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**Introduction and 3 letters for "messengers to themselves" ((שלוחים לעצמם**

The Jerusalem community was never well-off. It has gone through worse and less bad times, but the majority of its Jewish residents, most of them new immigrants, have always lived very modestly. In the last quarter of the 16th century, the economic situation in the Ottoman Empire worsened. The community's debts to the authorities and private creditors multiplied, and the legal struggle for possession of the synagogue, known as ‘the Ramban synagogue’, in which a great deal of money was invested, ended in failure and its final closure at the end of the century.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The number of Jews in Jerusalem by that time was reduced to about a thousand souls. According to the poet Rabbi Israel Najara, about a quarter of them, 230 souls, were poor.[[2]](#footnote-2)

At the beginning of the 17th century there was a certain recovery which was partly due to the decline and abandonment of Safed. New immigrants arrived in the city, including well-known rabbis who preferred Jerusalem to the sinking Safed. The community expanded, and in the twenties of the 17th century numbered about 2500 souls.

But the hopes for prosperity and blossoming were dashed within a few years. The reign of a cruel governor, Muhammad ibn Farokh (1621, 1624-5), was disastrous for the city's residents in general and the Jews in particular. Faced with unprecedented extortion, corporal punishment and threats of deportation, the Jerusalem community became a broken and debt-ridden community. The number of the Jewish citizens was reduced to about 1000 souls.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The financial crisis and its ramifications continued to oppress the community for decades, yet Jerusalem never ceased to be a focus for Aliya. The place of the deceased and deserting fugitives was filled by new immigrants. But the heavy debts continued to oppress everyone, old citizens and new-comers alike. The majority of the public was poor and a large part was supported by donations from the diaspora or funds which did not always arrive on time and in the desired amount. Yeshiva students received a meager stipend for their living, but the poor who were not Torah scholars – not תלמידי חכמים - and did not belong to any group, had no regular sources of income. The immigrants who came to Eretz Israel, a major part of them in old age, encountered, therefore, a bleak reality.

One of the solutions of the Jews in Jerusalem (and other Jewish centers in Eretz Israel) was to send emissaries to the *Gola*, to every Jewish center in the world. Those emissaries were known by the acronym “*shadar*” (in plural: *shadarim*), which means messengers of the rabbis – שלוחי דרבנן (rabbinic emissaries)

The emissaries were sent to Jewish communities in the Diaspora to solicit funds for institutions, congregations, Torah centers and schools (*yeshivot*). They left Eretz Israel equipped with letters of appointment, which described the sorry plight of the city or institution on whose behalf they were acting - the burden of debts and the bullying of the local governors. Sometimes they provided ideological reasons for why the Jews of the diaspora should support their brothers in the Holy Land.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The letters of mission (כתבי שליחות) presented the emissaries to the leaders and rabbis of the Jewish centers they reached, and begged them to welcome them with open arms, host them and donate kindly to the institutions they represented. Many of the emissaries were scholars who not only brought with them news from the Holy Land but also preached in public and arbitrated in disputes on Jewish law. After a trip lasting sometimes several years, they returned to their home city with the funds they had managed to raise from the various Jewish communities. Avraham Yaari wrote a comprehensive book about the institution of the emissaries, the nature of the messengers, the importance of their mission, the directions of the mission, the methods of collecting funds, and more.[[5]](#footnote-5) Matthias Lehmann’s book, *Emissaries from the Holy Land*, gives a historical overview of the institution of *shadarim* and links its beginning with the Ottoman occupation of Eretz Israel (1517). He actually describes the phenomenon as “**very much a product of the early modern period**”.[[6]](#footnote-6) But Lehmann refers mainly to the 18th and 19th centuries.

A wide range of sources exists on the itinerary and activities of the emissaries. Among these sources are the letters of appointment and recommendation the emissaries were provided with before their departure.

Hundreds of such letters were sent from Jerusalem to the diaspora and, in particular, the flow increased during - and following - the disastrous reign of Ibn Farukh in the 1620s.

Most of the mission letters published in the past by Abraham Yaari and other scholars were general letters, which refer to the plight of the many - and not the plight of the individual. But alongside the letters describing the troubles of the community or its institutions as a whole, letters were also written describing the desperate situation of private individuals, who had to go on the road themselves in order to collect alms for their personal purposes. These individuals, who also carried with them letters signed by the community's leaders, were called "messengers to themselves" (שלוחים לעצמם).

In Yaari’s monumental book, containing about 900 pages, only two pages were dedicated to the phenomenon of messengers to themselves!

This is the subject I would like to focus on: letters written by the community of Jerusalem for private individuals and for private purposes.

The three letter I chose as examples are found in a handwritten collection prepared by a Jerusalem community scribe in the first half of the 17th century.[[7]](#footnote-7) This is a sample collection (**אגרון**), in which the author copied letters that had already been sent, so that he can use their formulas in the future. In this case the scribe copied about two hundred letters of mission for emissaries, among them about twenty letters for individuals, and except for a few cases made sure to omit identifying details.

Minna Rozen published 83 letters of mission out of this manuscript, but most of the letters she published and referred to speak of the troubles of the public.

The three letters I present here were not included in Rozen’s book, and to the best of my knowledge were not published anywhere else.

**I**n contrast to the general letters whose wording often repeats itself, this is not the case in the private letters of mission, where no one case is similar to another. Each person and his own trouble. What made these people go out and collect alms?

There were several reasons why people wandered the roads to collect money for their own benefit:

A few letters were written for people described as destitute poor, who had no income and had to borrow money and go into debt to feed their families.

Several letters were intended to come to the aid of people who were robbed or taken captive on their way to the Land of Israel, as a result of the maritime piracy that prevailed in the Mediterranean basin during this period.

A group of letters in the manuscript received the title "A Daughter's Trouble" (צרת הבת). It turns out that the birth of a daughter was not considered a blessing to her parents, and from her childhood they began to worry about preparing a dowry for her so that she would be married when the time came. An unmarried daughter became a burden on her family. Fathers of daughters whose condition would not allow them to provide a proper dowry for their daughters had to wander on the roads to raise funds for this purpose.

Another issue that preoccupied Jerusalem's leaders was the situation of abandoned women, whose husbands left the city and left them without sources of income to become a burden on the public.

Why did the leaders bother to write letters of recommendation to private individuals while they are so preoccupied with vexing general problems? There is no doubt that behind the heartbreaking descriptions of people who lost their property, or captured by pirates, of poor fathers and abandoned women, there is also the fear of the leaders that these will fall a burden on the public.

The community institutions in Jerusalem, which were designed to support the poor, the elderly, the sick and the lonely - were themselves poor and dependent on occasional donations. The Jerusalem community was mostly poor, the many financial demands of the Muslim governors did not allow it to stand on its own feet. Most of the donations that came from outside the country did not go to individuals but were intended to pay the community's debts to Gentile creditors. That's why the leaders tried in every way to reduce the number of the poor and free themselves from personal obligation, and they had a clear interest that those individuals would succeed in their mission. Therefore, it should not be surprising that those in need were equipped with heartbreaking letters of recommendation, and in fact they were encouraged to go on the road and try to raise funds on their own.

In conclusion: the collection of letters from Jerusalem shows an extensive network of connections that existed between the Land of Israel and communities and individuals in the Diaspora not only in public affairs and financial contributions to the general, but also in various private matters. Quite a number of messengers to themselves left Jerusalem with letters of rercommendation and support, signed by public figures and rabbis.

Here are three examples of such letters, sent by the community for private individuals.[[8]](#footnote-8)

I.



The preamble to this letter is particularly long and consists of fragments of biblical verses. It is an example of the style of addressing distiguished people. It is intended for certain benefactors - possibly from a family of Cohens - and praises them with an abundance of eloquent phrases.

It continues with a general description of the dire situation in Jerusalem, and then describes the hardships of immigrants seeking to live in the Land of Israel.

Only then the fate of the poor bearer of the letter is described. It is about a man named David, who lost all his possessions on the way and after arriving in Jerusalem.

II.



This is a plea written on behalf of a mother to the head of a certain family, whose generosity and support for the poor of Jerusalem was apparently known. It was published by me, without references, in the “Culture and Literature” supplement of the *Haaretz* newspaper on October 23rd, 2009.

III.



A letter for a poor person emphasizing that the community cannot afford the expenses of helping all the poor people.

1. This is a traumatic event for the Jerusalem community. For summaries and additional references see A. Cohen, *The Jewish Community of Jerusalem in the 16th Century*, Jerusalem 1982, pp. 85-93 (Hebrew); A. Cohen and E. Simon-Pikali, *Jews in the Moslem Religious Court (16th Century)*, Jerusalem 1993 , pp. 70-88 (Hebrew); idem, *Jews in the Moslem Religious court (17th Century)*, vol. I, Jerusalem 2010, pp. 142-144 (Hebrew); M. Rozen, *The Jewish Community of Jerusalem in the 17th Century*, Tel Aviv 1984, pp. 32-33 (Hebrew). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ישראל נג'ארה, מימי ישראל, ויניציאה שס"ה, קסב ע"ב.. Ottoman pole 1553/5 - 325 households. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Rozen, The Jewish Community, pp. 3-20. On Ibn Farokh period and its consequences see pp. 36-50; *The Ruins of Jerusalem* (first published in 1631), edited and annotated by M. Rozen, Tel Aviv 1981 (Hebrew). Ottoman pole 1625/6 - 200 households. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Emissaries came up with innovative arguments about why the poor Jews in Palestine were, in fact, *more* worthy of charity than the “poor of your city”—whom Maimonides designated as taking “‘precedence over the poor of another city’” (Matthias B. Lehmann, *Emissaries from the Holy Land: The Sephardic Diaspora and the Practice of Pan-Judaism in the Eighteenth Century*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2014, p. 160). See Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Matnot ‘Aniyim*, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. A. Yaari, *Emissaries from the Land of Israel*, Jerusalem 1977 (Hebrew). Yaari estimated that the *shadars* trips usually last three to four years and that ten percent of them died during their mission. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Lehmann, Emissaries, p. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Jerusalem, National Library, MS. 8\*61 כ"י אגרות שד"רים מירושלים (Letters of Emissaries).

   The manuscript was previously described and mentioned in the research. See its description in Rozen, Rozen, *The Jewish Community of Jerusalem* , pp. 299-315. Treasures of information about Jewish personalities and communities in Syria, Eretz Israel and Egypt still remain in this manuscript. Among it 93 private letters written and copied by Rabbi Yosef Mataron (a student of Rabbi Moshe Alsheikh of Safed), from the end of the 16th century and the beginning of the 17th, which were not thoroughly searched until now.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. In the original Hebrew there are entire sections that are written in rhyme, the majority is based on biblical verses, but it was impossible to translate them accurately, and I tried to translate as close as possible to the original. All punctuation, spaces and division were done by me. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)