

~~From Spain to Tunisia~~
Letter of J. Traber No. 75

22. A Journey from Palermo to Messina

(1154)

ENA 151 (2557)

The letter was sent from Messina,¹ the well-known seaport in northeastern Sicily, to Mazara, a town in southwestern Sicily, which served as the terminus of the traffic between Tunisia and the island. It was written by Perahya Yijū, a nephew of a great India trader, who had come back to Cairo from the East, after an absence of many years, with great riches, accompanied by his only daughter, whom he planned to marry to the writer of our letter. In response to his uncle's invitation, Perahya left Mazara for Egypt, turning first north to Palermo, the capital or, as it was called in Arabic, "The City" (al-Madīna), and from there he embarked on the second lap of his itinerary: the journey described in this letter.

With a craving for adventure - attested in the Geniza for other young men also - Perahya's younger brother Moses insisted on accompanying him to the foreign country. After some mishaps - Moses was caught by pirates - the two finally arrived and were later followed by the rest of the family. Many letters concerning this family have been preserved in the Geniza, which is to be explained by the fact that the youngest brother, referred to in this letter, became a judge of the rabbinical court in Old Cairo, a position also attained by Perahya at the end of his life.

The writing is effaced in several places, but can mostly be restored by reasonable surmise.

A. From Palermo to Messina

This is to inform you - may God...(keep) you - that we arrived in Messina in safety and good health - for which we must thank God, and not ascribe it to our own merit or good deeds - after we had passed eight days on our journey. For a rainstorm kept us back in Baqtas (Patti).² We paid the Christian skipper of the boat a fare of two ruba^eis³ less one quarter and stipulated that he should let us disembark at the lighthouse near Messina - the town is, indeed, visible from it.

We embarked on Friday night, in the company of a Jew, a Kohen, from Salerno, and were at sea until...day, when we arrived at Baqtas (Patti). There, however, a rainstorm befell us, and we stayed until Friday. We boarded the boat again in the morning and arrived at a place called Mīlās (Milazzo).⁴ There, the above mentioned Jew, along with Isaac, the son-in-law of Giovanna's son, disembarked and continued their travel by land. The Christian skipper told us that we would not reach the lighthouse - the place where we had agreed that he would let us off - before Sabbath⁵ and added that we could disembark there whenever we arrived, but that he could not take a shortcut. As I was afraid of desecrating the Sabbath, and of other things (as well), I took another boat for two-thirds of a ruba^ei, and we arrived

in Messina on Saturday.

B. About the Proposed Journey to Egypt

On the following Sunday, I inquired about my uncle Mevassēr and found him there. He did not fall short (of his family duties), and we stayed with him. Then, I inquired about Ben Siṭlūn and Ben Barūkh⁶ and found them. Ben Siṭlūn said: "I shall take care of your fare, and you will go up (i.e. to Egypt) with me, if God wills." Then, I consulted my uncle and Ben Siṭlū(n) about Moses' travel, and they said: "There is nothing to be gained by it. He had better go back to his father." But he insisted on setting out with me, so that he ^would not come back empty-handed. Thus I am uncertain with regard to him, and I have not received a letter from you giving instructions, or about your well-being, as might be expected. Now, please do not neglect to send a detailed letter with information about your well-being and that of my mother and my brother, and do not worry about us, for we are well.

C. Report About Messina

Ben Siṭlūn let me copy the commentary on ^cĒrūvīn by Rabbēnū Nissim for him,⁷ and most of the people in the town have asked me to serve as a schoolmaster in his house, for the town lacks everything. Were not the town unfit for you to live in (, you could find a good job here). However, the town is mediocre; one cannot live here. (...Here, it requires an) effort to study and to pray.

Since we arrived, there has been no public prayer in the afternoon and the evening, while the morning prayer is said before dawn; at daybreak, they are already through with it. If we lived here..., we would miss the prayer; and it is impossible to walk in the streets here because of the (dir)t.⁸

D. Conclusion

After dealing with some sundry items, the writer asks his parents not to worry too much about their absent sons and, in particular, not to fast too much for them - it was customary to fast as a means of enhancing the efficacy of prayer for relatives on travel. He then reiterates a medical prescription for his mother, which he had previously sent from Palermo, and concludes with a series of greetings, which shows that the community in Mazara must have included quite a number of scholars.

(Address:)

To our dear Father - may God keep him, with His never ceasing watch - Joseph, the teacher, b. Perahya Yijū - God is his protector!

From his sons Perahya and Moses, who are longing for him.

May salvation be near!

Notes

¹Spelled here, as in other Geniza papers, msyny, which indicates that the name was pronounced Messīnī or Messēnī by

the writer.

²A town and a gulf of the same name on the northern shore of Sicily.

³A quarter of a gold dinar, the standard coin of Sicily at that time.

⁴A town on the eastern end of the gulf of Patti, the ancient Mylae.

⁵The Sabbath begins on Friday evening with nightfall.

⁶Business friends of his uncle, the India trader. The usual spelling of the first name was *Ṣiṭrūn* (citron), a family name still common among so-called Sefaradi or Spanish Jews.

⁷The frequently quoted book of the great Tunisian Jewish scholar is lost, except for three pages found in the Geniza, which are indeed in the handwriting of our Perahya! Obviously, they were his first attempt before he made the copy mentioned here and he carried them with him to Egypt. Ms. ENA 2936, edited by B. M. Lewi, Jacob Freimann Jubilee Volume (Berlin, 1937), pp. 72-80.

⁸Both Muslim and Jewish writers used to decry the low standard of their coreligionists in Sicily in Norman times. Mazara, the town to which this letter was directed, was of a different type, owing to its close connections with Tunisia (see above).