

A PIETIST LETTER FROM THE GENIZAH

by

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The eminent scholar to whom the present volume is dedicated was not only the undisputed master in the field of Genizah research but also one of the pioneers in the study of the Jewish pietist movement which flourished in Medieval Egypt. Indeed, Professor Goitein published a number of documents which shed light on the personalities involved in the movement and some of the difficulties they encountered (see references below). We ourselves have of late been concerned with elucidating further personalities and with the editing of Jewish Sufi texts of a doctrinal nature (see references below). Other writings of relevance which have come to light in the Genizah include theological texts, commentaries, mystical manuals and tracts. Private letters between pietists are much rarer and therefore of particular interest.

The following document emanating from the Genizah is just one such letter from a pietist mentor to his disciple and is, therefore, a fitting tribute to the memory of a revered master. The sender is concerned with the addressee's spiritual welfare, having heard that he has at last obtained material tranquility, and recommends a mini-program of ethics and contemplation to him. He warns the disciple against stray thoughts (*ghafila*) at the time of meditation. If his reflection be pure then the thoughts which occur will be those sought after, unless they be awesome and frightening, in which case the disciple is advised to abandon his meditation and return to the oral repetition of Divine Names (*dhikr*). The master is obviously alluding to the practice of *khalwa*, and we have here an additional indication that this spiritual exercise of Sufi origin was practiced amongst Jews.¹ Moreover, the text is replete with Sufi technical terms. An exegetical remark on Ps 30 provides a glimpse into the allegorical method of the pietists. The master is delighted that his disciple is

1. On the practice of *khalwa* see Fenton (1981a, pp. 15–16), where a similar warning is given against “foreign thoughts”. See also Fenton (1986).

studying the tractate ²*ʿAbôt* and requests him to occupy himself with the *Treatise on Prayer* which he wrote for him. In the latter part of the letter, the addressee is requested to send the master's greetings to a number of personalities, including Rabbi Peraḥya, and his sons Samuel and Moses. The former may possibly be identical with the Peraḥya b. Nissim, judge of Bilbays. Since he was both a correspondent of Abraham Maimonides (1186–1237) and a pupil of Ḥānan³ b. Šemū³ʿel, he may have been a pietist. Alternatively, Moses b. Peraḥya may be the judge of Minyat Zifta, who was also a correspondent of Abraham Maimonides.³

The letter, which is written in a neat, experienced hand, ends with the greeting "Peace", but a tear in the lower left corner has unfortunately deprived us of the sender's name. However, a certain number of internal details nevertheless provide an indication of his identity. The writer, who was obviously a prominent member of the Jewish Sufi circle, refers to his *maqālat aṣ-ṣalāt*, *Treatise on Prayer* (1b line 11), which he had apparently entrusted to his disciple to make a clean copy, since the author himself had not had the opportunity to do so. Now it is known that Abraham Maimonides wrote such a treatise, entitled *al-maqālat aṣ-ṣalawīya*, which it seems was in fact an extract from the second section of the second part of his monumental *kifāyat al-ʿābidīn*.⁴ However, not only is the latter's title somewhat different, but also its contents are purely halakhic, whereas the treatise referred to here obviously appears to be of a mystical nature. Moreover, the present letter, which in view of the insertions recorded in the margins recto and verso, appears to be an autograph and not the work of a copyist, is not in the handwriting of Abraham Maimonides. Such a content does, however, fit two remnants of a mystical treatise on prayer contained in Cambridge University Library, T-S Arabic 44.3 and 47.58. The text, which is partly identical in both fragments, contains numerous corrections and additions and is evidently a draft copy. Moreover, both texts are written in a hand practically identical with that of our letter; both writers indicate the *šadda* and diacritical points over the *ḏād*, *jīm* and the *lām*⁵ (exceptionally:

2. In keeping with the Rabbinic adage, "Whosoever would become a *ḥasid* (i.e., a Jewish Sufi), let him fulfill the dicta of (the tractate) ²*ʿAbôt*" (TB *Baba Qamma* 30a). The pietists considered this tractate the epitome of their ideals.

3. On R. Peraḥya b. Nissim, see Goitein, (1980–1981, p. 393–94). On Moses b. Peraḥya, active in 1226, see Goitein (1967–1983, II, p. 49 and p. 533, n. 54).

4. The treatise is referred to with this title in his *Responsa*, ed. Freimann and Goitein (1937, pp. 124, 126, 133). A fragment of this part of the *Kifāya* is to be found in T-S Arabic 46.321. Extracts from the Oxford manuscript (Bodl. 1274) have been published by Eppenstein (1911, pp. 33–59); Wieder (1947, pp. 83–93) and Blau (1980, pp. 229–241); see also Wieder (1947, p. 54, n. 231).

three points). Of this extremely interesting treatise we have located three further neat copies, in T-S AS 165.135 (= Arabic 47.58 1a line 9ff.) ENA 2751.15 and II Firkovič Heb-Arab. I.1040 (11 folios), which testify to its having enjoyed some popularity.⁵ Moreover, one of the phrases which the writer uses in his letter is to be found in a page from a mystical treatise in a Genizah fragment preserved in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Strasbourg 4110.61b-62a.⁶ We have suggested elsewhere⁷ that this text, because of its similarity in style, was possibly written by Abraham he-Ḥasid. Furthermore, it is not unreasonable to conjecture that he was also the writer of the present letter. To be sure, Abraham Maimonides himself testifies to Abraham he-Ḥasid's interest in prayer, to which he introduced a number of Sufi practices (see Eppenstein, 1911, p. 53; Wieder, 1947, p. 37). R. Abraham was known to have passed away in 1223, which, if our identification is correct, tallies with the dates of Moses b. Perahyah the judge.

JUDEO-ARABIC TEXT

Jewish Theological Seminary, ENA NSI 10 (Laminated 46)

1a וצלת משׁפּה מולאנא עין אלאעיאן ורוח אל () אין
 אלמולי אלאגל אלשיך אלחכים אלברהאן געלה אללה
 ברהאן לנפסה ברחמתה ומנתה וינחלה חכמה
 אלדניא ואלאכרה חכמה אלדניא מא הו פיה וחכמה
 5 אלאכרה מא קד תוגה אליה פאלמסול מן פצלה תע
 אן ירקיה מן אלחציץ אלדני אלי אלאוג אלאעלא
 ויגעלה ממן קד אסתאנס פי (בית) קדסה ען אלולוג
 פי בית דמסה ויכון ממן רפצו צ . . . מ . ק
 בעלה אלעלל בחית ישאהד פי כל מצנוע צאנעה

5. The parts preserved include chapters dealing with preparation for prayer, its seven purposes and times of prayer, the whole being completely infused with Sufi vocabulary and concepts.

6. Here is the wording in the Strasbourg ms, which is to be compared with our manuscript fol. 1a lines 9–11:

והדה מקאמאת אלקום אעני מבקשי יי וועאלאהא
 מקאם אלפנא . . . פהם ישאהדון פי כל מצנוע צאנעה
 יתברך שמו ופי כל מוגוד מוגדה ומקומה ומקימה
 ומחורכה ויתצלוא אליה בה ובה לכל מן הו (א62)
 קאים בה

7. Fenton (1981b, p. 60, n. 43). Is this the work *Tāj al-ʿārīfīn*? See *loc.cit.* note 27.

ר' משה ור' שמואל וצהרהם אלשיך אלגל צדקה ואלשיך
 אלרייס אבו אלכיר אבן אלימני ותתשכר מן אחסאנה עליי
 20 ותסלם עלי אלשיך צדקה אלכהן אלכיאט ועלי אלשיך (. . .)
 אלדי יעאני ב(יע.) ועלי אלכהנים אלשיך מכאום
 ואכותה ותסלם עלי ר' אלעזר (. . .) אדי אלי(עזר) ועלי
 כל מן תערף אנה מן אצחאב(נא)
 [ואלמסול מן אחסאנך איצא תסלים אל(. . .) לר א(ליעזר) אלמדכור]
 מולאנא ואלשיך אלג(ליל)
 25 ושלום בכט

JUDEO-ARABIC TEXT

Translation

1. The noble letter of our master, essence of the nobles and spirit of the (. . .)
2. the excellent master, wise and celebrated sage, may God
3. in His mercy and munificence make him a proof unto himself and shower him with the wisdom
4. of this world and the next; the wisdom of this world which he already possesseth and the wisdom
5. of the hereafter unto which he has turned his countenance. We beseech the grace of God
6. that He elevate him from the lowest depths to the highest peak
7. and that He count him amongst those that delight in the intimacy of His sanctuary having avoided being submerged
8. in the abode of His obscurity. He shall be amongst those that have spurned (.)
9. the Cause of Causes.⁸ So much so that in each creature he shall behold the Creator
10. and in each moving thing, its Mover, Supporter and Sustainer.

8. This superlative expression, as well as that of "Truth of Truths" (1b line 2), are typical of the mystical Neoplatonic vocabulary whose ultimate source was the Theology of Aristotle.

11. He shall attain to Him through Him and through Him to all that exists through God.

12. On account of this revelation, (spiritual) intuitions⁹ and unravellings shall be vouchsafed unto him

13. even as the visions of the gnostics. Then he shall drink plentifully from the source

14. of life and thereafter his thirst shall be quenched for evermore.

15. May the supplication of the prophet be realized in him “to the end that my glory may sing praise unto Thee,

16. and not be silent” (Ps 30:13). “glory” here signifies “intellect”,¹⁰ which Thou hast (bestowed)

17. upon me and honoured me with its infusion within me [*margin*: for on its account we pray and commune with Thee, and through it we behold what is visible of Thy brilliant light, as David, peace be upon him, hath said, “in Thy light shall we see light (Ps 36:10)"]. My purpose, design

18. prayer, request and petition are that (my intellect may delight in Thy remembrance?)

19. and turn unto thee and delight in Thy praise, extolling

20. and glorifying for ever and ever as long as I exist,

21. (as it is written) “and not remain silent.” As for now, I was pleased and joyful on account of

22. the peace of heart and ease of circumstance which thou hast attained.

1b

1. What can be the purpose of the tranquility of the heart in respect of worldly toil and the endurance of

2. adversity if not to (be able to) turn unto the Truth of Truths, (may He be extolled).

3. as David, peace upon him, hath said, “I have placed the Lord continually before me (Ps 16:8)”.¹¹ Beware that

9. On this term see Fenton (1981b., p. 64, n. 47).

10. On *kābōd* as ‘intellect’ see Goldziher (1907, p. 29, 11. 2–11).

11. Classical *locus probans* for solitary meditation, which percolated through pietistic writings into Qabbalah and thence into Hasidism. See Fenton (1986c).

4. inadvertence take not hold of thee and obstruct thee from (His) remembrance
5. as well as the contemplation of His creatures at times of respite from travail
6. that thou hast. . . .
7. in thy soul. Thou wilt employ (have recourse to), in this respect, the state of "presence",¹² and if a thought then take hold of
8. you, it will be the desired goal, insofar as it is through a sound reflection.
9. But if during this recourse (?) a dreadful and difficult vision occurs, then resume
10. thine exercise of remembrance of God, His glorification and Majesty and the perfection of His wisdom.
11. I was pleased that thou art studying the *Tractate of the Fathers*. I recommend to thee the study of the *Treatise on Prayer*,
12. for thou knowest that I did not make a clean copy of it, and were one of its chapters to be lost
13. I would be unable to replace it for numerous reasons. Consequently
14. if thou findest the time, please occupy thyself therein with it, for it contains precious notions
15. of noble elevation. Perchance . . . unto me to study with thee,
16. God willing. I beseech of thy virtuous nature, o sir,
17. to kindly convey my greetings to our master Rabbi Peraḥya, may he be remembered for good, and his children
18. Rabbi Mošeh and Rabbi Šēmū³ēl and their brother-in-law the noble elder Šadaqa, as well as the elder,
19. the chief Abū l-Khayr Ibn al-Yamanī,¹³ and thank him for his kindness towards me.
20. Likewise give my regards to the elder Šadaqa Hakkohen the tailor and so too the elder . . .
21. who is suffering from (. . .), and to the *kōhanîm* the elder Makārim

12. Sufi technical term; cf. al-Sarraj, *Kitāb al-Luma^c fī t-tašawwuf* ed. R. A. Nicholson, London, 1914 pp. 340, 344.

13. On an Ibn al-Yamani, see Goitein (1962, p. 139).

22. and his brothers, as well as Rabbi ʔĒlī^cezer the . . . who, and also
 23. all those whom you know to be our friends (especially) our master,
 the noble elder . . .

and Peace, in the hand of. . .

[margin: and kindly request thee to convey my greetings to . . . the Rabbi
 ʔĒlī^cezer mentioned].

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