

III, 49 *Letter from Joseph Yijū to His Sons Perahyā and Moses*

Mazara, Fall {or summer} 1156

TS 16.288

Ed. Simonsohn and Gil, "Sicily," 44–50; English translation in Simonsohn, *Jews in Sicily*, 1:408–12.

Joseph had asked the 'master' (or 'teacher', *mu'allim*, line 17),¹ who certainly was also a scribe, to write this letter. However, despite the excellent relations between them, the *mu'allim* refused. We can easily understand his refusal, considering how diffuse and verbose Joseph was with reference to his love and concern for his distant sons. Thus, Joseph had to write a letter himself. His hand, although making reading often difficult, is not unpleasant, and the slips and omissions are not more than one would expect from an old, sick man, writing in a state of great excitement. After line 7, the lines are curved and decline somewhat to the left, obviously because the writer then held the paper on his knee.² On the second side of the page, which is also completely covered with writing, Joseph tried, although not always successfully, to keep his lines more straight.

About one third of the text is occupied by Hebrew phrases and quotations, which also indicates that the writer had to convey more feelings than facts. His Arabic spelling is exceedingly 'plene,' i.e., uses many *w*'s and *y*'s for expressing short *u*'s and *i*'s or *e*'s; he writes even *byyt* for *bayt*, line 8 and *drhym* for *dirhem*, verso, line 12.

No. III, 49 certainly was written shortly after III, 48 and, most probably, was sent with the same mail {possibly on another ship in the same convoy}, for, as far as facts are concerned, it is almost identical with the latter, written by Joseph's youngest son, Samuel. Obviously, the old man was not satisfied that the boy's letter {which contains a number of errors in writing} would be effective; therefore, he added a letter by himself. See the introduction to III, 48 for the date.

¹ For this term, see 741, n. 35.

² Cf. III, 15, where the lines slant in the opposite direction. {In the Middle Ages, one did not write on a table but on a board held on the knees; see Sadan, "Clerks," 41–42, n. 55. Cf. the description of a vision in a medieval mystical work, possibly depicting events in Sicily: "On the third night, after midnight, when my pen was in my hand and the paper on my knees [...]" (Idel, *Mystical Experience*, 62–63).

Our letter is a most moving document of fatherly love and would deserve a full translation in a book on medieval family life.³ Section I, translated below, throws interesting sidelights on public life and institutions in the Mediterranean area of those days.

The *Rayyis*, or Head of the Egyptian Jewish community, referred to {in verso, line 16}, is called in III, 48v, line 15, Samuel, i.e., Samuel b. Ḥananyā, who, as far as we know, occupied that position from 1140–59.⁴ He was physician at the Fatimid court and 'a great benefactor of the poor and the scholars.'⁵ However, the way in which Joseph speaks here of the *Rayyis* suggests that he was an old acquaintance of his; for, he supposes that his sons had free access to him—which was by no way usual;⁶ he gives him best regards and asks him to guide his sons with his advice and help (III, 49v, lines 31–33). Presumably this acquaintance went back to the times when Joseph was a merchant in al-Mahdiyya, Tunisia; he must have visited Fustat on business trips and sent presents to the Nagid's court, as was usual.⁷

Likewise, we see here three Sicilian Jewish notables personally associated with the Egyptian *Rayyis* or Nagid, as he was called with his Hebrew title. Two of them were merchants: Sheikh Dā'ūd b. Šāliḥ (III, 48v, line 18), and Sheikh Abu 'l-Faraj, known as Masnūt or *Ibn Masnūt* (just as sometimes the family name Yijū or Ben Yijū is used), most probably, like Yijū, the name of the Berber tribe, with which the family had been attached.⁸ The third was a physician, called (in III, 48v, line 18), by the rare name Rabīb and possibly, the father of R. Jacob *al-rayyis al-jalīl* [= illustrious headman] b. al-Rabīb,⁹ mentioned in the *dūwān* or collection of poems of Anatoli.¹⁰

³ Goitein prepared a complete Hebrew translation, which is published in the Hebrew edition of this book.

⁴ See Mann, *Jews*, 1:229, and idem, *Texts*, 1:395 and 450. {Cf. Friedman, "Maimonides and Zūtā," 474 ff.}

⁵ Cf. the memorial list, published in Mann, *Texts*, 1:469, 2:15–17.

⁶ See Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 2:37.

⁷ {On Goitein's assumption that Joseph had been a businessman in al-Mahdiyya, see page 745.

⁸ See page 53, n. 11. Our (Ibn) Masnūt adds substantial weight to those manuscripts, which place the origin of the thirteenth century Talmudist and Jewish Aleppo community leader Samuel b. Nissim Masnūt's family in Sicily rather than Toledo. On this question, see Ta-Shma, "Masnut.")

⁹ For *rabīb*, compare the Hebrew *al-ḥānīkh*, which has the same meaning of 'foster son,' e.g., Abu 'l-Faḍl b. al-Ḥānīkh in Mann, *Texts*, 1:468, line 4 and n. 46. {Rabīb also means 'foster father,' the first definition for the name according to Ibn al-Zubayr, *Asmā'*, 1637.}

¹⁰ Cf. Stern, "Hebrew Poets," 78, n. 57.

Even more interesting is Joseph's request that the Egyptian Nagid should contact for him the Muslim commander of Mazara—not even mentioned by name—and 'the commander' Mubashshir, who, according to III, 48, line 21, was in charge of Messina.

It is well known that the Norman kings of Sicily employed Muslims for both military and administrative posts. The word *qā'id*, translated here as 'commander,' designed at that time not only an officer, but also a secretary or a courtier.¹¹ However, from the context in III, 48 and III, 49, it is evident that the persons concerned were in charge of the relevant towns or, at least, of their ports.¹² Why Muslim officials in the service of the Christian king of Sicily should be interested in doing a favor to the Head of the Jewish community of Egypt, and in particular in 1156, a year after the Norman raid on the Egyptian coastal towns, seems strange to us, but was taken for granted by the writer. Perhaps the Jewish Nagid, who, as mentioned above, was court physician, had had something to do with concluding the peace treaty {in about 1143} between King Roger II (died 1154) and the Fatimid court,¹³ just as a hundred years earlier, we find a Jew in the company of the ambassador of a Muslim ruler of Sicily to the Fatimid court.¹⁴

Contents

- A. Complaint that the longing for the addressees was 'killing' their parents, who, in addition, suffered from all kinds of privations and illnesses (lines 1–9).
- B. The writer had hoped that Peraḥyā would soon come back as a married man, for he wanted to participate in the education of his niece and future daughter-in-law (lines 9–17).¹⁵
- C. The 'master' had refused to pen this letter (lines 17–26).
- D. The writer thanked God that his son Moses was rescued from the pirates and did not care about the loss of the goods (lines 26–37).

¹¹ See Amari, *Musulmani di Sicilia*, 3:267–74, 455. {Cf. Takayama, *Norman Administration*, 100.

¹² For the office of *qā'id al-madīna*, military governor of a large city, see Colin, "Qā'id."

¹³ See Amari, *Musulmani di Sicilia*, 3:433.

¹⁴ See Mann, *Jews*, 1:202–3. {The reference is to TS 13 J 11, f. 2, ed. ib., 2:239–40; Ben-Sasson, *Sicily*, 20–21, no. 4; Gil, *Ishamael*, 4:241–42, no. 674. On the conjunction of ambassadorial missions and trade ventures in the Middle Ages, see Jacoby, "Byzantine Trade," 34, 43, 71 (who actually speaks of travel on the same vessels).

¹⁵ For this passage, see page 80; Friedman, "Marital Age," 170, n. 39, and the literature cited there.

- E. The boys should have informed their father what merchandise and of what value they had sent with Ḥajjāj; cf. III, 44. The man had sent ninety *rubā'īs* only a year after his arrival and another ninety some time later (lines 37–49).
- F. Admonition to bear the losses with submission to God's will (line 50 and margin).
- G. The religious importance of marrying one's cousin (verso, lines 1–10).¹⁶
- H. Hope to see his sons again, despite present hardship (verso, lines 10–15).
- I. Request that the Head of the Jews in Egypt write letters to the Muslim commanders of Mazara and Messina and to Jewish notables in Sicily to arrange for the travel of the Yijū family to Egypt (verso, lines 15–27).
- J. Greetings (verso, lines 28–36).
- K. Address of sixteen lines.

As in all the letters of the Sicilian Yijū family, no greetings are extended {here in section J} to Abraham, of whom it had been probably known that he had taken up residence in a locality other than the Egyptian capital. See III, 51.

{When Peraḥyā arrived in Egypt he stayed with Abu 'l-Fakhr al-'Aṭṭār in Fustat (III, 46; III, 47), to whom and to whose family greetings are extended here (verso, lines 33–35). For some time, Moses stayed in Alexandria (III, 47). While in this letter Joseph writes primarily to Peraḥyā, he addressed it to Alexandria, perhaps because the ship, which carried it from Sicily, would dock there. No. III, 48, on the other hand, is addressed 'to Alexandria or Fustat.'

Note that III, 57 should be read after III, 49.}

Translation of section I¹⁷

[Verso] (15) Please explain our situation (16) to our lord, the *Rayyis*¹⁸—may God preserve him! Perhaps he will write for us a letter to (17) the

¹⁶ For this passage, see page 81.}

¹⁷ This section is complemented by a similar passage in III, 48v, lines 14–20.

¹⁸ [I.e., the Nagid Samuel b. Ḥananyā. See the introductory remarks above.]

Commander Mubashshir, the *fatā*,¹⁹ to Sheikh Ben Sālīḥ—may God preserve him!—to the Doctor (18), and to the *Muslim*²⁰ commander of Mazara. Perhaps our trip will come about this way, (19) so that we may board a ship.²¹ He will supply us with provisions as well as our costs for (20) the boat fare, which he will collect from us in Alexandria.²² Either²³ I shall hold on to (21) hope {lit., 'I shall calm my heart'}²⁴ or I shall go mad. God give me power of endurance {alt. tr.: comfort me} through you three being alive,²⁵ (22) and may He fulfill, with regard to you, the verse: "A threefold cord is not readily broken,"²⁶ and may he increase (23) your well-being! Amen.

And a letter²⁷ to the congregation²⁸ against (24) Ibn Mubashshir,²⁹ concerning the gold we gave him, for he did (25) not return anything to us, claiming that it was lost {alt. tr.: that he was destitute},³⁰ nor did he rent {lit., 'give us lodging in'}³¹ a house for us, (26) nor did he give us

¹⁹ Of the many meanings of the word *fatā*, the most appropriate here is 'eunuch,' a usage common in the Maghreb, see Dozy, *Supplément*, 2:241a. Higher officials in Muslim states, as well as in Arabized Sicily, sometimes came from the class of castrated slaves or freedman; see, e.g., below. {Cf. Zeldes and Frenkel, "The Sicilian Trade," 110, n. 21; Ahmad, *Islamic Sicily*, 58–64.}

²⁰ *Yishmā'el*, a Hebrew word, is written here according to the Arabic spelling. {Cf. III, 47, line 19.}

²¹ Lit., 'go up on a ship,' a common expression. Travel from Sicily to Egypt is called 'going up' in III, 43, line 20.}

²² The general meaning of the sentence seems to be that the governor of Mazara should provide for the cost of the passage, while, in Alexandria, Joseph would pay back with the help of his friends or his sons or perhaps by his own work. However, the language and details are obscure {I have extensively revised here the translation in Goitein's rough draft. For *yajī* 'alaynā, lit., 'cost us,' in line 19, see Dozy, *Supplément*, 1:237b.}

²³ Arabic *ʾmn*, which I assume is as a contraction of *immā an*.

²⁴ {Arabic *nuṭammin qalbī*.

²⁵ Arabic *yusabbiruni bi-ḥayātikum al-thalātha*. Cf. Perahyā Yijū's letter to his brother Samuel, III, 55, line 5, *yu'izzuni bi-ḥayātika*, 'strengthen me in your life.'

²⁶ Eccles. 4:12.

²⁷ I.e., and request the *Rappis* to write another letter.

²⁸ The intervention of the congregation was invoked only in cases of utmost duress. This was normally done by interrupting public prayer, until the person against whom accusations had been brought gave sufficient securities for fulfilling his obligations. Here, Joseph wants the Egyptian Nagid to give instructions to a similar effect to the local congregation of Mazara, which is very remarkable. {On the practice of interrupting the prayer, see 194, n. 3. It is not clear that this was the intention here.}

²⁹ The name Mubashshir or Hebrew Mevassēr was very common in the western Mediterranean. Cf. also the name of the eunuch and freedman Mubashshir b. Sulaymān, who was in command of Majorca in 1114 (Amari, *Musulmani di Sicilia*, 3:383). {See 'the Commander Mubashshir, the *fatā*,' in line 17.}

³⁰ Arabic *bil-faqd*. The word can also be read with Simonsohn and Gil *bil-faqr*, which means the same.

³¹ Arabic *sakkananā*.}

anything. <<And a letter to Sheikh Abu 'l-Faraj Ibn Masnūt—may he see the days of the Messiah!—for had it not been for him, Ḥajjāj would not have paid us a thing.>>³² Be not remiss, perhaps we shall succeed. Why should we (27) stretch out our hands (for alms)? {Alt. tr.: Be not remiss. Perhaps we will be able to put our hands on something.}³³

³² The meaning of the sentence is this: after Ibn Masnūt had once showed himself so helpful to the family, a letter by the Nagid might perhaps induce him to facilitate its travel to Egypt. A parallel to this passage is found in III, 48v, line 16.

³³ {I.e., find something for support. The latter clause in Arabic: *la'alla najid li-aysh namudd yadaynā*. Cf. III, 48v, lines 18–19: *wa-mā baqiya ma'anā... illā bi-aysh nashtariyū qūtanā*, "nothing remains with us... except something (= some merchandise) with which we can buy our food."}