

Mossari L197

To Leon Nemoy
with admiration & gratitude
for his contribution to scholarship

A Maghrebi Living in Cairo asks Implores
His Karaitic Wife to Return to Him

The letter translated below is apt to illustrate some more intimate aspects of the life of the Karaite community in Egypt during the early years of the twelfth century. Its ^{approximate} date is assured by its very last sentence: "Sheykh Abū Munajjā occupies today a very high rank and place." Abū Munajjā, ~~was~~ a Jew in the service of the Egyptian viceroy al-Malik al-Afdal, supervised the construction of a canal in the Eastern Nile Delta called after him (the Jew, not the viceroy) during the years 1112-1119, from the elevation of Abū Munajjā ^{to high rank} (the letter was ^{written} is recorded here as news, ~~was~~ ^{was} probably a few years prior to 1113, Abū Munajjā, like his descendants, most probably was a Karaite; this explains why the ~~Karaite~~ ^{both Karaite} writer & the ~~Karaite~~ ^{interested} recipient, were personally in his of the letter

auspicious fortunes. ✓

The ~~scribe~~ ^{scribe}, who calls himself Yehuda ha-
 from Tripoli, Libya, like his wife, l. 10
 Ma'aravi (from North Africa, probably Karadana),
 was also the writer of the letter, as is proved by the
 intimate terms used, which would be avoided in
 a letter dictated to a clerk, - the way ^{how} the pages are
 including the four margins of page ~~one~~ ^{two} - for ~~only~~ ^{two}
 free ones of page ~~two~~ ^{one}, ~~are~~ ^{filled with writings} ~~used~~. He was the proprietor
 of a Bakery (but may have done also other business)
 a scribe must have been a man of some learning, as
 his good Arabic style & the correct use of Bible
 & other ^{Hebrew phrases} ~~quotations~~ show. His wife was a Karaite (see ch. 16
 - 17), but this alone does not prove that he, too,
 belonged to ^{that} sect. There were many mixed
 Rabbanite-Karaite marriages in medieval Egypt.
 But he uses definite Karaite terminology, when
 he swears by the Torah, the Religion, the Oral Tra-
 dition, namely, ^{the} gabbalah, the Karaite Tradition, ✓
 & his expressions of love name echo the style & spirit
 of the Karaite marriage contract. ✓

The letter is addressed to the writer's brother-in-law, a physician, who probably lived in Alexandria or another town situated at some distance from Cairo, since the fugitive wife, if she consented to return to her husband, was supposed to travel in the company of her Maghrebi relatives. This shows, by the way, that husband & wife shared also ^{a common} geographical origin,

The reason ^{for} of the discord between the two spouses, is easy to discover, which led to the wife's flight to her brother. It was indeed a very common occurrence, *sitt al-Sāda*⁴ wished to be a working woman⁵ & left the house for this, ^{also} perhaps, other purpose, more frequently than her husband liked. The restriction of the freedom of movement of the wife, an ancient custom, elevated into law by Mosaic Maimonides & other medieval sages, was a constant cause of contention between the spouses & was apt to lead to divorce, or, at least, to temporary separation.⁶ We see here the husband, although

affirming his love in the strongest terms,
 staying put on this matter. He promises that
 she will be his fiancée & his slave (unice, ll.
 8-9), but insists that, ~~he~~ except ^{for} ~~the~~ weekly
 visits to the Karaite prayer ~~house~~ ^{hall} & the public
 bath house, she should refrain from leaving ~~the~~ her
 home as far as possible. There was no difference
 in this matter between Karaites & Rabbanites.

Translation

Moiseri L 197 ⁷

In Your name, oh All merciful ⁸

He will receive blessing from the Lord [and
 vindication from the God of his salvation] ⁹. Plenty
 of peace have those who love Your Torah. ¹⁰

To his excellency, my lord, the illustrious sheykh,
 the accomplished Head (physician) ¹¹ the erudite,
 capable, noble, & "efficient" ¹² Fadel B. Khalaf,
 may God enhance his honored position and grant
 him long life & wonderful success. Amen,

God knows how much I am yearning for
 your excellency, my master & lord - may God enhance
 your honored position. My wife, known as Sitt al-
 Sāda, the daughter of Khalaf, the woman ^{from} of Tripoli,
 wife of Mr. Yehuda ha-Ma'arāvi¹³, has by now
 staying¹⁴ with you for a long time. If he intends
 to ~~return~~ ^{join} him¹⁴ to be with him as before,
 being his wife under his career command, have
 her come up¹⁵ to Cairo, Roofed Passage 16 in
 Ayyūb¹⁶, and stay with her guardian and
 dear husband, the Beloved of her heart, to be with
 him as the pious & chaste men of Israel are
 with their wives. She will be reserved, going
 out little, except to the prayer hall of the
 Karaites¹⁷ ~~to~~ to the bathhouse, but stay in the
 house of her husband, and he will be with her as
 God, may ^{he be?} he be praised, has ordained in His ^{Law} ~~Law~~ ^{Law} which
 guides on the right path, with ^{namely} affection, good
 will, ¹⁸low, and generosity. If he does not wish
 this, let her divorce me¹⁹ & leave me and I

shall go & marry another wife, for I have no longer
 strength for ~~single~~ bachelorhood & solitude. I
 have already made a legal inquiry in this matter.¹²⁰

Margin

embroidery frames^{5?}
 She should come & take her ~~things~~ from the
 house of the Qawās²² & her bucket & tray from
 the woman teacher²³ & come up to Cairo to my house,
 in the Roofed Passage Ibn Ayyūb. She should
 hurry & not leave her things, ~~but~~

Versu

but come & take her things, whether she wishes
 to divorce me or to be my wife. I shall do her
 no wrong & not rob her of her embroidery frames
 or her jar, her glass..., her small trunk at the ...
 of my house, or her bucket or tray at the woman
 teacher. Have her come and take everything whether she
 will be my wife or divorce me.

If she returns to me, I shall be with her
 better than I was before, I shall serve, obey, honor,
 respect, and treat her with deference, I shall be

the slave, and she the mistress, the queen,
 and I her slave, her freedman, and then
 is my duty to have mercy with me because
 of my bachelorhood, solitude - my living in
 Cairo, for it is ^{too} difficult for me. ²⁴ If she does
 not come, have her set me free, whereupon I
 shall immediately set out for the countryside ²⁵
 & marry. ²⁶ But; then, she will blame me, ^{but} ~~so~~ I
~~am~~ cannot be accused by her, I am innocent.
 Leading the life of a bachelor in Cairo is ex-
 tremely difficult for unblemished & chaste
 persons. If she does not come, I shall leave
 the city for the Rif. There are many girls
 available there & I shall marry ~~then~~ one of
 the finest, a girl or a widow.

And. Peace. Peace. ²⁷

Written around the page on the four margins:

O my God, my lord, do not disappoint me;
 send my wife to Cairo with her Maghrichi

relatives, for leading the life of a bachelor in
Cairo is very, very difficult. I cannot bear it.

The prices here: nine pounds of pure bread
cost $1\frac{1}{8}$ lishem. Two ^{regular} ~~in~~ ^{of} wheat (cost one
dishem lishem): nine ^{and a quarter} ~~ways~~ ^{ways} of good wheat (cost
one lishem). Bread is cheap - cannot be sold.
After the first third of the night some ^{of men} ~~are~~ ^{have still}
remained in the market.

The dayah Abu 'l-Munajja occupies
today a high position in place ²⁹ And Ibn al-
Sal'a ^{cut away} [cut away] Abu Nasr.

[did this or that to]

written, after the conclusion of the letter, on top of
page One;

Og the Torah, the Religion, and the Oral Tradition,
Send me my wife, the lifeblood of my heart, my
beloved. ¹³⁰

Notes

✓
Abū Munajjā's story is told in S.D. Goitein,
A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza, University of California Press,
Berkeley - Los Angeles, ^{vol.} II, 1973, pp. 356, 604, n. 36; vol. III, 1978, pp. 10-11, where the relevant sources are ~~mentioned~~ noted.

✓² See Leon Nemoy, Kanah Anthology, Yale University Press, New Haven 1952, pp. XVI, XXIII, and passim.
Read addition on top of page One of the letter and

✓³ Nemoy, ibid., pp. 183-184. Mediterranean Society
The Family,
(see n. 1, above), vol. III, pp. 50-51.

✓⁴ "The Mistress over the Lords". I have noted at least ten women bearing this proud name. For instance, the Gaon Evyatar ha-Kohen named his daughter thus, Ts 10.74, f. 17 (1118), Ts 16.207 (1118/9) in three other documents. It might have been, of course, that Mrs. Kohen, the girl's mother, was responsible for that name.

✓¹⁵ See margin, ll. 1-2.

✓ Mordechai A. Friedman has treated this subject extensively in his paper "The Ethics of Medieval Jewish Marriage," in Religion in a Religious Age, ed. S. S. Gordin, Association for Jewish Studies, Cambridge, Mass. 1974, especially pp. 87-95. Additional details in Med. Soc., III, The Family, pp. 152 ff.

✓ A copy of this letter was given to me by the late Bernard (Eliezer Dov) Chapira about thirty years ago with the request to publish it. (A list of Chapira's valuable publications on Geniza material is to be found in Shaul Shaked, A Tentative Bibliography of Geniza Documents, Mouton^{and Co.}, Paris and The Hague 1964, pp. 278-279.) I was able to check, correct, and complement Chapira's transcript with the aid of ~~the~~ a photostat ~~manuscript~~ from the Mosseri Collection preserved in the Jewish National^{and} University Library, Jerusalem, where it bears the mark Mosseri II, 195. I wish to

express my thanks to the Library authorities for their permission to use their facilities.

⁸ In Aramaic, -probably ^{a/}pre-Islamic ^{formula} Words in Hebrew ^{or} Aramaic are printed in italics.

⁹ Psalm 24:5.
Bible verses at the beginning of a letter often contain an allusion to its content. The preceding verse ~~describes~~ praises one who does not swear falsely. It is not excluded that the physician had promised to ^{send} his sister ^{back} to his brother-in-law, but failed to ~~fail~~ carry his promise out.

¹⁰ Psalm 119:165.

¹¹ A physician was addressed as Head Rayagi's ^{chief} meaning, that he had served as ~~x~~ head of a department in a hospital. He was referred to with that honorific title, although he ~~had~~ ^{had never been} ^{the community,} connected with a hospital. See Med. Soc., II, p. 246.

¹² 'Efficient', Salid, a common title of honor for a physician. He would be addressed not by his name but as 'Mr. Efficient.'

13 The writer intended to use this letter as legal proof when he would be forced to apply to a khariz court ^{seeking} for a divorce. Therefore he had to be explicit uprecede, while referring to his wife. We have here the draft written in the Egyptian capital (and therefore preserved in the Geniza), while the clean copy, sent out of town, is, of ^{course}, lost. Tripoli, Libya (not Lebanon) it was, ~~lost~~.

14 Since he had mentioned himself by name, he continues referring to himself in the third person.

15 From Alexandria - places in the Nile Delta one went upstream on the Nile to Cairo.

16 The exact address is given, as proper in a document apt to be used in a litigation. Roofed Passage translates sabāt, see Med. Soc., IV (in progress), ch. IX, A, 1, n. 151. ~~elsewhere~~ The spelling in our letter sabat (s instead of s, and two short a's) betrays the Maghribi, who is ^{often} unable to keep

s and s ^{aporta} ~~acceder~~.

✓¹⁷ Ar. majlis al-ṣalāt 'ind al-Qarā'iyīn.

The Karaites (as far as the Geniza shows) did not call their place of prayer ~~Kaḥan~~ Kaḥīṣā, since Islamic law prohibited the erection of new synagogues, and Karaism came into being under Islam. A majlis, or reception hall, in an affluent home was probably larger than a medieval synagogue.

✓¹⁸ In Hebrew, an allusion to Biblical verses such as Genesis 24:67, I Samuel 1:5.

✓¹⁹ This technical term for divorce is often used in the general meaning of setting free.

✓²⁰ Meaning, I have already found out that the refusal of a wife to accept the legal restriction of her movements was a sufficient reason for a divorce.

✓²¹ Ar. manāṣiḥ means looms, and is used in this sense in the Geniza, e.g. Dropsie University.

Journa, no. 400, p. 8, "the mancas is without work"
 (because of lack of yarn), or TS 13, J 16, f. 26, p. 11,
 "the two arms, Idayn, of the mancas are broken".
 However, because of the plural, I am inclined that
 the word pronounced mencas in Cairo, designates
 here a frame for embroidery, as described (around
 1835) by E. W. Lane, The Modern Egyptians, Every-
 man's Library, London - New York 1936, pp. 194-195:
 "Leisure hours are mostly spent in embroiderying
 handkerchiefs, head-veils etc. upon a frame called
mencas, with coloured silks - gold. Many women,
 even in the houses of the wealthy, replenish their
 private purses by ornamenting handkerchiefs and
 other things in this manner - employing a female
 brother to take them to the market."

²² ✓ Mr. Qawās, bowmaker, archer, police man;
 probably a Muslim family name, ~~was~~ his wife, I
 assume, was teaching the women various types of
 embroidery. Our Sitt al-Nāda, who was a
 newcomer to Cairo, naturally was eager to learn
 what kind of embroidery was most sought after

saleable in the city. About the immense importance of embroidery in the life of women see Med. Soc., III, The Family, p. 342.

²³ These ~~brass~~ vessels, made of brass or bronze, were part of her dowry; the fugitive wife deposited them with a friend, either a female school teacher (see Med. Soc., III, The Family, pp. 344-346, 355-356), or a teacher of needle work.

²⁴ The writer uses her three different expressions designating the status of a slave.

²⁵ Since this is an allusion to the sexual aspect of the matter, it is in Hebrew, a language not everyone knows, as Lotin was used on such an occasion, when I was young.

²⁶ Because of the intricate Kavad theory of forbidden marriages it was extremely difficult for the writer to find a wife among his ^{com}patriote co-religionists. Marrying a Cairene girl was a long-drawn, costly affair. Since he was in a hurry,

he mentions twice that he was looking for a girl from the provinces. See Memory, Karaitic Anthology, p. xxiii. As a dealer in wheat in Baker the writer had certainly close connections with the countryside.

²⁷ ~~The first~~ "And Peace" is the regular conclusion of a letter. The word "Peace" means: Don't be angry with me. My intentions are good.

²⁸ This paragraph is discussed in detail in Med. Soc. IV (in progress), ch. IX, C, 1 (¹⁴⁰⁰ ¹⁴⁰⁰), nn. 84-86. The general trend of ^{the} note is that everything is extremely cheap. The writer suffered some losses with his bread, but the general situation in Cairo was ^{excellent} ~~good~~ and the wife had nothing to fear, if he returned to him.

²⁹ See the Introduction.

³⁰ The reader should not be repelled by the repetitiveness of Yehuda ha-Masoravī. It was customary to emphasize urgent matters by referring to them at least three times, crowning the effort by a P.S. of the same content, or inserted wherever some blank space was left.