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Fragment of the Month: October 2021 **Cambridge University Library**

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Teaching & Learning

Collections Nāṣir, the Hebrew Littérateur Alan Elbaum

Collections & departments "I am the Hebrew littérateur / they call me Nāṣir / eloquent and witty in every matter..."

Research

Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research אנא אלאדיב אלעברי אלדי אסמי נאצר פי גמיע אלאשגאל לי כלאם גיד נאדר Fragment of the month

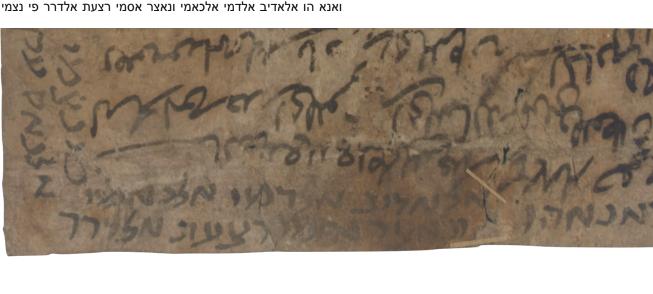
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"I am the dhimmī untaught poet / my name is Nāṣir / I've studded my verse with pearls...."

What's On

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same tradition that gave rise to Nāṣir, the Hebrew Littérateur.



To date, I have found some 40 Genizah fragments written in his distinctive hand, the majority of them containing poetry or rhymed prose of his own composition.³ His thematic repertoire is wide. He composes solemn dirges and festive songs, erotic odes, parodic medical prescriptions for the lovesick, lampoons of stingy hosts and tactless guests, retellings of biblical tales, a jingle about basketmakers and fava bean vendors ("if you pop these beans in your mouth, you'll be perfumed with fragrance and freshness"), and poetic debates between mind-

Nāṣir, the self-proclaimed "Hebrew littérateur," enjoyed a heyday as an eclectic poet in Mamluk Egypt ca. 1300 CE only to lapse into obscurity

after his death. His works, approximately two-thirds in Judaeo-Arabic and one-third in Hebrew, were probably not crafted to build a literary

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legacy. They seem rather to be the ephemera and occasional pieces of a man who made a living as a performer, singing at weddings and circumcisions and entertaining in the marketplace. altering substances.4 In this Fragment of the Month, I will contextualize Nāṣir's literary oeuvre, sketch the silhouette of his life and social context, and conclude with an excerpt from one of his more delightful works.

Yet only in recent years, thanks largely to Mohamed A. H. Ahmed and Rachel Hasson, have scholars begun to examine the Genizah's vast riches of Judaeo-Arabic (not to speak of Arabic) poetry. The neglect of the Judaeo-Arabic poetry found in the Genizah, often described in catalogues as piyyut or liturgical poetry, is consistent with the wider trend in Judaeo-Arabic literary studies of relegating popular poetry to passing mentions and footnotes. 6

The contribution of the Cairo Genizah to the study of Hebrew liturgical and secular poetry cannot be overstated. Countless poems—and

numerous poets—are solely attested in manuscripts from the Genizah and related troves such as the Firkovich Collection in St. Petersburg.

The chief exception to this rule (outside of Genizah studies) is the scholarship on the "Shabazian" school of poetry in Yemen. As far back as the 15th century, Yemeni Jewish poets began to place Hebrew and Judaeo-Arabic on an equal footing, mixing the two languages together in one and the same poem. This style reached its efflorescence in the days of Shalom Shabazi (d. after 1679), who became the most revered poet of Yemeni Jews. The vacuum of research on medieval Judaeo-Arabic verse has led scholars to treat the Judaeo-Arabic portion of Shabazian verse as sui generis, when in fact it draws from a much older—albeit mostly unknown—tradition within Jewish literary history, the

1310), the two characters have much in common, and it is not far-fetched to imagine that they might have crossed paths or even known each other. One intriguing intersection is that Ibn Dāniyāl earned part of his living as an eye doctor, and while we do not know if Nāṣir had any additional trade, he frequently draws on the imagery of medicines, physicians, and eye diseases. 10 It is worth noting that Nāṣir is far from the only author attested in the Genizah who produced vernacular, lowbrow, and/or humorous literature in Judaeo-Arabic. Rachel Hasson has published an early Ottoman-era debate poem between "the city slicker and the hillbilly" (almiṣrī wa-l-rīfī), composed by a wandering cantor named Sulaymān. 11 To mention only two other unpublished and barely studied manuscripts, T-S NS 99.34 is a litany of praises for God, Who rounded the walnut, Who placed the whales in the sea, and Who created all

Nāṣir's diverse themes demand diverse registers. He can write in an elevated style when he pleases, and he is also the poet who rhymes "stoner" (masṭūl) with "ghoul" (ghūl). Though he does not reach the pinnacles of vulgarity of his contemporary Ibn Dāniyāl (ca. 1248–

sorts of humans—those with their noses between their eyes, and those with their heads between their ears. And T-S Ar.6.12 contains a rollicking mock epic in which Bouncer, the Amir of the Mice, musters the mice of the world to vanquish Flapper b. Grabber, the King of the Pigeons, who slew his father Abū Fasād. 12 Returning to Nāṣir: how can we unearth any details about his life, given that no documentary fragments have surfaced in his handwriting and

that his poetry preserves only a modicum of biographical information? I propose that we can shade in the contours of his life by examining his reuses of earlier documentary material and by identifying the earlier literary works that he copied in his hand. Every such fragment

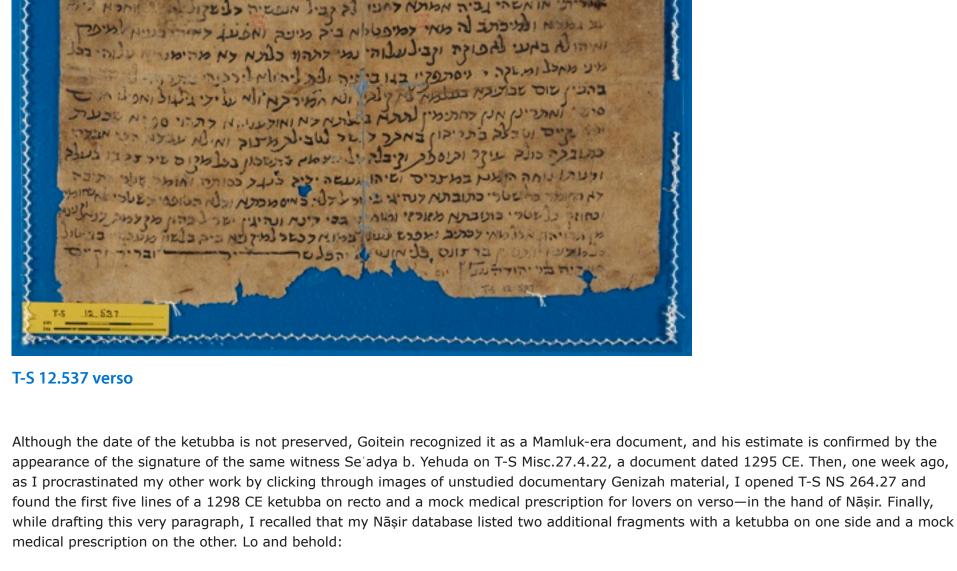
provides a data point linking him to specific times, places, and people, and to the constellation of his literary influences and interests.

My first lead was T-S 12.537, a mock medical prescription for lovers written in Judaeo-Arabic rhymed prose. To my knowledge, this is the only one of Nāṣir's compositions that has drawn the attention of previous scholars. S. D. Goitein transcribed it for his own records and called it "rhymed advice for lovers ('āshiqīn), no doubt copied from [an] Arabic book." As Nāṣir does not sign this text, and the religious allusions are far more Islamic than they are Jewish, Goitein's suggestion that Nāṣir copied (or adapted) it from another source is not implausible. 14

התכי שייבה מכומים ומרא אנפנה מן נומה תעניול זכליות מנחי ולדמדון מפנוחה ומן ערכ מצומים מוא אלרבוע ושרבו כיב זנין) יפן מכו אציבטע פאיר אלעזת לאלאה וחדהו אציבטע פאיר אלעאשהין בטאעת אלמ יה ארמען וכר (בי) ירוקט מאדין ואסטער אי ער משפעה ומקות סרית) פינילם תחת על אל מענה על מצעית של אהר אל בשן ורדן וילנאר ומפמין ובהאר וכרבלתף אל אותאר ותפפום יאל אנהאר על שביקין ומכן אנחפר למה רב אל עאלמין אנוי מן עלוני מיעה חד למשתמאע מן בעד טול מינו כדי מה מה כדי מול מינו מה מה מה מלה מן כצר לנכעה ופאבת אמצוניאר מן קמרנות מאר ובי בל ושחרור ופאבת אחר וזרור וסמא) ועצפור ורואלוב) וחלצה וקשלים מנסכבה ונאות אב מטרבה אחסן אלעצר וטלב לצא, מחבובל בהד מאחדו ורואקץ אל מעניבה ונפים אנסארו ברואים אל מהחרי נבנפסג) מזרק ונסרינן מעבק ונרנים מחדק: ועפרת מנצמקעה ומני עלינלי דינה יכבעבינת הל עלודופל מוח בסד זהר בי מלהינה נהשתד ש אניות כואל תכלל עלה ברכת מלהות ומיות בי עלה ברכת מלחות נו מיות בי מלחות מלח ופאכהתה משמשן ותכשה ונקלה תקביר אלור בנפסף שולחד מנכולא מן מנכי אלבעאדהווסית מן מדמץ מלענמק ופנה מן טיב מלחמוק מהיוזה מ) מימם מלפרמק: ועודין מן כימר שנבר מל דלהל מצביא מן מלהדר ולמלמלתעשרון זה המן אלמלאח ויכתר מן אלוניה ולאנפסאח ודא יבתש מן מצוופתצוחה פמות עלוה פי כנת יעמל דנמה ל-קול כמו קאל משחער כלמוח נית נתוב מונמי צלארו מאודעני אלמדאם ולואנה אלמלאה: בר מלוצמל מנקשועה מן עירהן מלמנפציאלונצ לושימן סבר מפוצעת נוסיותו סתבסתא ועבמדי וובלצב יומיני ורפע הבדי והזמצרי ובימם דפיואם מו בלומה מת מת אל לייוובר בשאף יהודיא וקטאם שניה נשחום חבשות מן כל ומחף וקיהם



T-S 12.537 recto

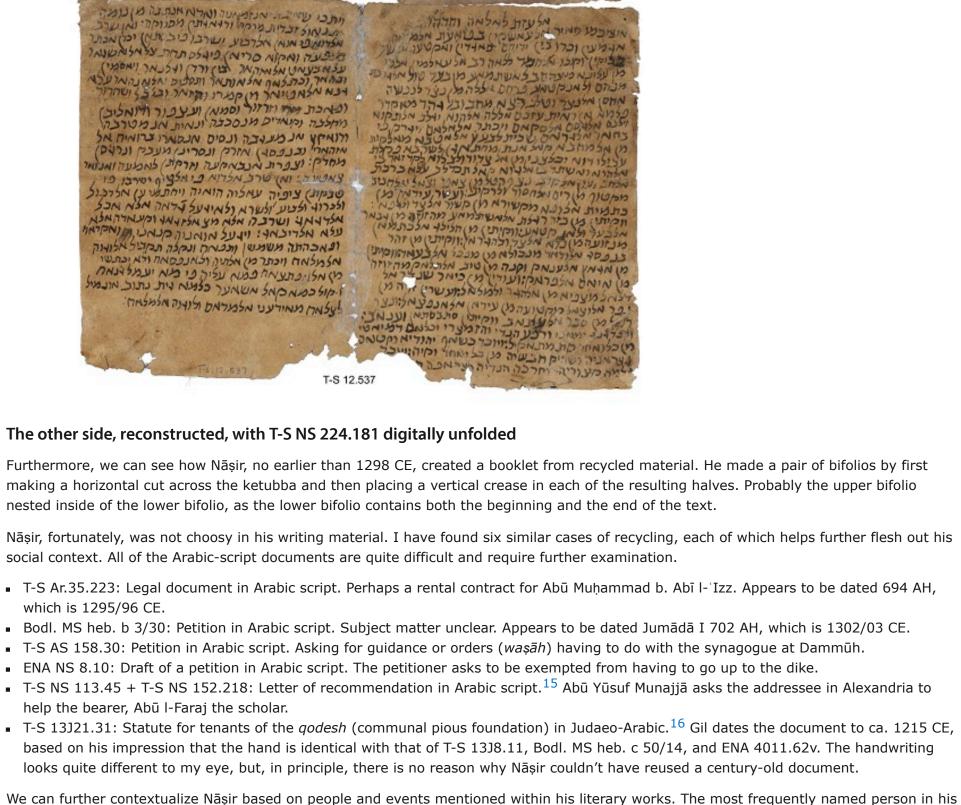


ובולוני א הניה קרומה וביות T-S NS 224.181 צנשמויוכר אלף שוני בנצומאיה בו אבל דינו ני לבה אצור דיליואםר



בין-מרן אלציתיוע צדיר וכבין ייעט שור בלומלרונד

224.181



detail from everyday experience. The Rayyis Avraham who fits Nāṣir's timeline is likely the Nagid Avraham b. David b. Avraham b. Moshe Maimonides, the Head of the Jews in Egypt ca. 1300-13 CE. 19 Other dignitaries are named in T-S AS 129.86, including Yefet Rosh Qehillot, Avraham Sar [...], Yiṣḥaq, Yehuda, and Moshe. 20 Lastly, T-S NS 146.106, a Hebrew poem bemoaning the pain of separation, appears to As for the literary interests and influences that shaped Nāṣir's style, we often find him copying the works of earlier poets and, at least in one

■ T-S NS 260.39: The Midrash of Solomon's throne, containing passages also found in T-S Ar.16.25 and T-S Ar.18(2).115, fol. 3

(identification and references by Oded Zinger).²¹ ■ T-S AS 171.77: An Arabic poem by Bahā' al-Dīn Zuhayr (d. 1258) (identification by Hamzeh AlMaayteh). As we do not know what Nāṣir's Halper 321: A Hebrew wine-water debate poem by a certain Yehuda b. Eliyyahu (at least according to the acrostic). The same poem

I have no doubt that a great amount of material related to Nāṣir has yet to be discovered. All of the fragments I've found thus far may be accessed at this link on the Princeton Geniza Project. About two-thirds of these were offered by the Joins Suggestions algorithm on FGP, and the remaining third came from open-ended browsing. If you find yourself squinting at a cryptic composition in Judaeo-Arabic and/or Hebrew with rhyme words followed by colons and with lameds shaped a bit like Harry Potter's scar, you may very well be looking at his handiwork. I

While this is not the place to analyze this text in depth, a few of its salient features are important to mention. ²⁴ This is essentially an abbreviated maqāma (a picaresque tale in rhymed prose), similar to other known maqāmāt in Arabic and Hebrew, both in terms of its overall conceit and its rhetorical techniques.²³ Nāṣir has a mischievous habit of taking a religious phrase about God and replacing the divinity with the human beloved (e.g., "prostrate yourselves before [the beautiful]"). This mild irreverence is of a piece with the extreme irreverence found in a 13th-century Arabic maqāma on same-sex marriage recently published by Maurice Pomerantz. The maqāma that most closely resembles the text edited here is probably the 48th maqāma of the Taḥkemoni of Yehuda al-Ḥarizi (d. 1225), centered on a mock medical prescription for a lovesick man. ²⁸ The two texts are astonishingly similar, though it does not appear that they share any phrases verbatim. ²⁹ The relationship between these maqāmāt, and whether Nāṣir's version might be considered a link between the Arabic and the Hebrew maqāma traditions, deserves futher study.

קאל אנת מחתאגן לשרבא פקלת עבילי דוא / יכלצני מן אלצדוד ולבלוא לקד זאד בי אלהוא / ואשתד בי אלגוא קאל תכד לך עלא ברכת אלחב ועון אלקלב : נצף רטל מן צאפי וצאל אלחביב / מקטוף מן ריס אלחסוד ולרקיב : ועשר עידאן מן כתמית אלופא / מקשורא מן קשור אלצד ולגפא : ווקיתין מן בזר רגלת אלאשתמאע / מהזוזה מן גבאר אלבעד ולאנקטאע : ווקיתין מן הלילג אלכתמאן / מנזועה מן נוא אלצד ולהגראן

May God favor the one who looks after his needs, who strives his utmost to gratify his beloved. 2 ounces embracers' plum and galbanum of coupling, shaken of the days of separation:

אלעזת לאלאה וחדהו

אוציכמו סאיר אלעאשקין / בטאעת אלמ[ל]אח אגמעין

פלמא אן ראית עזכם אללה אלהוא / יגלב אלתקוא

: ווקיתין מן זהר בנפסג אלודאד / מנכולא מן מנכל אלבעאד

: ועודין מן כיאר שנבר אלדלאל / מצפיא מן אלהגר ולמלאל

: ונצף רטל מן סכר אלעתאב / ווקיתין סת בסתאן וענאב

ויוכד גלמה קצוריה / וחרכה הנדיה / וצראפה . [.

: ועשרין זרה מן גפר(?) אלוצאל / מקטועה מן עידאן אלאנפצאל

: ווקיתין מן אגאץ אלענאק / וקנה מן טיב אלתלאק / מהזוזה מן איאם אלפראק

: ויוכד גנג ימאני / ורפע הנדי / והז מצרי / וכלאם דמיאטי / מן כל ואחד סת מתאקיל

: ויוכד כשאף יהודיא / וקטאם נצראניה / ושהיק חבשיה / מן כל ואחד וקיה

וכרו בין ידיהם סאגדין / ואקטעו אלשך בליקין / וקולו אלחמד ללאה רב אלעאלמין

אלדי מן עלינא מעהם בלאשתמאע 30 / מן בעד טול אלגרבת מנהם ולאנקטאע

פרחם אללה מן נצר לנפשה אחסן אלנצר / וטלב רצא מחבובו גהד מא קדר

3 There is a major caveat: short of finding his signature at the end of a poem or an attribution of a text to a different author, we cannot be certain about authorship. 4 Dirges: T-S 13J21.31, T-S AS 165.123. Festive songs: BL OR 5557P.47, Moss. II,173, T-S AS 171.77, T-S NS 113.45 + T-S NS 152.218. Erotic odes: Bodl. MS heb. b 3/30, ENA 2700.25-26, ENA NS 8.10, JRL SERIES B 4144, T-S AS 159.242. Parodic medical prescriptions: T-S NS 264.27 + T-S AS 145.360 + T-S NS 224.181 + T-S 12.537. Stingy hosts and tactless guests: T-S AS 158.30, T-S NS 38.32. Biblical tales: T-S Ar.7.24, T-S NS 131.29 + T-S NS 224.143. Fava bean vendors (fawwālīn) and basketmakers (qaffāṣīn): T-S Ar.30.197. Debate poems:

1 ENA NS 8.10, image provided by the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary.

Nāṣir (T-S NS 207.90) and three in the hands of different scribes: ENA 2700.10, Halper 329 (possibly related to the deposition and later reinstatement of David I Maimonides, in which case it would date to the mid-13th century), and T-S Ar.30.87 (signed by David b. Moshe ha-Levi and dated 1254 CE). 8 "Check out that stoner. . . He looks like a ghoul!" (PER H 134). 9 Li Guo, The Performing Arts in Medieval Islam: Shadow Play and Popular Poetry in Ibn Dāniyāl's Mamluk Cairo (Leiden, 2012).

Yehudit, ed. Yoram Erder et al. (Tel Aviv, 2014), 209-33.

https://geniza.princeton.edu/pgpsearch/?a=object&id=3177. (Ignore the fact that the main shelfmark listed there is T-S NS 264.27, which is on account of ongoing renovations of the Princeton Geniza Project technical infrastructure and website.) 14 My thanks to Michael Rand for this insight. 15 Join by Oded Zinger. Ed. Zinger and Naïm Vanthieghem. My thanks to Zinger and Vanthieghem for sharing their pre-publication edition

11 Rachel Hasson, "Qişşat al-Mişrī wa-l-Rīfī: Shir 'Amami be-'Aravit Yehudit me-Osef Firkovich" (Heb.), in 'Iyyunim be-Tarbut ha-'Aravit ha-

with me. 16. Moshe Gil, Documents of the Jewish Pious Foundations from the Cairo Geniza (Leiden,, 1976), 411, doc. 112. 17 ENA 3216.7, ENA NS 8.10, JRL SERIES B 4144, PER H 134, T-S Ar.7.24, and T-S Ar.35.223. 18 T-S NS 38.32. The other side refers to people who "died in the scarcity (ghalā')," perhaps also referring to a known event from recent

21 Briefly mentioned in Zinger, "Meanderings in the Arabic Literary Genizot: New Texts and New Contexts," Intellectual History of the Islamicate World 8 (2020) 188-223, at 203 22 Identification from Halper catalogue (https://openn.library.upenn.edu/Data/0002/html/h321.html).

25 An Arabic magama on medical themes is edited in Bilal Orfali and Maurice Pomerantz, "A Lost Magama of Badī al-Zamān al-Hamagānī," Arabica 60 (2013), 245-71. 26 The Arabic phrase "prostrate yourselves before them" is a Quranic allusion (e.g., 19:58 and 32:15). Similarly, Nāṣir's "with the blessing of Love and the aid of the Heart" is an allusion to the standard phrase accompanying actual medical prescriptions, "with the blessing of God and His aid."

28 Yehuda al-Ḥarizi, *Taḥkemoni*, Yahalom and Katsumata eds. (Jerusalem, 2010), 515–19.

Hebrew Tradition of the Ḥarīrīan and Ḥarizian Magama: Maḥberot Eitan ha-Ezraḥi (Leiden, 2021), 116-18. 30 A variant of אגתמאע.

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honor of Rabbi Avraham. 20 T-S AS 129.86.

Month (September 2020). 24 I am indebted to Michael Rand for nearly all of the insights in this paragraph and for his invaluable aid with the edition of the text.

27 Maurice Pomerantz, "A Maqāma on Same-Sex Marriage in the Thirteenth Century," Intellectual History of the Islamicate World (2021), 1-27, esp. 21-23.

prescriptions, the first prescription consisting of the desirable ingredients, the second consisting of the undesirable ones. Elsewhere in

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

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Research at Cambridge

On the other side of the manuscript, we find the lower half of a ketubba (marriage contract): בבבית בין ממקר קעי ובין ממלולו די פין מיי עשב איתעם אחריתי ולא צישהי גביין אמתא צפעון לל ואי נם בי שתית או אשהי נביה אמתא לחני לק קביל אנשיה כלשקול אה

T-S NS 264.27 ה הכחב מלוש מינים לעו נה בלון ומותבה ול הריינים אם מצמשה מוצבי הומן זור

prescription: צנישה ויוכד מכף +בולומאיה בי א T-S AS דכן אולוו שנייו ומנייה וקת א

The other side, reconstructed, with T-S NS 224.181 digitally unfolded corpus is Nāsir himself. 17 But others may be identifiable. In T-S NS 38.32, he narrates a squabble of some kind, repeating the punchline "but they didn't leave me." Then, as the conflict escalates, "If they carry on like this, I'll go to the chief (al-Rayyis) and tell him all my woes, 'Hey Rabbi Avraham, by God, look at my state!"¹⁸ While the narrative might be fictional, petitioning the head of the community for redress is a address the city of Tyre and its sages (this requires further examination).

case, a non-poetic literary text:

Glory be to God alone.

He said, "You need a potion,"

Footnotes

2 T-S Ar.35.223.

the Month (September 2020).

I exhort you, o lovers, to pledge fealty to the beautiful.

I complained to a doctor of my symptoms of love.

Who bestowed union upon us after long estrangement and division"—

When I experienced, dear listeners, how passion overcomes piety,

Wastes the body, increases its pains, and drowns it in the seas of ardor,

So I said, "Fix me a medicine that will save me from discord and distress,

½ pound pure lovers' union, picked from the heads of the envier and the censor :

10 stalks marshmallow of fidelity, peeled of the husks of discord and scorn:

2 ounces myrobalan of secrecy, pitted of the kernels of discord and exile :

2 sticks cassia of coquetry, purged of abandonment and listlessness:

2 ounces purslane seeds of union, shaken of the dust of distance and division:

For my passion is unbearable, and my pangs are powerful."

He said, "Take, with the blessing of Love and the aid of the Heart,

2 ounces violet of amorousness, sifted of the bran of parting:

20 buds [...] of union, pruned of the branches of disunion:

[...] courtiers' debauchery, Indian dancing, [...] grace....":

Halper 321 (wine vs. water), PER H 134 (wine vs. hashish).

1/2 pound sugar of reproof, 2 ounces garden lady(?) and jujube :

1 ounce each Jewish striptease, Christian lust, Abyssinian moans :

Prostrate yourselves before them, dispel doubt with certainty, and say, "Praise be to the Lord

Arabic script handwriting looks like, this could either be a copy in his own hand or it could simply be a reuse. ■ ENA 2875.31–32: Multiple Hebrew poems, including one by Avraham Ibn 'Ezra. appears in T-S 8K15.9.²² ■ T-S K25.276: A Judaeo-Arabic poem, many of whose lines begin with Yā Nafs. Potentially related to the poems discussed by Hasson in her September 2020 Fragment of the Month.²³ would be grateful to learn of your discovery and add your new manuscript to the heap. I conclude with an edition of the first page of Nāṣir's medical prescriptions for the lovesick (T-S 12.537). This transcription is based on Goitein's but has extensive emendations. I have followed the general style of the Princeton Geniza Project in omitting the diacritical marks found in the manuscript. I have not followed the lineation of the manuscript, so as to better convey the rhythm of the text. To the same end, I've added slashes after the rhyme words (the colons are Nāṣir's). There remain several unresolved ambiguities in both the transcription and

וילבס אלגסם אלסקאם / ויכתר אלאלאם / ויגרק פי בחאר אלגראם שכית לבעץ אלאטבא / מא לקית מן אלמחבא

6 measures each Yemeni flirtation, Indian erectness, Cairene quivering, Damiettan pillow talk:

Hebrew script) from around the 15th century. Godfrey Wettinger, "Late Medieval Judaeo-Arabic Poetry in Vatican MS. 411: Links with Matese and Sicilian Arabic," Journal of Maltese Studies 13 (1979), 1–16. 7 On Shabazian poetry and Yemeni Jewish poetry more broadly, begin with the publications of Yosef Tobi, e.g., "Ivrit, Aramit, ve-'Aravit be-Shirat Yehude Teman" (Heb.), Pe amim (1987), 3-22, and Mark Wagner, Like Joseph in Beauty: Yemeni Vernacular Poetry and Arab-Jewish Symbiosis (Leiden, 2009). While macaronic Hebrew/Arabic poetry is not common in the medieval fragments of the Cairo Genizah, there is probably much waiting to be found. Without conducting any kind of systematic survey, I have encountered one such poem in the hand of

5 Mohamed A. H. Ahmed is the principal investigator of the European Research Council-funded project "Arabic Poetry in the Cairo Genizah" (2020–25). See M.A.H. Ahmed, "An Initial Survey of Arabic Poetry in the Cairo Genizah," Al-Masāq 30:2 (2018), pp. 212–33, and M.A.H.

6 E.g., William Brinner, "Popular Literature in Medieval Jewish Arabic," in Judaeo-Arabic Studies, ed. Norman Golb (Routledge, 1997), 70. These footnotes sometimes lead to the manuscript Vat.ebr.411, which contains 8 poems in what is likely Sicilian Arabic or Maltese (written in

Ahmed, "Judaeo-Arabic Poetry in the Cairo Genizah: T-S Ar.37.127," Fragment of the Month (March 2018). See also the publications of Rachel Hasson, including Hasson, "Yā Nafs - A Judaeo-Arabic Reproof for Yom Kippur (?): RNL Yevr.-Arab. II:2682 and T-S Ar.36.134," Fragment of

12 According to Victor Lebedev, this bifolio may belong together with a larger manuscript in the Firkovich Collection (no shelfmark given) about the war between cats and mice. Victor Lebedev, "Cats, Mice, Thieves and Heroes in 'Arabian Nights' Genizah Tales," Genizah Fragments 24 (1992). 13 Goitein's index card, his original transcription, and his transcription with my emendations may all be found at

10 ENA NS 8.10, T-S Ar.7.24, T-S NS 264.27 + T-S AS 145.360 + T-S NS 224.181 + T-S 12.537.

19 S. M. Stern, Maimonidis Commentarius in Mischnam, vol. 3 (Copenhagen, 1966), 45. Cf. T-S 8J23.15, by Nāṣir, catalogued as a poem in

23 Rachel Hasson, "Yā Nafs - A Judaeo-Arabic Reproof for Yom Kippur (?): RNL Yevr.-Arab. II:2682 and T-S Ar.36.134," Fragment of the

29 A particularly intriguing observation (made to me by Michael Rand) is that the parallelistic structure of the prescription in Nāṣir's version, where the basic structure is "X amount of [something desirable] without [something undesirable]," is broken up by al-Harizi into two separate Taḥkemoni, al-Ḥarizi uses a similar technique of "breaking up" when he adapts earlier material. See Michael Rand, Studies in the Medieval

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