

# Between Egypt and Yemen in the Cairo Genizah

Amir Ashur

Center for the Study of Conversion and Inter-religious Encounters, Ben Gurion University, the Interdisciplinary Center for the Broader Application of Genizah Research, University of Haifa, and the Department of Hebrew Culture, Tel Aviv University  
[amirash@bgu.ac.il](mailto:amirash@bgu.ac.il)

Ben Outhwaite  
University of Cambridge  
[bmo10@cam.ac.uk](mailto:bmo10@cam.ac.uk)

## Abstract

A study of two documents from the Cairo Genizah, a vast repository of medieval Jewish writings recovered from a synagogue in Fustāṭ, Egypt, one hundred years ago, shows the importance of this archive for the history of medieval Yemen and, in particular, for the role that Yemen played in the Indian Ocean trade as both a commercial and administrative hub.

The first document is a letter from Aden to Fustāṭ, dated 1133 CE, explaining the Aden Jewish community's failure to raise funds to send to the heads of the Palestinian Gaonate in Egypt. It signals the decline of that venerable institution and the increasing independence of the Yemeni Jews. The second text is a legal document, produced by an Egyptian Jewish trader who intended to travel to Yemen, but who wished to ensure his wife was provided for in his absence. Both documents show the close ties between the Egyptian and Yemeni Jewish communities and the increasing commercial importance of Yemen to Egyptian traders.

## Keywords

Cairo Genizah, history, India trade, al-Ġuwwa, Hebrew, Judaeo-Arabic, marriage, Jewish leadership, legal contract, Aden, Fustāṭ.

## 1. Introduction

The discovery of a vast store of manuscripts and early printed material in the Ben Ezra Synagogue in Fustāṭ at the end of the nineteenth century revolutionised the academic study of Judaism and provided a wealth of primary sources for the scrutiny of the Mediterranean world at large in the High Middle Ages and Early Modern period. S.D. Goitein, the greatest historian of this collection, has called it 'a unique historical source,' hugely important for the study of 'the

Jewish community on the one hand and of Islamic civilization on the other.’<sup>1</sup>

Known as the Cairo Genizah, reflecting Fustāṭ’s decline from the first Islamic capital of Egypt to a suburb of modern Cairo, this remarkable collection of paper and parchment stems from an imperative in Jewish religious practice to avoid disposing of any writings of a holy character; that is, containing the name of God. Instead, they should be interred in a special storeroom, known as a Genizah. Over the course of centuries, the Jewish community of Fustāṭ deposited their worn-out or unusable scrolls, codices and papers. For reasons unclear, among the copies of the Bible, prayer books and other religious works, they also deposited personal papers, business archives and all manner of documentary material, thus producing the finest and most comprehensive archive of any medieval community yet known to us.<sup>2</sup>

## *2. Contribution of the Genizah to the history of trade with Yemen: The state of the art*

Containing a wealth of primary sources for the community of Fustāṭ and other communities around the Mediterranean and Middle East with which they communicated, the Cairo Genizah collection has become an essential resource for the study of the medieval Islamic world, particularly in the so-called Classical Genizah Period (late tenth to the middle of the thirteenth centuries, the periods of Fatimid and Ayyubid rule in Egypt).

In producing his masterful five-volume work, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish communities of the Arab world as portrayed in the documents of the Cairo Geniza*, on the social and economic history of the society evinced by the medieval manuscripts of the Cairo Genizah, Goitein became increasingly

---

<sup>1</sup> Shelomo Dov Goitein, *A Mediterranean society: The Jewish communities of the Arab world as portrayed in the documents of the Cairo Geniza*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 5 vols. plus an index vol. by P. Sanders, 1967-93 [reprint: *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza*, Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2000], vol. i, p. vii. The Cairo Genizah Collection is now scattered in libraries and archives around the world, but the greatest part, by far, is in Cambridge University Library, where it is known as the Taylor-Schechter Cairo Genizah Collection. It contains more than 193,000 items. Thanks to digitisation, most of the worldwide Genizah is now online and can be freely accessed through the website of the Friedberg Genizah Project; see [www.genizah.org](http://www.genizah.org) for further information on how to access the images and data.

<sup>2</sup> In origin it is not an archive, but a loose collection of discarded material. The Hebrew word *geniza* (גניזה), derived ultimately from a Persian root, originally referred to ‘treasure,’ but in the rabbinic period came to refer to the practice of storing away sacred works to prevent them being desecrated. A good introduction to the story of the Cairo Genizah discovery and an analysis of its importance is Adina Hoffman and Peter Cole, *Sacred Trash: The Lost and Found World of the Cairo Geniza*, New York, Nextbook, 2011, whose irreverent title ‘Sacred Trash’ sums up the original nature of the collection.

interested in the history of the Jewish involvement in the Indian Ocean trade and the important role of the Jewish community of Yemen in that trade.<sup>3</sup> Yemen, and particularly the port city of Aden, was a vital staging post for Egyptian Jewish merchants intending to make the passage across the Indian Ocean to the Malabar Coast of India, and many sojourned or made their permanent home there, alongside the local Jewish community. They remained in touch with their relatives and business partners in Fustāṭ by means of letters, which were carried to and fro by Jewish, Christian and Muslim traders who were travelling the same trade routes. Basing himself on the hundreds of letters, legal documents and accounts that testified to the important Jewish role in this trade, Goitein prepared drafts of a major work on the subject, always known as his 'India Book.' Although Goitein managed to produce a major work on the Yemeni Jewish community, *The Yemenites: History, communal organisation, spiritual life*, in 1983,<sup>4</sup> on his death in 1985, his project of the India Book was still far from complete. It remained to his former student, Mordechai Akiva Friedman, to complete and expand the work, eventually publishing it as S.D. Goitein and M.A. Friedman, *India Traders of the Middle Ages: Documents from the Cairo Geniza ('India Book')*, in 2008.<sup>5</sup> The pivotal role of Yemen permeates this lengthy work, showing the wealth of sources relating to the history of Yemen that were remarkably preserved in the former storeroom of the Ben Ezra Synagogue.

In the years since Goitein's pioneering work, others have exploited the potential of the Genizah as a source for Yemenite history. The most comprehensive example is the study by Roxani Eleni Margariti.<sup>6</sup> Her in-depth examination of the topography and history of Aden's port could not have been written without the work of Goitein and the sources preserved in the Genizah collections around the world.

In this article, we present two documents that demonstrate the

---

<sup>3</sup> Goitein began his career as a student of Islamic studies and conducted fieldwork in Yemen, thus unconsciously preparing himself for the discoveries he would later make among the Cairo Genizah manuscripts.

<sup>4</sup> S.D. Goitein, *The Yemenites: History, communal organisation, spiritual life*, Jerusalem, 1983 [in Hebrew, English and Hebrew Ed.: *The Yemenites: History, communal organization and spiritual life*, Jerusalem, Ben-Zvi Institute, 1999].

<sup>5</sup> S.D. Goitein and M.A. Friedman, *India Traders of the Middle Ages: Documents from the Cairo Geniza ('India Book')*, Leiden/Boston, E.J. Brill, 2008. Further Hebrew-language volumes, containing editions of all the original source material, continue to emerge on a regular basis from the Ben-Zvi Institute. For the present purposes, the second volume, S.D. Goitein, and M.A. Friedman, *Maḍmūn-Nagid of Yemen and the India Trade: Cairo Geniza Documents*, Jerusalem, Ben-Zvi Institute, 2010 [in Hebrew], is particularly relevant.

<sup>6</sup> Eleni Margariti, *Aden & the Indian Ocean trade: 150 Years in the Life of a Medieval Arabian Port (Islamic Civilization and Muslim Networks)*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, "Islamic Civilization and Muslim Networks," 2007.

value of the Cairo Genizah for the study of the links between Egypt's Jews and the community in Yemen. One is a lengthy letter, sent from Yemen to Fustāṭ, and the other is a legal document prepared by a merchant setting off to Aden. Neither has been edited or published in full elsewhere, nor have they previously been translated.

### 3. *Two unpublished Genizah documents on trade with Yemen*

a. Cambridge University Library T-S 20.173, a letter from Jacob b. Salim, 1133 CE

The close links that the Jewish community of Yemen retained with their co-religionists in Egypt are the reason that so much of their material ended up in the Genizah. While links were developed along family and business lines, with several merchant dynasties in particular playing a major role, they also revolved around the traditional centre of Jewish governance in Palestine, the Palestinian Academy, the Yešiva of Ereš ha-Ševi. The documents preserved in the Genizah testify to the growing importance for the Jews of Egypt of the Indian Ocean trade from the 1090s, following disruption to the traditional trading routes in the Mediterranean, and this coincided with a decline in the fortunes of the Palestinian Academy, which came increasingly to rely on its links with the Yemeni community to sustain it in its public role.

Although the Jewish community of Yemen had recognised the authority of the Reš Galuta (the Jewish exilarch) in Babylon, with the wane of that centre and the demise of the academies of Sura and Pumbeditha, they had grown increasingly close to the Palestinian gaonate, recognising the name of the Palestinian Ga'on, Mašliaḥ ha-Kohen, in their synagogue services.<sup>7</sup>

As a prosperous community on the Indian Ocean trade route they were able to make generous contributions to the upkeep of the gaonate and the charitable foundations it administered. Formerly situated in Jerusalem, the Palestinian Yešiva ('Academy') had been itinerant for some decades, having sojourned in Tyre and then Damascus, before eventually establishing itself in Fustāṭ under the Ga'on Mašliaḥ ha-Kohen b. Solomon in 1127. This was the final act of a venerable but vulnerable institution, however. In Fustāṭ, it found itself cut off from its spiritual home in Jerusalem, in the midst of a powerful and increasingly independent community, which was also home to a substantial number of Jews who recognised only the authority of the Babylonian centre, and not Mašliaḥ. After a few years, its role and duties were subsumed into the

---

<sup>7</sup>Yosef Tobi, *The Jews of Yemen: Studies in their History and Culture*, Leiden, E.J. Brill ("Études sur le judaïsme médiéval," 21), 1999, p. 44; S.D. Goitein and M.A. Friedman, *India Traders of the Middle Ages: Documents from the Cairo Geniza ('India Book')*, pp. 40-1.

greater Egyptian community around it, and the post of Head of the Academy, Ga'on, gave way to the power of the Nagid ('Prince'), the head of the Jewish communities in Egypt.<sup>8</sup> In the last decade of the gaonate's decline, however, the disputes that erupted in Egypt were mirrored in the wider diaspora. In Yemen, the local Nagid (a title granted by the Babylonian exilarch), Maḏmūn b. Yefet b. Bundār, sought to steer a middle course, recognising the authority of both the exilarch and the Palestinian Ga'on, but local arguments broke out and communities fractured along party lines. This fracturing and the waning influence of the Palestinian gaonate in the Yemen is beautifully displayed in the following letter from the Cairo Genizah, Cambridge University Library T-S 20.173.<sup>9</sup>

This is a lengthy letter on paper from a member of the Jewish community in Aden who acted as advocate and collector of donations for the Palestinian gaonate. Like many of the letters sent between the leading citizens of Fustāṭ and Yemen it is in Hebrew.<sup>10</sup> While most commercial correspondence—if not all—was in the usual written vernacular of the merchants, Judaeo-Arabic, the holy language, Hebrew, was often preferred for communications of a more official or rhetorical nature. Hebrew was considered a suitable language of communication for communal affairs, and its use reflected both on the learning of the writer and the respect in which he held his correspondent.<sup>11</sup> Jacob b. Salim, the writer of this letter, was evidently keen to impress his correspondent, or at the very least, to moderate the disapproval that would inevitably meet the bad news he was conveying, and he penned a very long epistle of more than fifty lines. The letter opens with a series of rhymed blessings that extol the virtues of the recipient and shower him with generous

---

8 On the decline of the Palestinian gaonate see Moshe Gil, *A History of Palestine, 634-1099*, Cambridge, 1992 [transl. and revised version of vol. I of *Palestine During the First Muslim Period*, in Hebrew, 1983], pp. 774-6.

9 This letter was originally partially edited by Jacob Mann, *The Jews in Egypt and Palestine under the Fatimid Caliphs: A Contribution to Their Political and Communal History Based Chiefly on Genizah Material Hitherto*, New York, 2 vols., 1970 [1920-22]), vol. ii, pp. 366-7. Goitein prepared a complete edition of the Hebrew text, intended for inclusion in his 'India Book' (no. VII,67). We are grateful to Prof. M.A. Friedman, who inherited the prodigious task of completing and publishing Goitein's work on the Indian Ocean trade, for putting Goitein's edition of this text and of T-S 12.585, below, at our disposal. Our readings differ slightly from those made by Goitein.

10 See, for instance, the various letters to and from Yemen described by S.D. Goitein, *The Yemenites: history, communal organisation, spiritual life*, Jerusalem, 1983 [in Hebrew], p. 27.

11 On the motivations for writing Hebrew instead of Judaeo-Arabic in correspondence from the Cairo Genizah, see Ben Outhwaite, 'Lines of communication: Medieval Hebrew letters of the eleventh century,' in E.-M. Wagner, B. Outhwaite, and B. Beinhoff (eds.), *Scribes as Agents of Language Change*, Berlin, De Gruyter ("Studies in Language Change"), 2013, pp. 183-98.

praises; the language is a combination of contemporary poetic style and frequent allusions to the Bible. Jacob expends more than twenty lines on this preliminary paean, an unusually large amount, before announcing that this is a reply to a letter he had received from his correspondent, Nathan b. Solomon, the *dayyan* ('judge') and *parnas* ('administrator of charitable funds') in Fustāṭ. Nathan is a well-known figure in the Fustāṭ community and features in a number of documents relating to the administration of the *heqdeš* ('charitable foundation'). As a *parnas* he was responsible to the gaonate both for the collection of funds, through donations and the rent on communal property, and their distribution to the poor.<sup>12</sup>

Having announced the receipt of Nathan's letter, Jacob expends another twenty lines in praise of the language of the letter he had received ('its words [...] were [...] more desirable than honey, like nuggets of gold or the choicest corals,' lines 25-6) before wishing Nathan a happy return to his former homeland, the land of Israel ('you are one of the people of the Land of Israel,' line 35). With all the unwillingness of someone with bad news to deliver, it takes Jacob until shortly before his paper runs out, line 43, to finally come to the point. It had evidently been Jacob's role to act as a representative of the Palestinian gaonate in the city of Aden, collecting charitable donations from Aden and the villages round about and sending them on to Fustāṭ, to the *parnas* who administered the funds for the gaonate. This had probably not been Nathan previously, as Jacob's letter suggests that they are only newly acquainted through Nathan's recent letter. Now, however, he has to report that his task will be impossible. He has fallen out with the remainder of the Aden community, over differences of opinion concerning Halakhic practices ('delays in executing judgement and perversions of justice,' lines 49-50), and he has not been able to make any collections or advocate in other ways on behalf of the gaonate. Moreover, such has been the breakdown in communication with the community of Aden that he has removed himself to the town of al-Ġuwwa, several days travel to the north.<sup>13</sup> The situation reflected is of the split in the Aden community between those followers of the Nagid Maḏmūn who recognised the authority of Maṣliah ha-Kohen and the other, more traditional followers of the Babylonian exilarch. The latter are evidently in the majority, causing Jacob to leave town. The letter demonstrates

---

12 For the role of the *parnas* (פּרנאס) in the Genizah world see Mark Robert Cohen, *Poverty and Charity in the Jewish Community of Medieval Egypt*, Princeton, 2005, pp. 211-6. Further evidence of the judge Nathan's role in the collection of charitable funds is noted by M. Gil, *Documents of the Jewish pious foundations from the Cairo Geniza*, Leiden, E.J. Brill ("Publications of the Diaspora Research Institute"), 1976, p. 42, § 61.

13 Al-Ġuwwa was on the main land route from Aden to Ṣan'ā', see the schematic map in Margariti, *Aden & the Indian Ocean trade*, p. 54.

clearly the fragility of the Palestinian gaonate's authority within the community of Aden and the tenuousness of its funding, reliant in this case on the tenacity (or the lack of it) of a single representative. Such a dearth of genuine influence, both in Egypt and abroad, led to the wane in the power of the Palestinian Ga'on and his replacement by locally appointed leaders.

Cambridge University Library T-S 20.173

	בשמי רחמי	1
	שלום כנהרים . וטובות כממי יאורים . וצדקות סדורים . וזכויות	2
	ספורים . וישועות צבורים . וברכות מוסדרים . וחכמות לא	3
	נעדרים . ובינות וסברים . ושם טוב בכל מעברים . לא יזח	4
	לדורי דורים . ודעות יקרים . וחלק ומנת מובחרים . וכח	5
	כגבורים . ושבילים ישרים . ופרצות נגדרים . ורחמים	6
	נגררים . והוד והדר בציבורים . וקהלות אבירים . לבינתו	7
	מאשרים . ועטרת צפירים . וחבישת פארים . והכנעת	8
	סורים והכאת צרים . ואור וזוהר מזהירים וגיהים	9
	מאירים . וכל רווחות ונכוחות והצלחות מותאחות יוכללו	10
	לך אדוני לעדי עד נצח . שלום מעולה . וברכה כפולה .	11
	וטובה כלולה . ושמחה וגילה . ורוח והצלה . וישע וגאולה	12
	ודעה מהוללה והגיון חמורה וקלה . כרב הונא ועולא .	13
	וישור מסילה . במעשים טובים בתוך עדת סגולה . וחסד	14
	וחמלה . כרצון יוצר מטה ומעלה ושאר כל הברכות	15
	והחכמות והטובות יהיו נא זר ונזר לראש כב' גד	16
	קד' הד' יקרת אדוני . ואור עיני . השר הנכבד הדיין המשכיל	17
	מר' ורבנ' נתן הכהן החכם והנבון נטר' רחל ואחיהו	18
	בר כבו' גד' קד' מרנ' ורבנ' שלמה הכהן תוצרר בצרור	19
	החיים נשמתו ותחת עץ החיים חייתו . ישא אדוני	20
	שמי וסהרוני . צרבי וראש תחכמוני . שלום מפי שלום	21
	וממלאכי השלום ואחר כך מדורש שלומך ומבקר נעמך	22
	ברית שלום תלמידך הזוטר יעקב בן סלים רי'ת	23
	הגיעה איגרת מרנ' ורבנ' התמימה בראותה והנעימה	24
	בקריותה ואתבונן דבריה והנם כדבר דבור על אפניו	25
	מדבש נחמדים . ומאבני פז וראמות נבחרים . ואצא	26
	לקראת דבריה שהם רצופים בדגלי אהבה וחיבה	27
	כורתים ברית שלום ומתנהגים מנהג ידידות לשם	28
	שמים שלא תיזח ולא תמוש על כן שמחתי בה וששתי	29
	בהגעתה כמוצא שלל רב וכשמחת בית השאובה	30
	וכיום יסוד אהלה ואהליבה שיהי רצון מלפני אומר	31
	ועושה גוזר ומקים לפארך ולרוממך ולגדלך בעיניו	32
	בראש ובעיני כל רואיך ולהתמיד חינוך ולהתמיד	33
	שלומך לעדי עד נצח וכשהיבנתי בכתבך רבנו	34
	כי מבני ארץ הצבי אתה כבר נתוספה חיבתי	35
	ואהבתי בך עד מאד ושאלתי מלפני יוצר הכל	36
	לתת לך שאלתך ולהחזירך לאדמתך שהיא חביבה	37
	מכל הארצות ואשריו מי ששוכן בה ומי שהוא	38
	גר בה ומי שנקבר בה כי כן הבטיח הכתוב	39

40	וכפר אדמתו עמו . וגם הבטיח וכל יאמר שכן
41	חליתי העם היושב בה נשוא עון . כן יהי רצון
42	להחליק לנו ולך גורל נעים וחלק יפה עם שוכניה
43	והדרים בה . וכבר ידוע ידעתי כי אתה צורבא
44	רבא והיה ראוי להתנדב לך ולסנגר בעדך כראוי
45	לכבודך עם הדרים במדינת עדן כי הם חייבים
46	לפתוח פסת ידיהם ולהרחיב מתנותיהם אצל
47	חכם ורב גדול שכמותך ומה אעשה ולא
48	זכיתי לקיים זאת המצוה החמודה לפי שנפלה
49	מריבה ביני וביניהם על עינוי הדין ועל עיות
50	הדין ועל המורים בתורה שלא כהלכה ולא אוכל
51	לפתוח פה אליהם מרוב השנאה ששניאוני וגם
52	אני נתרחקתי מהם ושכנתי בעיר אחרת מהלך
53	שלשת ימים ולא אפגע בהם זולתי חדש אחד
54	בשנה ואני לבדי והם לבדם יעשה רבנו חסד גדול
55	ואל יאשימני על זאת וידינני לכף זכות ששחתי
56	לו דברי האמת והנה בשמים עדי . ושלומך רבוני
57	ושלום תורתך הקדושה יגדל לעדי עד נצח סלה

Margin

- (1) גם הנלוים עליך ונספחך יגדל שלומם נצח ישע רב ראש תשרי אתמ"ה לשטר  
(2) מעיר אלגיוה ימן

Address on verso

1	לכבוד [השר] הנכבד כג"ק	תלמידך הקטן
2	מר' ור' נתן [הכהן] בר כג"ק	יעקב בן סלים
3	רבנא שלמה [נ"ע]	רי"ת

A note on verso

יסל מדח ללעבאן אכירא

1. In Your Name O Merciful One<sup>14</sup>

2. Well-being like rivers and bounty like streams of water,  
righteous deeds all arranged<sup>15</sup> and merits

14 This is an abbreviated form of the Aramaic *בחמך רחמנא*, a common benediction found at the head of many Jewish documents (letters and legal deeds) from the Islamic world. In form and use it is similar to the Islamic *basmala*. M.A. Friedman, *Jewish Marriage in Palestine: a Cairo Geniza Study*, Tel Aviv and New York, Tel Aviv University, The Chaim Rosenberg School of Jewish Studies, 1980-81, 2 vols., vol. i, pp. 92-3 (and especially p. 93 n. 24) examines the evidence in relation to its use in Jewish marriage deeds (*ketubbot*) and presents Goitein's suggestion that, in origin, the Jewish formula actually predated the Muslim one. Given its absence in the earliest extant Jewish correspondence from the Cairo Genizah, for instance that of the Babylonian *ge'onim*, then its subsequent use in letters such as this one may have resulted from the later reciprocal influence of the Islamic practice.

15 To maintain the rhyme scheme ending in *-im*, all the feminine plural nouns in lines 2-4 take masculine concord. A common device in the opening of Hebrew letters in the eleventh-twelfth centuries.



3. numbered, victories heaped up and blessings arrayed, wisdom  
 4. unflinching, insight and reason and everywhere a good name  
 never to be taken away  
 5. for all generations. Precious knowledge and the choicest  
 lot and portion, strength  
 6. like that of warriors, straight pathways and breaches  
 fenced-off. Mercy  
 7. in attendance, and honour and glory in public, communities  
 of the Mighty,  
 8. walking in His wisdom.<sup>16</sup> A coronet of crowns and a crowning  
 with turbans, a humbling  
 9. of the rebellious and a scourging of enemies, and light and  
 brightness illuminating and  
 10. setting aflame. All respite, truth and prosperity  
 together, may it be gathered<sup>17</sup>  
 11. to you, my lord, for all eternity. Overwhelming well-being  
 and a doubled blessing,  
 12. a perfect bounty, happiness and joy, peace and  
 deliverance, safety and redemption.  
 13. Illuminating knowledge and a swift ferment of  
 understanding like that of Rav Huna and 'Ulla.<sup>18</sup>  
 14. A straight road, with good deeds in a treasured  
 congregation, kindness  
 15. and mercy, according to the will of the Creator of the  
 Below and Above, and the remainder of all the blessings  
 16. and wisdom and bounties should be a coronet and a circlet  
 for the head of the honourable, great  
 17. and holy, my splendid,<sup>19</sup> dear lord, the light of my eyes,  
 the honoured prince, the prudent judge,  
 18. our master and teacher<sup>20</sup> Nathan ha-Kohen, the wise and  
 discerning—the Merciful One protect him<sup>21</sup> and his brothers—  
 19. son of the honourable, great and holy, our master and  
 teacher Solomon ha-Kohen—may his spirit be bound up in the  
 bundle  
 20. of life, and may his vigour rest beneath the tree of life.  
 Greetings, my lord,  
 21. my sun and my moon, my scholar and the head of my academy,  
 from the mouth of well-being  
 22. and from the angels of peace. And afterwards, expounding  
 your well-being and announcing your pleasant state,

---

16 The language often alludes to biblical verses. For example, **לבינתו מאשרים** recalls Proverbs 9:6 **ואשרו בדרך בינה**, 'and walk in the way of wisdom.'

17 The spelling **מותאחות** is unusual, perhaps reflecting the reanalysis of the form as a *huf'al* stem or a sound change of *mit-* to *mut-*, but in meaning it can be understood as a *hitpa'el* stem of **אחה**, 'to join.'

18 Leading scholars from the two great Talmudic centres, Palestine and Babylon.

19 This is a common epistolary mode of address in abbreviated form: **כבוד גדולת קדושת הדרת**.

20 Abbreviated form of the Aramaic titles **מרנא ורבנא**; 'teacher' is just a respectful mode of address and does not imply a teacher-pupil relationship.

21 Abbreviated form of the common Aramaic blessing **נטריה רחמנא**.

23. a covenant of peace [from] your young student Jacob b. Salim—the spirit of the Lord give him rest.<sup>22</sup>  
 24. The letter of our master and teacher arrived, immaculate in its form and pleasing  
 25. in its reading, and I considered its words, and they were like a revelation to [my] ears,<sup>23</sup>  
 26. more desirable than honey, nuggets of gold or the choicest corals. And I went out  
 27. to meet its words, which were arrayed with banners of affection and devotion,  
 28. making a covenant of peace and conducting itself in a custom of friendship for the name of  
 29. Heaven, which may never be removed nor depart. Thus I rejoiced at [the letter]  
 30. and celebrated its arrival like discovering a great treasure or like the joy of the fountainhead,<sup>24</sup>  
 31. and like the day of the foundation of Ohola and Oholiba.<sup>25</sup> Let it be the will of the One Who Speaks  
 32. and Creates, the One Who Decrees and Establishes, to glorify you and to raise you up and magnify you in His eyes  
 33. at the head and in the eyes of all who see you, and to perpetuate your grace and perpetuate  
 34. your well-being for ever and ever. And when I discerned in your letter, my master,  
 35. that you are one of the people of the Land of Israel, my devotion and my affection for you grew  
 36. enormously and I asked the Creator of Everything  
 37. to give you your request and return you to your land, which is more precious  
 38. than any other country and happy is he who dwells there, the one who  
 39. lives there and he who is buried there, for scripture promises: (Deut. 32:43)<sup>26</sup>  
 40. "He will make expiation for the land of his people." And it also promises: (Isaiah 33:24) "And no inhabitant will say,  
 41. 'I am sick;' the people who dwell there will be forgiven their iniquity." So may it happen  
 42. that we and you are apportioned a delightful lot and a pleasant portion with those who dwell there  
 43. and those who live there. Now, I know well that you are a great scholar  
 44. and that it was the practice to offer you donations and to

---

22 Abbreviated form of the Hebrew blessing רוח יי תניחנו.

23 The writer gets a bit confused here, switching to the third person—third person being a common epistolary form—although the rest of the letter is in the first person.

24 Refers to the joyous procession at the festival of Sukkot, when water is drawn from a well.

25 In the book of Ezekiel chapter 23, Ohola and Oholiba are two harlots, representative of Israel and Judah.

26 As is common in correspondence of this period, verbatim quotes from the Hebrew Bible are marked with dots above the quoted words.

advocate on your behalf, as is suitable  
 45. for someone like your honour, with the residents of the  
 city of Aden, because they should  
 46. open the palms of their hands and increase their gifts to  
 47. a sage and a great teacher such as you. But what can I  
 do?! I have not  
 48. succeeded in instituting this desirable obligation because  
 a dispute has broken out  
 49. between me and between them concerning delays in executing  
 judgement and perversions of  
 50. justice and about those who teach the Torah incorrectly  
 ('not according to the Halakha'), and I cannot now  
 51. open my mouth to them because of the great extent of the  
 hatred that they bear for me. And also  
 52. I am distant from them, because I reside in a different  
 city,  
 53. three days' journey away, and I only meet up with them now  
 for one month  
 54. every year. I am on my own and they are on their own, so  
 let my lord do me a great kindness  
 55. and not blame me for this and judge me favourably for I  
 have told<sup>27</sup>  
 56. him the truth: (Job 16:19) "and behold, my witness is in  
 heaven." May your well-being, my master,  
 57. and the well-being of your holy teaching grow for ever and  
 ever, *sela*.<sup>28</sup>

#### Margin

1. Also those who are close to you and are joined with you,  
 may their well-being grow always. A great deliverance. The  
 beginning of Tišre 1445 according to the Era of Documents<sup>29</sup>
2. from the city of al-Ġuwwa, Yemen.<sup>30</sup>

#### Address (verso)

- 1a. To the honour of, our esteemed prince, the honourable,  
 great and holy,<sup>31</sup>
- 2a. our master and teacher Nathan ha-Kohen son of the  
 honourable, great and holy

---

27 This could perhaps be read as שסחתי rather than ששחתי, which would represent a minor orthographic difference.

28 The liturgical expressions סלע or אמן סלע often close a letter.

29 'The era of documents' (לשטרות or מנין שטרות), also known as 'the era of the Greeks,' is a common method of dating in Genizah documents that derives its starting point from the establishment of the Seleucid Era. Tišre (the first month of the Jewish year) 1445 equates to September 1133.

30 J. Mann, *The Jews in Egypt and Palestine*, p. 367, read the last two words together as אלגיהומא, but there is a noticeable gap between them. Goitein, in his unpublished transcription read ומא, but this would imply the letter was unfinished. We prefer the reading ימן or perhaps ימין; the settlement of al-Ġuwwa was not well known, so we might well expect the clarification 'Yemen' after it.

31 Abbreviations for כבוד גדולת קדושת

3a. teacher Solomon—his rest be in Eden.<sup>32</sup>

1b. Your lowly student,

2b. Jacob son of Salim—

3b. the spirit of the Lord give him rest.<sup>33</sup>

Note (verso)

He will request a praise for Abyan afterwards.<sup>34</sup>

b. Cambridge University Library T-S 12.585, a legal document of a trader preparing to travel to Aden

The second document from the Cairo Genizah that relates to Yemen is a common type, a legal deed. Jewish Halakhic custom dictates a necessity for written agreements around many aspects of a person's life. Consequently, legal deeds form a major part of the documentary Genizah and, since they usually note the place and date of their composition, they can be a tremendously valuable source of reliable historical information, for the social and economic realities of the Jewish communities of their day.

The form and conduct of much Jewish Halakhic practice is already laid out in the great books of Jewish law, the Mishnah and the two Talmuds, but in the Cairo Genizah scholars have discovered many new forms of legal deed, hitherto unknown, that reflect the changed practices of the Jews of the Islamic world, adapting existing legal customs to suit their contemporary needs. A good example of this is the engagement deed, which was created in the twelfth century as a necessary measure to protect the rights of women, who were having to wait longer and longer between their engagement (previously just an oral contract) and the moment that a betrothal deed (with its financial stipulations) was signed, usually right before the wedding itself. With the increased popularity of the Indian Ocean trade as a means for Jewish men to make a living in the twelfth century, there was a comparable need for the rights of their womenfolk, engaged or married, to be protected in the event that their men either disappeared, presumably lost at sea, or simply decided not to return, having found life too comfortable elsewhere. The voyages from departure until eventual return could take years, and it was not unknown for traders to settle down in Yemen and marry locally there.<sup>35</sup>

---

32 An abbreviation for נוחו עדן, a very common post-mortem blessing: Nathan's father, Solomon, is dead.

33 Again this is an abbreviated form of רוח יי תניחו.

34 Both the reading and the translation of this scribbled note are unsure. Abyan is a settlement to the north east of Aden.

35 As is noted in S.D. Goitein and M.A. Friedman, *India Traders of the Middle Ages: documents from the Cairo Geniza ('India Book')*, p. 11, "the beauty and charm of the women of Yemen are praised in both the Hebrew and

Cambridge University Library T-S 12.585 is a damaged legal document, written on parchment sometime in the second half of the twelfth century. It is in Judaeo-Arabic (Middle Arabic, of a Jewish character, written in Hebrew script) in the handwriting of Mevorak b. Nathan, who writes a number of other legal documents in the Cairo Genizah, including betrothal and divorce deeds as well as a whole raft of legal agreements preserved in the court record book of Fustāṭ for the period of April-August 1156 (Russian National Library Yevr.-Arab. I (Firkovitch II) 1700).

The deed is a legal agreement made between a husband, Moses b. Yefet, and his wife, who is only known by her Arabic name (as was common for Jewish women in Egypt), Sitt al-Faḥr. Moses is a businessman who is planning an overseas voyage to the Yemen, probably Aden. Since the journey was long and arduous, he makes a legal contract to ensure that his wife is provided for in his absence. The agreement stipulates that she may have 25 dinars and five *irdabb*-s (a dry measure for grain, for a total of about 350kg) of wheat towards her maintenance and that of her daughter and maidservant. Since he has already signed some of his property in Fustāṭ over to her, in another document that is mentioned in this agreement, she will be able to sustain herself and her family during his long absence at sea and in the Yemen. This was important since, as the post-mortem blessing indicates, her father was dead and she might have had no one else who could help her. Moses, indeed, is a particularly thorough businessman—although in this he is not unusual, but typical of many such figures in the Cairo Genizah—for he also provides his wife with a conditional divorce deed, allowing her to divorce him in the event that he does not return within a given period of time.<sup>36</sup>

The Genizah does reveal that Moses b. Yefet successfully reached the Yemen, as he is signatory to an important letter sent from Aden in the spring of 1156.<sup>37</sup> The potential dangers of overseas travel, which prompted Moses to leave his wife

---

Arabic literature of the period." On the evolution of the engagement deed see Amir Ashur, "The India trade and the emergence of the engagement contract—a Cairo Geniza study," in S. Huebner and G. Nathan (eds.), *Household and family in the ancient and early medieval Mediterranean*, Cambridge, forthcoming. See also his unpublished PhD dissertation, *Engagement and betrothal documents from the Cairo Geniza*, Tel Aviv, 2006 [in Hebrew], which is being prepared for publication in Brill's "Cambridge Genizah Studies" series.

36 For a woman to remarry she must receive a *geṭ*, a divorce deed from her husband. If a husband were to disappear or never return and there is no proof of his death, then his wife would be unable to remarry. Cambridge University Library T-S 8J5.23, also in the handwriting of Mevorak b. Nathan, is Moses' conditional divorce deed for his wife.

37 An English translation of this letter (PER H 161, from the Papyrussammlung Erherzog Rainer, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna) can be found in S.D. Goitein and M.A. Friedman, *India Traders of the Middle Ages: documents from the Cairo Geniza ('India Book')*, pp. 530-40.

equipped with all the necessary legal protections he could, are starkly displayed in that letter, which is an account of a ship lost on a trading trip from Aden to the Malabar Coast of India. Four Jewish merchants drowned and a vast amount of cargo was lost.

Cambridge University Library T-S 12.585

- 1 [...] אר מר' ורב' משה הזקן היקר ש"צ בן כג"ק מר' ורב' יפת הפרנס הנאמן ראש ה[פרנסים קבל ספרה אלי]
- 2 [ב]לאד אלימן תקרר בינה ובין זוגתה סת אלפכר בת כג"ק מר' ורב' טוביה הזקן הנכ' נ"ע [...]
- 3 [...] אן יכון להא ולאבנתיא וללגאריה אלתי תכדמהם מן אלעין אלגייד כמסה ועשרין [דינארא כל סנה]
- 4 [...] כ]ארג ען אג'רה גמיע אלדאר אלמסתגדה אלעמארה אלתי לה במצר בקצר אלשמע [...]
- 5 [...] א]חז טבאקהא }והדה אלדאר הי אלתי אנתקלת מן מלכה אלי מלך זוגתה פלי באלביע ואלשרי עלי מא ישדה בה אלשטר אלתי בידהא בדלך} ודהא אלכמסה ועשרין דינאר ואלכמסה אראדב אלקמח הי ען מונתהם
- 6 [...] א]מא לזוגתה או לאחד בנאתה פאנה מלתזם עלי נפסה מעכשיו במא יחתאגוה מן
- 7 [...] אלמון ... ותדפע הדה אלכמסה ועשרין דינאר מן אגרה אלדאר אלתי לה במצר

{ } denotes text added above the line.

1 [...] declared before us] Our master and teacher<sup>38</sup> Moses, the esteemed elder, may God protects him, son of the honourable, great and holy,<sup>39</sup> our master and teacher, Yefet the faithful *parnas*, the h[ead of the *parnasim*, before he went on a voyage to

2 the land of Yemen, that he and his wife Sitt al-Faḥr, daughter of our master and teacher Ṭoviyya the esteemed<sup>40</sup> elder—may he rest in Eden<sup>41</sup>—[...] agreed

3 [...] that there will be for her, her daughters and the maidservant who serves them, 25 cash, good [dinars, annually]

4 [and it is for the c]ost of the rent of the newly refurbished house that he owns in Qaṣr al-Šam' [...]<sup>42</sup>

5 [...] o]ne of its floors, and this is the house that he sold from his own possession to his wife's possession in 'sale and purchase,' according to what is stated in the legal document that she holds in her possession. And this 25 dinars and five *irdabb*-s of wheat are for their maintenance

6 [...] either for his wife or one of his daughters, and he is obliged from now in everything they will need for

7 [the maintenance ... and he will pay it from this 25 dinars rent] of the house ~~which he owns~~ in Fustāṭ.

38 Abbreviated titles, מרנא ורבנא or מרנו ורבנו.

39 An abbreviation for כבוד גדולת קדושת, 'the honour of, greatness of, holiness of.'

40 An abbreviation for הנכבד, 'honoured, esteemed.'

41 An abbreviation for נווחו עדן, a post-mortem blessing: her father is dead.

42 'The quarter of the candle makers' in Fustāṭ.

#### *4. Conclusion*

These two contrasting documents, which reflect just a small part of the range of material that the Jewish community of Fustāṭ cast into the storeroom of the Ben Ezra Synagogue, represent invaluable primary sources for the study of the medieval history of Yemen and, in particular, for the role that Yemen played in the Indian Ocean trade as both a commercial and administrative hub. These two alone show the increasing strategic importance of the Yemeni community for maintaining the moribund political structures of the Palestinian Jewish community and its essential role in furthering Egyptian Jewish commerce in the twelfth century. Even with the comprehensive studies of Goitein, Friedman and others, there remains much of interest still to be discovered among the thousands of tattered leaves in the Cairo Genizah Collection. That such important material, attesting to economic, social and political matters, should have been collected out of a religious imperative to avoid desecrating the name of God, is remarkably fortunate for today's students of the Islamic world in the Middle Ages, but, given the extent that religious piety and expressions of faith permeated all the activities of the medieval communities, it should not, perhaps, be unexpected.