

III, 43 *Letter from Peraḥyā Yijū to his father Joseph: Skipping along the Coast of Sicily*

Messina, ca. 1153

ENA 2557, f. 151

Ed. Simonsohn and Gil, "Sicily," 32–36. Translation published in Goitein, "Sicily," 28–30; Goitein, *Letters*, 327–30, on which, together with additional notes in Goitein's papers, the following is based; also translated in Simonsohn, *Jews In Sicily*, 1:405–8.

The warm invitation extended by the India trader Abraham Ben Yijū to his family in September 1149 (III, 29) did not find immediate response. Letters were exchanged, but no action was taken. Finally, after a lapse of about four years, we find here Ben Yijū's nephew, Peraḥyā b. Joseph, on the first leg of his trip to Egypt, where, again after considerable time, he finally married his cousin, the only remaining child of the India trader.

Peraḥyā's family had left Tunisia, probably in 1148, when it was partly occupied by the Normans, and settled in Mazara, a port on the southwestern coast of Sicily. During the eleventh century, Mazara was a lively entrepôt, serving as a bridgehead to Tunisia and a terminal for ships going to the Levant. After the Norman conquest of Sicily, however, and the subsequent severing of close relations between Tunisia and the island, Mazara lost its importance as a seaport. Peraḥyā had to look for another way to get to Egypt. He turned first north overland to Palermo and from there went by boat to Messina on the east coast of Sicily.¹ This voyage is described in our letter. {Peraḥyā wrote the letter in his and his brother Moses' name and sent it to their father in Mazara.}

With a craving for adventure—attested in the Geniza for other young men too²—Peraḥyā's younger brother Moses insisted on accompanying him to the foreign country. After some mishaps—Moses was captured by pirates—the two finally arrived and were later followed by the rest of the family. Many letters concerning this family have been preserved in the Geniza, which is to be explained by the fact that the youngest brother, referred to in this letter {line 25}, became a judge of the rabbinical court in Old Cairo.³

¹ {For Messina in the Geniza documents, see Kraemer, "Messina," with reference to this letter on 366, 368.}

² See, for instance, Goitein, *Letters*, 255–57 (TS 10 J 16, f. 19).

³ {Samuel was the youngest of the three brothers; see III, 48, line 11, where he refers to Moses as 'my brother and head,' i.e., my older brother. He was a schoolteacher

The writing is effaced in several places, but can mostly be restored by reasonable surmise.

Translation

[A. The trip from Mazara to Messina]

(3) This⁴ is to inform you—may God {add: keep you safe!}⁵—that we arrived (4) in Messina in safety and good health—for which we must thank God, *and not ascribe it to our own merit* (5) *or good deeds*⁶—after we had passed eight days on our journey. For a rainstorm (6) kept us back in Baqṭas.⁷ We paid the *Christian* skipper {alt. tr.: owner} (7) of the boat⁸ a fare of two *rubāʿīs* less one-quarter and stipulated {lit., 'we made an agreement with him'} that he should let us disembark at the lighthouse (8) near Messina⁹—the town is, indeed, visible from it.

We embarked on Friday (9) night,¹⁰ in the company of a Jew, a *Kohen*, from Salerno, and were at sea until [...]day, (10) when we arrived at

in Fustat, and there is no evidence that he became a judge; see the introduction to III, 58.

⁴ The beginning of the letter contains a standard salutation, omitted by Goitein in his translation.

⁵ I read: *sallamaka ʿllāhu* (the first word was not deciphered by Goitein or by Simonsohn and Gil). The phrase (sometimes with a diferent pronominal suffix) appears frequently in the Geniza letters, e.g., in III, 28a, line 18, VI, 7, lines 3–4; VI, 34, line 3.

⁶ The translation does not fit the words in the original Hebrew, *lo bi-ḥesed we-lo bi-maʿasim*. One would expect *lo bi-zkḥūt we-lo bi-maʿasim (ṭōvīm)*. In his papers Goitein marked these words as unusual. The writer probably intended to write *bi-ḥesed lo bi-zkḥūt...*, 'and ascribe it to His grace, not our own merit or good deeds.' Cf. CAJS 389, line 11 (facsimile in Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, opp. 1:20), in Aramaic and Arabic: *lā bi-zkḥū we-lā bi-ʿōvādīn ṭāvīn ellā bi-rahmatihī*.)

⁷ Patti, a town and a gulf of the same name on the northern shore of Sicily.

⁸ {Arabic *ṣāhib al-qārib*. The *qārib* (also in lines 11–13) is a seagoing barge; see Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 1:305, and other references ib., 6:91.}

⁹ Spelled here, as in other Geniza papers, *mysmy*, which indicates that the writer pronounced the name Messīnī or Messēnī. {See Kraemer, "Messina," 373, n. 39, who suggests that the final *y* may represent *alif maqṣūra*, so that the name was pronounced Messina. The lighthouse is called here and in line 13 'the *faro*,' an Italian word derived from Pharos, the islet situated at the entrance to the port of Alexandria, on which had stood a famous lighthouse; see Sadan, "*Manāra*," 358a.}

¹⁰ On the prohibition of sailing on the Sabbath and the exceptions to this rule, see Tosefta Shabbat 13:13, ed. Lieberman, 61, and parallels; Lieberman, *Tosefta Ki-Fshutah*, 3:216–18. Below, lines 14–17, the writer describes the pains he took not to desecrate the Sabbath. Here he writes *ṭalaʿnā ilā ʿl-bahr*, 'we went up to the sea,' and in lines 10–11, *ṭalaʿnā ilā ʿl-qārib*, 'we went up to the boat.'

Baqṭas. There, however, a rainstorm befell us, and we stayed until Friday. We boarded (11) the boat (again) in the morning and arrived at a place called Milāṣ.¹¹ There, (12) the (above-mentioned) Jew, along with Isaac, the son-in-law of Giovanna's son {alt. tr.: of Ibn Giovanna},¹² disembarked and continued their travel by land. (13) The *Christian* skipper told us that we would not reach the lighthouse—the (14) place where we had agreed that he would let us off—before the Sabbath¹³ and said that (15) we could disembark there whenever we arrived, but that he could not take a shortcut {alt. tr.: . . . and said, “Whenever I arrive there with you, I will let you disembark, because I cannot interrupt the journey.”}.¹⁴ As I was afraid (16) of *desecrating the Sabbath*, and of other things (as well),¹⁵ I took another boat {alt. tr.: hired a boat together with other people} for two-thirds of a *rubāʿī*, (17) and we arrived in Messina on *Saturday*.¹⁶

[B. Meeting Uncle Mevassēr and others; plans for travel to Egypt]

On Sunday, I inquired about my uncle (18) Mevassēr¹⁷ and found him there. He did not fall short,¹⁸ and we stayed with him. Then I inquired¹⁹ (19) about Ibn Siṭlūn and Ibn Bārūkh²⁰ and found them. Ibn Siṭlūn said:

¹¹ Milazzo, a town on the eastern end of the gulf of Patti, the ancient Mylae.

¹² I assume that *bn* = Ibn, and this functions here as a family name.

¹³ The Sabbath begins on Friday evening at nightfall.

¹⁴ {By staying till after the Sabbath. The last words in Arabic are *mā nuṭīqu naqṭaʿu al-tariq*.

¹⁵ I assume that Perahyā alludes to some fear for his and his brother's personal safety.

¹⁶ Evidently they did not disembark until after the Sabbath. For the circumstances when a Jew may disembark from a ship on the Sabbath, see M. Shabbat 16:8; Tosefta Shabbat 13:14, ed. Lieberman, 61–62; Lieberman, *Tosefta Ki-Fshutaḥ*, 3:218–19; Maimonides, *Responsa*, 2:569 (see additional sources *ib.*, n. 48), 4:15, no. 308 (TS NS 325, f. 182 is a fragment of this responsum—the identification should be added to Brody, *Hand-List*, 238—in the hand of R. Joseph *rōsh ha-sēder* b. Jacob; in Friedman, “Fragments of Maimonides' Responsa,” 457, mistakenly printed as TS NS 235.182). Amir Ashur calls my attention to a list of responsa from R. Nissim Gaon in CAJS Halper 160, the first item of which reads (In Hebrew): “It is permissible for a Jew to disembark from a ship on a festival.”

¹⁷ This is Abraham {and Joseph} Ben Yijū's brother, whom Abraham addressed in III, 29.

¹⁸ Of his family duties. {The remark echoes the criticism of Mevassēr in III, 30, lines 9 ff. and other documents.}

¹⁹ Arabic *asqasaytu* for *astaqasaytu*.

²⁰ Business friends of his uncle, the India trader Abraham Ben Yijū. The usual spelling of the first name was *Sitrūn* (citron), a family name still common among so-called Sefaradi, or Spanish, Jews. {In our documents the spelling Siṭlūn seems more common. Abraham Ben Yijū sent from Egypt to Sicily with Sulymān b. Siṭrūn a bale with commodities as a gift for his brother Joseph: III, 41, lines 26–27; see 731, n. 27 and the following

“I shall take care (20) of your fare, and you will go up with me {alt. tr.: with us},²¹ God willing.” Then I consulted my uncle and Ibn Siṭlūn (21) about Moses' travel, and they said: “There is nothing to be gained by it. He had better {alt. tr.: It is better that he} go back to his father.” (22) But he insisted on setting out with me, so that he would not come back empty-handed {lit., ‘But he said: “My travel is absolutely necessary, so that I do not . . .”’}.²² Thus I am uncertain (23) with regard to him, and I have not received a letter from you giving instructions, or about your well-being, (24) as might be expected {lit., ‘a detailed letter or [one] about your circumstances, as people do’}. Now, please²³ do not neglect to send a detailed letter (25) with information about your well-being and that of my mother and my brother,²⁴ and do not worry (26) about us, for we are well.

[C. The stay in Messina and the city's deplorable state]

Ibn Siṭlūn let me copy [Margin] the Commentary on *ʿĒrūwīn* by Rabbēnū Nissim for him.²⁵ And most of the people in the town have asked me to

note here. As far as I know, Ibn Bārūkh is not mentioned in connection with Abraham Ben Yijū. Isaac b. Bārūkh, of Almeria, Spain, appears several times in the documents of chap. 4. See the following note.)

²¹ I.e., to Egypt. {Arabic *taṭlaʿ maʿanā*. For *ṭalaʿa*, ‘reach (a country),’ see Hava, *Dictionary*, 436. For ‘going up’ to Egypt from Sicily, cf. III, 49*v*, line 19; but there it may simply mean embark—see 749, n. 4. Perahyā attempted to borrow money from Ibn Siṭlūn to send to his father Joseph; see 746, n. 8. Ibn Bārūkh did travel from Sicily to Egypt. In a letter from Alexandria, Moses Yijū wrote his brother Perahyā in Fustat that he would journey there with Ibn Bārūkh; cf. III, 47*v*, line 4.}

²² Young Moses wanted to come home a success. In Messina, obviously, there was no opportunity for business, while he hoped that in Egypt he would do better. {Joseph, on the other hand, wrote to his son Perahyā in Egypt that Moses had traveled with Perahyā only out of compassion for him (III, 49, line 28).}

²³ ‘Now, please,’ Arabic *wa-asāʿa* = *wal-sāʿa*. For this spelling see Blau, *Grammar*, 23–24, 282; Goitein, *Palestinian Jewry*, 224, n. 19. In III, 48, lines 29, 43, verso, lines 5, 28, *wa-asāʿa*. For the meanings ‘now’ and ‘please,’ see Blau, “Judeo-Arabic Features,” 187–92. In the same context, *wa-asāʿa* is used for ‘please’ in III, 47*v*, line 7; III, 48, line 39, verso, line 15; III, 49*v*, line 15. The members of the Ben Yijū family who wrote these letters evidently did not distinguish between the two words. See further 426, n. 68 on *asā*.

²⁴ His youngest brother, Samuel.

²⁵ The frequently quoted book of the great Tunisian Jewish scholar is lost, except for three pages found in the Geniza, which are indeed in the handwriting of our Perahyā! Obviously, they were his first attempt before he made the copy mentioned here and he carried them with him to Egypt. ENA 2936, ed. Lewin, “R. Nissim.” {The correct shelf mark is: ENA 2639, fs. 1–2. See Abramson, *R. Nissim Gaon*, 100 ff. “The Commentary on *ʿĒrūwīn* by Rabbēnū Nissim” is mentioned in several book lists found in the Geniza; see Allony, *Library*, 491. The order of a copy of Ibn Gebirol's *Dīwān* from a copyist named R. Perahyā the scholar called Abu ʿl-Surūr, is mentioned in TS 12.394. Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 2:238, 574, n. 47, suggested identifying him as Perahyā b. Joseph Yijū (this reference to

serve as a schoolmaster in his house,²⁶ for the town lacks everything.²⁷ Were the town not unfit for you to live in (you could find a good job here) {read: I would suggest that you come}.²⁸ However, the town is mediocre; one cannot live here. (. . . Here, it requires an) effort {read: Its homes are filthy and its people make little effort}²⁹ to study and to pray. Since we arrived, there has been no *public prayer* [Verso] (1) *in the afternoon and the evening*,³⁰ while the *morning* prayer is said (2) before dawn; at daybreak, they are already through with it.³¹ (3) If we lived here . . . , (4) we would miss the prayer {read: Whenever someone goes to the sea for his business—since the residential area of the town is not within view of it—he misses the prayer};³² and it is impossible to walk in the streets here because of the [dir]t.³³

Perahyā is to be added to the index of Goitein, *Med. Soc.*). Some support for the identification can be adduced from the names, known from Perahyā's family and close circle, mentioned in the letter, including R. Nissīm, the name of one of Perahyā's sons; but since the fathers' names are not provided, this is inconclusive. The writer asks Perahyā to give regards to his son-in-law, "the elder, the esteemed, respected cantor." The writer was found in Fusat (Miṣrayim), and Goitein identified him as 'a bibliophile from Byzantium.' Beit-Arié, "Quntres," 75, rejects this identification (there is an error in the page reference to Goitein) and notes that the script of the letter is Eastern in style, and accordingly the language of the letter writer (though not necessarily its author) conforms to the Eastern tradition. Goitein's tripartite explanation for his identification of the writer detailed in the note cited above and Beit-Arié's characterization of the handwriting are perhaps to be resolved by the suggested distinction between writer and author. Attention should also be paid to the use of vellum for the letter, which is atypical of letters written in Egypt in the 12th century.

²⁶ Arabic *indahu* {lit., 'with him,' which could mean 'at his place'}. One expects *indahum* {'with them'}, but there is no space left for *m*. Most probably, Ibn Siṭrūn had a spacious house, where he could harbor the proposed school—or Perahyā simply forgot the letter, as the word occurs at the end of a line.

²⁷ Religious education is referred to, of course. Joseph, as remarked above, had become a schoolmaster.

²⁸ {Arabic *la-kāna nushiru 'alayka [bi]l-majī'*, not read by Goitein, who supplied the words in parenthesis. For *la-kāna*, see Blau, *Grammar*, 186.

²⁹ I read *qadhār al-suknā wa-qawmuhu qalilu 'l-ijtihād*.

³⁰ Abulafia, *Two Italies*, 44–45, correctly notes that this refers to the difficulty of finding a *minyān*, a quorum of ten males for the services, but his reference to 'the rabbi' no longer holding these prayers is imprecise.

³¹ For the preceding lines, cf. Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 1:98, 2:157. The morning prayer service is not supposed to be completed until after sunrise.

³² The original is effaced and its decipherment is doubtful here. I tentatively read *wamā [yam]dī al-insān ilā al-baḥr lil-taṣarruf idh sukna al-balad mi[n] ghayr (mlh'zth [?] =) mulāḥazatihi tafūruhu al-ṣalā*. The suggested translation is approximate. This passage may have some significance for the economic history of Sicily. From the fact that in Goitein's published translation of this letter Perahyā fails to mention the port in Messina as a commercial center, Abulafia (*Two Italies*, 44–45) infers that it no longer played a great role in trade with Egypt or elsewhere, as it had in the eleventh century and that this had passed to Syracuse. See Kraemer, "Messina," 366, who notes that the port was not in Perahyā's purview and that Abulafia's inference is therefore unwarranted.

³³ Both Muslim and Jewish writers used to decry the low standard of their coreligionists in Sicily in Norman times. Mazara, the town to which this letter was directed, was of

[D. Miscellaneous and greetings]

(After dealing with some sundry items, the writer asks his parents not to worry too much about their absent sons and, in particular, not to exaggerate in their fast for them—it was customary to fast as a means of enhancing the efficacy of prayer for relatives who were traveling. He then reiterates a medical prescription for his mother, which he had previously sent from Palermo,³⁴ and concludes with a series of greetings, which shows that the community in Mazara must have included quite a number of scholars.)³⁵

[E. Address]

(1) (To) Our {alt. tr.: my} dear father—may God keep him with His never-ceasing protection!—(2) Joseph, *the teacher* {alt. tr.: *Teacher*},³⁶ b. Perahyā Yijū, God is his protector {add: and preserver}!

(1) (From) His sons, who are longing (2) for him, Perahyā and Moses.

(3) *Salvation is near!*

a different type, owing to its close connections with Tunisia (see above). {For Muslim and Jewish writers' description of Messina, see Kraemer, "Messina," 365. For a description of Palermo by Muslim writers similar to that found here, see Ahmad, *Islamic Sicily*, 40.

³⁴ Palermo is not mentioned explicitly in the text here. In the continuation the writer speaks of meeting someone in al-Madīna ('the City'), which often designates Palermo (cf. Kraemer, "Messina," 364). It is noteworthy that Perahyā evidently had some medical training.

³⁵ From the greetings here and in III, 45, lines 11–12, it appears that the Jewish community in Mazara was a well-organized congregation headed by the usual functionaries. *Mu'allim* means here (line 16) rabbi, as it does in southern Yemen up to the present time. This is proven by the fact that greetings to him and to his brother (Jacob) are given in both letters before Rabbi Zechariah, an authority of Jewish law, quoted by Perahyā many years later in his letter III, 55, line 10. {There referred to as 'Rabbi Zechariah, our teacher (*mu'allimunā*)' Goitein later crossed out the translation 'rabbi' for *mu'allim* in his edition of III, 49, line 17. In Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, the word is rendered 'teacher,' 'master [craftsman],' or 'young physician.' In III, 48v, lines 35–36, greetings are sent from "the *mu'allim*, the rabbi, our Rabbi Zechariah and . . . the *mu'allim* Jacob." Here in III, 43v, lines 17–18, greetings are also sent to Solomon, Ḥiyyā ha-Kohen and to the cantor. On fasting and praying for relatives in danger, see page 158.

³⁶ Joseph's sons Perahyā and Samuel refer to their father in the addresses of their letters (here and III, 30v, III, 45v and III, 48v) with the Hebrew *melammēd*, 'Teacher,' without the definite article, which seems to function not only as a designation of his occupation but an honorific. Moses, the third son, in the address of his letters (III, 46v, III, 47av), uses the def. art., referring to his father Joseph as *ha-melammēd*, 'the teacher.'