professor Sascha Stern, Dr Nadia Vidro, and myself. Each of us will showcase findings from our respective fields.

We warmly invite all interested scholars and enthusiasts to attend. This is just the beginning of what modern technology can reveal about the hidden layers of our history.

Appendix: Transcriptions and Translations of the text

Sha'arei Tzedek

רב האי ז"ל. [גם זו הועתקה] דע כי זה הוחק שי בבבל מהו' שנים רבות: שמושל המורל את הערלה ופסקי הקליפה התחתונה בידו דרך שהם יודעין עד שהיא נפסקת, ומאבד אותה עם הערלה, וחותר אותה בבת אחת.

ואם אינה נסדקת ונפסקת באצבע או בצפרו, יהיה לו סרו הנקרא בלשון ערבי מדור ופוסק בו וחותר הכל בבת אחת ושפיר דאמי. ואין ראוי לחתוך בשני פעמים, אבל ראוי להיות מילה ופריעה בבת אחת ושנעשות שתיהן יצא. עד הנה.

Rav Hayya, of blessed memory (also translated):

Know that this practice has existed in Babylonia for many years: The *mohel* (ritual circumciser) pulls the foreskin and separates the lower membrane with his hand in the manner they are accustomed to, until it is detached. He then discards it along with the foreskin and cuts everything at once.

If the membrane does not split and detach with his finger or fingernail, he may use a tool called *madur* in Arabic to separate it and cut everything at once, and this is permissible.

It is not proper to cut in two separate actions; rather, the circumcision (*milah*) and the uncovering (*priah*) should be performed together. When both are completed, one has fulfilled the obligation.

T-S Ar.50.198

1. [...] האי ראם אלמתיבה מוח עדן

2. [...] קטע אל [...] מל קלת ופי אישאם מן יקול אנה י'מע אלקלפניק וקטע מרה וסאלת י'ז'ח דלך

3. [...] ואן לאן] ואן לאן] אב [אלערה ואקשרה] אדא קטעתה לם יראד גיר דלך ואעלם אן אדא אלורסה מן בבגאד מד שנים רבות

4. אן [י'מע אלמנה] אלערה תם [י'פסי'י' אלקשרה אלספלאניה בידה בטריל לם חתי תנשק י'מע טע אלערה וקטעמא דפעה

5. ואחדה פא'י' לם תנפס' ותנשק באצבעה או ב'פירה כיון טעמ מחד ישיק בה וקטע אל'מע דפעה ואחדה ודאד לא'י פליס

6. באולאג' אן יקטע דפעתין בל תנון מילה ופריעה דפעה ואחדה פאדא חזלת ג'מעא ג'אז

[The heading: ...] Hayya Head of the Academy, his rest be in Eden.

[The question: ...] You said that, in the Land of Israel, there are those who say that the mohel gathers both layers of the foreskin and cuts them at once, and you asked whether this practice is permitted or not.

The response: If the foreskin and the membrane have been cut, nothing else is required beyond this.

Know that this practice has existed in Baghdad for many years: The *mohel* first gathers the foreskin and then separates the lower membrane with his hand, according to their custom, until it detaches. He then collects it together with the foreskin and cuts both at once.

If it does not separate and detach with his finger or fingernail, he has a *mirwad* (=a blunt but pointed instrument, traditionally used for applying eye makeup, but also employed by *mohalim* to separate the membrane) – to assist in the separation, and then cuts everything at once. This is permitted.

It is not necessary to cut in two separate actions; rather, *milah* (circumcision) and *priah* (uncovering) can be performed at the same time. Once both have been completed, the obligation has been fulfilled.

If you enjoyed this Fragment of the Month, you can find others [here](#).

Contact us: genizah@lib.cam.ac.uk

One of the manuscripts in this article is part of the Cairo Genizah Collection in Cambridge University Library. To see more items from this collection visit: <https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/collections/genizah/1>

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