

60 FROM FEZ, MOROCCO, TO ALMERIA, SPAIN

Written at the time of the Almohad menace
December 1141

Joseph Ibn Migash (Megas, "Great"), the spiritual leader of the Jews of Spain, whose death is referred to in section D, died in Sivan (May/June) 1141.¹ Our letter was written between the 20th and 30th of December of that year, as noted in section E. It is translated here because of its historical significance. It took another five years until Fez, the city in which this letter was written, fell into the hands of the Almohads.² But here we see that the merchants were fully aware of the imminent danger: business had come to a standstill in the capital, although the Sūs, the region referred to here, is in the utmost southwest of Morocco, while Fez is situated in its northernmost part. To be sure, the term Sūs comprised in the Middle Ages more than it does today, when it denotes the plain between the Atlantic Ocean, the Great Atlas, and the Anti-Atlas mountains.³

The beginning of the letter and the address on the verso are lost. Script and style are not those of the Spanish intellectuals, as found in no. 59, written by the merchant Isaac b. Baruch of Almeria, who is mentioned here also (sec. B). The writer was either a native of an eastern Mediterranean country or belonged to a class of people in Spain otherwise not well known to us. His script and style, although not remarkable in any respect, are regular and pleasant. They are similar to those of no. 7, above, but not quite identical. The two letters might have been written by the same man, but at different periods of his life (see also n. 15, below). Our translation begins on line 5, where the first consecutive sentence is discernible.

University Library, Cambridge, Taylor-Schechter
Collection, TS 13 J 21, f. 12.

¹ TS 10 J 24, f. 4v, l. 9, *India Book* 121, ed. S. D. Goitein, *Tarbiz* 24 (1954), p. 33.

² See *EI*², I, 79, s.v. 'Abd al-Mu'min (the Almohad caliph), and II, 818-819 (s.v. *Fās*).

³ See *EI*¹, IV, s.v. *al-Sūs al-Akṣā*.

A. ORDER OF WEDDING ROBE FOR A BRIDEGROOM

S[ell] the hundred pounds of [. . .] and take 20 mithqāls (Spanish dinars) from the price for yourself. With the balance buy a silk robe from the master who made the 'attābī (tabbi)⁴ for the elder Abū Zikrī⁵ for 3 1/2 mithqāls approximately. It should be tailored.⁶ If you cannot get it ready made, have it made quickly, dye it pistachio green,⁷ and have it ironed in the very best way. Send it on quickly with the mats for Abraham, for the robe is also for him and he needs it for his wedding. Please be not slack in this matter.

B. THE CONQUEST OF THE SŪS BY THE ALMOHADS:

VARIOUS BUSINESS NOTES

Please inform R. Isaac b. Baruch, (*may his*) *R(ock)* *p(rotect him)*, that I paid to Aaron Ibn al-Barjalūnī ("the man from Barcelona, Spain") the 2 mithqāls that he, Isaac, owed him, when he, Aaron, set out for Sijilmāsa.⁸ Please take them from Isaac without delay.

My heart burns because I have assembled gold and have found no one with whom I could send it. So I must send it with David, which does not make me happy at all.⁹ But "*trust in God.*"¹⁰ I shall also send copper, as much as I can get, with him.

Take notice that lac remained on its original market (price) for only a short time. From the day when the usurper¹¹ occupied the Sūs, a general depression set in.¹² Five bales have still remained with me. Baruch has been hitherto unable to sell the quantities I gave to him and I am upset about this more than about anything else. The entire lac is with me in my apartment.¹³ Had I not been

⁴ The English is derived from the Arabic.

⁵ Many persons with this byname are known from that period.

⁶ Ar. *tafsīl*. For *thawb* designates not only the standard robe, but a piece of cloth needed for its tailoring.

⁷ The color worn in Paradise.

⁸ The desert entrepôt in the deep south of Morocco.

⁹ Who will travel later (see end of letter). They hated to let money lie idle.

¹⁰ Psalm 37:3.

¹¹ Ar. *al-ḫāriḫī*. The Almohad is intended, as is indicated by the place and the date.

¹² Ar. *ḍarab bi-rūḥih al-arḍ*.

¹³ Ar. *hujra*. Respectable merchants did not live in a caravanserai, but hired

concerned about the other goods you had entrusted to him, I would not have given him a thing, so that it should not be said that my goods were with him.¹⁴ May God, the exalted, turn everything to a good end.

Do not think that anything keeps me back here in Fez except that I must await what will happen with Baruch. For most of the things which Ibrahīm¹⁵ has taken, he has managed to sell.

You asked me about the price of brazilwood. A pound and one-half can be had for 1 mithqāl.

C. ORDER IN ALMERIA OF SCALES AND WEIGHTS
FOR A GOLDSMITH IN FEZ

I mentioned in a previous letter that a Jewish goldsmith here is very helpful to me in the collection and payment of debts. He wishes to have a pair of scales and a set of weights, and has already given to me the entire price of this. In addition to my letter to you in this matter, I have also written to the scales maker¹⁶ directly. Please do not neglect this matter.¹⁷

The arrival of your note has been acknowledged by me several times.

D. EXPRESSION OF GRIEF OVER THE DEATH OF
THE SPIRITUAL LEADER OF SPANISH JEWRY

I am unable to describe to you my unhappy mood¹⁸ here in Fez. This was increased by the great disaster, the terrible catastrophe, the death of *our master* Joseph, *the great Rāv*, (*may the*) *s(pirit of)*

an apartment for themselves when they stayed in a foreign city for a more protracted period.

¹⁴ This Baruch was a local merchant. The writer did not wish to become suspect of evading customs by declaring his own merchandise as belonging to a local man. See no. 7, above.

¹⁵ The bridegroom Abraham mentioned above (cf. n. 23, below). He might have been identical with the Abraham referred to in no. 7 above.

¹⁶ Ar. *mayāzinī*.

¹⁷ What astounds me in this paragraph is (*a*) that the great industrial center of Fez did not have a maker of scales, a common commodity, but one had to order them from far-away Spain; and (*b*) that seemingly the weights used by the goldsmiths in Fez and Almeria were identical.

¹⁸ Ar. *ḍiq ṣadr* "narrowness of the breast," which sometimes corresponds to "depression."

G(od set him at) p(eace). I am unable to give you an idea about my feelings in this matter. Had God willed that I had remained in my previous state, I would have sought his company and made his personal acquaintance. Never in my life have I felt a sadness more bitter than this.¹⁹

E. SHIPMENTS OF ALUM SENT FROM
MOROCCO TO SPAIN

Please take notice that in the shipment of alum which I sent you there are seven bales of particularly good quality, each qinṭār costing more than the regular price by 1/4 mithqāl. The remaining quantities are of different values,²⁰ but the whole purchase was at a low price. Before its official announcement,²¹ a qinṭār rose by 1/4 mithqāl. You may either sell each quality by itself or mix them, you know the market better and are able to act in accordance with the situation. Sell also all the containers; each one is worth 1 dirhem. The entire weight of the alum belonging to you is 45 1/2 qinṭārs, small measure. May God, the exalted, grant success. Had I had courage, I would have sent you 100 qinṭārs. But I did not dare, since there was a great demand for it.²²

Be under God's safeguard and protection. Best regards and greetings to you and yours. Written in a hurry, while the bearer is on the point of leaving. *May your well-being wax*. Written during the last ten days of Tevet (December 20-30, 1141).

Do not neglect to send me letters. The bearer of this letter is the packer who was present when the alum was packed. He knows which is the good quality and which the excellent one. I have lent him my small saddle. When he arrives, take it from him. With

¹⁹ The news of the Rāv's death had reached our writer several months before, and then, of course, he wrote a letter of condolence in the style of nos. 34 and 45, above. Here he expresses regret that he had not continued the studies pursued in his youth, which would have given him the opportunity to be near to the late master (who resided in Lucena, near Cordoba). The *lām al-tā'kid* is spelled here as a separate word: *la*.

²⁰ Later he goes on to say that the packer would arrive and tell which bale was of which quality.

²¹ Ar. *qabl khurūjih*. The writer bought at a lower price before the official market price was made public.

²² The writer was afraid that many Spanish merchants would send alum to Almeria, and its price would fall.

Dā'ūd²³ I shall send you various letters specifying all you need to know. *And peace!*

61 A NOTE FROM THE COUNTRYSIDE

Short letters dealing with local business and having the form of notes (see no. 35, n. 2, above) are typical for the Geniza correspondence of the thirteenth century.

The recipient of this letter was a banker, who, together with another investor, had a partnership with the writer, which was most successful. For a profit of 60 dinars for each of them, as mentioned here, was unusually high under any circumstances. Like all citizens of the Egyptian capital, the writer hated to travel in the countryside, but his telegraph-style note is cheerful and bears the imprint of a personality.

University Library, Cambridge, Taylor-Schechter
Collection, TS 13 J 13, f. 18.

Your slave and servant

In (Your name). Ibrahīm b. Abu 'l-Surūr, . . .

I yearn for my lord and master, the illustrious elder Abū Naṣr—may God prolong his life and crush his enemy. Another matter: my lord, I parted from you, without having been satiated with the pleasure of your company, which I regret very much. Another matter: Your letter arrived. I kissed it before reading it and took notice of its content. The spices¹ and the silk arrived, may I never be deprived of you and never have to miss you. But the spices, may God punish him who packed them. No profit will come from them. By my head, I shall not see a dinar from them. Had I been in the store, as I intended, I would have found that they are not of full weight. The rose marmalade is thin and does not bring relief to a person in

²³ Identical with David, sec. B, above. See n. 15, above.

¹ That is, all an *'aṭṭār*, or perfumer, used to sell. Later, *hawā'ij* simply meant "spices." The partnership no doubt concerned only the silk, while the "spices" had been ordered by the writer on his own account. Otherwise, he would not have used such strong words against the sender.

illness.² The tragacanth gum is not worth a penny. A God-fearing man does not do such a thing.

My lord, I sent you beekeepers, scrapers of honey,³ with Ibn Hāja ("Son of Something"),⁴ also a basket with half a *wayba* of sifted caraway seed, a quarter for you, and another for the elder Ma'ānī.⁵ This is for your kindnesses; no payment is required. Each of us has made a profit of 60 dinars. I gave him (the basket) and was extremely happy for having been able to do this. I am coming to town. Only the debts owed me keep me in the country. The end will be good for you; trust in God and extricate yourself. The seeking of sustenance spurns a man as does the seeking of glory. So make an effort and extricate yourself. (Greetings to the sons of his maternal uncle and three other persons.) Kind regards. The answer to this letter should be sent to Alexandria. Would I try to describe to you how much I am eager to get out of the countryside, a letter would not suffice for this. And peace.

(P.S. on the first page:) And send me the alkali quickly. Put it in a jug and secure its⁶

(Address:)

To Fustat, to be delivered to the elder Abū Naṣr, (*may his e(nd be) g(ood)*), son of Abu 'l-Karam, (*may he r(est in) E(den)*).⁷

² Rose marmalade was widely used for the alleviation of illness.

³ The honey scrapers (see *Med. Soc.*, I, 125, 429, n. 71) were fellahs, who would not have made the journey to the city alone.

⁴ A nickname, derived from the phrase *lī hāja ilayk*, "I want something from you," too often used by an ancestor or ancestress. There is also a nickname *Ibn al-Hājjā* "Son of the Female Pilgrim" (with article and double *j*).

⁵ Abbreviated from Abu 'l-Ma'ānī ("Eloquent"), a common name in that late period. A man bearing this name contributed to the same appeal as the recipient (see n. 7, below, and *Zion* 7 (1942), 143, col. 11b, l. 10).

⁶ Text: *shs-hā*, "its opening"?

⁷ Contributed to the public appeal discussed in *Med. Soc.*, II, 488-490 (see Bodl. MS Heb. c28 [Cat. 2876], f. 47, ed. E. Strauss-Ashtor, *Zion* 7, p. 142, col. 1a, l. 19). There he is described as *ṣayrafī*, banker.