

GENIZAH FRAGMENTS

The Newsletter of the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit, Cambridge University Library

No. 58 October 2009

Rachel's Missing Letters?

Although the amount of Yiddish material in the Cambridge Genizah collections is very small in comparison with that written in Judaeo-Arabic, Hebrew, Arabic, Aramaic or even Ladino, the few existing fragments are rather extraordinary.

The most important literary example is the 14th-century *Dukus Horant*, a narrative poem from the Middle High German epic tradition, featuring heroes such as Kudrun, Hagen and Hilde. Significantly, this text has no German analogue and presents, therefore, an invaluable source for the study of medieval German literature.

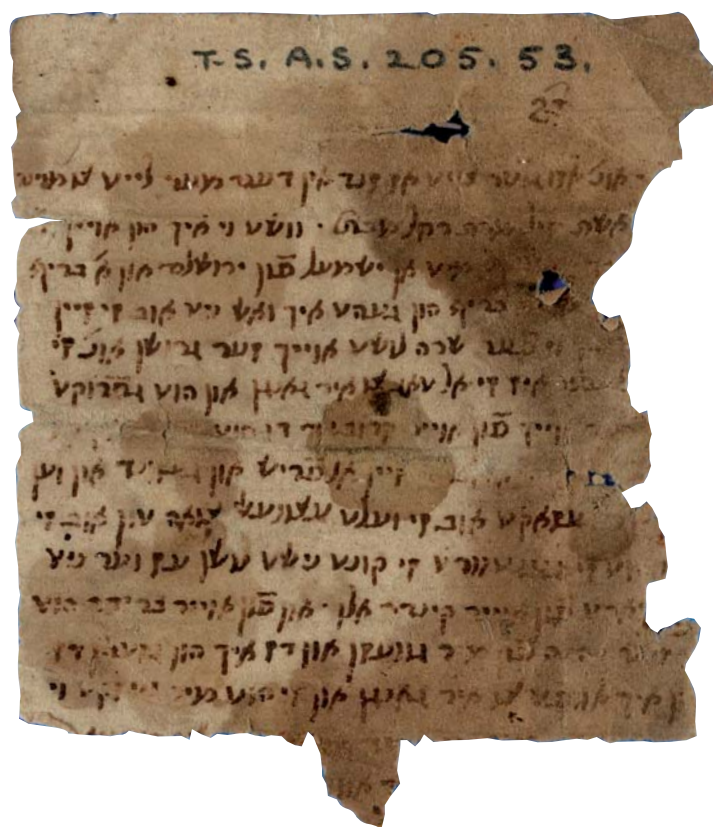
The non-literary Yiddish fragments are of comparable importance. The Taylor-Schechter Collection holds a total of five letters from the 1560s, written by a woman living in Jerusalem called Rachel Zusman. Four of the letters were sent to her son Moshe in Cairo and one was meant to be forwarded to a Rabbi Jacob Katz in Venice. They are among the earliest extant examples of Yiddish letter-writing, preceded only by two other documents: a so-called "*Kassiber*" (secret message) from 1478 preserved in an archive in Munich (incidentally, the German word "*Kassiber*" for this kind of genre is actually a loanword from the Hebrew root *ktb* in Yiddish *kessav*),

and a letter from the year 1533, written by a woman in the Balkans (two further Yiddish letters from the same collection in Vienna are now missing).

The Yiddish letters from the Genizah thus hold vital clues to the early history of the Yiddish language and are a most important source for the study of the emergence of Yiddish as it is known today.

Considering the significance of these few early examples, I was astonished and delighted when I came across four more fragments of Yiddish letters in the Additional Series, after my colleague Dotan Arad first alerted me to the existence of uncatalogued Yiddish material in the Genizah Collection. The handwriting seemed very familiar and so it was no surprise to discover that the first of these fragments is actually the missing right-hand part of a known letter.

Needless to say, a search is now ongoing for what is still missing from the left-hand side, which we will hopefully locate in the course of continued cataloguing. The other three fragments together form another letter to Rachel Zusman from an unidentified man (as evidenced by the remark "my wife sends you greetings") who calls her his "dear friend". On verso there is a short note, possibly in the hand of Rachel's



T-S AS 205.53: One of three newly discovered fragments of a letter written in an early form of Yiddish to Rachel Zusman in Jerusalem. The letter mentions sensitive health problems: *ub zi velts tsoye tun... zi hot zi geentfert zi kunt nisht esn.*

son, who apparently had been forwarding Rachel's letters on to Venice. Therefore, there is a good chance that this might be a reply from Rabbi Jacob Katz, again sent to the son Moshe, who would forward it on to his mother.

A common motif in Rachel's writing is her complaint that she receives no letters, and it is a relief to see that this might not have been always the case.

Esther-Miriam Wagner
Research Associate

Remnants of Lost Ladino Books

It is sometimes forgotten that not only were manuscripts deposited in the Cairo Genizah but also printed texts, some from the earliest days of printing. In the course of preparing a comprehensive bibliography of Ladino prints (an ongoing project for the Institute for Hebrew Bibliography founded by The Hebrew University of Jerusalem), I discovered that there were remnants of printed Ladino works within the Genizah.

In July of this year, I came to Cambridge University Library to find, inspect, and catalogue those Ladino prints, a project supported by the Genizah Research Unit and the Ben-Zvi Institute.

After inspecting 136 volumes of Genizah fragments, I was able to recover 350 remnants of Ladino books (it is believed that Ladino literature encompasses around 3,500 titles). These books were published from the beginning of the 16th century up to the late 19th century when the Genizah was discovered. They were printed in the various centres where the Sephardic Jews exiled from Spain

and their descendants settled, in cities of the Ottoman empire such as Istanbul, Salonica and Izmir, in Vienna, and in Italian cities like Venice, Livorno and Mantua.

The books cover a wide range of subjects, including Bible translation and commentary, *halakha*, *Pirke Avot*, liturgy, poetry,

drama, fiction and journalism. In addition, I was excited to discover 15 previously unknown editions in Ladino, all from the 16th century. These discoveries will add greatly to our knowledge of early Ladino printing.

Dov Cohen
Assistant Director
Ben-Zvi Institute Library

T-S Misc.32.51: **Book of Daniel, with Ladino translation (Salonica c. 1514). The earliest known Ladino biblical translation and one of the first books printed in Ladino.**



Genizah Offers Long-lasting Protection

Working in the Genizah Research Unit on a British Academy Visiting Fellowship, I examined what appeared to be three amulets written for a man named Eliyahu ben Esther. Two of these fragments are preserved in the Taylor-Schechter Collection (T-S K1.166 and T-S AS 142.256), and a third is found in the Hebrew Union College Collection in Cincinnati (HUC 1035). Written in the same hand, they appear to comprise three separate amulets; however, a close inspection of the Cambridge fragments revealed tiny punctures in their margins. Upon further investigation I saw that they were stitch

marks and that the fragments were originally sewn together. Another look at the image of the Cincinnati fragment confirmed that it bears the same stitch marks, showing that the three amulets were in fact one remarkably long amulet, ca. 135 cm long and 5.5 cm wide, containing more than 170 lines of text.

The amulet, written in a mixture of Hebrew, Aramaic and Judaeo-Arabic, begins with an appeal to God, followed by a request from the "holy letters" to protect Eliyahu the son of Esther from every disease, harm and evil eye. Eliyahu is designated by his mother's name, as is customary in magical texts. The



T-S K1.166: **One of the three pieces of a remarkably long amulet that were originally sewn together.**

angels Rahmiel and Hasdiel are asked to grant him favour and grace, and to prevent any person from speaking evil against him. The amulet also quotes several Torah verses in order to strengthen its efficacy.

The original amulet was probably rolled up and encased in a metal container. Eliyahu ben Esther would have worn it to increase his charm and preserve him from perils. It has undoubtedly served to preserve Eliyahu's name and memory, to be rediscovered now, centuries later.

Ortal-Paz Saar
Tel Aviv University

Sects and the City

Review of Marina Rustow, *Heresy and the Politics of Community: the Jews of the Fatimid Caliphate* (Cornell University Press, 2008)

Marina Rustow, an associate professor at Emory University, should be congratulated on producing a rigorous and trailblazing work of historical scholarship that is also eminently readable.

Rustow draws upon the vast resources of the Genizah to examine the community life of the Jews of Egypt and Syria under the Fatimid caliphs (969–1171). She concentrates upon the role played by the Karaites, the heretics of the title, and their interrelationship with the Rabbanites.

Conducting a cogent examination of the many letters and other primary documents preserved in the Genizah, Rustow ably

demonstrates that far from being a marginalised “sect” the Karaites were in fact at the very heart of Jewish communal affairs and a powerful body. Indeed, the word “sect” is a misnomer, since they are referred to in contemporary Rabbanite letters as a “party” (Hebrew *kat*), on a par with the Rabbanites themselves.

Through an examination of the major events to befall the Jews of the Fatimid Empire, and with a fresh look at the politics of everyday life, Rustow demonstrates the central role that the Karaites played and the considerable impact they had upon the shaping of the medieval Jewish community.

HEAD LINES

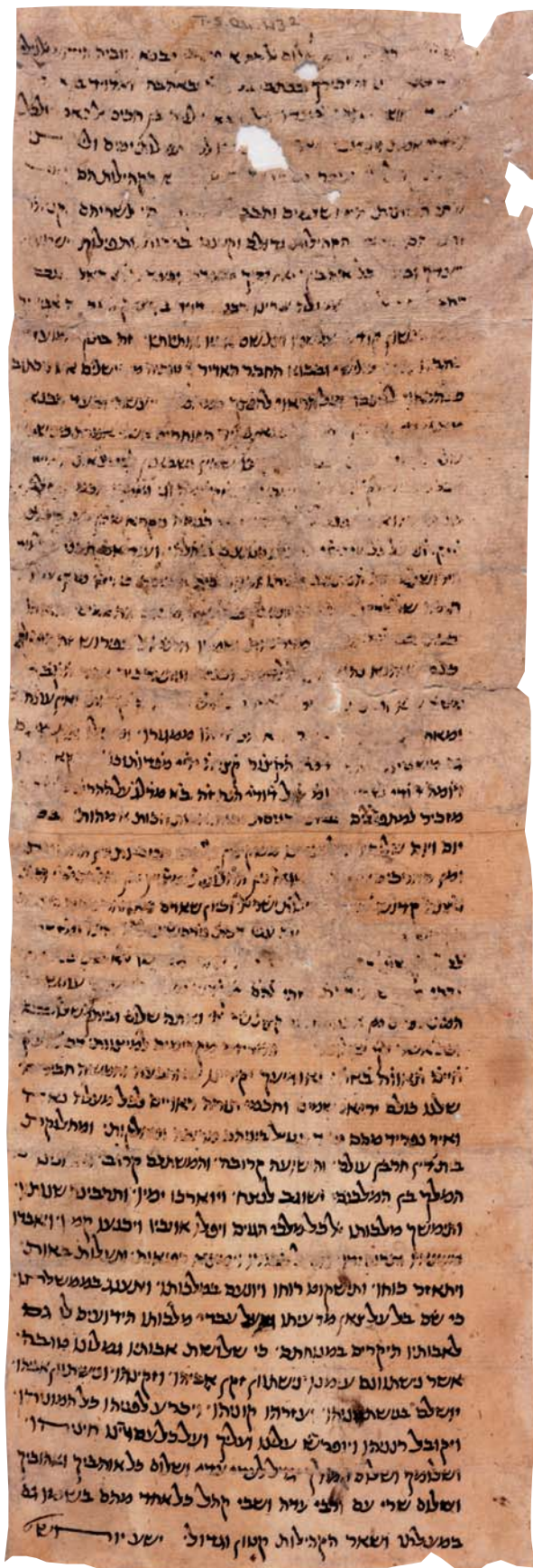
With new projects underway, we find ourselves busier than ever. So it was extremely beneficial for us to host a number of visiting scholars in the last six months. British Academy funding allowed Dr Ortal-Paz Saar to spend two months in the Unit, working on our surprising array of magical material. The generosity of our supporters also enabled us to host Dr Dov Cohen, of the Ben Zvi Institute, and Mr Dotan Arad, of the Hebrew University, with excellent results for our joint projects.

We say goodbye to Mila Ginsburskaya, a long-time volunteer and more recent employee of the Unit. Recently awarded a PhD, she is off to the University of Birmingham. So too we say goodbye to Ellis Weinberger who, for more than ten years, stoically maintained our website and image servers.

As you will have noticed, the newsletter has been re-designed. The new format is easier on the eye, presents fewer impenetrable blocks of text, and generally takes advantage of recent developments in computerised typesetting.

We are extremely grateful for the continued major funding of our work by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Friedberg Genizah Project. The Unit also greatly appreciates the help it has received from its other supporters, including Jason Kravitt (\$2500); the Cyril and Betty Stein Charitable Trust (£1000); an anonymous donor who attended the Charles Taylor seminar (£1000); Mrs V. Elenowitz (\$1000); the Charitable Trust of 1965 (£500); the Goldberg Family Charitable Trust (£500); the H. Joels Charitable Trust (£250); Prof. Sir Elihu Lauterpacht CBE QC (£250); David Sellman (£250); Daniel Schechter (\$300); Roy Hayim (£150); the F. & D. Worms Charitable Trust (£150); James R. Cook (\$250); Dr R Cantor (£100); Dr Benjamin Cohny (£100); Alan Kaye (£100); P. & H. Maurice Charitable Trust (£100); the Rofeh Trust (£100), and for the many other anonymous and smaller donations.

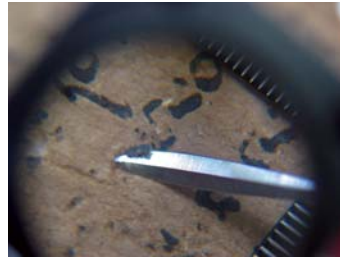
Ben Outhwaite
Head of Genizah Research Unit



T-S 24.43 recto: A letter from Shelomo ha-Kohen, short-lived Ga'on of the Jerusalem Yeshiva, to his Rabbanite and Karaité supporters in Fustat c.1025. The Ga'on signs off with his motto *yeshā' yuhash* ('may salvation be hastened').



Lifting the flaking ink at an angle



Inserting paste underneath



Securing the ink back down

Special Thanks

With the adoption of the new design of *Genizah Fragments*, we would like to take the opportunity to express our profound thanks to Dr Meir Persoff. Meir's association with the Genizah Research Unit extends beyond thirty years. He was first introduced to the work of the Genizah Unit while working as a journalist on the London *Jewish Chronicle* (a role he filled for forty years).

In the early 1980s, Stefan Reif enlisted his help to design *Genizah Fragments*, deliberately giving it the appearance of a newspaper. The first issue sent out in April 1981 received much praise both here at home and internationally.

Since that time, Meir has overseen the production of 57 issues of the newsletter. His professionalism and guidance have been immensely important to the development of *Genizah Fragments*, and we wish him every success with his own academic work and publications – Meir was recently awarded a doctorate from the Middlesex University in London for his work on the history of the Chief Rabbinate, and his book *Faith Against Reason* (Valentine Mitchell; Middlesex, 2008) has appeared to great acclaim.

Testing Times

One of the challenges of conserving the Jacques Mosseri Genizah Collection is the problem of flaking inks. Where it occurs, the attachment of the ink to paper breaks down and small particles are easily dislodged.

The possible causes are many, including methods of ink preparation, the finish of the paper and mechanical damage. So far, of the 1800 fragments conserved, the problem is identified on roughly 0.2% of the Collection (34 fragments).

Where the problem only affects limited areas, it is possible to carefully lift the flaking ink at an angle (see photo 1), insert a small amount of wheat paste on the paper underneath (see photo 2), then secure the ink back down (see photo 3).

However, where the problem is more extensive and the above method is impractical, another means of consolidating the ink needs to be investigated and then applied.

Based on extensive research conducted by Ngaio Vince-Dewerse, the previous conservator for this Collection, Salianski isinglass (dried swimming-bladder of the sturgeon) in a prepared solution, applied with a liquid dispensing machine, has been chosen as the most promising method on which to conduct testing.

Isinglass is known to be tackier and less likely to give a glossy finish than gelatine, stronger than cellulose, is inert with a pH-value of 6–7, generally does not alter the colour of the inks, and has the necessary flexibility.

The liquid dispensing machine, operated with compressed air, allows precise amounts of the prepared solution to be applied without flooding the substrate unnecessarily.

Tests were conducted on both light and dark-coloured paper to simulate the wide range of materials that make up the Collection. For the lighter paper, I found that the best method of applying the isinglass is to apply ethanol first, without humidifying the paper beforehand. For the darker paper, humidifying the paper for 20 minutes beforehand, applying ethanol, then isinglass, yields the best results.

The next stage of testing will involve what concentration of isinglass provides the necessary adhesiveness to secure the inks and if multiple application of the adhesive is necessary for effective treatment.

Lucy Cheng
Conservation Department

HOW YOU CAN HELP

To receive *Genizah Fragments*, to inquire about the Collection, or to learn how to assist with its preservation and study, please write to Dr Ben Outhwaite, Head of the Genizah Research Unit, at Cambridge University Library, West Road, Cambridge, CB3 9DR, England.

The Library can be reached by fax (01223) 333160 or by telephone (01223) 333000. Inquiries by email should be addressed to the Unit at: genizah@lib.cam.ac.uk

Contributions to the Unit are made to the "University of Cambridge," which enjoys charitable status for tax and similar purposes.

In the USA the collection is supported through "Cambridge in America." For further information please contact them on 212-984-0960 or see their website: www.cantab.org

"Cambridge in America" is recognized by the IRS as a charitable organization, and contributions for the benefit of the Genizah Research Unit are legally deductible for USA income tax purposes. Contributions are similarly deductible in Canada even if made directly to the Development Office at the University of Cambridge.

The Lauffer Family Charitable Trust has generously contributed towards the cost of producing this newsletter in memory of the late David Lauffer, an enthusiastic student of history and supporter of the Genizah Research Unit.