

(A P.S. of four short lines, referring to several of the goods mentioned before, is too much effaced to attempt translation.)

#### 44 MURDER OF THE SELF-STYLED CALIPH AND RETURN OF JEWISH LIFE IN ADEN

July 1202

The sender of this letter, Maḍmūn b. David, was the head of the Jewish community of Aden. He is referred to in TS 8 J a, *India Book* 183, ll. 4-8, as the Adenese counterpart of Abraham Maimonides, the head of the Jews in Egypt. Thus he is identical with the Maḍmūn of the preceding selection.<sup>1</sup> The Hebrew equivalent of Maḍmūn, which means "protected by God" was Shemarya, and under this name, namely, Shemarya b. David, "the Nagid (leader) of the Land of Yemen," he appears both in Hebrew literature and in Geniza documents.<sup>2</sup>

The aforementioned letter, TS 8 J a, contains also the name of the recipient of our letter, *al-Muwaffaq*, "the Successful," a title which had become a proper name. He had another title *Amin* (*al-Dawla*), "Trustee (of the Government)," the like of which would be given to a Jewish representative of merchants. The two titles are contained in the untranslatable honorific epithets of the introduction, so characteristic for the artificial style of this late period.<sup>3</sup> Fortunately, the main text of the letter is in straightforward language.

As far as I am able to read between the lines, the Jews were permitted to return to their religion only after the murder of the self-

Jewish chief judge of Cairo and a close associate of Maimonides, but also very active in the economic field. See next selection.

<sup>1</sup> No. 43, n. 4, above. Maḍmūn I b. Japheth (d. 1151; see no. 37, above) probably was his great-grandfather.

<sup>2</sup> TS NS J 242, *India Book* 311; TS 6 J 2, f. 10, *India Book* 310. The famous Spanish Hebrew poet Judah al-Harizi dedicated to him his masterpiece, *Tahkemoni* (or, rather, a copy of it). See Mann, *Jews in Egypt*, II, 338.

<sup>3</sup> For instance, instead of the title Trustee of the Government, the introduction has: "Your Trusteeish Excellency."

styled caliph. This is clearly alluded to in the remark that the Feast of Weeks was celebrated "*in the proper way*," which makes no sense in normal times. The writer did not mention the change of religion expressly because his action of leading the community into even temporary apostasy, although eminently reasonable, was religiously not without blemish. The P.S. of the writer's namesake, perhaps a cousin, is even more outspoken.

University Library, Cambridge, Taylor-Schechter Collection, TS 28.11<sup>4</sup>

In the name of the Merciful.

A

Your servant Maḍmūn, son of David, (may the) s(pirit of) G(od) g(rant him rest),<sup>5</sup> sends regards to his high and lofty excellency . . .<sup>6</sup>

B

I received your distinguished letter in which you report about the trouble you had with the pepper carried with you. God knows that my intention in this matter was only to be useful to you. God, the exalted, will support you and grant you success. Amen, Amen.

C

I should like you to share this with your servant: the troops killed al-Malik al-Mu'izz, who claimed to be caliph. He is succeeded by al-Malik al-Nāṣir Ayyūb, the son of the Sultan Sayf al-Islam,<sup>7</sup> who is still a boy, and his Atabeg (guardian and regent) is the Sultan Sayf al-Dīn Sunqur.

<sup>4</sup> Ed. D. H. Baneth in *Epstein Jubilee Volume* (Jerusalem, 1950), pp. 205-214, with an excellent introduction and most instructive notes. With one exception, deviations from Baneth's interpretation are not noted expressly.

<sup>5</sup> For this blessing see *Med. Soc.*, II, 551, n. 14.

<sup>6</sup> Eight lines of introduction.

<sup>7</sup> "The victorious king, Job, the son of the Sword of Islam," a younger brother of the murdered "caliph." The Sword of Islam was a brother of the famous Saladin.

## D

After his government had become settled, your servants submitted your case to him.<sup>8</sup> He referred it to the administrative court. But your servants declared that this was a case belonging to the religious court. We obfuscated the matter before the divines and paid the poll tax.<sup>9</sup>

## E

All this happened in the month of Sivan, one day before the eve of *Pentecost*.<sup>10</sup> We celebrated the feast in the proper way, in *happiness and joy*. Some *Jewbaiters* formed menacing groups, but could not do a thing, thank God, the exalted. All that happened to us has come through the blessings of our lord, the Rayyis Moses—(*may the memory of the righteous be blessed*)<sup>11</sup>—and the blessings of our lord, *the pious man, our master Isaac*,<sup>12</sup> and through your blessings, may God, the exalted, grant you good reward for your liberality.<sup>13</sup>

## F

Your distinguished letter, containing several orders, has arrived. Your servant hopes to be able to carry them out. I do not doubt that

<sup>8</sup> Since a reference to the poll tax follows presently, I assume the case involved goods for which foreigners, but not local people, had to pay high customs dues. By paying the poll tax, the Cairene merchant, who had just visited Aden (see sec. B, above), and probably had done so often before, became a permanent resident there.

<sup>9</sup> The Muslim divines, like their Jewish colleagues, were local and merchants. The administrative court was in the hand of officers from the foreign mercenary troops, with whom little contact existed. Matters affecting non-Muslims were indeed the domain of the religious court.

The editor, to my mind, misinterpreted this passage by taking *al-mamālīk*, which simply means "your servants," as "Mamluks."

<sup>10</sup> Corresponding to May 27, 1202. The Heb. word used here is not "Feast of Weeks" (Shevuoth), as common today, but *'ashereth*, as in the Talmud, which is identical with the Christian word for Pentecost, *'anšara*, used all over the Middle East.

<sup>11</sup> Moses Maimonides the Rayyis, or head of the Jewish community in Egypt. The blessing following his name was normally said over a dead person, but in Yemen occasionally also over one alive, especially an eminent divine.

<sup>12</sup> The chief Jewish judge of Cairo. See no. 43, n. 20, above.

<sup>13</sup> See n. 16, below.

you—may God make your honored position eternal—love me and are concerned with my well-being. May God, the exalted, help me to satisfy your wishes, as is my duty, if God wills.

## G

I renew my reliance on you for having the two pieces sent with you co[llated] and a third copy made in good script and on fine paper.<sup>14</sup> And have the medical writings of my lord the Rayyis copied for me. And please buy for me any fine copies of useful books you can lay hands on and kindly send them to me—may I never be deprived of you and never miss you.<sup>15</sup>

## H

(P.S. by a bystander:) Your servant Maḍmūn b. Jacob, . . . present at the writing of this letter, sends his best regards to his excellency, my master. Thanks to [God? . . .], the affair with all *those Arabs*, ended happily in this *salvation*. We were not worthy of this, but *the Holy one, may he be blessed* did what he is worthy of, *for the sake of his great name*, and brought relief to the Jews in the entire country of Yemen. Relief was brought first, slightly before us, to the people of the mountains. Finally the Sultan came to us, and the relief became complete, *by the help of God* and through your success.<sup>16</sup> "They thank God for his lovingkindness."<sup>17</sup>

Kindest regards to his excellency my lord and to all under his care, *and to all connected with him and subordinated to him a million greetings of peace*.

<sup>14</sup> Most probably a reference to parts of Maimonides' legal code. The writer, like some other readers, had doubts with regard to many passages and wished his copies to be collated with a reliable text. The other members of the rabbinical court needed a copy as well.

<sup>15</sup> The writer may, among many other things, have dealt in books, as did Nahray b. Nissīm before him. But since this letter, certainly purposely, does not mention any business detail, I prefer to think that the head of the Yemenite Jews simply was a lover of books—as Yemenites are now.

<sup>16</sup> Again a reference showing that the recipient had been substantial in the turn of the fate of the Jews in Yemen (see sec. E). He, together with Maimonides and the Jewish judge of Cairo, had intervened with the Muslim authorities in that city. The allusion to his liberality means that the arguments based on Islamic law had to be fortified by "presents" to the proper persons.

<sup>17</sup> Psalm 107:8, to be cited when saved from a danger.

*Written on 17th Tammuz*<sup>18</sup> 1513 of the Documents (July 9, 1202).  
*Salvation is near.*

Two copies were made and sent by way of the Hijāz.<sup>19</sup>

#### 45 AN INDIA TRADER WRITES TO HIS WIFE

Ca. 1204

A voyage to India necessitated an absence of two years at least, but often of many more. When the trader, as happened frequently, suffered shipwreck, or was plundered by pirates, he had to work first to replace the capital entrusted to him by others and, of course, his own, and then to make gains which would make his toilsome and dangerous trip rewarding. Years would pass in this endeavor. So long an absence put an intolerable strain on the trader's wife, a situation reflected in a number of Geniza documents. The letter translated here was selected because of its personal tone, the like of which is rarely found.

The writer was closely connected with another India trader whose son is mentioned, as traveling to India also, in a document from the summer of 1226 (see sec. F). The letter opens with a condolence on the death of Judge Manasse. In a deed from January 1214, reference is made to a house "formerly known as the home of the late Judge Manasse."<sup>1</sup> Section B reveals that the family back in Fustat was

<sup>18</sup> A day on which fasting is obligatory. I have found many letters written on that fast in July: perhaps the merchants were too exhausted to do much business and passed the time in letter-writing.

<sup>19</sup> Overland, and not, as usual, by sea, probably because all the ships of the season had already sailed.

This note makes sense only if we assume that what we have is the original draft which was destined to be retained in Maḍmūn's office. The manuscript gives the definite impression that this is indeed the case. It is written with utmost carelessness and the main letter lacks any conclusion. This draft found its way to Fustat as scrap paper: on the reverse side the Jewish calendar for the years 1207-1212 is jotted down. Someone who used that calendar took the paper with him to Egypt. After it had lost its practical value, he threw it away into the Geniza.

<sup>1</sup> TS 13 J 4, f. 14, ll. 9-11. This judge was active in the time of Moses Maimonides. Another judge Manasse, most probably his grandson, was a member of the court of Abraham, Moses' son. *Med. Soc.*, 11, 124 and 514, sec. 27, are to be corrected accordingly.

saved "from the great terrors, the like of which have not been experienced for many generations," no doubt alluding to the famine and plague which ravaged Egypt in the years 1201-1203. Thus the summer of 1204 is the most likely date for this letter.

No address is found on the space destined for it. The writer might have had second thoughts about his own frankness (see sec. E) and not sent the letter off after all. In view of the poor state of preservation, some omissions, always indicated, have been necessary.

Jewish Theological Seminary, New York, E. N. Adler Collection,  
ENA 2739, f. 16, *India Book* 176.

In (Your name!)

#### A. DEATH OF THE JUDGE

Just is the Lord in all his ways, etc. (Psalm 145:17)

The righteous man has gone, etc. (Isaiah 51:1)

Comfort, comfort my people, etc. (Isaiah 40:1)

From their father who is yearning after them,<sup>2</sup> Solomon, son of Japheth, (may he) r(est in) E(den).

I am able to express only a fraction of my grief over the passing away of my lord, the illustrious leader, (*his*) *honor*, *greatness*, and *holiness*, our master and teacher Manasse, the wise and prudent judge, whose demise has hurt the hearts and caused pain to the souls. (*May the*) *m(emory of the)* *r(ighteous)* be *b(lessed)*. How deeply was I afflicted by his death and by his being taken away from those who relied on him. May God assign him *a place with the saints*, may he grant consolation to his mourners and heal their wounds and comfort them *in his great mercy*.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Decency required that a husband should not address his wife in a letter, a piece of paper which could fall into anyone's hand. Most Geniza letters destined for wives are addressed to another relative. Our letter, which is entirely directed to the writer's wife, starts in the third person plural masculine, continues in the second person plural, but ends in the second person feminine singular. The reader will be alerted on the transition to the latter.

<sup>3</sup> The judge was also a spiritual leader and as such his death was felt by the community like that of a father (see no. 34, above, and no. 60, below). The remarkable thing is that our writer, who had been away from Egypt for years and was facing manifold adversity, should express himself in such a way.