

- A Gaon of Jerusalem sends
1. THANKS FOR A BEQUEST FROM SPAIN SENT FROM JERUSALEM TO EGYPT TOGETHER WITH RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION (ca. 1038)

Jerusalem, Egypt, Spain, separated from each other by vast stretches of deserts and seas, are represented together in this as in many other Geniza letters.

Until its capture by the Seljuks in 1071, Jerusalem, the seat of the yeshiva, or the Jewish High Council, was the religious capital of the Jews in the Fatimid empire and beyond. The head of the yeshiva, the Gaon, was the highest religious authority. Since many old people chose the Holy City for passing there their last days, and since not everyone possessed sufficient means, and those who did, often lost them on the way or were deprived of them by rapacious officials, the city was also full of indigent people. Their maintenance was regarded as a sacred duty on Jews all over the world, a fact paralleled by the lavish donations for Jerusalem by Christian princes and commoners and the veneration of Muslims for the Holy City.

These two aspects of Jerusalem as a pivot of spiritual life and as a city in need of help from far away, is illustrated in this short letter by the Gaon Solomon b. Judah (d. 1051).<sup>1</sup> The addressee, Sahlān b. Abraham, was one of the leaders of the Jewish community of Fustat, the ancient capital

- 2 -

of Islamic Egypt, and, like his father, was in charge of collections for the yeshivas of Baghdad and Jerusalem and many works of philanthropy. He was also a scholar and writer of religious poetry of no mean merit. For all these reasons he was honored by the yeshivas of both Iraq and Palestine with the most high-ranking titles. Our letter makes mention of four. In a later letter he has seven.<sup>2</sup>

Our letter shows also how money was transferred from one country to another. The Spanish merchant, who willed 10 dinars (worth about \$1,000) to the poor of Jerusalem, had an account with a banker in Egypt. The banker handed over the amount in cash to the addressee, for money transferred by bill of exchange or otherwise from the West to Fustat was often forwarded from there to Jerusalem in cash, since banking facilities in Jerusalem were limited. But Sahlān delivered the gold pieces to a merchant-banker in Fustat who sent them by bill of exchange to a banker<sup>3</sup> in Jerusalem. The latter paid cash to the Gaon, who handed it over to the various almoners of Jerusalem for distribution to the poor. As in other cases, it may be assumed that the two bankers renounced the commission due for the suftaja, as a bill of exchange is called in Arabic, or diyōqne, as it is referred to here with a Hebrew term derived from Greek, since the transfer concerned was destined for a work of charity.

- 3 -

The religious problem treated by the Gaon was one of great significance. The sages of the Talmud were regarded as an absolute authority as far as Jewish law and ritual were concerned. The question was whether their homilies and expositions of the Scriptures carried similar weight. The Gaon denies this categorically. Any competent scholar was free to interpret the Bible according to his own lights.

The letter is in Hebrew, as was customary among scholars. The introductory lines are in rhymed prose.

TS Loan 14.<sup>4</sup>

To (his) h(onor), g(reatness, and) h(oliness,) M(aster and) R(abbis) the esteemed and illustrious Sahlān, who is crowned with four titles of honor - may the Rock (God) be his helper and shadow of refuge. May he surround him as a protection, fulfill his wishes and hopes and give him one who perpetuates his name and memory<sup>5</sup> - [son of h. g.]h. M. R. Abraham, the hāvēr<sup>6</sup> - m(ay he rest in) E(den).

"Peace, Peace" may be heard by your ears, and the king in his beauty<sup>7</sup> may be seen by your eyes, and your days and years may be full of good.

Your esteemed letter [has arrived] together with the bill of exchange on 10 gold pieces for the poor, which were

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willed by M. Abra[ham] of Toledo<sup>8</sup>. They had been deposited with M. R. Mevōrākh, the honorable elder, the banker - m(ay the) R(ock) preserve him) - son of M. R. David, m. E. You - may the Rock preserve you - received them from him and gave them to L. L., the eminent elder Hesed<sup>9</sup> - may the Rock be his helper - son of M. Yāshār, (may he) r(est in) E(den). The latter issued a bill of exchange on them to M. Fadl, the elder, son of David, m. E. - I received them from him, gave them to the almoners of Jerusalem who distributed them to the poor in accordance with the established usages.<sup>10</sup>

We mentioned the deceased M. R. Abraham in the prayer for the dead and those who dealt with the gift until it reached the poor, in our blessings and prayers for them and their progeny, and especially you who took so much trouble in this matter. To h. h. M. R. Eli ha-Kohen, the cantor, R. P., one dinar was given in accordance with the will.<sup>11</sup>

You asked me to borrow the Midrash<sup>12</sup> on the Song of Songs from the Third<sup>13</sup> and to have copied for you what it says about "The mandrakes" (7:13, Heb. 14) and "Come, my beloved" (7:11, Heb. 12). The exposition given there is similar to that contained in the Midrach "Do you see".<sup>14</sup> I normally do not borrow books from the Third, for he does not like to lend his books out.<sup>15</sup>

You are certainly aware of the fact that most of the aggadot<sup>16</sup> are nothing but opinions, of which it cannot be said

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that they represent a true explanation of the Scriptures. If a man like myself<sup>17</sup> would expound today the Bible in this way, no one would listen to me. For instance: "Come my beloved, let us go forth and see whether the vines have budded" - these are the students of the Scriptures, 'whether the grape blossoms have opened' - these are the students of the Mishna, 'and the pomegranates are in bloom' - these are the students of the Talmud." Or the explanation that "The mandrake" refers to the story of the mandrakes of Leah and Rachel (genesis 30: 14-17). These and similar expositions are not acceptable to our audiences. Take notice of this.<sup>18</sup> A man with understanding may give explanations different from these.

Your welfare and that of M. R. Sa'adya alluf<sup>19</sup> may increase forever.

Solomon, the li(ttle), head of the yeshiva "Pride of Jacob", son of the rabbi.<sup>20</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>About him see , below, and index.

<sup>2</sup>Dated documents 1034 (TS 8 Ja 2, f. 1, mentioned Mann, p. 102) through 1049 (TS 16.162).

<sup>3</sup>Mann, Texts, I, p. 321, n. 42a, writes that he was the parnas, that is, almoner, but ENA 2804, f. 3, l. 7, ed. Mann, II, p. 146, says expressly that he handed over an amount received by him to the chief almoner of Jerusalem.

<sup>4</sup>Ed. Mann, Texts, I, pp. 320-322, See ibid, p. 312.

<sup>5</sup>Sahlān had married in 1037, perhaps only one or two years before the writing of this letter. TS 20.6, ed. S. Assaf, Tarbis 9 (1938), 30-32.

<sup>6</sup>(Honorific) member of the yeshiva of Jerusalem.

<sup>7</sup>The messiah, see Isaiah 33:17. "Peace" refers also to the messianic times, Isaiah 52:7.

<sup>8</sup>Toledo, Spain.

<sup>9</sup>Heb. equivalents of (Abū Nasr) Fadl C. Sahl, the brother of Abū Sa`d Tustarī, the visier of the dowager who, at that time, ruled the Fahinu'd empire for her minor son, the caliph Mustansir.

<sup>10</sup>Since many donations arrived in Jerusalem, it was necessary to identify the gift received exactly. As

the details given prove, this bequest of 10 dinars is not identical with a donation of the same amount by the elders of Fustat, handed over by the almoner in Jerusalem directly and acknowledged by the Gaon in a letter to another dignitary, see n. 3, above.

<sup>11</sup> It was customary to single out cantors for special gifts since they recited the prayer for the dead. This cantor, Eli ha-Kohen C. Ezekiel, was a noted writer of religious poetry.

<sup>12</sup> Various books of homiletic expositions of the Song of Songs were in circulation in those days. It is impossible to say which was meant here, see n. 14, below, and Mann, Texts, I, p. 322, n. 47a.

<sup>13</sup> The yeshiva was headed by a board of seven, the first being the Gaon, the second the president of the high court, the other numbers being called Third, Fourth, etc. See Med. Loc. II, p.

<sup>14</sup> So called after its opening, a quotation from the Book of Proverbs 22:29. This is the standard midrash on the Song of Songs, available in an English translation.

<sup>16</sup> Another word for fanciful expositions of the Bible and other literature not dealing with law or ritual.

<sup>17</sup> One of the privileges of the Gaon, recognized by the Muslim government, was the authoritative explanation of the Scriptures. Med. Loc., II. p. <sup>S</sup>

<sup>18</sup> The text is correct and should not be changed as Mann, Texts, I, p. 322, n. 51, does. The Heb. is a translation of an Ar. phrase which would be used in this connection.

<sup>19</sup> i.e., distinguished member of one of the two Babylonian (Iraqian) yeshivas. The reference is to Saàdyà b. Ephraim, brother-in-law of Sahlân's father. In modern Heb. allûf means general. Times have changed.

<sup>20</sup> Solomon <sup>b</sup> Judah signed in many different ways. 'Pride of Jacob' was the official title of the Jerusalem yeshiva.

Acknowledgment

No. 1

TS Loan 14<sup>t</sup>

sent to Egypt

THANKS FOR A BEQUEST FROM SPAIN EBNT FROM JERUSALEM TOGETHER WITH  
RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION

TS Loan 14<sup>t</sup>

Until its capture by the Seljuks in 1071, Jerusalem, the seat of the yeshiva, or the Jewish High Council, was the religious capital of the Jews in the Fatimid empire and beyond. The head of the yeshiva, the Gaon, was the highest religious authority. Since many old people chose the Holy City for passing there their last days, and since not everyone possessed sufficient means, and those who did often lost them on the way or were deprived of them by rapacious officials, the city was also full of indigent people. Their maintenance was regarded as a sacred duty on Jews all over the world, a fact paralleled by the lavish donations for Jerusalem by Christian princes and commoners.

These two aspects of the Holy City as a pivot of spiritual life and as a city in need of help from far away, is illustrated in this short letter by the Gaon Solomon b. Judah (d. 1051).<sup>1</sup> The addressee, Sahlān b. Abraham, was one of the leaders of the Jewish community of Fustat, the ancient capital of Islamic Egypt, and, like his father, especially concerned with collections for the yeshivas of Baghdad and Jerusalem and many works of philanthropy. He was also a scholar and writer of religious poetry of no mean quality. For all these reasons he was honored by the yeshivas of both Iraq and Palestine with the most high-ranking titles. Our letter makes mention of four. In a later letter he has seven.<sup>2</sup>

Our letter shows also how money was transferred from one country to another.

The Spanish merchant, who willed 10 dinars (worth about \$1,000) to the poor of Jerusalem, had an account with a banker in Egypt. The banker handed over the amount in cash to the addressee, for money forwarded transferred by bill of exchange or otherwise from the West to Fustat was often forwarded from there to Jerusalem in cash, since banking facilities in Jerusalem were limited. But Sahlān delivered the gold pieces to a merchant-banker in Fustat who sent them by <sup>3</sup>sufṭajā, or bill of exchange, to [Jerusalem a banker in]. The latter

paid cash to the Gaon who handed it over to the various almoners of Jerusalem for distribution to the poor. As in other cases, it may be assumed that the two bankers renounced the commission due for the suftaja, as a bill of exchange is called in Arabic, or diyōqne, as it is referred to here with a Hebrew term derived from Greek, since the transfer concerned was destined for a work of charity.

((Continue on my handwritten copy)))

p. 3

The Head of the Mission, or High Council of Jerusalem  
from ~~forbidden~~ <sup>forbidden</sup> to ~~the~~ <sup>the</sup> ~~after~~ <sup>after</sup> with  
1. The acts for a gift from Spain ~~and~~ <sup>to</sup> Religious  
Institutes or ~~request~~ <sup>request</sup> sent from Jerusalem

Loc 14.

~~1174~~ T 320 - 1

Until its capture by the Arabs in 1071, Jerusalem, the seat of the <sup>2</sup> ~~Armenian~~ <sup>2</sup> Jew H.C. was the rel. cap. of the Jew in  
the <sup>2</sup> ~~Armenian~~ <sup>2</sup> state

The Feb. anyone beyond. The lead is to y., to James, as the

list rev. auth. since many old people chose the CTA for passing

Here the last days I can <sup>find</sup> not one who proscribed means or  
~~abolitionists~~ <sup>that had some men</sup> that had lost them  
those exist <sup>depended</sup>  
These pointed on the way or were managed by reprobation officials,

~~the city was full of rich persons~~ Their  
corporation by the Greeks founded a ~~rich library~~ <sup>in Greek</sup> The ~~rich~~ <sup>poor</sup> regarded as a sacred duty on J. all over the world, ~~the~~  
~~parallelled by~~ <sup>the</sup> for Jerusalem <sup>in Egypt.</sup>  
large donations by Christian prince <sup>Emperor</sup> ~~of the~~ <sup>to the</sup> Christians

~~birds have been observed.~~ These two species of the H. C. T. as found on spruce

letter - a - a - c } & the first of " - need & keys from far away

is well illustrated on this short letter by the Jan. 8. 8. J. (d. 105)

The address, Sadas G. Abercrombie, was one of the leaders of

the J. c. at the foot of the hill headed  
west especially exposed

to be collections for the year, or J.-D. - for  
any ~~prolonged~~ cause or philanthropy. Oves

*Over*

Loan 14

He was also a broker owned by religious priests of no mean quality.  
For all these reasons he was known by the year 1700 by the  
~~name of~~ <sup>name of</sup> "Banker to the ~~whole~~ <sup>whole</sup> nation" & his name was mentioned in  
Pala <sup>and</sup> with the highest title. There were four. As a  
late document under written in seven he bears  
seven titles. - the maximum reached by any author to  
any date.

We learn <sup>also</sup> ~~that~~ how money was handled  
internationally for this was commercial purposes

The Spanish money had deposited <sup>with</sup> with a banker

In Egypt. In 1700 he had donated 10 l. for the poor  
of Jer. The banker handed on <sup>amount</sup> ~~money~~ to the  
head <sup>of</sup> of the Egyptian Bank in Fust. <sup>for</sup> <sup>see Ronald Savory</sup>

advice. Often the amount paid in bills of exchange

from there to Fust. <sup>parts</sup> <sup>between</sup> <sup>of</sup> were forwarded to each. There  
was the money that the merchants <sup>were</sup> <sup>in</sup> <sup>to</sup> <sup>the</sup> <sup>bank</sup> <sup>and</sup>  
carried bill of exchange went to a banker in J.

The latter <sup>gave</sup> <sup>over</sup> <sup>paid</sup>

who handed <sup>the</sup> <sup>amount</sup> <sup>over</sup> to the Georgs, who

sent the latter handed <sup>over</sup> <sup>12</sup> <sup>to</sup> <sup>various</sup> <sup>co.</sup>  
called partners.

serv. officers, who distributed 12 to the poor. The purchase  
value of 10 lira. then <sup>was</sup> about \$1000.

I 321 n. 42a.

MT writes this <sup>he</sup> was the Pasha, and ENA 2804, p. 3, l. 7  
says before, that <sup>he</sup> he handed over money, received by him  
to the <sup>(head)</sup> <sup>Chief</sup> <sup>Office</sup> in Fust.

Act. 1  
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The religious <sup>problem</sup> question treated by the Geon was indeed one of great significance. The sages of the Talmud were regarded as <sup>can</sup> absolute authority as far as Jewish law and ritual were concerned. ~~As a matter of fact~~ The question was whether their homilies and expositions of the scriptures carried similar weight. The Geon denies this categorically. Any competent scholar was free to interpret the Bible according to his own lights.

The letter is in Hebrew, as was customary among scholars ~~of~~. The introductory lines are in rhymed prose.

TS Loan 14. ✓

To (his) honor, greatness, and holiness, ~~and~~ Master  
and <sup>Rabbi</sup> Elazar, & Sahlān, [the esteemed and illustrious]  
who is crowned with four titles of honor - may the  
Rock ~~of~~ (God) be his helper and ~~protecting~~ shadow of  
May he  
refuge, surround him as protection, & fulfill his  
Over

T<sup>o</sup> Long 14

wishes and hopes and give him one who perpetuates his  
 name and memory<sup>5</sup> - [son of h.g]h. m<sup>2</sup>. Abraham, the  
 "Abn hārī"<sup>6</sup> - (may he rest in) E(den).

"Peace, Peace" may be heard by your ears, and  
 the king in his beauty<sup>7</sup> may be seen by your eyes,  
 and your days and years may be full of good.

[Enclose your esteemed letter <sup>[has arrived]</sup>] together  
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 the poor, which were willed by M. Abra[ham] of  
 Toledo<sup>8</sup>. They had been deposited with M.R.

<sup>the banker</sup> Mēmōrah, the honorable elder, <sup>may</sup> <sup>the</sup> R(ock) <sup>preserve</sup>  
 him) - son of M.R. David, m.E.<sup>9</sup>. You, may the Rock  
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I received them from him, gave them to the almoners of Jerusalem who distributed them to the poor in accordance with the established usage. <sup>✓</sup>

We mentioned the deceased M.R. Abraham in the prayer for the dead and those who dealt with the gift until it reached the poor, in our blessings and prayers ~~that they may protect~~<sup>for</sup> them and their progeny, and especially you who took so much trouble in this matter. To H.H. M.R. Eli ha-Kohen, the cantor, R.p., 1 dinar was given in accordance with the will. <sup>"</sup> <sup>✓</sup>

You asked me to borrow the Midrash on the Song of Songs from the Third <sup>✓</sup> and to <sup>have</sup> <sup>copy</sup> <sup>ed</sup> for you what it says about "The mandrakes" (7:13, Heb. 14) and "Come, my beloved" (7:11, Heb. 12). The exposition given there is similar to that contained in the Midrash "Do you see". <sup>✓</sup> I normally do not borrow books from the Third, for he does not

over

like to lend his books out. ✓<sup>15</sup>

You are certainly aware of the fact that most of the aggadot ✓<sup>16</sup> are nothing but opinions, of which it cannot be said that they represent a true explanation of the Scriptures. If a man like myself ✓<sup>17</sup> would expound today the Bible in this way, no one would listen to me. For instance: "Come my beloved, let us go forth and see whether the vines have budded" - these are the students of the Scriptures, "whether the grape blossoms have opened" - these are the students of the Mishna, "and the pomegranates are in bloom" - these are the students of the Talmud. Or take the explanation that "The mandrakes" refers to the story of the mandrakes of Leah and Rachel (Genesis 30:14-17). These and similar expositions are not acceptable to our audiences. Take notice of this. ✓<sup>18</sup> A man with understanding

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Your welfare and that of H.R. Sa'adya <sup>xg</sup> allif  
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Solomon, the ~~el~~(ha), head of the yeshiva "Pride of  
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<sup>NOTE</sup>  
Type on separate page

### Notes

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M. & L. continued  
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19 <sup>1.e.,</sup> Distinguished member of ~~the~~ <sup>one or the two</sup> Babylonian (Iraqian) sectarians. The reference is to Saladya b. Ephraim, brother-in-law of ~~the~~ Sahlani's father. In modern Heb. alluf means general; times have changed.

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Tajniss, page 10 our book's 52 p. 7.