

# An eleventh-century pledge of allegiance to Egypt from the Jewish community of Yemen

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## Abstract

The article presents a Hebrew letter sent from Dū Ġibla in Yemen to Fuṣṭāṭ, Egypt, around 1095 C.E. The letter was written by a local leader in Yemen and stresses the allegiance of the Jewish community to Mevoraḳ b. Sa'adya, who had recently been reappointed 'Head of the Jews' in the Fāṭimid Empire. Traditionally the Jews of Yemen, like those of Arabia, fell within the sphere of influence of the Babylonian Academies in the Geonic period. This letter is further evidence that the Jews of Yemen kept close ties to Egypt and the Palestinian Academy too.

## Résumé

Cet article présente une lettre en hébreu envoyée de Dū Ġibla, au Yémen, à Fuṣṭāṭ (Égypte) aux alentours de 1095 de notre ère. La lettre a été écrite par un dirigeant juif local du Yémen, qui souligne l'allégeance de sa communauté à Mevoraḳ b. Sa'adya, récemment nommé « Chef des Juifs » de l'Empire fatimide. Traditionnellement, les Juifs du Yémen, de même que ceux d'Arabie, faisaient partie de la zone d'influence des institutions babyloniennes de la période gaonique. Cette lettre est une preuve de plus du fait que les Juifs du Yémen conservaient des liens étroits avec les institutions égyptiennes, aussi bien que palestiniennes.

## خلاصة

تقدم هذه المقالة بريد يهودي ارسلت من ذي جبلة في اليمن إلى الفسطاط في مصر في أنحاء 1095 م. إن الرسالة كتبت من قبل رئيس محلي في المين وأكدت على الولاء للطائفة اليهودية إلى مبارك بن سعدية الذي عين إعادة مؤخراً 'رئيس اليهود' في الفاطمية. وقع اليهود في اليمن , مثل اليهود في العربية, ضمن نطاق النفوذ للأكاديميات البابلية في فترة جاءونيم. هذه الرسالة هو دليلاً إضافياً على أن اليهود في اليمن احتفظ بعلاقات وثيقة مع مصر والأكاديمية الفلسطينية أيضاً.

## Keywords

Yemen, Cairo Genizah, Hebrew, history, 1095 C.E., Jewish leadership, Judaeo-Arabic, Dū Jibla, Fuṣṭāṭ

## Mots-clés

Yémen, Geniza du Caire, hébreu, histoire, 1095, direction des communautés juives, judéo-arabe, Dū Jibla, Fustāṭ

تعبيرات رئيسية

اليمن، جنيزا القاهرة، اللغة العبرانية، تاريخ، 1095م، رئيس اليهود، اللغة العربية والعبرانية، ذو جبلة، القسطاط

### I. The Jews of Yemen during the eleventh and twelfth centuries

From the Geonic period of the early Middle Ages until the eleventh century, the diaspora Jewish communities of the Middle East owed allegiance to the traditional centres in Iraq and Palestine.<sup>1</sup> Before their decline in the early eleventh century, the yešivot, the Talmudic academies of Sura, Pumbeditha and Jerusalem, provided religious guidance, rulings on matters of Jewish religious law, training in the traditional texts of Judaism, and varying degrees of political influence; in return they solicited financial contributions<sup>2</sup> from the scattered Jewish communities of the Islamic lands and exercised, on occasion, the ability to affect events far beyond their immediate congregations in Baghdad or Jerusalem. Traditionally the Jews of Yemen, like those of Arabia, fell within the sphere of influence of the Babylonian Academies in the Geonic period. A series of letters preserved in the Cairo Genizah from an unknown Babylonian Ga'on ('Head of the Academy') addressing leaders in Yemen point to the longevity of this relationship as well as the strain it underwent in the course of the eleventh century.<sup>3</sup>

From the middle of the eleventh century southern Yemen, under the rule of the ambitious Ṣulayḥid dynasty, came under the political and religious suzerainty of Fāṭimid Egypt, following 'Alī ibn Muḥammad al-Ṣulayḥī's declaration of undying allegiance to the Caliph al-Mustanṣir.<sup>4</sup> The resilient adherence of the Banū al-Ṣulayḥī to the Fāṭimids and the Ismā'īlī faith survived the tumultuous politics of the disputed Fāṭimid succession following al-Mustanṣir's death, and the immense disruption to domestic and international affairs caused by the Crusader invasion of the Holy Land.<sup>5</sup>

The Jewish population features only rarely in the principal Islamic history of Yemen of this period, 'Umāra's *Ta'rik al-Yaman*, and then only in the form of particular individuals who happened to be Jewish.<sup>6</sup> Our knowledge of the Jews of Yemen during

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1 On the Geonic period, traditionally dated to the 6th–11th centuries, see R. Brody, *The Geonim of Babylonia*, 2013, pp. 3–18. On the academies and their place in Jewish society, see R. Brody, *The Geonim of Babylonia*, 2013, pp. 35–53.

2 Effectively taxes, though augmented by forms of donation too; see R. Brody, *The Geonim of Babylonia*, 2013, pp. 72–73.

3 R. Brody, *The Geonim of Babylonia*, 2013, pp. 125–126. The decline in the relationship is evident in the pleas for the sending of outstanding tithes and other payments overdue from the Yemeni Jewish communities.

4 A. Grohmann et al, s.v. "al-Yaman"; Ḥ.F. al-Hamdānī, "The letters of Al-Mustanṣir bi'llāh", 1934, p. 307.

5 Ḥ.F. al-Hamdānī, "Unknown Ismā'īlī authors", 1933, pp. 360–361.

6 H.C. Kay, *Yaman*, 1892. For instance (p. 40), the town of Dū Ġibla is supposedly named after a Jewish pottery seller who had his stall on the site of the future royal palace. For a comprehensive survey of

the eleventh and twelfth centuries is therefore derived mostly from the manuscripts of the Cairo Genizah. The Genizah ('sacred storeroom') is an enormous cache of medieval material that was recovered at the end of the nineteenth century from the Ben Ezra Synagogue in Fuṣṭāṭ. Principally a literary and religious depository, where sacred texts that can no longer be used (due to age or changes in fashion) are safely stowed away, the Genizah Collection also preserves a large body of documentary material, deposited mostly in a haphazard, rather than a consistent or archivally methodical, manner.<sup>7</sup>

The work of the historian S.D. Goitein on the documentary parts of the Genizah Collection revealed the strong links between the Jews of Yemen and Egypt, mostly from the late eleventh century onwards.<sup>8</sup> Following the domination of the Mediterranean by the merchant fleets of the Venetians, Genoese and Pisans, the Jewish and Muslim traders from Egypt turned their full attention to the Indian Ocean. Yemen, particularly the city of Aden, was a vital waypoint on the trans-oceanic trading route with India, and the links between the old Jewish centre of Fuṣṭāṭ-Cairo and the communities in Yemen were strengthened through the comings and goings of Egyptian Jewish merchants and a body of correspondence, aimed at directing trade, solving business disputes and building relationships.<sup>9</sup>

## II. Controversy over a *rašut* in Yemen

With an important role to play in international commerce and a burgeoning stature in the geopolitics of the Judaeo-Islamic world, Yemen and the allegiance of its Jewish congregations came increasingly to be of interest to the competing Jewish leaders in Iraq and Egypt as they sought to build up their influence there. In the twelfth century, as a symbol of acceptance of the authority of the Head of Jews it was customary to recite a *rašut*—a formula announcing under whose ultimate authority acts took place. This took the form of a public declaration in the synagogue before the cantor's reading of the prayers or the preacher's delivery of his sermon, and it is also found as a formula added to the text of marriage and other legal documents.<sup>10</sup> It consisted of the name of the Head of the Jews along with his sometimes quite bombastic titles. The *rašut* formula appears to have been introduced to Egypt into documents as a privilege of the *negidut* ('the rulership [of the Jews]') by the Palestinian Ga'on Maṣliaḥ ha-Kohen b. Solomon, who ruled as Ra'īs ('head') in the period 1127–1139.<sup>11</sup>

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references to Jews and their communities in Arabic histories of Yemen, see Y. Tobi, "Yedi'ot 'al Yehude Teman", 1995, pp. 18–56, 68–102.

7 For a concise overview of the Cairo Genizah and the manner in which manuscripts accumulated, see B. Outhwaite, "A hoard of Hebrew MSS", 2016.

8 Goitein's landmark publication on the subject in Hebrew is S.D. Goitein, *The Yemenites*, 1983. His contribution to the field of Yemen studies is summarised in R.E. Margariti, *Aden & the Indian Ocean trade*, 2007, pp. 18–21.

9 Many letters relating to Yemen and the India trade may be found in English translation in S.D. Goitein & M.A. Friedman, *India Traders of the Middle Ages*, 2008.

10 On the *rašut* see M.A. Friedman, "R. Yehiel b. Elyakim's Responsum", 1998, pp. 328–329. The practice of proclaiming the *rašut* in the synagogue probably owes much to the Islamic pledge of allegiance in the Friday sermon, the *ḥuṭba*.

11 M.R. Cohen, *Jewish self-government*, 1980, pp. 268–269. Again, the impetus for its introduction in forms of Jewish legal deed was probably its appearance, at Badr al-Ġamālī's instruction, in official Fāṭimid documents (M.R. Cohen, *Jewish self-government*, 1980, p. 267).

Following its introduction, the *rašut* became a cause of controversy in Yemen. Maḍmūn b. Ḥasan, the Jewish *wakīl al-tuḡḡār* ('representative of the merchants') in Aden, who himself later became a local Nagid, sent a letter to the wider Jewish communities of Yemen asking them to add the name of the Nagid and head of the Palestinian Academy, Maṣliḥ Ga'on, to their public recitation of the *rašut* formula.<sup>12</sup> Testimony sent from the city of Aden, however, relates how fraught the practice could be. A Jewish visitor from Ṣa'da in northern Yemen was censured for mentioning the Palestinian Ga'on in the sabbath service, despite this having previously been the practice in Aden, and was forced to make a public apology. The arrival of a Persian notable in the city had bolstered the Babylonian faction.<sup>13</sup>

In the face of energetic support for the Babylonian cause, even in southern Yemen, Maḍmūn backed down and promulgated the removal of the mention of Maṣliḥ Ga'on from the recitation of the *rašut*.<sup>14</sup> Among the opponents to Maṣliḥ's authority were Egyptian Jews in Aden, who, it seems, were partisan members of Fuṣṭāṭ's Babylonian community, rather than followers of the Palestinian Yešiva.<sup>15</sup> Further evidence of this can be seen in letters sent by a Yemeni Jew, Jacob b. Salim, to the Palestinian Gaonate in Fuṣṭāṭ. In one, he reports collecting large sums of money on behalf of Maṣliḥ Ga'on from the inland town of al-Ġuwwa.<sup>16</sup> In another letter he explains that he is unable to collect funds for the Palestinian cause from the port city of Aden, due to a controversy having erupted in the community, and he himself has been forced to decamp to al-Ġuwwa.<sup>17</sup> This is evidently as a result of the growing Babylonian influence in the port city, probably given increasing impetus by the arrival there of merchants from the Babylonian community of Fuṣṭāṭ.<sup>18</sup>

### III. Ties with Egypt: A Hebrew letter sent from Dū Ġibla to Fuṣṭāṭ around 1095

The allegiance shown to the Palestinian centre was not a novel development in Maḍmūn's reign, since evidence of southern Yemen's respect for the Jerusalem Gaonate can be found in an earlier generation. Indeed, with the Ṣulayḥid rulers' strong ties to the Fāṭimid Caliphate and vigorous defense of its Ismā'īlī faith, it would have been politically expedient, and probably of great practical benefit too, for the Jewish communities of the Ṣulayḥid realm to look to Egypt for their suzerainty too. The degree

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12 The full tale can be found in M.A. Friedman, *India Book IVA*, 2013, pp. 115–129.

13 See Cambridge University Library T-S 20.37. The text is edited by S.D. Goitein, *The Yemenites*, 1983, pp. 57–61, and, more recently, as 8π in S.D. Goitein & M.A. Friedman, *India Book IVB*, 2013, pp. 41–46. A. Franklin, "Relations between nesi'im and exilarchs", 2006, pp. 310–312, discusses the event in some detail.

14 Cambridge University Library T-S 20.37, lines 23–24.

15 S.D. Goitein & M.A. Friedman, *India Traders of the Middle Ages*, 2008, p. 41; S.D. Goitein, *The Yemenites*, 1983, pp. 55–56.

16 Cambridge University Library Or. 1080 J225, edited as H5 in S.D. Goitein & M.A. Friedman, *India Book IVB*, 2013.

17 Cambridge University Library T-S 20.173, edited in A. Ashur & B. Outhwaite, "Between Egypt and Yemen", 2014, pp. 198–219, and n. 13, p. 214. See further in M.A. Friedman, *India Book IVA*, 2013, pp. 119, 124.

18 S.D. Goitein, *The Yemenites*, 1983, p. 56.

to which the Jewish community of the late eleventh century followed the events in the Fāṭimid centre can be seen in the following letter from the Taylor-Schechter Cairo Genizah Collection at Cambridge University Library, T-S 16.255.<sup>19</sup> The letter was sent from the Ṣulayḥid capital of Ḍū Ġibla to Fuṣṭāṭ around 1095 C.E. by a leading member of the Jewish community, Jacob ha-Kohen b. Isaiah. The letter—written mostly in Hebrew as was customary when addressing leading members of the Jewish community—can be dated with certainty to a point soon after the events of 1094, when the change of leadership at the head of the Fāṭimid Empire had inevitable repercussions for the leaders of its Jewish population.<sup>20</sup> Egypt was thrown into crisis in 1094 by the deaths of the Wazīr Badr al-Ġamālī and the ruler, the Caliph al-Mustanṣir. Once the dust had cleared, the Wazīr's equally capable son assumed his father's old position, both as formal vizier and as kingmaker, and he ruled as al-Afḍal. The youngest son of al-Mustanṣir, al-Musta'īlī, was placed on the caliphal throne, in defiance of the claims of the eldest son, Nizār, and other older brothers. Changes at the top had consequences further down the chain of command. The Jewish leadership in Egypt had for more than a decade been involved in a fight for power between the incumbents of the Palestinian Gaonate, members of a Babylonian exilarchic family, and the holders of the Negidut in Egypt.<sup>21</sup> In a dramatic course of events, the former Head of the Jews, the learned physician Mevoraḳ b. Sa'adya, had been ousted from that post by the Babylonian Nasi (exilarch, 'scion of the House of David') David b. Daniel, sometime after 1080, who attempted also to wrest the Palestinian Gaonate from Evyatar ha-Kohen Ga'on, managing to force him into exile. This brought the leadership of the Jewish community of the Fāṭimid Empire under the power of a Babylonian Nasi, usurping the old Palestinian faction. The death of al-Mustanṣir, however, and the succession of al-Afḍal as Wazīr overthrew this new order, and both Mevoraḳ b. Sa'adya and Evyatar ha-Kohen b. Elijah were able to return to their former posts. David b. Daniel's star was diminished. Mevoraḳ b. Sa'adya had been a loyal doctor to Badr al-Ġamālī and was consequently also familiar with his son. Al-Afḍal duly rewarded him with a return to the headship of the Jews and a succession of distinguished titles, including the novel and superlative Ra'īs al-Ru'asā ('Head of Heads'), which was rendered in Hebrew as Sar ha-Sarim, 'Prince of Princes', and became Mevoraḳ's most prominent title.<sup>22</sup>

It is the use of this grandiloquent phrase 'Prince of Princes' in the letter sent by Jacob ha-Kohen that clearly marks it as post-dating Mevoraḳ's triumphant return to the headship of the Jews in the Fāṭimid Empire and the overthrow of David b. Daniel. Like their Ṣulayḥid overlords, the Jews of southern Yemen were evidently following events in Egypt, and Jacob's letter demonstrates just how closely.

The letter was sent to Mevoraḳ and addresses him directly, though loss of text at the top of the leaf means that only his titles and his father's name, Sa'adya, are still

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19 See S.D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, 1967–1993, vol. 5, pp. 196–197. The letter was one of many collected by Goitein for his 'India Book', and was numbered by him as number VII, 64 in the unpublished part of the book.

20 On the use of Hebrew in Jewish correspondence of the eleventh century, see B. Outhwaite, "Lines of communication", 2013.

21 M.R. Cohen, *Jewish self-government*, 1980, pp. 178–212; M. Rustow, *Heresy and the politics of community*, 2008, pp. 328–332.

22 M.R. Cohen, *Jewish self-government*, 1980, pp. 220–221.

extant. In lines 3–4 he is addressed as ‘Prince of Princes (שר השרים), Ruler of Rulers (נגיד הנגידים), the Great Sanhedrin (סנהדרא רבא), the Sage of the Academy (חכם הישיבה), the Might of all the House of Israel (עוז כל ב[י]ת ישראל)’. This combination of titles is found in other correspondence directed to Mevorak and is peculiar to his second administration, rather than his earlier service, since it was the new Wazīr al-Afḍal who raised him to his highest status, marked by the addition of ‘Prince of Princes’ and ‘Ruler of Rulers’ to his existing titles.<sup>23</sup> Jacob carefully employs all of Mevorak’s titles, and in the correct order that we know them from elsewhere.

The letter was sent to Mevorak shortly after his political resurgence as a declaration of the Yemenite community of Dū Ġibla’s allegiance and a recognition of his authority over them. Jacob recounts how the community has celebrated his return to power: ‘and furthermore all the people who are in our land have rejoiced in a great celebration and praised the Almighty who has kept the covenant of their forefathers [...] providing them with someone of the stature of our lord’ (lines 17–19). Furthermore, Jacob, evidently a community leader, describes himself as the one ‘who reckons your praise and recounts your delightfulness, who extols you at every gathering and celebration’ (lines 6–7). This suggests that the community that he represented in the Ṣulayḥid capital was in the habit of blessing the Nagid Mevorak at public gatherings—festive or liturgical occasions. This practice is well attested in the Genizah, and leaves of prayer-books from Egypt are preserved with prayers for the leaders of the day as well as their deputies.<sup>24</sup> This blessing played the role of announcing and reinforcing on regular liturgical occasions the allegiance of the congregation. Following further praises on the person of Mevorak, and blessings on the deity for having given the Jewish community such a champion of stature (line 21), the letter breaks off.<sup>25</sup>

Mevorak was held in high esteem by some members of the Yemeni merchant community for the power he could wield in Egypt to solve business problems they encountered there.<sup>26</sup> Jacob’s encomium, however, reveals that the Jewish community of Dū Ġibla closely followed Mevorak’s return to power in Egypt and regularly celebrated, at appropriate gatherings, their allegiance to him, and thus, like their Ṣulayḥid overlords, to the imperial centre in Fatimid Egypt. This, despite the Yemeni Jewish community falling under the Babylonian sphere of influence in earlier times.

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23 For a useful tabulated timeline of Mevorak’s titles, see M.R. Cohen, *Jewish self-government*, 1980, pp. 263–266. Unfortunately, our letter is defective at the beginning, but we would expect two additional titles, dating from his earlier administration, to occur before ‘Prince of Princes’—‘Member (of the Academy)’ (החבר) and ‘Master of Wisdom’ (אלוף הבינות).

24 M.R. Cohen, *Jewish self-government*, 1980, pp. 223–224, 267–268. Cambridge University Library T-S 6H6.6 folio 4 recto contains a text of the Qaddiṣ prayer roughly contemporary with our current letter. The prayer includes a blessing on the members of the Palestinian Gaonate, wishing that God’s rule and the arrival of His Messiah take place ‘in your lifetime, our lord Evyatar ha-Kohen, Head of the Academy of the Pride of Jacob, and in the lifetime of our teacher Solomon ha-Kohen, Deputy of the Academy, and in the lifetime of our teacher Zadoq the Third in the Academy’. This important text, originally deciphered by Solomon Schechter, is edited most recently in S.C. Reif, *Jewish prayer texts*, 2016, pp. 129–138.

25 Preserved in the margin is part of a postscript query in Judaeo-Arabic that Jacob makes concerning Passover, though much of it is lost.

26 See, for instance, Amram b. Joseph’s letter, preserved in the David Kaufmann Collection, Budapest, DK 230.3, which celebrates the Nagid’s solution to a long-running business dispute. The letter is edited in S.D. Goitein & M.A. Friedman, *India Book II*, 2010, pp. 105–112 no. 6ב.

Such regular blessings are most likely the forerunner of the more formal statement of allegiance, the *rašut*, which came into vogue in the subsequent generation, and which caused such problems among the wider Yemeni Jewish community during Maḏmūn b. Ḥasan's period of office.

Cambridge University Library T-S 16.255, letter on paper, c. 1095 C.E.

Text in Hebrew

	1מד[...]
	2 מרע אדונינו ומ[...]
	3 שר השרים נגיד הנגידים סנהדרא רבא חכם הישיבה עוז כל
	4 בת ישראל נט רח וג למ בירב טצת מרנא ורבנא סעדיה
	5 תנצבה שא אדונינו שלום עד אן קץ וברכה עד בלי דאי
	6 מעבדך מונה שבחך ומספיר נעמך המשתביח בזכרך
	7 בכל מושב ומסיבה יעקב הכהן בן ישעיה נעג ולפי מעטו
	8 וקוצר דעתו חקק שני הטורים הללו לשאל בשלום אדונינו כראוי
	9 על עבדו לכבודו כי כבודו עדוף עד מאוד ואהבתו נרשמה
	10 ונחקה בלב עבדו מתחילה וכן שכן ששמע עבדו שמעו וענותות[ו]
	11 ויראת חטאו והשפלתו לעצמו וגדולתו בעיני כל הבריות נכפלה
	12 אהבתו ונשתלבה בלב יי יוסיף לו גדולה על גדלתו ויתיניהו לחן
	13 ולהסד בעיני יי ואדם וישמרו מכל צרה ויגון ולהתמיד לך אורו
	14 ולהשכילך לדרשיהו תמיד למען תצלה את כל אשר תעשה
	15 וחיבין אנו להודות לאלוהינו שלא עזב חסדו ואמתו מעמי בת ישראל
	16 והמציא להם גדור למען לא תשכח התורה מקהלותיהם ואמנם כי
	17 עניני החסידים החכמים הצדיקים עניני אדונינו ועד שמחו
	18 כל העם שבארצינו שמחה גדולה ושבחו יי השומר ברית אבותיהם
	19 עים זרעם אחריהם להמציא להם כמות אדונינו מקור מים חיים
	20 למען יחיו ולמען יודיעו את אשר יעשו בתורתו ואם עזר מעט הבטח
	21 הבטיח עזר רב וגדול המציא וברוך הוא אלהינו הנאמן בכל דבריו
	22 ואדונינו בחכמתו ועשתונותיו יורינו וכל מקהלות ישראל דרך הטובה
	23 והישרה וכענין שנא' והודעת אותם את הדרך אשר ילכו בה ואת
	24 המעשה אשר יעשו וכמדרש שדרשו בו רבותינו זל והודעת
	25 [...]

Right margin

	1[...]
	2 פי ח ימי פס[...]
	3 [...]
	4 [...]
	5 אלא[...]
	6 דאלך [...]
	7 מחרור[...]
	8 ויחרם [...]

או הל יחל בבעץ [...]	9
ויחרם בבאקיה או הל [...]	10
הו חלאל עמל כרה או חרא[ם]	11
[...]רה יפריש [...]	12
[...] מן הדין [...]	13



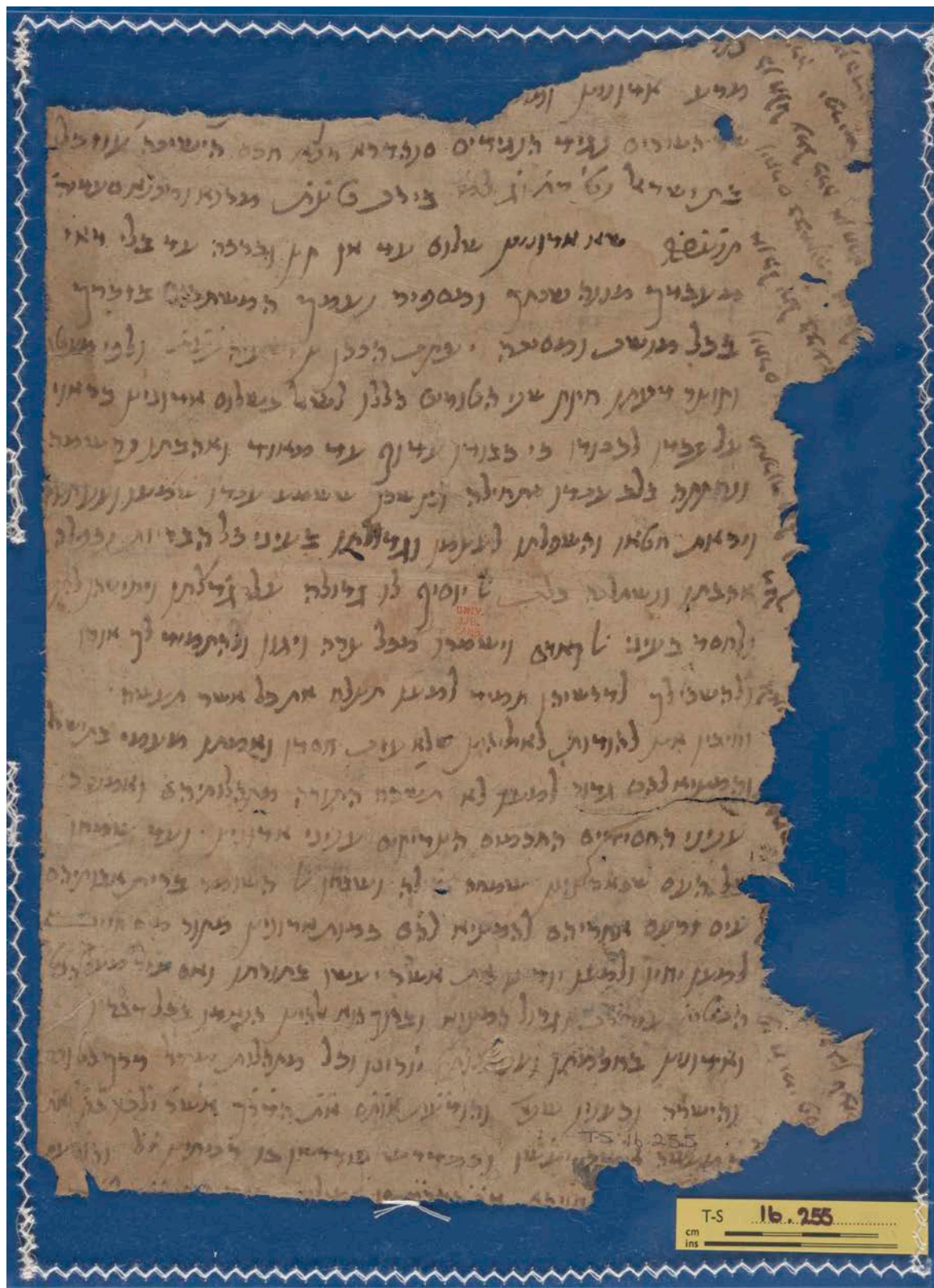


Fig.1. Letter, Cambridge University Library T-S 16.255, c. 1095 C.E. © Cambridge University Library, UK. The authors would like to acknowledge the permission of the Syndics of Cambridge

University Library.

Translation

1. [...]

2. from evil, our lord and our m[aster ...]

3. Prince of Princes, Nagid of Nagids, the Great Sanhedrin, the Sage of the Academy, the Might of all

4. the House<sup>27</sup> of Israel – the Merciful One protect him and strengthen his fortune,<sup>28</sup> son of<sup>29</sup> the glorious diadem,<sup>30</sup> our master and teacher Sa‘adya—

5. may his soul be bound up in the bundle of life! Accept greetings, our lord, without end and a blessing without measure<sup>31</sup>

6. from your servant, who reckons your praise and recounts your delightfulness,<sup>32</sup> who extols you

7. at every gathering and celebration, Jacob ha-Kohen son of Isaiah—his rest be in the Garden of Eden.<sup>33</sup> With his shortcomings

8. and his lack of knowledge, he has inscribed these few lines to inquire of our lord’s health as is customary

9. for a servant to one as honourable as he, because his honour is greatly superior, and respect for him is recorded

10. and inscribed deep within his servant’s heart. And so it was that when his servant heard tell of him,<sup>34</sup> of his humility

11. and of his fear of sin, and of his modest view of himself and of his stature in the eyes of all creation, that his

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27 The noun ‘house’ is spelled defectively as *בַּת* rather than the usual *בֵּית* (similarly in line 15). A similar defective spelling is *אֵין* for the usual *אֵין* in line 5, ‘without’. While such spellings may just be a feature of the writer’s usual orthography, it is possible that they are hypercorrections – in this case overly defective forms in supposed imitation of Biblical Hebrew’s prestigious orthography. Hypercorrections are more likely in a text such as this, which addresses a recipient of clearly much higher social status and presumed greater learning.

28 The writer abbreviates a number of stereotypical phrases, as is customary in medieval Jewish correspondence. *בִּטְרִיָּה רַחֲמָנָא וְגַבְרוּהִי לְמַזְלִיָּה* are Babylonian Aramaic blessings, *נְטְרִיָּה רַחֲמָנָא וְגַבְרוּהִי לְמַזְלִיָּה*. The use of extensive Aramaic blessings is more commonly associated with the Babylonian Jewish sphere of cultural influence than the Palestinian, where Hebrew predominates.

29 The word *בִּירְבִּי*, more commonly written *בִּירְבִּי*, is a conflated form for ‘son of the scholar’, and is used to introduce the father’s name.

30 These are further abbreviated honorifics, *טְצִיָּת*. They are usually construct nouns, but the first, which begins *טְ*, is not common in epistolary phrases, and it is therefore unclear what noun is being abbreviated. It may be *טְהִרָה*, in construct *טְהִרָת*, ‘the pure’. The rest are far more usual and should be read as *צְפִירָת תְּפִירָת*, ‘the diadem, the crown’.

31 The noun *דְּאִי*, ‘sufficiency’, is spelled according to the Babylonian tradition of post-biblical Hebrew, with *alef*. The original Biblical Hebrew spelling is with yod, e.g. Malachi 3:10 *עַד בְּלִי דִי*, and this is usually spelled with two *yods*, *דִּי*, in Palestinian traditions of post-biblical Hebrew. Again, the author reveals the Babylonian cultural background of his Hebrew learning.

32 Literally, ‘and tells of your delightfulness’, recalling the ‘delightfulness of the LORD’ in Psalms 27:4. Jacob uses a similar compliment in another letter, T-S 13J28.3, addressing a certain Isaac in the third person: *הַמְסַפֵּר בְּעַמּוֹ*, ‘who tells of his delightfulness’.

33 The post-mortem blessing, *בְּוִחוֹ עֵדֵן גֵּן*, on Jacob’s deceased father, Isaiah, is abbreviated.

34 There is possibly a Babylonian supralinear *u* vowel written above the *שׁ* of *שְׁמַעוּ*, i.e., *šum‘o*, an infinitive construct form. For this form in Babylonian Hebrew, see I. Yeivin, *The Hebrew language tradition*, 1985, vol. 2 pp. 812–813.

12. respect was redoubled and bound up in the heart. May the Almighty<sup>35</sup> add greatness to his greatness,<sup>36</sup> and may he be celebrated for grace  
 13. and kindness in the eyes of the Almighty and of man. And may He keep him from all danger and sorrow and shine His light continually upon you,  
 14. to give you insight to seek Him always so that you might succeed in all that you do.  
 15. And we should give thanks to our God, whose kindness and truth have not forsaken<sup>37</sup> the people of the House of Israel  
 16. and who has provided them with a wall<sup>38</sup> so that the Torah cannot be forgotten from their congregations.<sup>39</sup>  
 17. And truly the concerns of the wise and righteous men of piety are our lord's concerns, and furthermore  
 18. all the people who are in our land have rejoiced in a great celebration and praised the Almighty who has kept the covenant of their forefathers  
 19. with<sup>40</sup> their seed after them, providing them with someone of the stature of our lord, a source of living water  
 20. that they may live and know what they must do in following His Law.  
 21. And though He promised but a little aid, He has indeed provided a great and powerful aid. May our steadfast God be blessed in all his affairs,  
 23. and may our lord in his wisdom and in his thoughts guide us and all the congregations of Israel on a righteous  
 24. and straight path, as scripture (Exodus 18:20) states: 'And you will show them the way they must walk in and the  
 25. work that they must do', and as the midrash that our teachers of blessed memory taught 'and show [...]']

Margin (Judaean-Arabic)<sup>41</sup>

1. [...]

35 As is common in non-biblical texts of the Middle Ages, the divine name (the Tetragrammaton) is abbreviated to a symbol wherever it occurs in the letter, marked in our transcription by three *yods*, יי.

36 In גדלתו there appears to be a Babylonian supralinear *u* vowel written above the ד, *gəduḷb*. The same noun occurs earlier in the phrase, where it is written plene, גדולה. Variation in the spelling of similar words when they occur closely together in the text is a distinctive feature of Medieval Hebrew letters.

37 The phrase חסדו ואמתו שלא עזב חסדו ואמתו is derived from Proverbs 3:3 חסד ואמת אל יעזובך, 'let kindness and truth not forsake you', where the verb is plural, *ya'azbuḳ*, but written defectively in the standard Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Bible. There the subjects of the verb are חסד and אמת, 'kindness and truth'. In the letter you have the same two subjects, but the verb is singular. This is an unusual construction, but not without precedent in either Biblical or post-biblical Hebrew.

38 The spelling גדור for an expected גדר, 'wall', may reflect the well-attested alternation between o and e vowels in the Babylonian pronunciation tradition. See D. Ya'akov, "Yemen, Pronunciation Traditions", 2013. Again, the writer shows strong evidence of Babylonian cultural influence on his Hebrew.

39 The consonants ק and ת are written so similarly by this writer that you can conceivably read מתהללותיהם, 'from their praises/prayers', or מקהלותיהם, 'from their congregations', either of which fit the context.

40 The common preposition עם is unusually written plene, עים.

41 We are grateful to Prof. Mordechai Akiva Friedman who commented on an early version of this article, corrected our reading of the marginal text and pointed out that this is a halakhic query. To the best of our knowledge, this is the only known request for a *responsum* (legally binding answer to a question of Jewish law) sent from Yemen to Mevorak.

2. on the eight days of Pass[over]
3. [...] the light
4. [...]
5. the [...]
6. which [...]
7. hot [...]
8. and should be forbidden [...]
9. or should some of it be permitted [...]
10. and the rest be forbidden? Or is it [...]
11. permitted, indecent action or forbidden? [...]
12. [...] will spread [...]
13. [...] from the law [...]

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