

Fragment of the Month: August 2017

T-S 18J3.9 the Ramla Earthquake: for this relief much thanks

by Ben Outhwaite

One of the main aims of the current 'Discarded History' exhibition was to allow, as far as possible, the Genizah texts to speak for themselves, and to avoid intrusive interpretation or an overriding narrative too rigidly didactic. Ironically, this has meant spending a lot of time translating the documents, to open them up to the widest possible audience.

While we presented a large number of texts that have never been on exhibition before and some that have not previously been published, one of the great pleasures I had was in revisiting familiar texts that I had not read for a long time, and producing new translations of them. In most cases we preferred to produce new renderings, in order to preserve consistency of style across the exhibition corpus as well as to present something fresh to those who might have seen some of the material before.

One perfect example of this is the famous 'Ramla earthquake letter', T-S 18J3.9 (Hebrew text in Gil 1983: ii 382–384), which describes the disaster that struck 'all the land of Palestine' (בכל ארץ פלשתיים) in December 1033 CE:

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. (T-S 18J3.9 recto lines 11–14)

A lengthy text in Hebrew, it was written by Solomon b. Šemaḥ, and was probably intended to be a report of the event for public recitation in Egypt. Hebrew was in vogue in the early decades of the eleventh century, particularly for communications to and from associates of the Palestinian Yeshiva (Outhwaite 2013: 192–194). It was also preferred when the text was intended for public reading, since this would usually occur in the synagogue, the main gathering place of the Jewish community, where Hebrew was the most fitting language of communication (Outhwaite 2013: 191–192).

Solomon b. Šemaḥ is a good stylist in Medieval Hebrew. He has a few personal quirks, such as preferring not to use the nx object marker, but in general his language is typical of the era: a fluent, idiomatic documentary Hebrew, as befits a scribe of the Yeshiva.^{#1} This particular text is peppered with biblical verses, in part because the Bible provided the appropriate words of response to such a disaster:

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). (T-S 18J3.9 recto lines 9–11)

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). (T-S 18J3.9 recto lines 27–29)

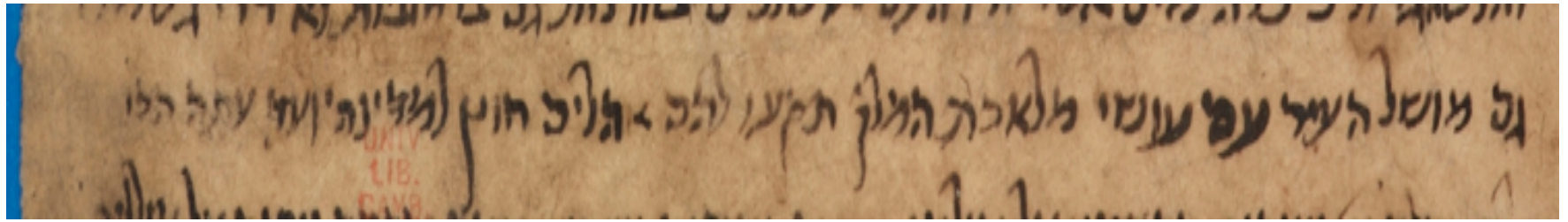
Despite describing the enormity of destruction visited upon the inhabitants of Ramla, Solomon is thankful that God showed sufficient mercy to provide warnings of the approaching cataclysm:

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. (T-S 18J3.9 recto lines 20–22)

And Solomon suggests that God's mercy extended to his actions after the event:

And the great miracle (והנס הגדול) was that all the days that the people were cast out into the open and in the streets, no rain fell. (T-S 18J3.9 recto line 30)^{#2}

Following this, he says גם מושל העיר עם עושי מלאכת המלך תקעו להם אהלים חוץ למדינה (T-S 18J3.9 recto line 31).#3



After I had produced my translation of this line, I checked it against the various other translations. The earliest is Mann's, and he renders it: 'Also the governor of the city, with the men in the Caliph's employ, pitched tents for themselves outside the town' (Mann 1970 [1920–22]: i 158). Mann's interpretation implies that the Muslim rulers made to look after themselves, thus somehow magnifying the scale of the disaster visited upon the Jewish population of Ramla with their apparent indifference to the suffering around them. Is this necessarily the correct interpretation of the text, given the immediate context of that sentence in the letter? Solomon is referring to the 'great miracle' that occurred, sparing the Jews from further suffering, but then he chooses to refer to the authorities' cold indifference?

Checking further, I found that the other writers on this letter all follow, consciously or not, Mann's interpretation:

- Kobler (1952, i 132): 'The governor of the city, also, and the men in the Caliph's employ, pitched tents for themselves outside the town'
- Gil (1983, i 329): ואף מושל רמלה והחיילים ('עושי מלאכת המלך') הקימו לעצמם אוהלים
- Goitein (1988: 64): 'Also the governor of the city, with the men in the Caliph's employ, pitched tents for themselves outside the town'
- Gil (1997: 399): 'and even the governor of Ramla and his soldiers ('the king's men') set up tents for themselves'
- Gil (2004: 174): 'Even the city's governor and those in the king's service erected tents outside the city'

I believe that the context of the sentence suggests another interpretation, however. Solomon is talking about a merciful act — the failure to rain — and the גם, especially when rendered 'moreover', offers a further act of mercy. Moreover, Gil's modern Hebrew rendering, הקימו לעצמם, draws attention to the ambiguity of the original letter's להם, since he translates it unambiguously with the Modern Hebrew reflexive pronoun עצם. Now, Biblical Hebrew lacks a dedicated reflexive pronoun and the preposition ל can be used with a reflexive sense, eg, יבן לו בית 'and he [Jacob] made for himself a house' (Genesis 33:17), though נפש is also sometimes used, eg, אל תשאו נפשיכם 'do not deceive yourselves' (Jeremiah 37:9). Mann and the others follow BH syntax and choose to understand להם as a reflexive. However, Solomon is not writing Biblical Hebrew (BH) but Medieval

Hebrew (MH), and it follows the post-biblical trend of preferring a dedicated reflexive pronoun (or circumlocution). While BH has נפש, MH, like Modern Hebrew, uses עצם; a few examples from the 11th century:

- Solomon b. Judah (Palestine, T-S 13J9.2) בוכה על עצמי 'crying for myself'
- Samuel 'the Third' b. Hoša'na (Palestine, T-S 16.68) ולא יטריח הוא על עצמו 'and not to trouble himself'
- Jacob ha-Kohen b. Isaiah (Yemen, T-S 16.255) והשפלתו לעצמו 'and his modest view of himself'

Given the ambiguity of להם, and the trend in MH to use a reflexive pronoun עצם, we might expect Solomon to have written תקעו לעצמם אהלים had he intended to state that the authorities put up tents for themselves. Instead the phrase he employs here seems almost to counterpoint the violence of Jeremiah 6:3, תקעו עליה אהלים ('they will pitch their tents against her' — i.e., besiege Zion), and stresses the merciful nature of the act: 'they pitched tents for them', i.e., for the destitute Jewish population of Ramla.

I think that it is entirely possible, and indeed suggested by the context, to interpret this sentence more positively, as an indication that the local Muslim authorities provided disaster relief to the Jewish population of Ramla, and that the previous interpretations, which all pointed to the authorities having at best an ambivalent attitude to their wellbeing, are open to question. The message at this point of Solomon's letter is one of mercy and redemption, and this generous act adds weight to what he is trying to say. Furthermore, from a practical point of view, the Jewish population of Ramla in the eleventh century was large. The town was an important centre, a military base, an administrative capital, a hub of trade and commerce, and it had a greater Jewish population than Jerusalem, including prominent merchants, traders and artisans, as well as members of the leadership of the Palestinian Yeshiva and the governor's own entourage (Gil 1992: 106, 173). Notwithstanding the well-established customs of medieval Islamic charity, which include disaster relief, it would also have been entirely sensible for the local authorities to have provided for the population to ensure that Ramla continued to thrive as the capital of Syria-Palestine. So, to conclude, I think there is sufficient reason to suppose that the interpretation, syntactically, contextually and historically might be different to that of the traditional interpretation, and one should consider carefully the alternative, before embracing Kobler's.

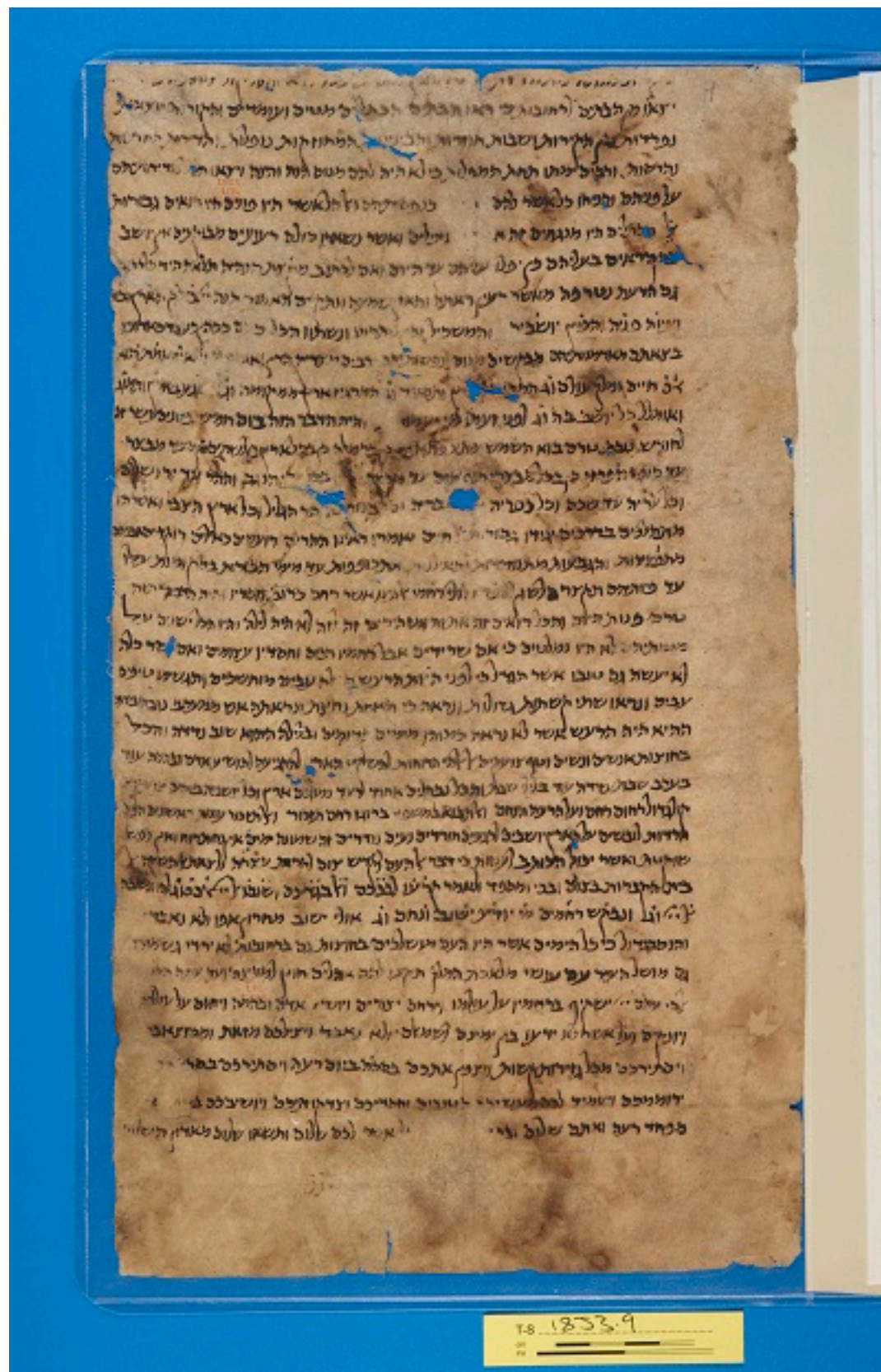
Notes

1. For a brief overview of this type of Hebrew, see Outhwaite 2013b or for a longer overview you can read my unpublished PhD thesis. On Solomon's ellipsis of את, see for instance, line 8 והמשכיל יבין פתרונו 'The intelligent man will

understand its interpretation'. Gil (1983: ii 382) misread this as והמשכיל יבין כי הרעו.

2. The chance of any one day in December having rain in modern Lod/Ramla is about 19%, and this is the wettest season of the year: <https://weatherspark.com/y/98202/Average-Weather-in-Lod-Israel>.

3. The end of the line is lost, but reconstructed by Gil (1983: ii 384) [ועד עתה ה]ם, understanding it as 'and they are still there now'. I'm not sure about that reconstruction, since the text is completely rubbed away, but would, if this is the reading, take it as referring to the 'tents' rather than the Caliph's men.



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