

DISCARDED
HISTORY

THE
GENIZAH
OF
MEDIEVAL
CAIRO

EXHIBITION GUIDE
AND TRANSLATIONS

DISCARDED HISTORY

When the spirit is gone, we put the corpse out of sight to protect it from abuse. In like manner, when the writing is worn out, we hide the book to preserve it from profanation. The contents of the book go up to heaven like the soul...

SOLOMON SCHECHTER



Genizah is a Hebrew word meaning 'treasury'. To the Jews of medieval Cairo, a Genizah was a place for worn out scrolls or other sacred texts. Brought to Cambridge by scholar Solomon Schechter in 1897 the contents of the Genizah of the Ben Ezra Synagogue are among the University Library's greatest treasures.

Through the Genizah manuscripts in Discarded History, we reveal the social, business and personal lives of the remarkable Jewish community of Fustat, Old Cairo, a thousand years ago.

LOST JEWISH TREASURE FOUND BY SCOTTISH TWINNS

In 1896, intrepid twins Agnes Lewis and Margaret Gibson returned to Cambridge from a research trip to Egypt and Palestine. They brought with them a treasure lost for a thousand years: a page from the original Hebrew book of Ben Sira. The page had accumulated along with thousands of other documents in the Ben Ezra Synagogue, Old Cairo, in a chamber called a Genizah. The Jewish community had been placing their worn-out books and documents in the Genizah since at least the 11th century CE.

Cambridge lecturer Solomon Schechter was so excited by the sisters' remarkable discovery he travelled to Old Cairo to see for himself what the Genizah held. The Chief Rabbi of Egypt gave Schechter permission to take whatever he liked. Schechter declared that he 'liked all', and shipped almost 200,000 manuscripts back to Cambridge.

1 THE BOOK OF BEN SIRÁ Palestine or Egypt, 10th century

This manuscript changed the course of scholarship. It prompted Schechter to travel to Cairo and retrieve the contents of the Genizah. The book of Ben Sira, known in Christian circles as Ecclesiasticus, was composed in the 2nd century BCE, but doubts about its sanctity led to its exclusion from the Hebrew Bible and the loss of its Hebrew text in the Middle Ages. In Solomon Schechter's day, the oldest known version was in Greek, and some questioned the existence of a Hebrew original. When Schechter saw that this manuscript preserved a copy of the original text, he made plans to track down its source in Cairo.

Hebrew, paper
Or. 1102

2 SOLOMON SCHECHTER TO AGNES LEWIS

Schechter wrote to Mrs Lewis declaring his excitement at identifying the Ben Sira/Ecclesiasticus fragment. He insists that for the time being they keep the discovery secret.

Dear Mrs Lewis,

I think we have reason to congratulate ourselves. For the fragment I took with me represents a piece of the Original Hebrew of Ecclesiasticus. It is the first time that such a thing was discovered. Please do not speak yet about the matter. I will come to you tomorrow about 11 pm and talk over the matter with you how to make the matter known.

*In haste and great excitement
yours sincerely
S. Schechter*

3 HEBREW BIBLE, THE BOOK OF NUMBERS in Arabic script Palestine or Egypt, 11th century

This Bible is written in the Hebrew language but with Arabic letters. It was probably written by a Karaite, a member of a Jewish sect that objected to the rabbinic tradition of mainstream Judaism and sought to return to the pure teachings of the Bible. Some Karaite scholars of the Middle Ages chose to write their Bibles with

Arabic script instead of Hebrew, as they believed it allowed them to present a more correct pronunciation of the original Hebrew text.

Hebrew in Arabic characters, paper
T-S Ar.52.242

4 QUR'AN in Hebrew script Egypt, 11th century

In the Genizah we can see evidence of close relations between the different faiths of Egypt. Some Jews were clearly interested in learning about Islamic theology. This fragment contains Suras 1 and 2 from the Qur'an, followed by omens for undertaking a journey. The text of the Qur'an has been transliterated into Hebrew script, suggesting that it can only have belonged to a Jew.

Judæo-Arabic, paper
T-S Ar.51.62

5 JERUSALEM TALMUD, TRACTATE GITTIN Palestine, 9/10th century

The Ben Ezra Genizah preserved many sacred texts unique to the Jews of Syria and Palestine. This large page from a magnificent copy of the Jerusalem Talmud (*The Talmud of the Land of Israel*) was an important discovery when Schechter first saw it in the sisters' possession. Syro-Palestinian traditions of Jewish worship were almost entirely forgotten until the discovery of the Genizah.

Aramaic, Hebrew, parchment
Lewis-Gibson Talmud 2.4

6 HEBREW BIBLE, THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH Du Gunbadan, Iran, 903–4 CE

When sacred books and scrolls became damaged and were no longer fit for use they were placed in the Genizah chamber. These two leaves from a small, personal copy of the Bible were written by a scribe called Joseph in Du Gunbadan in Iran. This Bible – the oldest dated medieval Hebrew manuscript – travelled far before it was eventually deposited in the Genizah.

Hebrew, parchment
T-S NS 246.26.2

7 UNCONSERVED TORAH Egypt (?), 10/11th century

Schechter described the Genizah as a 'battlefield of books'. 120 years later almost all of Cambridge's 200,000 Genizah fragments have been carefully conserved. This small copy of the Hebrew Pentateuch has been left in its original condition to show something of the task that confronted Schechter in Cairo.

Hebrew, parchment
T-S 6K3

Some... have perished outright, and are literally ground to dust in the terrible struggle for space, whilst others, as if overtaken by a general crush, are squeezed into big unshapely lumps.
Solomon Schechter

The Ben Ezra Synagogue before its recent restoration
Fustat, 1970s



SYNAGOGUE AT HEART OF COMMUNITIES

Public life in Fustat (Old Cairo) centred on religious institutions: the synagogue, the church, the mosque. For the Jews of Palestinian heritage, the Ben Ezra Synagogue, known in the Middle Ages as ‘the Synagogue of the Palestinians’ or ‘of the Jerusalemites’, was the community’s most important social hub. It provided a place for worship, education, public business, and charity.

The congregation prayed there three times a day, sent their children to study the Hebrew Bible, and assembled to exchange news and collect the charitable donations that supported the poor, the sick and refugees. People were proud of their magnificent building, and the wealthy donated cash for its upkeep, colourful hangings for its walls, and books and scrolls for its library.

1 PALESTINIAN VERSION OF THE AMIDA PRAYER

Palestine or Egypt,
10/11th century

The oldest form of the Amida prayer, recited by Jews at every weekday service, included a curse against ‘*Christians and heretics*’. The old Palestinian version of the rite, used in the Ben Ezra Synagogue in the Middle Ages, constantly reminded the congregation of the dangers posed by Christians and other heretical sectarians. In modern versions the wording has been changed to curse ‘slanderers’ and ‘enemies’ instead.

Hebrew, parchment
T-S K27.33b

*And may the Christians and
sectarians instantly perish...*

2 ALMS LIST

Fustat, 1107 CE

Judaeo-Arabic, paper
T-S NS J41

*In the name of God, Friday the 8th
of the month of Av, may its mourning
be turned into joy.
Dispensed to the poor, may God in his
mercy make them rich, 4 and a half
qintars of bread.
The orphans of the astrologer 8
The man from Acre 6
Abu Kathir 6
Noah 3
Sittan 2
Abu Hilal 4
Ayyash 3
Ibrahim of Tyre 4
The neighbour 2
The Surani 6
The acquaintance of Abu Surur 4
Samih 4
Umm Ubayd 3
Ma’la 5
An orphan girl and her brothers 43
The wife of the deceased man 4
The sons of Rahamim 3
Symeon 4
Nathan 3
The wife of the deceased man Eliakim 2
His travelling companion 2
The female proselyte 4
Maliha 3
Yaqub 1
Zafaran 8
Siba 4
The children of Abu Said 6
Umm Furayj 2
Wahib 3
Shalom 3
Umm al-Khayyat 2*

*Kinana 1
The ‘Adept’ ben al-Halla 8
Umm Sabi 3
Danil and his son 2
The Berber woman 3
Her sister 3
Zuhayr and his father-in-law 6
Yafuni 2
The newcomer from Rum 6
The ‘runner’ Kohen 6
His mother and maternal aunt 4
The brothers of the deceased man 3
Umm Aynayn Hamd 4
The children of the deaf man 8
Mubarak 4
The mother-in-law of Elia
and the orphan boy 2
Elia 3
Elia ‘the short’ 2
The orphans of the Karaite 2
The female washer of the dead
of the Rum 3
Rebecca 4
Umm Matatya 2
The acquaintance of the dyer 4
Abu Khalif the blind man 5
His in-law 1
Two acquaintances of Azhar 16
Ben Yahya 4
The acquaintance of the man
from Damietta 6
The daughter of al-Thulayth 2
The daughter of al-Jady 2
The sister of Ishaq 2
Ben Saada 2
The son of the writer/singer
of liturgical poetry 6
Saada 4
Umm Miryam 2
Abu Shaykha 2
Barakat the fortune teller 4
Salama 4
The man from Qalaha 3
Umm Zariifa 4
The wife of Awad 4
The mother-in-law of the parnas
of the Rum 4
Joseph 6
The supervisor of milk 4
The woman from Sicily 4
Shamia the newcomer 6
The widow of the seller of
honey sherbet 4
The afflicted newcomer 3
Shemarya 4
The proselyte from Cairo 6
The man from Hijaz 3
Abu Khalifa 6
Samih the grave digger 4
Umm Hilala 2
The man with tremors 3
The worker or dealer in lead 5
The wife of the furrier 5
Ben Danil 8
A newcomer 2
The Rayyis ben Joseph –
may his memory be blessed*

*The glassmaker 4
The son of the mother-in-law
of al-Mutalibi 2 – Received
A newcomer elder of Baghdad 6
The cantor ben al-Quda’i 6
The mother-in-law of ben al-[...] 4
The acquaintance of Abu l-Muna 8
The daughter of Hashika 5
Abu Mukhtar 4
His sister 3
The wife of the tanner 3
Yaqub the blind man 3
Makhluf the blind man 2*

Translation by MC

3 SYNAGOGUE INVENTORY

Fustat, 1080 CE

Hebrew, parchment
T-S 20.47

*... new material, [a colour] with yellow,
from the family of Sana’a al-Dawla,
on which there is inscribed ‘for the
congregation of the Iraqis’... and a
siqlatun handkerchief, black and
white, from Halfon... A grass-coloured
handkerchief with a blackish colour
from Abu l-Husayn b. Abu l-Bayan.
A very old siqlatun handkerchief,
black with white... and old... and
a small white handkerchief made of
fine sticky material and a piece of red
brocade... with the name of Farah
inscribed on it, and some siqlatun
material for the columns and a piece
of siqlatun with a fringe for the book
of Haftara portions and a covering for
the Ark... and material... for the Ark,
white and red, siqlatun and two worn
patches of western siqlatun and a prayer
shawl for priests and a green curtain for
the entrance-way... twenty-five lamps...
weaving their four chains... two or three
of iron and one of copper and on the
head... and two small copper lamps...
and three ‘scorpions’ made of copper for
snails [= kinds of lamp]... two bowls
of yellow copper and four small bowls...
and thirty-eight pen candelabra and
seventeen woven candelabra.
A candelabrum with three uprights
and a star, and its candelabra one large.
A big chain with a ‘scorpion’ and its
hooks with three candelabra (Zara’a
dedicated it). An iron triangle and
a large copper circle, with regard
to which it is doubtful if it belongs to the
Babylonians or to the Jerusalemites,
and a pair of ‘seats’ for reading (one
large and the other small...).*

Translation by SDG

HOLY BOOKS RECOVERED FROM CRUSADERS

On 15 July 1099 CE Christian armies of the First Crusade captured Jerusalem from its Fatimid defenders. The city was looted and burned, and many of its inhabitants slaughtered.

Among the Genizah manuscripts are rare accounts of the fate of the Jewish community in Jerusalem following the Crusader occupation. We learn that Jewish captives were taken, and came under pressure to convert to Christianity. Even the community's large collection of books and scrolls was looted and then ransomed

back to them. The Egyptian Jews came to Jerusalem's aid. Many books previously in Jerusalem ended up in Egypt and eventually in the Genizah itself.

The Crusader conquest was the latest in a series of wars that had afflicted the Holy Land throughout the 11th century. The relative silence of Genizah sources in the immediate aftermath is indicative of the widespread destruction of the traditional centres of Jewish life and learning in Palestine.

1 LETTER FROM THE JEWISH ELDERS OF ASHQELON

Egypt, 1100 CE

Hebrew, paper
T-S 20.113

News still reaches us that among those who were redeemed from the Franks and remained in Ashqelon some are in danger of dying of want. Others remained in captivity, and yet others were killed before the eyes of the rest, who themselves were killed afterwards with all manner of tortures; [for the enemy murdered them] in order to give vent to his anger on them. We did not hear of a single man of Israel who was in such plight without exerting ourselves to do all that was in our power to save him.

The Most High has granted opportunities of relief and deliverance to individual fugitives, of which the first and most perfect instance – after the compassion of Heaven – has been the presence in Ashqelon of the honourable sheikh Abu l-Fadl Sahl son of Yusha' son of Shay'a (may God preserve him), an agent of the Sultan (may God bestow glory upon his victories), whose influence is great in Alexandria where his word is very much heeded. He arranged matters wisely and took great pain in securing the ransom; but it would require a lengthy discourse to explain how he did it. But he could only ransom some of the people and had to leave the others. In the end, all those who could be ransomed from them were liberated, and only a few whom they kept remained in their hands, including a boy of about 8 years of age, and a man, known as [...] the son of the Tustari's wife. It is reported that the Franks urged the latter to embrace the Christian faith of his own free will and promised to treat him well, but he told them, how can I become a Christian and be left in peace by them [the Jews], who had disbursed on his behalf a great sum. Until this day these captives remain in their [the Franks'] hands; as well as those who were taken to Antioch, but these are few; and not counting those who abjured their faith because they lost patience as it was not possible to ransom them, and because they despaired of being permitted to go free.

We were not informed, praise be to the Most High, that the accursed ones who are called Ashkenazim [Germans] violated or raped women, as did the others. Now, among those who have reached safety are some who escaped on the second and third days following the battle and left with the governor who was granted safe conduct; and others who, after having been caught by the Franks, remained in their hands for some time but escaped in the end; these are but few. The majority consists of those who were ransomed. To our sorrow, some of them ended their lives under all kind of suffering and affliction. The privations which they had to endure caused some of them to leave for this country without food or protection against the cold, and they died on the way. Others in a similar way perished at sea; and yet others, after having arrived here safely, became exposed to a 'change of air'; they came at the height of the plague, and a number of them died. We had, at the time, reported the arrival of each group. And when the aforementioned honoured sheikh arrived, he brought a group of them, the bulk of those who had reached Ashqelon; he spent the Sabbath and celebrated Passover with them on the way in the manner as is required by such circumstances. He contracted a private loan for the sum that he had to pay the camel drivers and for their maintenance on the way, as well as the caravan guards and for other expenses, after having already spent other sums of money, which he did not charge to the community. All this is in addition to the money that was borrowed and spent in order to buy back 230 volumes, 100 codices and 8 Torah scrolls. All these are communal property and are now in Ashqelon.

The community, after having disbursed about 500 dinars for the actual ransom of the individuals, for maintenance of some of them and for the ransom, as mentioned above, of the sacred books remained indebted for the sum of 200 dinars. This is in addition to what has been spent on behalf of those who have been arriving from the beginning until now, on water and other drinks, medical treatment, maintenance, and, in so far as possible, clothing. If it could be calculated how much this has cost over such a long period, the sum would indeed be great.

Had the accepted practice been followed, that is, of selling three Jewish captives for 100 (dinars), the whole

available sum would have been spent for the ransom of only a few. However, the grace of the Lord, may His Name be exalted, and his ever-ready mercy, has been bestowed upon these wretched people...

Translation by SDG

2 A CRUSADER NOTE

Acre Palestine, 11th century

During their conquest of the Holy Land, the Crusaders took prisoners for ransom, and plundered ancient synagogues for books and scrolls to sell. Someone, a Westerner, has made a neat Medieval Latin note of the content of this looted book 'interpretacio esaya prophete' (a commentary on the prophet Isaiah). The words probably helped indicate resale value. The book was at least 70 years old when the Crusaders seized it. An earlier owner's note states that it was purchased by a man from Acre in 1031 CE.

Latin, Hebrew, parchment
T-S 12.722

A Crusader note
T-S 12.722



MAN FORCED TO GIVE UP EMPLOYMENT

All citizens of the Islamic Empire had the right to petition the ruler directly to seek justice. When Abd al-Baqi, a Jew in the Nile Delta town of Malij found himself in trouble, he petitioned Saladin, the ruler of the Ayyubid Empire, directly and asked for his help.

1 PETITION TO SALADIN

Malij, Egypt, 12th century

Arabic, paper
T-S K2.96

Nasih al-Din Ishaq. The slave Abd al-Baqi ibn Yahya, the Jew, who resides in Malij. In the name of God, the merciful and compassionate. May God, the exalted, make eternal the rule of the exalted and lofty seat, the mighty lord, al-Malik al-Nasir, the uniter of the word of the faith, the conqueror of the slaves of the cross, Salah al-Dunya wa-l-Din, sultan of Islam and the Muslims, reviver of the dynasty of the commander of the faithful, cause his power to endure and exalt his word. The slave kisses the ground and reports that he is a poor man with a family and children, who makes his living among Muslims in Malij in the province of al-Garbiyya. He pays the poll tax for which he is liable and there is no one with whom he has bad relations. Recently he has been hurt and made to suffer by the poll-tax officials. They have summarily made him give up his employment and forced him to work as a tax collector and an informant. There has been no precedent for this for 60 years. The justice of the master should prevent his being caused damage and his being made to give up his livelihood. He asks for the issuing of an exalted rescript, may God increase its efficacy, to all the officials concerned with the collection of the poll tax in the province of al-Garbiyya to release him so that nothing will befall him and to treat his case with justice and impartiality, that he may be able to live in his native town with his family and children. Let the exalted rescript be deposited in his hand, as a kindness and benefaction to him. Praise be to God alone and his blessings be upon our lord Muhammad, his prophet, and save him.

Translation by GK

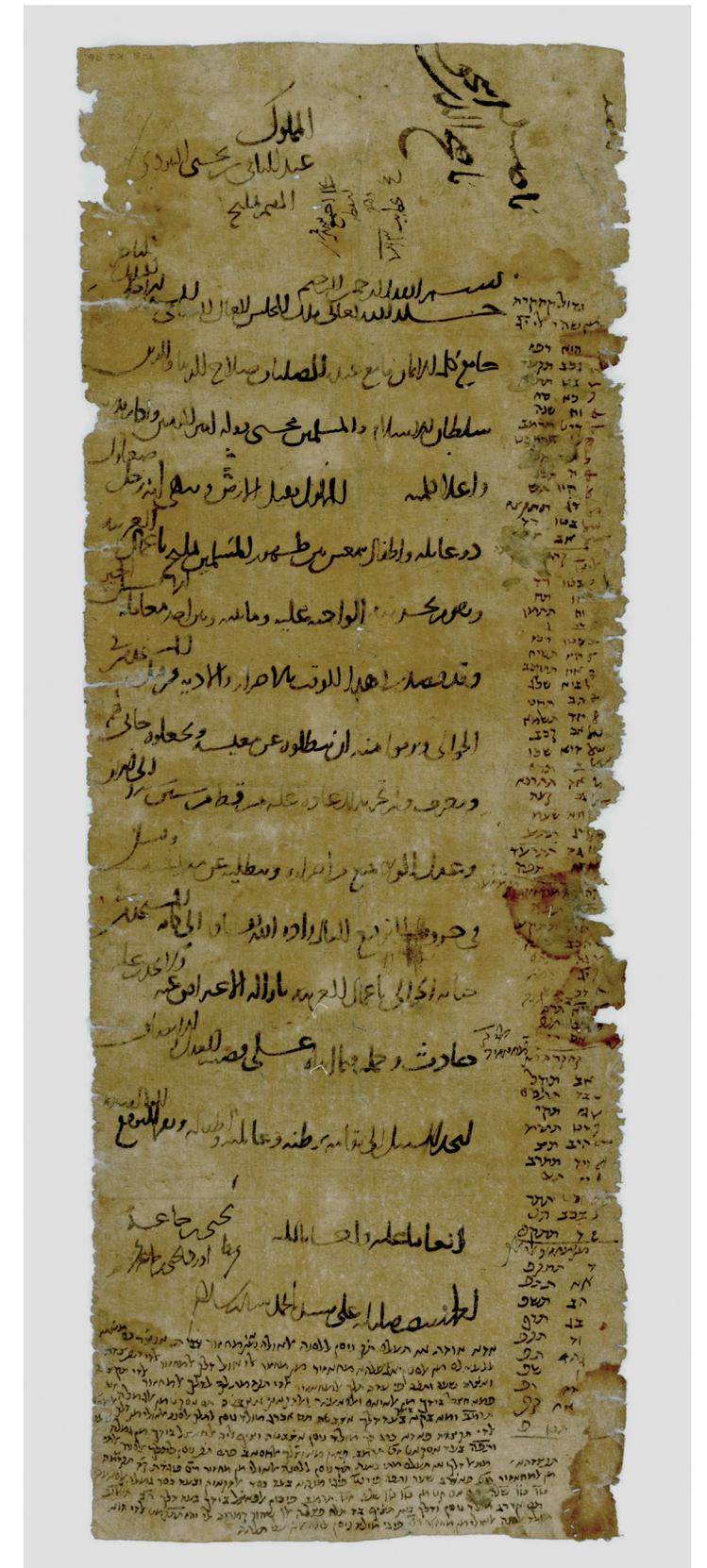
2 SALADIN'S REPLY

Egypt, 12th century

Arabic and Hebrew, paper
T-S K2.96

If there has been a precedent for you to work as a tax collector, you have no excuse with regard to the service of the aforementioned people.

Petition to Saladin
T-S K2.96



WOMAN AFFECTED BY DISFIGURING DISEASE

1 LETTER FROM A REFUGEE Tripoli, Lebanon, 1070s CE

The invasion of the Holy Land by the Seljuk Turks in the later 11th century was extremely violent and created large numbers of refugees, Jewish, Muslim and Christian. This letter is from a Jewish woman who had to flee Jerusalem, ending up in Tripoli in Lebanon. There she writes: *'I am an ill woman on the brink of insanity, on top of the hunger of my family and the little girl who are all with me, and the horrible news I heard about my son.'* She suggests it would be better to be captured since those in captivity *'find someone to give them food and drink'*. As refugees, she and her children are starving.

Judaeo-Arabic, parchment
Lewis-Gibson Misc. 35

*I was with him on the day I saw
them killed in terrible fashion...*

2 LETTER FROM A WOMAN WITH LEPROSY Egypt, c. 1090 CE

Hebrew, paper
T-S 13J13.16

The Lord answer you in the day of trouble! The name of the God of Jacob protect you!' (Psalms 20:2) 'May He send you help from the sanctuary, and give you support from Zion' (Psalms 20:3) 'He has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy' (Psalms 72:13) To the honourable, great and holy, glorious crown and diadem, a good name from above. To our master and teacher, our lord David the Great Prince, Head of all Israel in Exile, may our God keep him and our LORD preserve him and our Creator protect him, and may God allow him to see male offspring from his loins, to take his place and the place of his righteous ancestors. May He extend his days and his years in delight. Amen.

Your poor maidservant – pathetic, grief-stricken, wretched, worried and impoverished by my sins – I hereby present my supplication [before the LORD and] before you, that you may pay heed to the words of your maidservant, 'because my sighs are many and my heart is [faint]' (Lamentations 1:22), for I am all alone: I have neither husband, nor son, nor daughter, nor brother, nor sister.

I am 'like a lonely bird on a rooftop' (Psalms 102:8). As my sins and my transgressions increased, I developed a serious affliction upon my nose, and the infection spread, and it festered and my face was eaten away. This disease is worsening, and I cannot perform any work. I am naked, thirsty, and I lack everything. I am powerless. There is no one to take care of me, even if I were to die. Now then, [I] throw myself down before the LORD and before my lord, that you might show pity to me, according to your kindness, and take action for me, for the sake of the LORD and the sake of the merit of your righteous, pious and pure ancestors. 'You will decide on a matter, and it will be established for you, and light [will shine] on your ways' (Job 22:28). And may my lord order a charitable collection in any place that our lord desires, either in Cairo or the city, that I may find compassion and respite from the LORD and from you. And let my lord not send me back empty-handed [...] and humiliated from him. I shall be praying to the LORD for your pleasant and good name. And may God Almighty bless you, make you fruitful and multiply you, so that you become a congregation of nations, and may He give Abraham's blessing to you and to your descendants with you. And may your wellbeing increase and grow, and may your honour accrue and become greater than all others', forever and for all eternity. Amen.

Translation by BMO

3 LETTER FROM THE LEPERS OF TIBERIAS Tiberias, Palestine, 11th century

A man has died and cash is missing. The leper community of Tiberias sent two people out to collect funds from Egypt, a leper and a healthy man. After nine months of silence, Hillel, head of the Jewish community in Tiberias, has just heard that the leper is dead, and Hillel tries to retrieve the money he had collected. Lepers congregated in Tiberias, seeking cures in its hot springs, and had to rely on public charity to sustain them.

Hebrew, paper
Lewis-Gibson Misc. 25

They sent an emissary, a leper by the name of Kalaf of Aleppo, and with him was another healthy man.

We've recently received a report that he has departed this life...

4 AN EARTHQUAKE AND ITS AFTERMATH Ramla, Palestine, 1033 CE

Hebrew, paper
T-S 18J3.9

They came out of the houses into the streets because they saw in the houses that the walls were buckling back and forth, and the beams were flexing in and out of position in the walls. The fortified structures collapsed and the new dwellings were thrown down, and many died under the rubble because they had no means of escape. Everyone came out of their houses, each one leaving behind all that they had, and fled for their lives. Wherever they turned, they could see the evidence of God's mighty deeds. Walls had been thrown one on top of another and cast down, and all those that remained were damaged and broken open. No one is living within them because their owners are afraid that they might even now fall on them.

Even to write a little of what occurred causes my hand to grow weary of writing, and my mind is troubled by what the eye has seen and the ear has heard. Scripture has indeed been fulfilled: 'Behold, the LORD empties the earth, and makes it waste, and turns it upside down, and scatters its inhabitants' (Isaiah 24:1). The intelligent man will understand its interpretation. Everyone was alike, the ordinary person like the priest, the slave like his master, when they left their citadels seeking to save their own lives. Many resigned themselves to divine judgement, reciting 'The LORD is the true God, the living God and the everlasting King etc' (Jeremiah 10:10), 'Who looks at the earth and it shakes etc' (Psalms 104:32), 'Who shakes the earth from its place etc' (Job 9:6), 'Who touches the land and it melts' (Amos 9:5), 'And everyone who dwells in it will languish etc' (Hosea 4:3), 'Who can stand before His indignation etc' (Nahum 1:6).

And this event occurred on Thursday, the twelfth day of the month of Tevet, before sunset, all of a sudden in Ramla, and in all of the land of Palestine, in the fortified towns and the rural

villages alike, even in all the coastal fortresses up to the fortress of [...] and in all the towns of the Negev and in the hill country as far as Jerusalem, and in all the towns up to Shechem (modern Nablus) and the villages as far as Tiberias, and in all the [...] of the hills of Galilee and all of the Land of Israel. And those who have been out travelling on the roads tell of the mighty deeds of the living God, saying 'We have seen the mountains shaking, skipping like rams, their stones shattered, the hills rocked and the trees bent down. Even the well water, in places, came up to the brim.' The tongue is too short to tell the full tale. Were it not for the mercy of our God, who showed us mercy because of his great kindness, and caused it to happen before the end of the day, so that everyone could see each other and warn each other, then it might have happened in the night, when everyone would have been asleep in their beds unable to escape, bar a very few. But His mercies are great and His kindnesses are numerous, and though He decreed, He will not carry out a complete destruction. He even showed great generosity by, before the quake, summoning up dark clouds that rained heavy raindrops. Two great rainbows were seen, one of which appeared divided, and fire was seen from the south-west, at the very moment of the quake, such as had not been experienced since ancient times. That night it shook again, and everyone was outside – men, women and children – crying out to the God of the Spirits to still the earth, to give it rest, to save man and beast. Again on Friday night it shook, and on Saturday night. Everyone was alarmed, gripped with trembling. The land and all its inhabitants were melting away helplessly, weeping and crying out in a loud voice: 'O merciful One, show mercy and have compassion, save us from this evil. Do not come to a judgement out of rage. Remember mercy and do not remember our former sins.' Everyone is clothed with trembling, sitting on the ground, trembling at every moment, swaying and shaking. These last eight days there has been no peace of mind and no rest for the soul.

What could this letter-writer do but speak to the people to declare a fast, call an assembly, and go out into the field to the cemetery, fasting, weeping and mourning, and saying 'Rend your heart and not your clothing and return to the LORD your God etc' (Joel 2:13),

'Come, let us return to the LORD etc' (Hosea 6:1), 'Who knows? He may still turn and relent etc' (Jonah 3:9). Perhaps he will turn from the ferocity of his anger and we shall not perish. And the great miracle was that all the days that the people were cast out into the open and in the streets, no rain fell. Also the governor of the city, with the men in the caliph's employ, put up tents for them outside the town, and they are still there even now. May the Everlasting God, the LORD, look down in His mercy at His world, show mercy to His creations and save man and beast, and may He have compassion for babes and sucklings and those that can't distinguish right from left, so that we shall not perish. And may He save you from this and things like it, and may He hide you from all harsh decrees and shelter you in His lair on an evil day, and may He hide you in the shelter of His wings. May He exalt you, and preserve for you your good deeds, your kindnesses and your charitable acts, and may He let you dwell in safety and free of the fear of evil. Peace to you, and peace to your household, and peace to all that you have. Receive peace from the Lord of Peace.

Translation by BMO

LETTER FROM THE HEAD OF THE JERUSALEM ACADEMY

Ramla, Palestine, 11th century

Hebrew, paper
T-S 13J14.5

To the dear, glorious, honourable, great, holy master and teacher Abraham ha-Kohen 'Prince of the Congregation' – may the Rock be his aid and his shelter's shade, and may he crown him and help him find grace, and hope and trust in Him – son of the honourable, holy master and teacher Isaac ha-Kohen – his rest be in Eden. Accept, our mighty Prince of the Congregation, a blessing from the LORD and righteousness from the God of his salvation, as well as from me and from my son, much wellbeing without end. The intention of these lines to his Honour concerns a request that was asked of me by an elder from the city's nobles by the name Murajja, one of my greatest friends who honours me exceedingly. Men of his acquaintance came to him and asked him to make a request of his Honour.

The one known as Qayn ibn Abd al-Qadir had reported that the governor, whose name and byname is Abu-l Futuh, Ruler of the District, has been seeking [his arrest] due to his earlier deeds. [Qayn] came to ask for a letter to his Honour asking this Abu-l Futuh the Ruler to do him no harm because he had already repented. And this man Qayn came and threw himself down on the floor: 'I am your supplicant!' And so I am requesting of his Honour to speak to the Ruler so that he does not harm him. And inform him of my standing with [his Honour] and of my standing with the elder so that my request will be more acceptable to him. And whatever he does to this man Qayn he also does to me, because members of his household came to the place where I am living now: they know that I am in good standing with our elder Prince of the Congregation. And may his wellbeing and the wellbeing of his honour and of his retinue and of his friends grow and not be laid. A great salvation! Solomon the downtrodden, who looks for and awaits God's salvation.

Translation by BMO

An earthquake and its aftermath
T-S 18J3.9



CHARITABLE APPEAL LAUNCHED

The Jewish community, like the Muslim society around it in Egypt, put special emphasis on public charity. The disadvantaged — the poor, the sick and foreign immigrants — could have their stories told in the synagogue and collections held for them. Money was pledged to support widows, orphans, to pay

taxes, to provide bread, to support the pilgrims in Jerusalem and to maintain the synagogues there. People left property to the community so that its rents could help those in need, and generosity was recognised as one of the highest personal virtues.

1 LETTER FROM THE HEAD OF THE PUMBEDITHA ACADEMY

Pumbeditha, Iraq, c. 970 CE

Hebrew, paper
T-S 13J25.5

[We] thank His Holy Name for ransoming it, as it is written: 'My lips will jubilantly cry out when I sing praises to you, and my soul, which you have ransomed'. And [we are hereby] informing [you] that though you — our brothers, the delights of our eyes, and the joys of our hearts and our friends in spirit — may have forgotten us, we have not forgotten you; for you are considered by us the very essence of our life, and how can a man forget the essence of his life?! And [we have not forgotten] your contributions, 'of which we have heard and known, and of which our forefathers told us', for you used to provide our daily bread, and how can a man forget the food that is his need? And [we have not forgotten] that the provision of our water is from you, and how can a man fail to recall the source of his life?

Therefore, though many years have passed and many days have gone by and you have not been in contact with us, [whether in the form of] letters, [legal] questions, votive offerings or donations, as was your forefathers' custom — may the memory of the righteous be for a blessing — [yet, despite all this] you are foremost in our thoughts. You are inscribed like a seal upon our heart; you murmur with its stirring; like a seal upon our arms you are engraven. And despite the fact that it is not always seen, it is the place of an important precept. And 'behold on the palms' we have engraven you, which will be seen.

Therefore, with their movements you will appear to us from a distance like lightning in the darkness, like the shade of a rock in the wilderness. And indeed it is said: the Lord 'is the one who knows and a witness' in these matters. If we should forget you, may our strength be forgotten. And we [praise] the memory of your parents so often, our tongues become dry. And above our highest joy [you] will be set, as the messenger prophesied, saying: 'If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither, let [my tongue] cleave to my palate if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy'. And with a great deal of

contemplation we say: 'For what reason have you forgotten us?' Our elders sit desolate, our young men are sighing, our teachers are grieving, and we suffer bitterly because we see how the world continues to be laid waste. Though surely it is in accordance with the bidding of our Holy One, because on His covenant, which is his Law, [the world] stands. As it is written: 'Thus said the Lord: "As surely as I have established my covenant with day and night, the laws of heaven and earth". And [because His Torah] is found continually to be diminishing, so also the world that rests upon it continues to perish, as it is written: "They neither know nor understand. They walk about in darkness. All the foundations of the world are shaken". And what profit is there that you forge a path for the world's destruction? If you say [about us] that we are lacking and that our wisdom has diminished, truly it is so.

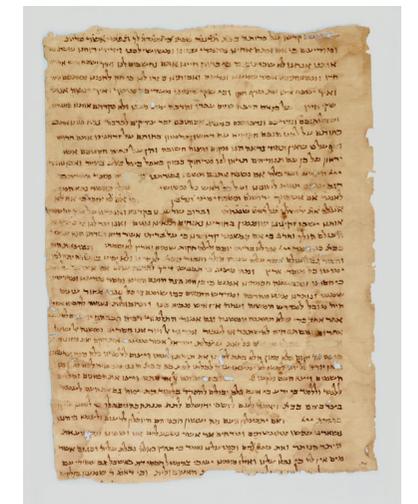
Certainly our splendour has been tarnished, our learning is diminished and our schools are desolate. We are left, few from many. The school of the teachers is like a wasteland, for every bright-eyed lad used to be brought to the house of study, but now no one brings his son and we must employ strategems to bring them one by one so that the Mishnah will not be forgotten. Also many of the children of the talmudic scholars are leaving for other activities and taking their place among the salary-earners or emigrating. And from generation to generation we are becoming fewer, and from year to year [we are shrinking in number...].

What has brought about all this? The inaction of Israel, who withhold from them their stipend and their sustenance. For who can stand without sustenance?! When He gave his Torah to his people, ordering them to study it, each according to the sufficiency of his needs, did not manna descend every day so that they could not find a pretext not to follow it? As it is written: 'Behold, I will rain down bread from the heavens for you, and the people will go out and gather it etc'. And when He brought them to their land, and ordered the priests and the Levites to study and to teach because He knew that not all were able to dedicate themselves to the study of law, he also ordered the people to attend to their needs. As it is written: 'He ordered the people, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to deliver the portions of the priests and the Levites so that they might devote themselves to the Torah

of the Lord'. And if the people display inaction, what will their sages do? Should they go hungry and thirsty? For we are left now calculating and toiling in order to get enough food — we and our children — and we will use the food to satisfy the remainder [of the sages] that are left and their children. And as it has been said about us: 'For you will be like an oak whose leaf withers and like a garden that is without water'. For our leaves have withered and our water is exhausted, because when the sages of the law were compared to a cluster [of grapes], so also the wealthier people [...] the clusters. And because of what Rav Shim'on ben Laqish said:[...]

Translation by BMO

Sherira Gaon laments the decline of the Babylonian centres of learning.
T-S 13J25.5



**2 LETTER FROM THE POET
JUDAH HA-LEVI**
Toledo, Spain, 12th century

Judaeo-Arabic, paper
T-S 10J15.1

*My lord and master, may God unite
us soon under desirable circumstances!
You have strained my yearnings.
Please mend soon what you have
impaired. May I ask you a favour?
Kindly approach your uncle and your
paternal aunt, as well as the Head
of the Police Abu Ibrahim Ibn Baron,
who values you very much and who
is my support – may God make his
honoured position permanent – that
they should talk to Ibn al-Shayyani
with regard to the balance of the pledge
made for the imprisoned woman.
For we are in trouble with regard
to the small balance remaining as we
had been with regard to the large sum.
The bearer of this letter of mine – may
God restore his health – asks you to
kindly recommend him to someone
who could be of help to him. For he was
a man of means and has become the
opposite; on top of this, he has lost his
health and eyesight and is far away
from his family and native country.
And God may let you be the originator
of every charity and good work.
Peace upon my lord and God's mercy.*

*P.S. Convey my highest regards
to the illustrious Master, the Light
of Israel, may the All Merciful preserve
him, and substitute for me in asking
him to reply to the people of Toledo.
They rely on me in this matter,
and I cannot say that my requests
find no friendly response with the
Master – may his Rock protect him.
Peace upon my lord.*

Translation by SDG

**3 RESTORING A SITE
OF PILGRIMAGE**
Jerusalem, 1035 CE

In the 11th century the most important
synagogue in Jerusalem and major
site of pilgrimage was 'the Cave'.
It was damaged following a devastating
earthquake across Palestine. Among
Solomon son of Judah's duties as Head
of the Academy of Jerusalem was the
upkeep of Jewish property there.
In this letter, Solomon solicits help
from the wealthy members of the
Egyptian Jewish community to help
restore 'the Cave'. He describes work
that has already been undertaken
including the removal of rubble and
the use of 62 beams and 600 planks.

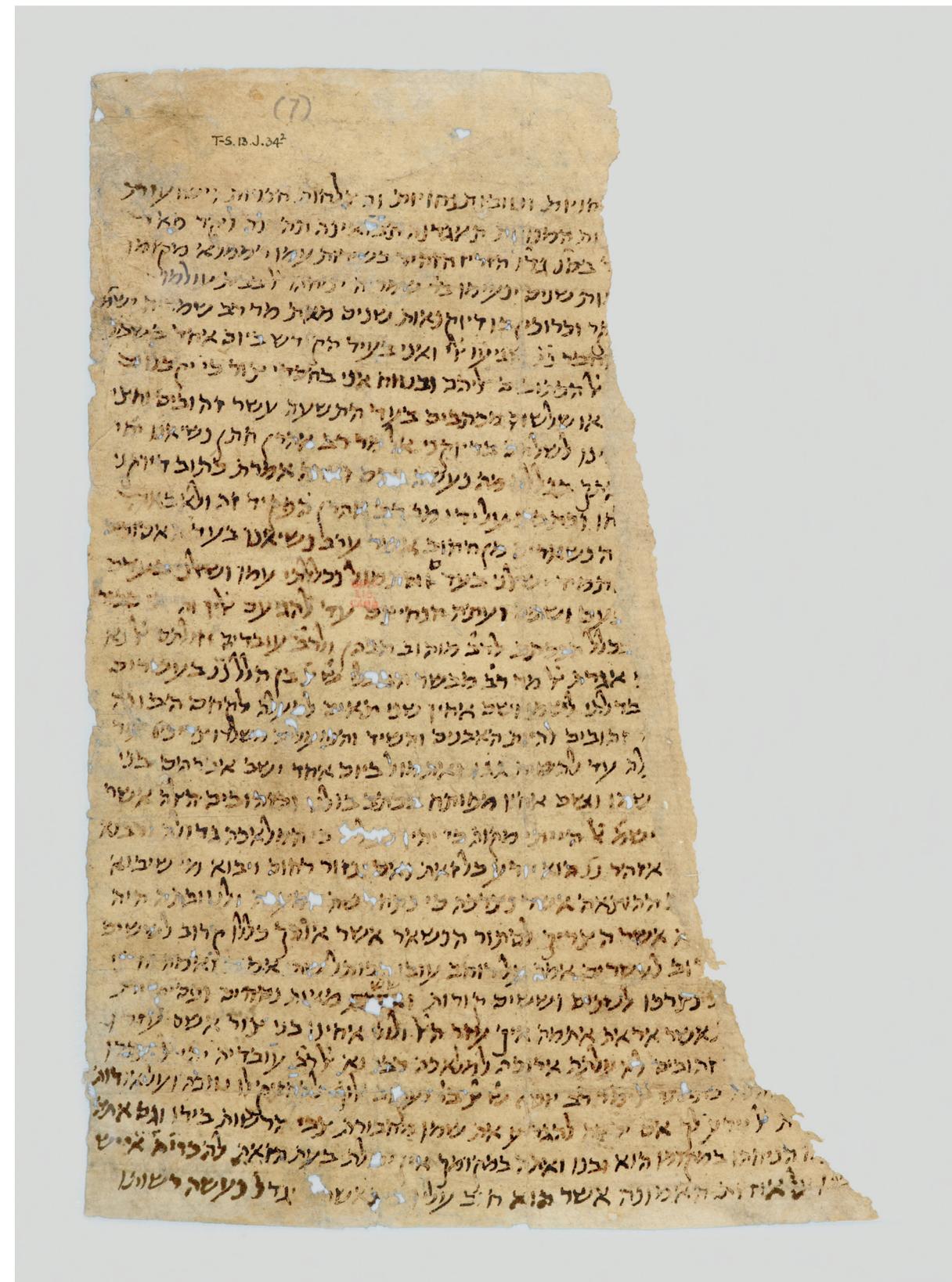
Hebrew, paper
T-S 13J34.2

*Dinars for the stones, for the
plaster and for the workers...*

Letter from the poet Judah ha-Levi
T-S 10J15.1



Repairs to the 'the Cave' synagogue
in Jerusalem
T-S 13J34.2



SYRIAN PRINCE SEEKS A BOOST

Many leading members of the Egyptian Jewish community practised medicine. Among them was the thinker Moses Maimonides (d. 1204 CE), who acquired his theoretical knowledge from Arabic translations of Galen, Hippocrates and the other great writings of Classical Antiquity. Maimonides worked as a physician at the Caliph's court in Cairo, but also dispensed medical advice to his neighbours and in letters to friends.

The Genizah contains many samples of his medical writings in his own hand. These reveal the most common ailments and their treatments. Despite advances in medical science, there also continued to be a strong reliance on magical cures for everyday problems. And so we find many amulets and collections of magical spells, which call upon God, his angels and even demons to solve problems, bring wealth or help find love.

1 MEDICAL RECIPE BY THE INDIA TRADER IBN YIJU

Mangalore, India, 12th century

A shortage of paper in India meant that cloth was often used as a writing material. The document was written by the trader Abraham Ibn Yiju. Here he copies a medical recipe that includes a wide variety of exotic ingredients from India, Persia and elsewhere. Abraham lived for 17 years in India. Soon after he arrived he got married, but by an unusual route: he bought a slave called Ashu and freed her, so that, in accordance with Jewish law, she became a Jew and he could then marry her. When Abraham returned to Cairo he brought back two decades' worth of correspondence and business accounts.

Arabic, cloth
T-S Ar.41.81

2 GOOD LUCK CHARM

Egypt, 12th century

Arabic, paper
T-S AS 183.272

Excellent fortune has come to you – good luck and a happy omen! Your fortune is on the increase every day, in a pure, new flourishing. Be thankful to God, and he will give you increase, for with Him is the greatest increase.

Translation by GK

3 SCORPION AMULETS

Egypt, 11/12th century

These magical amulets are intended to protect the purchasers against the bites of scorpions. They would have been worn in an amulet case around the neck. The magician, no great artist, copied them over and over, taking little care. There must have been a market for them, however, since some have evidently been cut off and sold.

Hebrew, Aramaic and gibberish, paper
T-S AS 143.26

4 MAIMONIDES' TREATISE ON APHRODISIACS

Fustat or Cairo, 12th century

Judaeo-Arabic, paper
T-S Ar.44.79

Long pepper, galanga, ginger and aristolochia, an ounce of each, cinnamon and anise, two ounces of each, clove, mace and nutmeg, one quarter ounce of each; grind these medicaments so that they will be ready to season any dish to be cooked and strew them over the dish. Strew it according to what will be mentioned in detail.

What one must avoid in foods and medicaments is all that makes cold or dry or drives away the winds. Of the things customary among us, lentils, vetch, and cold vegetables as cucumber, donkey cucumber, melons, garden orach and spinach belong to this group and more especially lettuce, which is very harmful in this...

For that is the most efficient treatment to warm the genitals, to conduct good blood to them, to strengthen them and to strengthen erection. One should also make a point to constantly drink iron water, as is prescribed for people with dysentery. Let it be filed and drunk at the time of need. If it is possible, then the broth of all dishes should be iron water, since this is very useful for strengthening the erection and strengthening all the inner organs. Know that the physicians only designate by 'joy-bringing drink' drink prepared with ox-tongue. Experience shows that if ox-tongue is placed in wine until its strength is extracted, it greatly increases the joy and strengthens sexual intercourse. If one takes this famous iron water and boils in it four dirhams of ox-tongue, half an ounce of lemon peel, half a dirham of beaten carnation; and one mixes in two ritls of wine or a ritl of honey (for one who does not consider wine permissible) and drinks this little by little, it will be of great avail. This much is sufficient for what the servant was ordered to do. The master may choose out of this that which is easy to do, do sometimes this, and another time that. May God lengthen his life in happiness and delight, and join for him this with the everlasting bliss, in His mercy.

Translation by SMS

5 A CONTRACT FOR EYE SURGERY

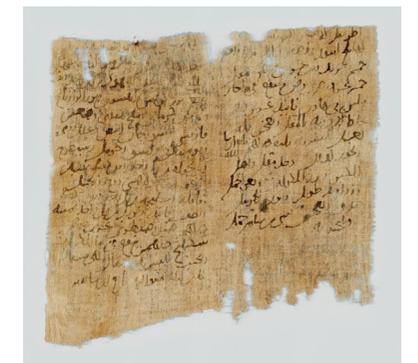
Egypt, 12th century

Arabic, paper
T-S Ar.34.94

Nasir ibn Jibril came to Makarim ibn Ishaq, the Jewish physician, together with his biological daughter called Sutayt, in whose left eye there was pus. He requested the aforementioned physician treat her eye with a sharp knife. If God, exalted is he, grants sight, his remuneration will be two dirhams. If the outcome is the opposite, he will evaluate the fee accordingly and the physician will be free from liability for that.

Translation by GK

Medical recipes on cloth
T-S Ar.41.81



Good luck charm
T-S AS 183.272



LETTER HOME FROM SCHOOL CAUSES A STIR

Jewish boys and girls attended school in Fustat (Old Cairo) in order to learn the Hebrew Bible. Through the Genizah we learn how children studied with writing boards balanced on their knees, clustered around the textbook. Schoolbooks were valuable and had to be shared, so the parents of children encouraged them to learn to read a book upside down or sideways. This way children could read it wherever they sat.

Manuscripts in juvenile handwriting show children practising their alphabet and copying biblical verses. Doodles in the margins of once-cherished books seem immediately familiar. Notes sent home from exasperated teachers reveal the punishments given to naughty children, and the crimes of schoolroom bullies.

1 LETTER FROM A TEACHER Egypt, 11/12th century

Judaeo-Arabic, parchment
T-S 8J28.7

I have to inform you, my lord, that I have not been successful in educating this boy, Abu Mansur. Perhaps you can help me in this. Whenever I spank him, I do so excessively; but as soon as I begin, the mistress rushes along and, having smacked him four or five times, releases him. Had it not been for his illness, I would have killed him with beating, although as a poorly clothed newcomer, he is entitled to some consideration. He is impervious to argument and not at all quiet. As soon as he comes in, he starts fighting with his sister and cursing her incessantly, especially if I am not present. Perhaps you could threaten him with a little spanking and tell him to be reasonable, well-behaved and quiet...

Translation by SDG

2 LETTER ABOUT SCHOOLYARD BULLIES Egypt, 11/12th century

Judaeo-Arabic, parchment
T-S Ar.53.65

I would like to inform my lord the sheikh – God (Allah) preserve his strength! – that Abu l-Hasan, no sooner had he been given over [to my care] than his eye was on his schoolwork. But I have to inform [my lord] what happened to him: [another child called] Abu l-Hasan ibn Wuhayb rose up and broke his writing-board with the full knowledge of the other boys. Greetings.

Translation by BMO

Child's drawing
T-S AS 221.204



3 MASTARA Egypt, 11/13th century

This is a mastara or ruling-board. Scribes from Islamic lands used them to prepare their writing paper, rubbing paper over it to leave straight-line impressions. Scribes wrote with a cut-reed pen, called a qalamos. Ink was made from carbon or iron gall nut.

Paper layered with string
T-S K11.54

4 CHILD'S DRAWING Egypt, 11/12th century

A thousand-year-old stick-man drawing. Although the Genizah was originally intended to store only sacred texts, it managed to accumulate an enormous amount of other material too.

Paper
T-S AS 221.204

5 CHILD'S ALPHABET Egypt, 11/12th century

A child's early attempt at writing the alphabet. Bored, they started to doodle. Children went to school to learn Hebrew so that they could read the Bible, a duty of every Jewish adult. They would have spoken Arabic, but few would have learned how to write it. Instead, when they grew up they mostly wrote their Arabic with Hebrew letters, Judaeo-Arabic.

Hebrew, paper
T-S K5.19

Child's alphabet primer
T-S K5.13



6 CHILD'S ALPHABET Egypt, 11/12th century

Learning Hebrew began with copying the alphabet from a textbook. Here a child has written out the first 10 consonants of the Hebrew alphabet, in combination with the eight Hebrew vowel signs. Once they had mastered the alphabet, children moved on to copying out prayers and parts of the book of Leviticus from the Hebrew Bible. The Genizah shows that this basic school curriculum remained unchanged for centuries.

Hebrew, paper
T-S K5.18

7 CHILD'S ALPHABET PRIMER Egypt, 11th century

Children learned to write the letters of the alphabet and the vowel signs from books like this. The colourful decorations on this Hebrew alphabet primer are designed to interest and delight children. The book would have been expensive to produce, and probably shared among several children in the school.

Hebrew, parchment
T-S K5.13

Mastara
T-S K11.54



HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

Egypt sat at the centre of a vast international trading network that stretched from Spain, around the Mediterranean, and as far as India. Commerce flourished across the barriers of faith, and Jews and Muslims launched joint business ventures together. Jewish merchants made use of their family and religious connections to trade over long distances. They relied on bonds of trust to ensure a smooth flow of goods and the settlement of debts.

The backbone of the medieval Egyptian economy was the trade route to India. Many of the commercial documents in the Genizah are related to this highly lucrative route, which flourished in the 12th century. Goods carried from India to Egypt for sale around the Mediterranean shores included aromatic spices, metals and textiles, while clothing, carpets, books and soap travelled East. Shipwrecks and piracy were a constant threat.

1 ALEXANDRIAN JEWS BUY BACK JEWISH CAPTIVES

Egypt, 1050 CE

Hebrew, paper
T-S 12.338

Greetings to our mighty and respected one, the honourable and holy, our master and teacher Nahray, glory of the scholars and crown of the discerning – may our God who dwells on high extend generously the thread of his kindness to him day and night, that his song be with him, to open for him the storehouses of salvation from the four winds – son of the scholar Nissim – may his memory be for a blessing. From me, his friend, who requests God – may He be exalted – to increase his wellbeing and who entreats Him to extend his days in prosperity and his years in delight. May He, in his grace, adorn him with kindness and crown him with mercy in His mighty faithfulness. May He hear my prayer for him. May He reunite us happily to keep sweet company, to walk together in His house. And were I to tell our mighty one the great extent of my longing for sight of him and my powerful desire to gaze upon him, I would fill many sheets. God – blessed be He – has been asked to bring together the separated and gather up the scattered in His grace. I am compelled at this time to inform him – his Rock keep him – that a year of poverty and pathetic subsistence, of limited livelihood, and the violence against us of robbers and of the rulers of this city has been brought to a close with the arrival of three captives with cruel masters who are traders from Amalfi. We inform him of our discovery that these three people were taken from a ship and were robbed by Byzantine soldiers of everything; they stripped them bare of [their] merchandise [...] and they enslaved them [...] and they planned to [...].

‘And we have brought them for you to buy them and to do them a favour as we ourselves did with them when we took them from [the soldiers] and made ourselves responsible for their upkeep’. So, despite the fact that time betrays us and our houses are empty of all goods, we have taken upon our necks the heavy yoke of their upkeep for about a month and we have struggled hard to find the price of even one of [the captives], managing to secure just ten dinars in donations and we

would like fifty dinars to cover their needs. This leaves forty dinars to come from the communities of Egypt – their Rock keep them. Altogether this will give fifty dinars. The total price [for the captives paid] by their masters (i.e., to the soldiers who originally took them) is forty-four and a half dinars; two of [the captives] for thirty-two and a half dinars and the third for twelve dinars. The master of one of them said to us: ‘I am due the sum of sixteen and a half. I will make you a present of half a dinar, so you just have to give me sixteen dinars’. The two others said: ‘For the other two [captives] we will only accept thirty-six dinars’. And so we are still striving until the Holy One, blessed be He, appoints their redemption. And all those who tremble at the words of our God should gather together and speak with them, [telling them] to gird up the loins and brace up the belly because it is for their sake that the word of the Lord has come upon us. To the honourable, great and holy, our master and teacher Nahray the wise A pearl of learning, son of the scholar Nissim, may his memory be for a blessing and for [life(?)] [May he progress] upwards and be successful in every deed and act. From me, the least of the people of the covenant, Yeshu’a ha-Kohen, the Haver, Son of the scholar Joseph, Bet Din, who loves him like his soul. A covenant of peace, and master [...] [...] and your wellbeing increase forever and for eternity.

Translation by BMO

2 A MUSLIM-JEWISH BUSINESS

Minyat Zifta, Egypt, 1140 CE

Judaeo-Arabic, parchment
T-S 8.4

... it will be upon him as a [legal contract] and a proof from this day onwards that I [attest before you using the most certain and perfect] expressions of affirmation, in my good health and freedom of will, willingly, with neither duress nor force nor compulsion, [with neither negligence nor error, nor defect of illness within me, nor anything of the like from] all the factors that nullify testimony, that I have received and taken from him, in cash, good Egyptian [coinssuch and such] weighted, good and correct Egyptian dinars. And all this arrived

to me completely [and totally ...] half of the property which is known as the sugar factory, which is located in Minyat Zifta, in the neighbourhood ... and its lower parts and upper parts, its visible parts and hidden parts and every legal right (derived from it) external ... in its possession from this day onwards, and he shall fence the aforementioned sugar factory, and will define it and circle it ... will reach to the street which is open in front of the property of Husayn ibn Ibrahim al-Ma'ari's heir, ... and the [house known] (to belong) to the heirs of the Rabbi's son who is the partner of the qadi Ali ibn al-Qasm, and the third part ... Salim ibn al-Ashqar, and the fourth part, the western one, will reach to the street which is open ... all the half part which I gave in possession, from the aforementioned sugar factory, to the Sheikh Abu al-Marja Salim the aforementioned, in one ... and its rights, a complete, effective and total sale ... to him and his heirs after him from this time onwards, and all this aforementioned half ... Salim, he and his soil, walls, ceiling, woods, mud, brick ... from the bottom of the ground to the top of the sky as a possession from this day onwards ... of any type of transactions in destruction or built, in residence or emptiness, in sale or gift ... and to hide ...

Translation by AA and BMO

3 ORDER OF PAYMENT Egypt, 1140 CE

Various languages, paper
T-S Ar.30.184

*In [your name O Merciful One].
Truth. 5 dinars.
May the elder Abu'l-Khayr Khiyyar
pay to the bearer five dinars
for wax candles.
The month of Av, 1451 of the
Seleucid Era*

Translation by BMO

4 THE LAST LETTER OF DAVID MAIMONIDES Aydhab, Sudan, 1170 CE

Judaeo-Arabic, paper
Or.1081 J1

*To my beloved brother R. Mos[es,
son of R.] Maymun – the memory
of the righteous be blessed!*

*David, your brother who is longing
for you – may God unite me with you
under the most happy circumstances
in his grace. I am writing this letter
from Aydhab. I am well, but my mind
is very much troubled, so that I walk
around in the bazaar and do not know –
by our religion – where I [am...], nor
how it is that I did not imagine how
much you must worry [about me].*

*This is my story: I reached Qus and
after Passover I booked for Aydhab
in a caravan. [...]*

*So we travelled alone out of fear of him.
No one has ever dared to embark on
such a disastrous undertaking.
I did it only because of my complete
ignorance. But God [saved] us after
many frightful encounters, to describe
which would lead me too far afield.
When we were in the desert, we
regretted what we had done, but the
matter had gone out of our hands.
Yet God had willed that we should
be saved. We arrived in Aydhab safely
with our entire baggage. We were
unloading our things at the city gate,
when the caravans arrived.
Their passengers had been robbed
and wounded and some had died of
thirst. Among them was Ibn al-Rashidi,
but he was unharmed. [...] We preceded
him only slightly and there was only
a small distance between us and those
who were robbed. We were saved only
because we had taken upon ourselves*

*those frightful experiences. All day long
I imagine how you must feel when you
hear about 'Ata' Allah Ibn al-Rashidi,
how he was robbed, and you believe that
I was in his company. Then God comes
between me and my reason.*

*To cut a long story short: I arrived
in Aydhab and found that no imports
had come here [...] at all. I found
nothing to buy except indigo.
So I thought about what I had endured
in the [desert [...]]; then it appeared
a simple matter for me to embark
on a sea voyage. I took Mansur
as my travel companion, but not
Ma'ani... for all my troubles came [only
from him; you know] the man and how
he behaves (2 Kings 9:11). Sometime,
if God wills it, I shall tell you [all that
happened between us] on our way from
Fustat to Aydhab.*

*My company in the Mala[bar] sea
will be [...], Salim, the son of the broker
and his brother's son, Makarim
al-Hariri and his b[rother], and the
brother of Sitt Ghazal. But Ma'ani
embarked, together with Ibn
al-Kuwayyis on another ship,
since the ship in which he travelled
foundered, but he was saved and
absolutely nothing of his baggage
was lost. Ibn 'Atiyya, however, was
in another boat, together with Ibn
al-Maqdisi. Their boat foundered
and only their din[ars] remained
with them. Now, despite all of this,
do not [worry]. He who saved me from
the desert with its [...] will save me
while on sea. [...]*

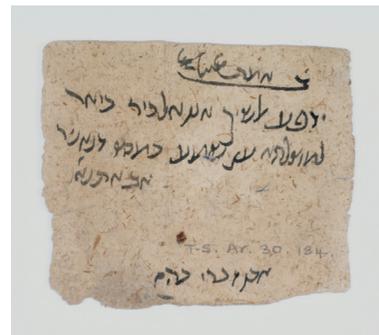
*And, please, calm the heart of the little
one and her sister; do not frighten them
and let them not despair, for crying
to God for what has passed is a vain
prayer (M. Berakhot 9:3). [...] I am doing
all of this out of my continuous efforts
for your material well-being, although
you have never imposed on me anything
of the kind. So be steadfast; God will
replace your losses and bring me back
to you. Anyhow, what has passed is
past, and I am sure this letter will reach
you at a time when I, God willing, shall
have already made most of the way.
But the counsel of God alone will stand
(Proverbs 19:21). Our departure will
probably be around the middle
of Ramadan.*

*I shall travel with ... Tell this] to his
uncle, and also that he is fine. [Best
regards to you, to] Bu 'Ali and his
brother, to the elder Bu Mansur and
his brothers, to my sisters and the boys,
to all our friends, to the freedman,
and Mahasin.*

*Written on the 22nd of Iyyar, while
the express caravan is on the point of
leaving.*

Translation by SDG

Order of payment
T-S Ar.30.184



The last letter of David Maimonides
Or.1081 J1



A MATCH MADE IN HEAVEN

Jewish marriage is symbolised by the ketubba, the marriage deed. Often this was the largest, most magnificent document a couple would own. In Judaism there are several other stages to marriage: engagement, betrothal and the wedding itself. All were marked with written deeds, hundreds of which are preserved in the Genizah. These are rich sources of social history, shining a light on the lives of ordinary people.

Prenuptial agreements aimed to ensure a cordial married life by solving problems in advance: no living with the in-laws, no buying a slave girl and no wild partying! Hundreds of trousseau lists survive, valuing in minute detail all the clothes, jewellery, bed linen and other property – including slaves – that women brought into a marriage. Such lists provided security in case of divorce or widowhood, ensuring that the woman would be no worse off financially than when she entered the marriage.

1 ENGAGEMENT DEED

Fustat, 1119 CE

Judaeo-Arabic, paper
Lewis-Gibson Misc. 42

The honourable, great and holy, our master and teacher Toviyya, the esteemed elder – may God protect him – son of the honourable, great and holy, our master and teacher Tiqva the esteemed elder – may his end be good – concluded a match with Sitt al-Kull daughter of the honourable, great and holy, our master and teacher Perahya ha-Kohen, the esteemed elder, who is known for his good deeds – may his end be good. And they both agreed that the early marriage payment will be forty gold dinars, as a complete, clear and open gift from the time of marriage, and the late payment will be [...] good gold dinars.

And her paternal uncle received in our presence two gold-set rings, one [...] ring, [...] one] silver ring, one amber ring, silver tubes, small pieces of [...] amber, a silk carpet, a golden green kerchief, and a head cover [...]. And the honourable, great and holy, our teacher and master Toviyya, the fiancé, took upon himself that this Sitt al-Kull will be regarded as trustworthy in her statements, in the conduct of her household and her ketubba, with regard to her outfit and all other implements used by her in every respect, by him and all his heirs after his death; that she has the status of two trustworthy witnesses; and that no oath, grave or light may be imposed on her under any circumstances, [nor even] an anonymous ban.

We performed an act of acquisition with him regarding everything imposed upon him with an implement fit for doing so, nullifying all secret dispositions and conditions.

And we have written and signed it so that it will be as a title of rights and as proof. All this took place on Friday eve, 2nd of Kislev, year 1431 of the Era of Documents. Strong and valid. Everything is strong, firm and valid. Abraham ben Shemaiah, Member of the Academy, son of Shemaiah Gaon – may he rest in Eden. [Isaac] son of Samuel the Spaniard – the memory of the righteous be blessed, may he live in the world to come. Halfon son of Manasseh ha-Levi

Translation by AA and BMO

2 KARAITE-RABBANITE MARRIAGE CONTRACT

Egypt, 1082 CE

Aramaic and Hebrew, parchment
T-S 24.1

And our Prince, this David, also stipulated that, if, God forbid, this Nashiah shall die without offspring, half of this dowry should be returned to her father's house according to the custom of the children of the Land of Israel and ... moreover he agreed not to force this Nashiah, his wife, to sit with him in the light of the Sabbath, nor to eat the fat (of the sheep's) tail, nor to profane her own festivals, on condition that she observe with him the festivals ... And we have carried out an act of acquisition from the honourable, great, holy, our master and teacher, our Prince, this David the Prince, Prince of the Exile of all Israel, son of the honourable, great, holy, our master and teacher, our lord, our Prince, Daniel the [great] Prince, Head of the Academy of the 'Pride of Jacob' – may his sacred memory be for a blessing – for this Nashiah, a young woman, this virgin bride, daughter of the honourable, great, holy, our master and teacher, our lord, our noble, Moses ha-Kohen, Banner of the Jews, their Stronghold, and the Joy of [their Crown, with an implement suitable for] acquisition, regarding all that is written and explained above. Fit and established.

Translation by BMO

3 CONDITIONAL BILL OF DIVORCE

Fustat, 1169 CE

Judaeo-Arabic, paper
T-S 8J5.23

This bill of divorce was delivered into the hand of Sitt [al]-Fakhr, who is being divorced, from the hand of master [M]oses, who is doing the divorcing, on condition that should he die it will go into effect as a valid bill of divorce and should he not die it will not go into effect as a valid bill of divorce. And so he has said to her in our presence: "This is your bill of divorce on condition that if I do not die it will not go into effect as a valid bill of divorce, and if I do die it will go into effect as a valid bill of divorce, and if I do not die it will not go into

effect as a valid bill of divorce". And this took place on the first day of the week, the 16th day of the month of Av, 1480 (of the Seleucid Era) Samuel ha-Levi son of Saadya – May he rest in Eden! Mevorakh son of Nathan, Member of the Academy – May he rest in Eden!

Translation by AA and BMO

4 TROUSSEAU LIST

Egypt, 12th century

Judaeo-Arabic, paper
T-S J1.29

With good luck and success!
A gold tiara 80 dinars
A shoulder band with 11 disks of gold and 20 of amber 70
A pair of pins with clusters of pearls 20
A pair of peacock pins 18
A pair of earrings 5
A pair of pins 5
A pair of niello-work bracelets 52
A pair of braided bracelets 30
A single enamelled (bracelet) 25
A maymun necklace of amber divided by cylinders and a box of gold 8
A pearl band divided by (beads of) gold 8
Gold tubes 6
Two rings 4
An ornamented mirror 10
A water container (for the table) and a cover, a silver goblet, and a ladle 15
A shallow bowl 4
A tureen, an étagère, a mixing vessel with feet 5
A crystal mixing vessel 5
Another mixing vessel 3
A gold [...] 2
An ivory kohl container 3
A crystal cock (a knickknack) 4
A pen-box made in China, with 2 knives, a sand sprinkler (for blotting), and an ivory plate (on which the pen is nibbed) 13
A silver comb 4
A pair of gold bracelets 15
3 gold rings 4
A locally-made scent-box of porcelain ornamented with silver 20
A round ornamented mirror 6
A (perforated) lion and a needle for perfuming 5
2 silver vases and a jewel box 5
An amber shallow bowl with a gold rim 5
A chest and its stand 10
Equipment for bloodletting 2
Total (value of jewellery) 471 dinars

The Clothing
 A cloud-coloured festive attire, consisting of a robe, a wimple, and a greyish headband 50
 A white wimple with gold threads 15
 A hood with stripes 'as the pen runs' and a robe, both with gold threads 10
 A kerchief of dabiqli linen 8
 A skullcap of dabiqli linen
 A wrap with two ends in gold threads
 And a veil with gold threads 22
 A wrap of dabiqli linen and silk 4
 A blue Rumi (dress of European style) 6
 A silk wimple in double layers 6
 A silken festive attire consisting of a robe
 [...]
 A greyish robe of silk and dabiqli linen and a greyish Rumi 15
 A greyish cloak 5
 A pomegranate-coloured festive robe and its wimple 15
 A blue wimple with gold threads 5
 A jukaniyya with bird patterns 4
 A poultice-coloured wimple 5
 An apricot-coloured jukaniyya, and a silk cloak with gold threads and an apricot-coloured silk Rumi 10
 A green robe with gold threads, and a wax-coloured wimple 5
 A home-made makhtuma (embroidered clothing) 6
 A jukaniyya of siglaton (precious brocade) 3
 A jukaniyya of red siglaton 4
 A makhtuma of siglaton 7
 A home-made tabby makhtuma 6
 A starch-coloured tabby makhtuma 5
 A jukaniyya of brocade with borders 10
 A jukaniyya of red brocade 10
 A makhtuma of pistachio brocade 15
 A greenish festive attire, consisting of a robe, a wimple, a headband, and a Rumi 30
 Panelled robes and pieces of cloth 30 [deleted]
 A handbag of siglaton 12
 A handbag of blue brocade 20
 Total of the Clothing 373 dinars
 A bedspread of Rumi brocade 10
 Another bedspread 10
 2 chameleon-coloured canopies 60
 A sofa of Rumi brocade, 6 pieces 40
 A sofa of 'Islets' brocade 15
 A sofa of brilliant colour, 4 pieces 15
 An 'Islets' sofa, 3 pieces 15
 A sofa of Rumi brocade, 3 pieces 15
 A siglaton couch 5
 A siglaton sofa 5
 A couch made of reeds 3
 A brocade pad 5
 Total of the spreads and hangings 198 dinars

The Copper
 A candle-lamp, an oil lamp, 2 complete Spanish Lamps, a large box and another box inside it,
 A pitcher, a large washbasin, a large ewer,
 And another washbasin, a ewer, a soda ash container, a box,
 A part of a box, an oven, a round bucket, 3 candlesticks,
 A copper stool, and a bathrobe with hems
 Total 200 dinars
 Vases with their perfume 8 dinars
The maids
 'Izz ('Glory') and Dalal ('Coquetry') and two personal attendants,
 Nusa ('Rainbow' or 'Lantern') and Wafa ('Fidelity') 100
 Total 1350
 The books 250
 Total 1600
 The first and final instalment 500
 Grand total 2100 dinars

Translation by SDG

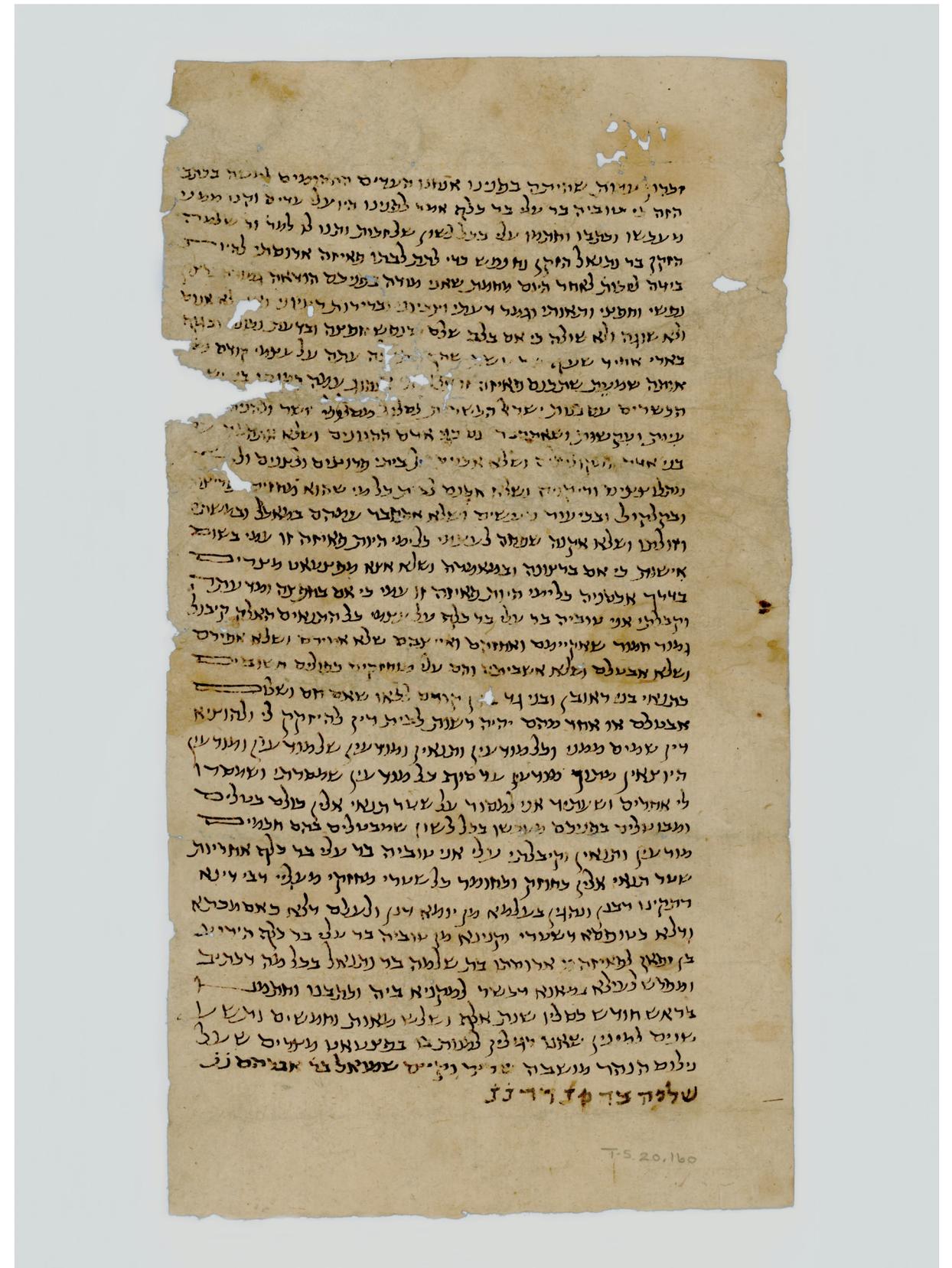
5 PRENUPTIAL AGREEMENT
 Egypt, 1047 CE

Hebrew, paper
 T-S 20.160

I shall not allow into my house the dissolute, jokers, frivolous company or good-for-nothings. Nor shall I enter the house of anyone who clings to licentiousness, corruption or immoral acts. Nor shall I associate with them for the purposes of eating, drinking or anything else. And I shall not acquire for myself a 'maid' (slave concubine) for as long as this Faiza is with me, except by her express desire and command. Nor shall I leave Fustat to take to the road all the time that this Faiza is with me, except by her wish and with her knowledge. I, Toviyya son of Eli, take upon myself all these conditions...

Translation by BMO

Prenuptial agreement
 T-S 20.160



CALIPH SAVES CONDEMNED JEWS

Most of the world's Jewish population lived in Islamic lands in the Middle Ages. As dhimmi, 'protected people', Jews and Christians in Egypt were free to practise their religion provided they recognised the absolute rule of Islam, paid the jizya – a severe poll-tax – and did not seek converts from among the Muslim population.

From the end of the 10th century, Egypt was incorporated into the Shi'ite Fatimid Caliphate. The large Jewish and Christian population was generally treated fairly by the Fatimids, and Jews were even admitted into senior government positions. But the second-class status given to the dhimmi under Islamic law meant that restrictions and oppression could be employed, and the Genizah records outbreaks of harsh discriminatory actions and even violence against the Jews.

1 LETTER FROM MOSES MAIMONIDES

Fustat, 12th century

Judaeo-Arabic, paper
T-S 12.192

May God prolong the life of his honour, my pillar and support, the faithful Sheikh al-Thiqa and sustain his position of honour. His servant and admirer Moses sends him greetings. He longs for him because of the distance between them. He requests him to be so kind as to help the bearer (of this letter), Isaac al-Dari, because he is one of our acquaintances. May he tell the Haver – God preserve him – to entrust his problem to the community and see (the money for) his poll tax collected from among you, because two payments of tax are due from him and from his son. If his honour is able to take steps to have this paid from among you in Minyat Zifta, then may he do it, for he is a newcomer and he has not yet paid a thing. He is now on his way to Damietta on important business for us, and on his return let there be done on his behalf as much as possible. May his wellbeing increase and the wellbeing of the Haver and his son, and the wellbeing of his own son – God preserve him.

Moses son of the scholar Maymun – may the memory of the righteous be a blessing.

Translation by BMO

2 POEM IN PRAISE OF CALIPH AL-HAKIM

Egypt, 1012 CE

Hebrew, paper
T-S 8K10

...in the land of Egypt and who rules over the corners of the world – the West, the East, the North and the South. And his rule grew lofty, powerful and mighty, and he raised his throne higher than the throne of his forefathers and their forefathers before them. In the thirteenth year of his (al-Hakim's) reign he guided all of the kingdom with magnanimity and good judgement. He did not need a vizier, nor a counsellor. A number of conspirators conspired against him and a number of adversaries rose up against him, and God cast them down beneath the soles of his feet, because he loved righteousness and hated wickedness.

He appointed judges in the land and ordered them to give fair judgements and dispense lawful verdicts. He banished men of violence and turned away the wicked. He abhorred those of perverse ways or shameful deeds. He loved prudent men, the establishing of justice and the right path.

And out of his great love of righteousness, he set up reliable witnesses for the places of execution, the offices of judges, and the night-watchmen, such as never had been in the mind of a king or been done by any ruler before. Everyone knew that he desired neither silver nor gold, nor plunder nor to rule by oppression or tyranny.

Now, on the third day of the month of Shevat in the year four thousand seven hundred and seventy of the Creation of the World (= 1010 CE), which is the year one thousand three hundred and twenty-three from the Cessation of Prophecy, which is the year nine hundred and forty-three of the Destruction of the Holy Dwelling, one of the cantors of the community, by the name of Putiel, died....

Translation by BMO

3 LETTER FROM THE JEWS OF DAMASCUS

Damascus, c. 1050 CE

Hebrew, paper
T-S 13J26.13

... The increase of our iniquities caused the hand of the Arabs to strengthen its rule, until, growing bold, the tyrants of the city, its notables, its elders and the qadi there, called 'the Nephew of Abu'l-Sayyar' – May the name of the wicked rot! – conspired to cut off our water supply. For they said 'How can the Hebrews drink from our water?' And whenever we called on a leader or governor to reopen our access to the water, they would gather and attest that 'They have no share or legal right over our water'. This went on until the arrival this year of the governor called Haydara 'Treasure of the Realm'. We saw that his hand ruled over the people of the city and the surrounding area. So we sent our emissary to Egypt to obtain a letter and a decree to deal with three matters: to reopen the water supply to us as it was previously; to allow us to slaughter in the market

according to the law, because they (i.e. the locals) had prevented us from slaughtering; and that the collection of tax should be from the beginning of the month called al-Muharram until the month called Du-'l Hijja, and they should not take tax from us until the beginning of the year. Our emissary came back and brought with him the decree dealing with the aforementioned three points. We took the papers and we went, a group of us, to the governor Haydara. He took the decree and some letters that we had brought to him from the 'Notable of the Realm' and other important people in the government, and he read them, before throwing them from his hand and seeking to obtain a bribe for doing all that they contained.

And so we went away afflicted and troubled, and we made a collection from every side and corner until we had given him a great many dinars, thus depriving the poor, the orphans and widows, after cries, trouble and distress. We also gave bribes to his officials and retinue, until we had been refined like the refining of silver and the testing of gold. After all this he sent for an elder called 'the Preacher' who testified before him that the Jews had previously enjoyed rights to the water... And so the day came that he reopened the water for us, and all the elders, the young men and all the notables of the city gathered and testified before him saying: 'They have no legal right to share our water and they have no share among us in this city'. He replied to them: 'My lord the Caliph has spoken and has enacted a decree: I will not negate a word of it until you bring me from him another decree like this one but an annulment of it'. When they heard this, everyone got up from in front of him in shame and reproach. He said to the qadi of the city: 'Look I have reopened the water for them; now I am returning to you alone the edict concerning their slaughtering because you alone can enact the edict'. The qadi left him as he was and the next day our destitution began. The governor heard of the arrival of soldiers (to his jurisdiction) and so he sent word to the Jews and sought to obtain the tax for the forthcoming year, five months in advance. He said, 'I desire two hundred and fifty dinars from you. I will not speak to you again till after the end of next year...'

Translation by BMO

HUSBAND WALKS OUT AFTER FAMILY DISPUTE

1 LEGAL QUERY ANSWERED BY MOSES MAIMONIDES

Fustat, 12th century

Judaeo-Arabic, paper
T-S 8K13.8

[Question: ...] An aged widow, who is above suspicion, has reported that [the teacher] jokingly expressed to her a desire to sleep with her. But she has no witness to this and no proof. And nothing like this has previously happened to him except for her allegation, which she made with the intention of harming him, damaging his reputation, cutting off his livelihood and putting him to public shame. Is her report concerning him credible or not? And if the aforementioned man wishes to free himself of suspicion, should he place a public ban on anyone alleging that he has done such a thing or telling lies about him or harbouring suspicions about him? Let our teacher instruct us and may he receive a double reward from Heaven.

*The answer:
Her testimony is not acceptable. And every individual has the right to excommunicate by name anyone who has publicly impugned his reputation, but not to pronounce an excommunication over someone who [merely] harbours suspicions about him. And the correct way to proceed in this case is to silence the gossiping and not to pronounce a ban and not to have any further discussion in public. Written by Moses.*

Translation by BMO

2 A CHRISTIAN-JEWISH LOVE AFFAIR

Egypt, 11th century

Judaeo-Arabic, paper
Or.1080 J93

...Amram ibn Sa'id ibn Musa appeared [before the court] and reported that he was working in the apothecary practice of Abu'l-Faraj ibn Ma'amar al-Sharabi and that there was a physician, Abu Ghalib, there who wrote out prescriptions for the apothecary. The aforementioned Amram ibn Sa'id stated that he noticed a woman sitting rather frequently with this aforementioned doctor, Abu Ghalib, and thought her to be a Muslim woman since he saw her

so often. After learning that she was a Jew, he inquired about her and found out that she was the daughter of Ibn al-Mashita. Some of the Muslims were seized with righteous zeal because of this and spied on her, suspecting her of having an affair with a Christian, the aforementioned doctor. This went on for about forty days, more or less. One day, she came to him and said 'I would like you to come and take a ride with me to a patient'. And she stayed with him until he had finished work. Then he got up and rode with her, and they went away together....

Translation by FN

3 WIFE THREATENS DAYTIME HUNGER STRIKE

Egypt, 12th century

A woman pleads with her husband to return home after he chose to move out in a dispute over having to live with her family and pay them rent. To avoid a charge of 'abandonment', the husband has been returning on Sabbaths for brief conjugal visits. The woman threatens to start a hunger strike (but only during the daytime) if her husband does not move back home. On the back of the letter he writes 'If you don't break your fast, I won't come back Sabbaths or any other day!'

Judaeo-Arabic, paper
Lewis-Gibson Arabic 2.51

I swear that I shall not break my fast by day...

4 A FATHER-IN-LAW WRITES TO HIS LONG-LOST SON-IN-LAW

Egypt, 10th/11th century

Hebrew, parchment
T-S 12.179

Accept greetings from me, Sa'd. I am letting you know that my soul longs to see your face and to gaze upon your honour. May the Holy One, blessed be He, let me soon look upon your face. [...] I would not have ceased my constant writing to you except we heard that [you had been killed by] the enemy. And I was sad about this news. But subsequently I have heard that you are alive and so I have written this letter. I implore you to reply to me and let me know

what you are up to and whether you have any needs and how you are. [...] Now, I am informing you that your wife suffers great distress with your children. You've abandoned them these past twenty-three years and have shown no desire to see them. Why do you act this way towards your wife and your children? You should consider what to do about your children. You said: 'Inform me about the water'. The Nile has already flooded and is at peace. As for the [price of] bread: twelve pounds for a silver coin. And a garden of the Lord is the land of Egypt.

Translation by BMO

**5 WITNESSES TESTIFY
TO AN ILLICIT
RELATIONSHIP**

Fustat, 12th century

Judaeo-Arabic, paper
T-S 10J7.10

...I was with the cantor Hillel ben Eli... when al-Wuhsha, the broker, came in and said to him: 'Do you have any advice for me? I had an affair with al-Hassun and became pregnant. Our marriage document has been lodged with the Muslims, but I am afraid that he may refuse to acknowledge the child.' She then lived in the house of Ben al-Sukkari on the uppermost floor. He (the cantor) said: 'Go and gather some people, and let them surprise you with him so that your assertion might be confirmed'. She did so, gathering two who surprised her with him, and confirmed her assertion. She was then pregnant with this Abu Sa'd, her son, from her illicit relations with Hassun. And I know that she went on Yom Kippur to the synagogue of the Babylonian community, but when the Nasi ('the Prince' – leader of the community) – of blessed memory – noticed her, he threw her out of the synagogue. I confirm all this and offer it as my true testimony. There appeared also in court the ritual slaughterer Abu Sa'id Halfon ha-Kohen, son of Joseph ha-Kohen – may he rest in Eden – and deposited the following testimony in our presence: 'I was living in the house of Hibat Allah Ben al-Sukkari – may God accept him with favour – on the ground floor for many years, while Wuhsha the broker had her domicile in the uppermost part of the house. In those days she came down once to one of the tenants, namely Abu Nasr the Kohen, the cantor Ben al-Kamukhi, and to Abraham the Jerusalemite known as the son of the poet, and said to them: "Please, come up with me room for something. The two went up with her and found Hassun sitting in her place and ..."

Translation by SDG

TRANSLATOR KEY

- AA Amir Ashur
- BMO Benjamin M. Outhwaite
- FN Friedrich Niessen
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- MC Mark R. Cohen
- SDG S.D. Goitein
- SMS S.M. Stern

A long-lost son-in-law
T-S 12.179



WHERE DO THE GENIZAH FRAGMENTS COME FROM?



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*One can hardly realise the confusion in such
a real old Genizah until one has seen it.
It is a battlefield of books, a battle in which
the literary productions of many centuries
had their share...*

SOLOMON SCHECHTER