

A Letter to Halfon from his partner, Abū Zikrī Kōhēn, Representative  
of the Merchants in Cairo.

Cairo - Aden

January - February 1134

Bodleian Library Oxford Ms. Heb. c28 (Catalogue No. 2876) fol. 22

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145-8.

27 x 18 c.m.

Light-brown, almost white, thin and strong paper. The back,  
which bears the address only, seems to have a smoother surface than  
the written page.

The letter is written in the characteristic hand of Abū Zikrī  
Kōhēn. Other specimens of his handwriting in Nos. 84, 85, 137, 138,  
139, 221, 222. About its intricacies cf. Vol. 1 Chapter Palaeography.

Abū Zikrī leaves very broad margins at the right side and the  
top of his letters, which he fills afterwards with writing, here  
about one third of the width and one fourth of the height of the page.  
As against 21 lines, written horizontally, there are 22 on the right  
margin and 8 on the top, all written upside down and forming obtuse  
angles with the main body of the letter. The aesthetic effect of such  
a distribution of the writing is certainly more satisfactory than the  
mere leaving of margins.

The letter is dated by month and year: Adar I 1445 Seleucid Era

Small  
type

which began on 27th January and ended on 25 February 1134. It was sent from Cairo to Aden, as is indicated above doubt by the names of the persons sending greetings and those to whom regards are extended, see ll. 33-47, as well as by the contents of the letter as a whole. The different and faulty interpretation of the learned first editor, who believed it was written in Aden, was due to the fact that at the time of his publication only a few letters dealing with the trade to India were known so that neither the terminology used nor the identity of the persons mentioned in them could be sufficiently established.

Nos. 84 and 85 precede No 83 in time. They appear here in order in which they were found and identified. For the reason of this procedure cf. the Preface.

Contents of No. 83

- A. Preamble, (ll. 1-7)
- B. Regret that Halfon had not returned to Egypt from Aden and even considered going back to India. For there had been a boom year, when even the unexperienced had made great profits. Sundry intimations. (l. 7 - margin, l. 10)
- C. Detailed greetings and regards (margin, l. 10 - top, l. 8)

Translation

- A. (1) I (n Your name, O merciful!)

Insert  
here pp. 5-7

(2) This letter of mine (is being sent) to "the Presence" of my master, the most illustrious Sheikh - may God prolong your life (3) in prosperity and make permanent your strength, happiness, welfare, wealth (4) highness and loftiness, and *prostrate in humiliation weakness* ~~subdue~~ your enviers and enemies and may he not keep from you (5) complete success. My longing for you is intense. May God in His grace (6) unite us in the near future in the best of state. His kindness<sup>n</sup> indeed is sufficient (guarantee for this). He (7) will take care of this end is able to achieve it, if God will, in His mercy.

E. What you do want (8) to know is that we expected you to arrive (home from India) this year, (9) until the merchants arrived and told that you did not set out (for home). This was very bad (10) for me - may God, (the) exalted, turn the end to the good and ordain (11) your welfare, as you wish and choose. I received your letter, in which you announced me (12) that you purchased pepper and left it in Aden. I have sent to Sheikh (13) Maḥrūz a number of letters and announced him the prices of all the goods. (14) Take the list from him and read it or from (15) the Sheikh Abū Saḡr Abraham and buy whatever God puts into your mind. (16) In any case set out for home, if God will, together with Sheikh (17) Maḥrūz.

If, however, you have to stay on, or you wish to go back (18) to India, please hand over the pepper (19) brought to the Sheikh Joseph B. Abreham - may God make him a good name. (20) For I cannot today for the third time year after year (21) begin a new travel. Had you set out for home this year, you would not have needed~~X~~

Margin:

(1) to travel to India. (2) for there arrived the young <sup>men</sup> ~~men~~ (3) who had never travelled and who do not know (4) how to sell or to buy (5) and have made out of a hundred two hundred, the least (6) among the ~~men~~ being Makārim ibn as-Salamī. (7) However Musallam has got out of 100-250. (8) This for the information of your "Presence". Perhaps (9) God (the) ex(alted) will turn the end (10) to the good and replace (our losses) in His mercy.

C. I express (11) to your <sup>house</sup> ~~"Presence"~~ my best (12) greetings. Our Lord - may God keep him alive - (13) sends to you the choicest greetings and your brother (14) sends to you his choicest greetings, and so does (15) your other brother. The two and their children (16) send to you their choicest greetings. They are (17) in complete well being and health, (18) thank God. May God, the ex(alted), ordain (19) your well being and unite you with them. (20) Likewise, Sheikh Abu l-Waḥḥ<sup>v</sup> (21) Sabā<sup>c</sup> sends to you choicest greetings. (22) Express to my master,

Top of the page:

*sheikh*

the illustrious ~~merchant~~ Maḍmūn, best (2) greetings; likewise to my master Sheikh (3) Joseph best greetings; likewise to my master (4) Sheikh Ḥalaf best greetings. (5) I need not entreat you to assist (6) Sheikh Abū Naṣr b. Abraham in all his (7) transactions. Express to all our friends (8) best greetings.

Peace shall be plentiful and salvation near, A(men) I (n eternity).

S(elah).

Adar I 1445

Verso

Address (~~right~~ side)

(1) To the Presence of my master the illustrious Sheikh Abū Sa'īd

(2) Ḥalfon Hallevi son of Neṭan'ōl, m(ay he rest in) P(aradise)

Dimyātī.

(left side):

(1) His grateful (2) Abū Zikrī Kōhēn.

Between (1) and (2): Peace.

The sender, Abū Zikrī (i.e. Zechariah) Kōhēn, Representative of the Cairine Jewish merchants at that time was himself a seasoned India traveller, see Chapter V section 1. Here he regrets very much that Ḥalfon, who was obviously his partner in various deals, did not return from India to Cairo, that year, but remained in Aden, for it was a boom year, in which even inexperienced young men had made

*I inserted  
this on  
p 2*

profits of 100 % - 150 %.

He asks Halfon to come back with Maḥrūz. This Adenese merchant was Abū Zikrī's brother-in-law, (cf. No. 34, D l. 4 and Index), and proprietor of a ship (cf. No. 133). Abū Zikrī suggested here perhaps that Halfon should travel in Maḥrūz' ship. In case Halfon insisted on remaining in Aden or going back to India, he should send the pepper, obviously acquired for the two partners, with Joseph ben Abraham, the well known Aden business man ( see No. 51, Introduction), who obviously was expected to travel at that time to Cairo.

Abū Zikrī had been overseas during two subsequent years; therefore, he did not want to set out a third time to fetch the pepper from Aden. The quantity acquired obviously was very large. Otherwise, the normal procedure was to send goods on with any trustworthy merchant known to the two parties.

The letter throws some revealing side lights on the life of the India traders. Of particular interest is the statement that even inexperienced travellers to India or Aden could make profits of 100 and even 150 per cent in one year. Normally, and for reasons easily to be understood, the merchants are extremely reticent with regard to their profits, even while making depositions in court with regard to them, Cf. No. 82, l. 11; No. 162, l. 11.

to p. 2

e  
 The Cairine merchants used to send to their partners or correspondents in Aden lists of prices current in Egypt so that these would know what was most profitable to buy. It is interesting that A. Z. had dispatched various such notes from Cairo during one year, Cf. li. 12-14. No. 85 is such an information sent by A. Z. to Halfon.

Notes:

1 with the lower stroke prolonged and ending in a flourish is an abbreviation for  $\dot{\text{v}}\Delta$  In (your name, O merciful),

Cf. Nos. 137-139

2-7 It is remarkable that even between partners such polite and elaborate language was used. Possibly the sender did so, because in the letter itself, he had to say some unpleasant things. Cf., however, the preamble to No. 85, which is almost identical with ours.

9 aḥkau (4th form, colloquial.) The pronunciation is indicated by the second Alef. For ḥaraj, setting out (from India or Aden in order to travel home to Egypt) see Index.

13 Maḥrūz: See the Introduction to this letter.

15 Abu Naṣr b. Abraham (see also l. 47) was a merchant from al-Mahdiyya in Tunis. Two letters of his sent to Halfon from ~~that town~~ <sup>Alexandria</sup> in May / June 1140<sup>n</sup> in 1142 respectively have been preserved, see Nos. 120 and 121. From our letter it appears clearly that he was in 1134 a novice in the Indian trade. Whether Abu Zikrī recommended

him as a personal acquaintance or whether this belonged to the duties of a representative of the merchants cannot be made out.

18 *itfaddal* - for *tafaddal* is common in modern Arabic speech.

20 tālīt sana - third year; colloquial.

21 kān ḥarajt - for class. kunta, see Vol I "Arabic use of Verb"

#### Margin

6 Makārim b. as-Salamī - The name M. was very common, see the Index.

The family name is derived from the town Salamīya or Salamiya in Northern Syria, the famous center of Isma<sup>o</sup>īlī propaganda.

7 Musallam - the Arabic equivalent of the Hebrew name Meshullam.

13-15 Your brother---your other brother - The brother of Halfon at that time was Eli Nēzēr ha-maskīlīm, a prominent dignitary of the Cairine Jewish Academy, see No. 86.

15 Your other brother - Abū <sup>o</sup>Alī Ezechiel, a business man, see Nos. 125-127a.

20 Abu l-Waḥs Sabā<sup>o</sup> : a close acquaintance of (or perhaps member) of Halfon's family, Cf. No. 86, margin, l. 27.

#### Top

1-4 Maḍmūn: Although the name was (and still is) common among the Jews of Yemen, the combination of the three names Maḍmūn (Ḥ. Yēfēt),



Joseph (b. Abraham) and Halaf ( b. Isaac) establishes the identity of the persons meant without doubt. They were the three most prominent merchants of Aden at that time, whose names occur in our papers again and again.

- 12 Our lord: The <sup>G</sup>ḥaon Maḡliḥ, the spiritual head of the Jews of Egypt and the adjacent countries, cf. No. 82, 1.26.