

III, 56 *Letter from Peraḥyā Yijū to His Wife in al-Maḥalla*

Fustat, late twelfth century

ULC Or. 1080 J 23

Translated by Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 3:218–20.

A letter in the hand of Peraḥyā b. Joseph, written while he was visiting the capital, to his wife Umm Thanā' ('Worthy of Praise'), is addressed to the judge's house in al-Maḥalla, a provincial capital in the Nile Delta. A man with this name was judge in al-Maḥalla in 1187.<sup>1</sup> His wife might have received this honorific title because of some generous gift to the community. An inventory of the Synagogue of the Iraqi Jews in Fustat from the year 1181/2 lists a Torah scroll written on order of a woman called Umm Thanā' and donated by her to that house of worship.<sup>2</sup> The interpretation in Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 3:218–20, has to be changed in light of III, 52.

{The change in interpretation obviously refers to the suggestion in *Med. Soc.*, 3:219, that Peraḥyā's wife was the daughter of al-Maḥalla's judge, which had been deduced undoubtedly from the fact the letter is addressed to the house of the judge there.<sup>3</sup> On the basis of India Book III, 52 and especially III, 54, Peraḥyā's wife is rather to be identified as his cousin Sitt al-Dār, Abraham Ben Yijū's daughter. In III, 52 (margin top, line 1), Peraḥyā wrote that he would leave the country, were it not for his wife. The desire to leave Egypt is echoed in our letter (III, 56*v*, line 7), where he writes her that he would leave the country, unless she joined him in the capital.

The name Umm Thanā' and the explanation that it was bestowed on Peraḥyā's wife because of some generous gift, which she had made, raise certain questions, however. It is exceptional that her honorific name would have been changed from Umm Yūsuf ('Mother of Joseph,' III, 55,

<sup>1</sup> See the introduction to III, 55 for references.

<sup>2</sup> Bodl. MS. Heb. f. 56 (Cat. 2821), fol. 50*v*, line 14. {According to Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 3:472, n. 250 (misprinted '240'), Umm Thanā, who in TS 13 J 20, f. 9 made an order for copying a Pentateuch, "might, or might not, be identical with the woman" to whom Peraḥyā wrote. Goitein, "The Synagogue," 96, identified it as the same Torah scroll, or rather *maḥḥaf*, mentioned in the document from 1181/2.

<sup>3</sup> The same appears in Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 2:238; id., *Education*, 79 (according to which Peraḥyā married the judge's daughter rather than his cousin). At yet an earlier stage of research Goitein assumed that Abraham Ben Yijū became a judge in an Egyptian provincial town, presumably al-Maḥalla; see above, page 84, n. 92.

top). More peculiar is her supposed reputation for beneficence, in light of Peraḥyā's repeated protestations of poverty: he had to deprive himself of food to pay a debt (III, 52, line 7); he was unable to contribute to his mother's upkeep (III, 55, lines 3–4); and he had difficulties paying the poll tax (III, 55*a*, margin). While we do not know what happened to Sitt al-Dār's ample dowry (III, 54), her supposed generous gifts to the community are completely incongruous with her husband's financial difficulties.<sup>4</sup> The relevant passage in the inventory from 1181/2—'Added to this is a new Torah codex, which Umm Thanā ordered copied and which she dedicated to the aforementioned synagogue'—has a parallel in an adjoining inventory, from Marheshvan, 1186, from the Synagogue of the Palestinians in Fustat: 'Added to this is a new Torah codex, which Umm Thanā the embroiderer ordered copied and which she dedicated to the Synagogue of the Palestinians.'<sup>5</sup> The vocation of the benefactress and the synagogue to which she dedicated her gift add to the unlikelihood of identifying her with Sitt al-Dār the wife of Peraḥyā, judge of al-Maḥalla.<sup>6</sup>

A closer examination of the manuscript shows that in verso, line 6, a stain obscures what Goitein had read as אַמַּתְנָא, 'yā (Oh) Umm Thanā.' In any event, it would be preferable to read אַמַּתְנָא, *yā sittunā*, 'Oh, my (lit., "our") lady,' the identical phrase with which the writer addresses his

<sup>4</sup> The incongruity of Ben Yijū's wealth, inherited by his daughter Sitt al-Dār, and Peraḥyā's poverty is a puzzle, even if we assume that his wife was not the benefactress. Several reconstructions can be imagined, e.g., Peraḥyā remarried after having divorced Sitt al-Dār or after her death; her inheritance was lost due to a poor investment or she retained exclusive rights over her possessions and did not make them available to her husband. Furthermore, besides our Peraḥyā b. Joseph and his grandson, other individuals bore this name during the Geniza period. I am uncertain which of them is intended in TS 12.599, according to which Saadya b. Yeshū'ā the father of the late Sitt al-Ḥusn released his son-in-law Peraḥyā b. Joseph from any claim concerning the property of his daughter. At the present time, the issue remains somewhat of an enigma.

<sup>5</sup> The 1181/2 inventory, as already noted: Bodl. MS. Heb. f. 56 (Cat. 2821), fol. 50*v*, ed. Allony, *Library*, 299–302, with references to earlier publications. For אַמַּתְנָא אַמַּתְנָא ('Umm Thanā' ordered it copied'), the first editor, Gottheil, "Tit-bits," 165, read אַמַּתְנָא אַמַּתְנָא ('Istunā [?] ordered it copied'). The 1186 inventory: Bodl. MS. Heb. f. 56 (Cat. 2821), fol. 49*v*; ed. Allony, ib., 303–5, with references to earlier publications. For אַמַּתְנָא אַמַּתְנָא, the first editor, Gottheil, ibid., 161, read אַמַּתְנָא אַמַּתְנָא ('Sittunā ordered it copied'), which in later editions was 'corrected' to אַמַּתְנָא אַמַּתְנָא.

<sup>6</sup> Goitein, "The Synagogue," 96, noted that Umm Thanā is a rare name. In Mann, *Jews*, 2:XXXV, Goitein remarked that it is a 'common' name, but the intention is: a known name. Umm Thanā the benefactress is probably the same as her namesake mentioned in other documents as living in the vicinity of the Synagogue of the Palestinians in Fustat; see Gil, *Foundations*, 594 (there spelled 'Umm Thinā'). See Allony, ibid., 302, where TS 13 J 20.19 is a misprint for TS 13 J 20.9.

wife in the opening of his letter. These phrases are often virtually indistinguishable, especially when the writer does not leave regular spaces between words.<sup>7</sup>

The letter has two main sections: the writer's longing for his wife and his urgent request that she join him;<sup>8</sup> a report on his sermon before the combined membership of the two synagogues in Fustat, that of the Palestinian Jews and that of the Iraqi Jews. While there are some indications that he would have liked to stay there for an extended period, the immediate purpose of his trip must have been to supplement his meager income as judge by the honorariums he received as a guest rabbi.<sup>9</sup> The sermon was a great success, he writes. But his satisfaction at its reception was dampened by his wife's absence and especially by the failure of someone named Abu 'l-Ḥakam<sup>10</sup> to attend. Peraḥyā was embarrassed when the congregants asked him about Abu 'l-Ḥakam's absence. A contemporary query to Maimonides describes the ruckus caused when a congregant in a synagogue in Cairo ridiculed the sermon, which the local leader delivered there, and Judge Abu 'l-Ḥakam is singled out as having been present.<sup>11</sup> Evidently, he was well known not only to Maimonides but also to Peraḥyā's wife, and accordingly it was sufficient to refer to him by use of his honorific only. We learn his full name from a legal opinion, which he wrote, also preserved in Maimonides' responsa, concerning a leviratic marriage, a case about which questions were addressed among others also to Maimonides and to our Peraḥyā b. Joseph. The ruling had obviously been written in Arabic but is preserved in Hebrew translation only. Its caption is 'the responsum of the judge Avī he-Ḥākhām' (Father of the Savant), clearly a rendering of the Arabic by-name Abu 'l-Ḥakam. At the end he signs his full name, Solomon b. Zakkay.<sup>12</sup> He is also known from documents he signed in Cairo

<sup>7</sup> Converse errors occurred in earlier publications, where the name Umm Thanā' was misread as if it contained *Sittunā*; see the preceding notes. *Sittunā*, 'our lady,' for addressing a wife should be added to those terms discussed in Goitein, 3:164.

<sup>8</sup> As noted by Kraemer, "Women Speak," 188, 197, 201, the personal and confidential nature of this part of the letter proves that Peraḥyā's wife was literate, and it was intended for her eyes only. As we recall, Sitt al-Dār was born in India and lived three years in Yemen during her youth; it is interesting that her father Ben Yijū had her learn to read.

<sup>9</sup> For such guest sermons, see Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 2:158, 217.

<sup>10</sup> Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, 3:219, translates "the brother of *the divine*." He obviously read in the original *akhu 'l-ḥākhām*, which except for the indistinguishable *b-k* interchange, has the same consonants.

<sup>11</sup> Maimonides, *Responsa*, 1:189, no. 110. The by-name Abu 'l-Ḥakam is uncommon. In 1225 Abu 'l-Ḥakam b. Hilāl sells his share in a house in Cairo, ULC Or. 1081 J 31.

<sup>12</sup> Maimonides, *Responsa*, 2:654-55, no. 373.

in the late eighties of the twelfth century.<sup>13</sup> In his Chronicle, Sambari lists Solomon's namesake among the savants of Alexandria contemporary with Maimonides;<sup>14</sup> evidently Solomon moved from Cairo to Alexandria (or vice versa).<sup>15</sup> Our letter thus supplies a small but interesting addendum to our knowledge concerning this group of Egyptian scholars in Maimonides' circle, which included Peraḥyā, and the dynamics of their relations one to another.}

<sup>13</sup> TS 18 J 1, f. 28, August 25, 1187. TS Misc. 25.63 (referred to by Mann, *Jews*, 2:294, without shelf mark), December 23, 1188. Thanks to Amir Ashur for supplying me with the pertinent data. On Solomon b. Zakkay, see further Friedman, "Maimonides and Zūṭā," 484.

<sup>14</sup> Sambari (Shtober), 219; cf. Mann, *Texts*, 1:396, n. 9.

<sup>15</sup> We cannot exclude the possibility that our letter was written not in Fustat but rather Alexandria, whose Jewish community also had Palestinian and Iraqi congregations.}