



Fragment of the Month: October 2016

Learning Torah and What is Connected to It: T-S Ar.18(1).16

by Noam Sienna

One of the areas of medieval Jewish life that has been uniquely illuminated by the documents of the Cairo Genizah is the educational process. Hundreds of children's workbooks and exercises have survived from the Genizah, allowing us to reconstruct the process of mastering Hebrew literacy.¹ Children began by tracing the letters, written out by their teacher in large and colourful alphabets, and copying each letter alone and in combinations. Once the pupils had mastered the consonants, vowels, and their various combinations, they moved on to copying texts from the Hebrew Bible (especially Leviticus, but fragments have been found with Genesis, Deuteronomy, Psalms, and Esther), as well as poems and prayers from the liturgy. The overall intent of elementary education was to prepare children for participation in Jewish ritual life, and thus the focus was on literacy and familiarity with Hebrew text.

But while students were learning to read and write the Hebrew alphabet, it is not clear to what extent they were also learning to understand the Hebrew language (that is, vocabulary and grammar). According to some scholars, we can assume that in Genizah society the elementary study of the Hebrew Bible was accompanied by a translation into the vernacular language, as was true of later periods.² This process — known in Judaeo-Arabic as *sharḥ*, in Judaeo-Spanish as *enladinar*, in Yiddish as *fartaytshn*, etc. — is well-documented throughout the Jewish world from the late Middle Ages into the modern period, but until now we have found no direct evidence for its use in the medieval Jewish societies of the Mediterranean basin.³ As it turns out, we do have some information now regarding the use of a vernacular *sharḥ* in a child's education in an unpublished Genizah manuscript.⁴ The manuscript fragment seems to be from an unidentified treatise on education, of which 9 pages have been preserved (two bifolia and one

detached leaf). The fragments, in Judaeo-Arabic with many Hebrew quotations, are written on paper in a clear hand classified as documentary or semi-cursive Oriental script, and which might be dated palaeographically to the late 12th or early 13th century.⁵

The manuscript is focused on outlining the essential elements of a child's proper education. After discussing the importance of studying both the Written Torah [i.e. the text of the Bible] and the Oral Torah [rabbinic literature], and praising the communities of "*sukkān bilād al-Rum wal-Faranj* [the inhabitants of the countries of the Byzantines and the Franks]" who do so from early childhood, the author explains the importance of the mastery of the Hebrew language, taught by instruction in the vernacular and oral translation [*sharḥ*] of the Biblical text:

As soon as the child begins to articulate speech and language, his father must instruct him in the articulation of Torah, just as he must also accustom [the child's] limbs from the beginnings of their growth to the performance of the commandments... And thus through the virtue of exercise... until the child grows and he reaches six years... [Then] he should go to the teacher of children and work for the majority of the day in learning Torah and what is connected to it, I mean its explanation [*sharḥuha*] in translation [*al-tarjūm*] and in the vernacular tongue [*al-lisān al-mafhūm*], and the books of the prophets and writings also, one by one.⁶



T-S Ar.18(1).16 P2 verso

This text illustrates how (at least in one writer's opinion) parents had the responsibility to begin the child's education at home, both with regards to the physical performance of the commandments and to familiarity with important Biblical and liturgical texts. Later the author of this treatise emphasizes again the importance of "the translation [*ta'bīr*] of [the Torah's] texts into the vernacular language [*al-lugha al-mafhūma*]."7 From this it is clear that a child's early schooling in medieval Fustat, building on the religious education they received in the home, included not only literacy in the Hebrew alphabet but also practice in translating from Hebrew into the vernacular language. A fuller translation and analysis of this text, hopefully forthcoming, will help shed light on the schooling process of children in Genizah society and add to our knowledge of medieval Jewish ideas about education.

Notes:

1 Many of them are analyzed in Goitein, *Sidrei Hinukh*, 1962; Bezalel Narkiss, "Illuminated Hebrew Children's Books from Mediaeval Egypt," *Scripta Hierosolymitana*, 1972; Judith Olszowy-Schlanger, "Learning to Read and Write in Medieval Egypt: Children's Exercise Books from the Cairo Geniza," *Journal of Semitic Studies*, 2003; and Shulamit Elizur, "'The Acquisition of Knowledge is Greater than Silver': On Educational Metered Writing Exercises from the Middle Ages," *Ha'Ivrit* (Academy of the Hebrew Language), 2016.

2 See, e.g., Olszowy-Schlanger 2003: 68.

3 See Menahem Banitt, "La'az," *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 1971; and Moshe Bar-Asher (ed.), *Studies in Jewish Languages: Bible Translations and Spoken Dialects*, 1988.

4 T-S Ar.18(1).16 and T-S Ar.47.7. The fragments are listed and briefly described in Baker and Polliack's *Catalogue* (2001: 58, 453). I am grateful for the assistance of Prof. Katrien Vanpee with the Judeo-Arabic of this text; I hope to publish a full translation and analysis of this document in the future.

5 Thanks to Prof. Judith Olszowy-Schlanger for her confirmation of this initial analysis.

6 T-S Ar.18(1).16 P2-P3. This phrase could also conceivably refer to the Aramaic Targum, and thus *sharḥuha bil-tarjūm wabil-lisān al-mafhūm* would refer to the traditional tripartite reading of the Torah in Hebrew, followed by the Targum, and then an Arabic rendering. Many examples of these three texts written verse by verse have been found in the Genizah, such as those in box T-S B1, and see Goitein 1962: 54.

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