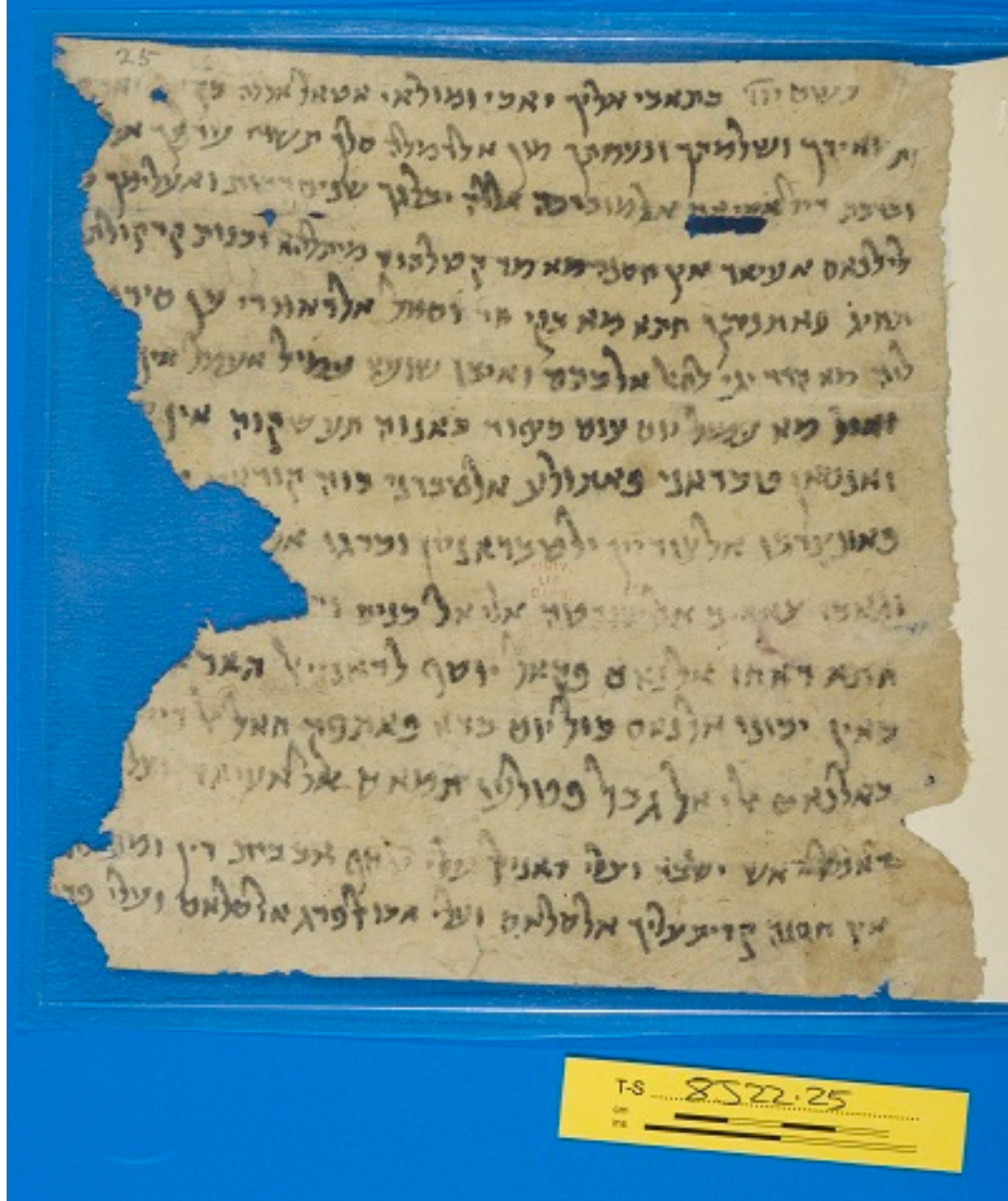


Fragment of the Month: February 2018

What happens on pilgrimage...: T-S 8J22.25

By Melonie Schmierer-Lee

In February, the University of Cambridge is celebrating and recognising LGBT history, an annual event promoting equality and diversity by increasing the visibility of the lives and experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. The Cairo Genizah famously reflects all sorts of aspects of the lives of people not usually visible in the historical record, but there are vanishingly few references to non-heteronormative experiences. This letter is one of the few, fascinating exceptions.



T-S 8J22.25 recto

T-S 8J22.25, a mid-11th century note, was sent from Hasan son of Mu'ammal of Ramla, in Palestine. It describes a very public display of same-sex affection, controversially so, that took place in the synagogue on the holiest day of the year, Yom Kippur. Pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem to celebrate Sukkot spent the fast day in Ramla, and during the service the affectionate behaviour of a man from Tyre and a man from Tiberias caused a public brawl in the synagogue. The (Muslim) police had to be called to restore order for the continuation of the service.

"...Ibn Shu'a was involved in some activities, the first of which occurred on the Yom Kippur fast. A man from Tyre and one from Tiberias fell in love with each other, and the man from Tiberias made passionate overtures to his companion in the presence of the community. The pilgrims from Tyre and Tiberias fought each other and went out... They summoned the chief of police to the synagogue and he stayed there till everyone left..."

The sexual activity that precipitated the Yom Kippur fight likely wasn't considered acceptable to the Jewish authorities (or to their fellow pilgrims). But was it punishable? Moses Maimonides, in his Mishneh Torah, stated that both parties in

any homosexual sex act should be dealt with severely (Mishneh Torah, Issurei Biah 1:14). The theoretical punishment was stoning or flogging, depending on the age of the parties. In practice, the punishments pursued by the Jewish court of the time only consisted of flogging, fining, and excommunication, but Maimonides couldn't advise that the punishment should be less than that required by the Torah.

What does Maimonides have to say on same-sex female relationships? Although there is no biblical prohibition, his Mishneh Torah found a technicality through which punishment could be administered: the crime of disobedience (Mishneh Torah, Issurei Biah 21:8). In his Commentary on the Mishna, Maimonides had to rely on forceful terminology to show that he disapproved of the practice, which he described as 'abominable' and 'disgraceful' (Commentary on the Mishnah, Sanhedrin 7:4).

As for our miscreant lovers in Ramla, it is significant that the events took place during a pilgrimage. We know from studies on pilgrims' behaviour in general that distance from familiar surroundings, the opportunities to meet new people, as well as the physical and mental stress of pilgrimage all could encourage the flouting of conventions and even transgressive behaviour. Though there are halakhic and literary sources that deal with same-sex relationships in this period, once again it is the documents of the Genizah that provide a fascinating glimpse into real life in the Middle Ages.

If you enjoyed this Fragment of the Month, you can find others here.

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