

Community

Statement About Collections Made in Minyat Zifta in Connection with the
Fine Imposed by Sultan Balbars on Christians and Jews in 1265

T.-S. 12.543

(This short document from a little town in Lower Egypt relates a great disaster which befell Christians and Jews in 1265, at the beginning of the Mamluk rule. When, during Sultans Balbars' great war against the Crusaders, a church burnt down in Nazareth and shortly afterwards a devastating fire broke out in Cairo, the Christians and, oddly enough, ^{the} Jews with them were accused of having set the town on fire. Balbars gave orders to burn the Christians and Jews in the capital, and only the intervention of the Commander of his troops induced him to change his mind. A fine of the enormous sum of 200,000 dinars, to be paid in ten installments, was imposed on the nonbelievers.^{a)} Our document, which reports how much was collected in Minyat Zifta until April 14, 1266, betrays some pride about the fact that the poor people of the little town were able to help the inhabitants of the capital, who were immediately involved. The statement was sent to Cairo, and therefore found its way into the Geniza.)

We, the congregation of Minyat Zifta Jewid, make the following statement: When, in the month of Av 1576,^{b)} the decree of the king^{c)} came upon us because of our many sins, necessitating a collection, we extracted strength from weakness and joined Israel in its tribulation, despite our ² inability to do so, our poverty and indigence, and made

collections twice, once on the twelfth of Av...^{d)} and the second time on the eighth of Marheshwan 1577^{e)} of (the era of) the documents. In the following, we give the details of what was brought together on these two dates, specifying our names.

(Eighteen names, all in Arabic, follow, including those of two doctors, two tax-farmers, a person bearing the family name Goldsmith, and another Perfumer or Druggist. Seven persons were related to each other, and five were Kohanim, two of whom were brothers. Coptic numerals, only partly preserved, indicate the amount contributed by each individual.)

(Continued in another, less beautiful, but still well-trained hand:)

The total collected on the two aforementioned dates, until the seventh of the month of Iyyar, in the year 1577^{f)} of (the era of) the documents, one thousand, twenty and a half and a quarter si(iver) dirhams.^{g)} We have put our signature at the bottom of this document as a proof of the correctness of the details stated.

(There follow seven signatures, with one exception, totally or partly legible. All the names are exclusively in Hebrew, but some, or all of them, were certainly borne by the person who appear above, in the list of contributors with Arabic names. Thus Ussiah b. Pethahia - two Biblical names very rarely found at that time - is identical no doubt with Abu 'l-'Iss b. Futuh, and Shelah ha-Rafe (the Hebrew word for physician) must be identified with Abu al-Faql al-'Tabib in the Arabic list, since the other doctor is called Joseph, a name whose spelling is identical in the two languages.)

Notes

- a) The Muslim and Christian sources about this event are carefully collected and discussed in E. Strauss, The History of the Jews in Egypt and Syria under Mamluk Rule, I (Jerusalem 1944), pp. 63-7 (in Hebrew).
- b) Began on July 16, 1265.
- c) A reference to God rather than to the Sultan. In plain language, this Hebrew phrase means: "when it became necessary."
- d) July 26, 1265. As the continuation shows, the same year as above is intended.
- e) October 19, 1265.
- f) April 14, 1266.
- g) According to the Geniza documents of that period, one gold dinar contained 13 1/3 Ruqra or silver dirhams. Thus, the little community had contributed about 76 dinars to the first installment of the fine, 800,000 dinars, to be paid by the Christians and Jews of Cairo, or Egypt, in that year.

About the strange use of saying "1/2 and 1/4" instead of 3/4, see

