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WHAT WOULD JEWISH AND GENERAL HISTORY BENEFIT BY A SYSTEMATIC PUBLICATION OF THE DOCUMENTARY GENIZA PAPERS?

By SHELOMO DOV GOITEIN

Only a few hours ago I learned that our revered Master and Teacher, Professor Alexander Marx, passed away. Jewish custom forbids me to say words of praise about the dead, while he is lying in state, awaiting burial. However, it is impossible to speak about the Geniza documents of historical contents without making repeated reference to Alexander Marx. Thus, by its very content, this lecture is a memorial to the great scholar, whose sudden death has afflicted us so deeply.

Solomon Schechter contemplated the publication of a *Corpus* of all Geniza fragments which would form "the greatest Historical Work on Jewish Lore published in the Century. It should be divided into periods, and each period subdivided into schools, e. g. the Babylonian, Egyptian etc."¹ The present paper is concerned with a far less ambitious undertaking: the preparation of a *Corpus* of the documentary Geniza, which is written mostly, although by no means exclusively, in the Arabic language.

This also is far from being a new project. As long as 35 years ago, Alexander Marx, while addressing the American Jewish Historical Society on the "Aims and Tasks of Jewish Historiography" said: "It is much to be regretted that no one has seriously thought of undertaking a comprehensive publication of the letters and documents found in the Geniza which would again bring together these *disjecta membra*, which, after having rested in the dust for so many centuries, are now dispersed through so many libraries and can only be made to yield their rich information in

¹ Norman Bentwich, *Solomon Schechter, a Biography*, Jewish Publication Society of America, 1948, p. 162.

full, when they are again placed together in systematic order. Even though many of them are incomplete and full of puzzles, since we find allusions frequently to facts entirely unknown to us, a complete *Corpus* of these texts will immensely increase our knowledge of conditions during the period of transition, when the center of Judaism gradually shifted from East to West. We will then perhaps be granted a deeper insight into the private life of the people, for which we formerly had no sources whatever, than we possess now even for periods opened up more fully by historical research.”²

So far, this idea of a *Corpus* of the documentary Geniza has not yet been realized. However, our knowledge of Jewish history has been immensely enriched by the publication, partly systematic and partly occasional, of Geniza documents, and Marx himself has given a survey of these finds in his lecture about “The importance of the Geniza for Jewish History,” which he read at a symposium held in December 1946 in commemoration of Dr. Schechter’s setting out for his epoch making journey to Egypt exactly fifty years earlier.³ Two men in particular won fame by their extensive publication and discussion of Geniza documents, Jacob Mann and Simha Assaf. Mann⁴ was mainly concerned with the chronological sequence of events, with the historical frame. He really laid the groundwork for a completely new structure of the history of Oriental Jewry during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Assaf⁵ was mainly interested in social and cultural history and his relevant books add up to a charming Oriental counterpart of I. Abrahams’ *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages*.

² *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, No. 26, 1918, pp. 21/2.

³ *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research*, vol. 16, 1946/7, 183–204.

⁴ A bibliography of Jacob Mann’s writings was published by Raphael Mahler in *YWO-Bletter*.

⁵ A bibliography of Simha Assaf’s publications, by Yitshaq Repha’el, appeared in the Assaf Jubilee volume *Sefer Asaf*, Mosad ha-Rav Kook, Jerusalem, 1953, pp. 12–32. The bibliography is continued to 1952, inclusive, a year before Assaf’s death.

There is another very important difference between the two. Mann published in the main *Hebrew* documents. As a matter of fact, in his fundamental first book *The Jews in Egypt and Palestine under the Fatimid Caliphs*, 1920/2, with the exception of two or three small Arabic pieces, all the hundreds of documents printed there are in Hebrew. Most significantly, his later major book, the *Texts and Studies in Jewish History and Literature*, vol. I, 1931, although containing an overwhelming majority of Hebrew material, already gives 15 — and if we include also the inventories of books, which are in Arabic — about 20 Arabic texts, some of considerable length. Assaf, who appeared far later on the stage of Geniza studies, had to rely, for historical documents, largely, if not mainly, on Arabic texts. Through a fortunate coincidence, he had Dr. D. H. Baneth at his side in Jerusalem, an Arabic scholar of nineteenth century erudition and meticulousness, who either himself transcribed and translated the texts and accompanied them with a philological commentary, or revised those translated by others; sometimes Assaf also gave him material for publication on his own, such as the documents about life in the Egyptian Communities, published in the *Alexander Marx Jubilee Volume*, Hebrew Section, 1950, pp. 75–93, to which reference will be made later on. This ideal cooperation of a most prominent Judaist with a thorough going and competent Arabist makes the Arabic Geniza documents edited by Assaf the most reliable published so far. Anyone wishing to undertake the intricate philological task of properly editing an Arabic Geniza paper should study those texts first.

What is the present position of the research of the documentary Geniza? So far, the vast majority of this material has still remained unpublished. Naturally, the documents which have not yet been edited, are mostly those composed in Arabic and those which are less well legible and less easily given to interpretation. Nevertheless, intensive occupation with these texts during the last three years has convinced me that their value for both General and Jewish history is so considerable as to justify a full survey, and, to my mind, even a complete edition.

With the term “General History” I refer, in the first instance, to that great civilization, which we are accustomed to call

"Islamic" to-day, but which should be called with better right "Intermediate," as its most characteristic feature was not Islam, but the fact that it was intermediate in character between late antiquity and modern times and intermediate in space between the old civilizations of the Mediterranean, on the one hand, and India and China on the other. The Jews took their full share in the creation and development of this Intermediate civilization, and therefore it is only natural that documents telling us about their life at the same time provide information about that civilization in general.

Let me illustrate this just by one example. Of late, I have collected over 130 Geniza documents relating to the trade between the Mediterranean and India via Egypt, East Africa and South-Arabia. This commerce was the very backbone of Eastern international economics during the Middle Ages. Notwithstanding this fact, — as Professor Grohmann assured me only a few weeks ago — so far not a single Muslim Arab document referring to that trade has been found. Under these circumstances, of course, this collection from the Geniza represents a first rate source for one of the most characteristic aspects of the Intermediate civilization.⁶

However, this Intermediate civilization was most closely interconnected with Mediaeval Europe, in particular during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, precisely the time from which most of our Geniza documents hail, with the result that many of these have a significant bearing on European affairs as well. I would like to explain this by a few examples taken from the collection of the papers of our India merchants, as well as from some other documents discussed by me of late.

We call today the local representative of a state in another country consul, which is a rather strange usage, as the Roman

⁶ Cf. "From the Mediterranean to India, Documents on the Trade to India, South Arabia and East Africa from the 11th and 12th centuries," *Speculum*, Quarterly of the Mediaeval Academy of America, April, 1954. A few letters connected with the trade to India — all in all less than a dozen — have been published previously by various scholars, such as E. N. Adler, S. Assaf, D. H. Baneth, M. Braslawski, R. Gottheil (in conjunction with Worrell), E. Strauss-Ashtor, Avinoam Yellin and myself.

consuls used to be the executive chiefs of the state. The origin of this usage is to be found in the communities of Italian merchants especially those from Venice, Genoa and Pisa, which settled in Muslim and other countries and whose executive chiefs were mostly called consuls, but had largely the function of representatives of their compatriots at the courts of the Muslim rulers. One has the impression that this institution of the head of a merchant colony had its local precedence. This has now come into the full light of history owing to our Geniza documents, where we learn a lot about the *Peqīd ha-Sōḥarīm* or Trustee of the Merchants, in Arabic *Wakīl*, who represented the Jewish merchants with various authorities, sold and bought for the foreign, and partly also for the local merchants, and served also as a shipping agent, banker, and post office, and ran a storehouse, where most of the bigger business was done. There can be little doubt that non-Jewish merchants had similar heads. About a single such head, Maḍmūn ben Yefet ben Bundar of Aden, no less than thirty documents have been brought together, and about various other members of his family — one of whom received particular praise from Maimonides — over ten, and there exists a considerable amount of information about such *Peqādīm* in Cairo and other places, ranging from the very beginning of the eleventh century. I am by no means positive about the connection between the institute of the *Peqīd ha-Sōḥarīm* and the Consuls of the Italian communities, but there can be little doubt that the Mediaevalists and the historians of Economics will raise this question, when these documents appear in print, appropriately translated.

Another point, about which much information is to be gathered from the India papers of the Geniza, is the old and often discussed question, how the Western World made good its apparently unfavorable balance of gold in its trade with India. Here we learn that at certain times an enormous export of goods went on from the Mediterranean to India. We possess detailed lists of such goods e. g. for the year 1097/8, included in the records of a big lawsuit carried on in nine sessions before the Rabbinical Court of Old Cairo. One of the many items mentioned there is Russian linen, a detail worthy of attention. For

we know from literary sources of the thirteenth century that Russian linen was actually used in India, but it was regarded as so precious, that only those persons were privileged to wear it, on whom the Sultan of Delhi had bestowed it as a robe of honor. From our records we learn now by which way Russian linen came to India, and that Jewish merchants handled it 150 years prior to its occurrence in literary sources.

Finally, I would like to draw attention to a legal institution of mediaeval Europe, for the history of which our India papers may be not without significance. Much of the mediaeval oversea trade was carried on on the basis of the *commenda*, a partnership, in which persons shared, some of whom provided the money and others did the business. Of the profit accrued, the former usually got three quarters and the latter one quarter. It has long been assumed that the *commenda* goes back to a similar Oriental contract, the Muslim *Mudāraba* or *Muqārada*, which is known in Jewish law by the name 'isqa or 'eseq. Whatever the merit of this assumption, our Geniza can provide material for its elucidation, for it has actually preserved a considerable number of such contracts. In these, the capitalists invariably get two thirds of the profit and the merchants one third, which is more or less in conformity with contemporary European and Muslim usage, while Maimonides in his Code ("Partnership", ch. 6, para. 3) provides for the opposite, one third for the financier and two thirds for the agent. This apparent puzzle finds its solution in the fact that in the Geniza contracts — as in the *commenda* — the agent is not responsible for losses by acts of God and consequently gets less of the proceeds than provided by Maimonides who assumes that the latter takes upon himself part of the risk. Still, for the history of Halakha this difference is not without interest.

The India papers constitute only a small fraction of the Geniza treasures. In order to show the richness and variety of information to be gathered from a new scrutiny of the Arabic Geniza documents and its use for both general and Jewish history, I should like to discuss a few points raised through the publication of new Geniza material during the last two years.

In a review of S. Runciman's new *History of the Crusades*,

the reviewer heavily censures the author for emphasizing the nationality of the various peoples which took part in the first Crusade; according to him, all of them were essentially Frankish, of French civilization. However, in a detailed document on the fate of the Jewish community during the conquest of Jerusalem by the Crusaders, we read that "the cursed ones who are called Ashkenazim", i. e. Germans, did not violate women, in contrast to others who did. This shows that from the very outset the local population discerned among the Crusaders nationalities other than the French. That document and a second one on the same event⁷ put into relief another often discussed problem: the unheard of massacre inflicted by the Crusaders on the inhabitants of the Holy City. According to R. Grousset in his *Histoire des Croisades*, this was not an outburst of cruelty, but an act of deliberate military tactics, aimed to dispose of a population which could be dangerous in the case of a counter-attack. Indeed the two Geniza documents regard the massacre as caused by savage bestiality, but show on the other hand that the conquerers acted quite circumspectly, taking prisoners in order to make money from their ransom or to use them otherwise.

Many interesting sidelights fall on Crusaders' policy from eleven documents in the course of publication⁸ dealing with Palestine in Crusaders' times, from which it may be learned e. g. that King Baldwin's policy of pacification began at a very early period; that the Crusaders' attack on Beirut in February 1110 was a surprise attack; or that the Jews were driven out from Jerusalem during the second Christian occupation under Frederic of Hohenstaufen, after they had returned there with enthusiasm after Saladin's conquest; then by the way there was found in Jerusalem even a "kanīs Ibn al-Yemenī", a synagogue

⁷ Cf. "Contemporary letters on the Conquest of Jerusalem by the Crusaders", *The Journal of Jewish Studies*, vol. 3, 162-177. The Arabic originals of these letters in *Zion Quarterly*, vol. 17, 129-147.

⁸ Cf. "Letters from Palestine in Crusaders Times", *Yerushalayim Quarterly*, vol. 5, 1954, and "New Information about Palestine in Crusaders Times." *Cassuto Memorial Volume*, 1954, Jerusalem.

of a Yemenite, no doubt identical with "Sa'adya ish Yemīnī", whom the poet al-Ḥarizi met there, according to his *Tahkemoni*. The discovery of four additional pages — unfortunately in a very bad state of preservation — of the Megilla of 'Obadya ha-Ger, of the Norman nobleman who adopted Judaism in 1102, led to a complete reevaluation of the proselyte's career. He was not a Crusader, but a learned man, who was converted through his own preoccupation with religious studies and was saved from persecution through the efforts of Jewish compatriots who brought him to Muslim Aleppo.⁹

Even purely military events get most welcome elucidation by the Arabic Geniza. During the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the sea route to India was under the sway of the rulers of the island of Kish, a sort of Malta of the Persian Gulf. In 1135 — the correct date too is to be learned from the Geniza documents — these rulers of Kish tried to complete their hold over the way to India by the conquest of Aden. The event is described in great detail in a Muslim Arabic source, but, as often, with more phantasy than correctness, the historian using the literary schemes of desert warfare, ill-fitted for the description of a naval attack. Two Geniza letters, one sent from Aden to Egypt and the other from the same town to India, give an exact picture of the whole war with details about the types of ships used, the numbers of soldiers involved, the tactics adopted, etc. It is easy to understand why these Jewish merchants were so exact; their addressees travelled on the sea route to India and were vitally interested in these military news items from Aden.¹⁰ I should like to remark in passing that the Geniza contains quite a number of references to naval warfare in the Mediterranean; these papers, however, are still under study.

Under these circumstances it is not surprising that many aspects of Jewish history as well get new light through the study of the Arabic Geniza. To come back to some of the publications

⁹ Cf. "Obadya, a Norman Proselyte," *Journal of Jewish Studies*, vol. 4, 74–84.

¹⁰ "Two Eyewitness Reports on an Expedition of the King of Kish (Qais) against Aden," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, London, July 1954.

alluded to above, until recently we possessed no Jewish source whatsoever for so momentous an event as the conquest of Jerusalem by the Crusaders; now we possess two, and they show us, that the Jewish population was not completely destroyed — as was believed before — and that the Jewish people, as often, defeated disaster through philanthropy and reliefwork. The new Obadya material and other finds have brought with them a complete rearrangement of our knowledge about Messianic movements in Mesopotamia during the twelfth century. The identification of David Alroy with Ibn Dugi mentioned by Obadya is faulty and the connection of both with the Khazars — a surmise which induced some historians to far-reaching conclusions — has no foundation whatsoever, the correct reading in the Megilla being not Kazaria, but Hakkeria, a district near Mossul. Thus we have four Messianic movements in Mesopotamia during the twelfth century, that stirred by a woman the daughter of Joseph, the son of the physician, described in a circular letter of the Baghdad community,¹¹ that of Ibn Dugi, when the Jews of Baghdad expected to be flown miraculously to Palestine — they were obviously mistaken by about 800 years, — that of Ibn Shaddad, also mentioned by Obadya, and finally that of David Alroy. To the history of the Jews of Yemen a complete new chapter has been added. We have already alluded to Madmūn, the *Peqīd ha-Sōharīm* of Aden and his house. He bore also the title “Negid Erets Teman” and many other honorific epithets showered on him by the Exilarchs of Baghdad on the one hand and the Geonim of Egypt on the other. We learn much about the rivalry between these two Jewish ecumenical authorities for Yemen,¹² a rivalry connected

¹¹ Cf. “A Report on Messianic Troubles in Baghdad in 1120/1”, *Jewish Quarterly Review*, 1952, 57–76.

¹² Cf. “The Jewry of Yemen between the Gaonate of Egypt and the Exilarchs of Bagdad,” *Sinai Monthly*, 1953, 125–137. A particularly interesting letter from Aden, dated July 9, 1202, was published by D. H. Baneth in the *J. N. Epstein Jubilee Volume*, Jerusalem 1950, 205–214. The letter shows that at that time — about 25 years after the events which induced Maimonides to write his famous epistle to the Jews of Yemen — the latter had again passed through a period of great danger. This, in its turn,

with communal strife in Egypt itself and with the age long dissension about the "Reshūt," the official prayer for the head of the Jewish community to be spoken both in Synagogue and before grace. The often quoted fact that the Yemenites mentioned Maimonides in the Kaddish prayer is nothing exceptional; this was the normal procedure and shows only that at Maimonides' time, owing to his personal prestige, Egypt held the upper hand. When, shortly after Maimonides' death, in Egypt itself the old Herem against the saying of the Reshūt was renewed, this was a sign that his son Abraham, who was then still very young, naturally had not yet attained the same authority as his father.¹³ In addition, we possess very interesting documents showing the opposition to Abraham Maimuni's pietist reforms of the synagogue service working against him at the Sultan's court.¹⁴ On the other hand, we learn from a document from the time of Abraham's great-grandson, that pietism or mysticism in its Muslim form had considerable attraction for the Jewish rank and file.¹⁵

This brings us to our last point. As Alexander Marx has emphasized in his above-mentioned address 35 years ago, the main importance of the Geniza for Jewish historiography is the enormous amount of information to be gained from it for the private life or to put it more exactly: for the daily life, both private and communal, of the Jews around the Mediterranean. These Jews were an integral and most characteristic section of the Intermediate civilization. Therefore their documents are a true mirror of the life and the spirit of that civilization in general.

Let me illustrate this by a single example. The first of the documents, published by Dr. Baneth in the *Alexander Marx Jubilee volume* (cf. above p. 31) is a marriage permit issued by

was caused by one of the many political upheavals in that country, which is described in detail in the letter.

¹³ Cf. "The Dispute over the Prayer for the Head of the Community," *I. Goldziher Memorial Volume*, vol. 2, Jerusalem, 1954.

¹⁴ "New Documents from the Cairo Geniza," *José Millas Villacrosa Jubilee Volume*, Barcelona, 1954.

¹⁵ "A Jewish Addict to Sufism," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, 1953, 37-49.

the Nagid, the Head of the Jewish community in Egypt. That rather strange document is to be understood in the light of other documents from the Geniza, in which the family and social status of the prospective spouses is testified by witnesses. These, in their turn, are paralleled by similar certificates, found in Arabic papyri with regard to Muslim couples, cf. Adolf Grohmann, *Arabic Papyri in the Egyptian Library*, vol. 2, pp. 139–141. The question, whether the two partners of a marriage are equal in birth and rank (“hōgēn” in Hebrew) looms very large in the history of Jewish marriage and of human marriage in general. The Geniza provides us with concrete details which illustrate this problem.

In conclusion, I would like to warn against the belief that the Geniza has been exhausted, as far as more essential finds are concerned. When I submitted to an internationally recognized authority on Mediaeval economics a report on the India papers of the Geniza, he sent it on for publication with the remark: “This is the greatest documentary discovery in mediaeval trade history that has been made in my opinion since Nicole found and published the book of the Prefect in 1893.” And I have already said, that the India papers constitute only a very small part of the Arabic Geniza. On the purely Jewish side, I would like to mention that, of late, no less than ten letters have been found in which there are direct references to Yehuda Hallevi, which give us quite a new picture of the last phase of the poets life.¹⁶ It is my considered opinion that only after the whole documentary Geniza is — not published, this constitutes a separate problem — but transcribed, translated and properly commented on, shall we know what it contains and shall we have fulfilled our duty to Jewish and general historiography. How such an undertaking should be planned and executed — this would form the subject of another lecture.

¹⁶ “The Last Phase of Yehuda Hallevi’s Life in the light of the Geniza papers,” *Tarbiz*, 1954.