The Jewish Calendar Controversy of 921/2 CE

Sacha Stern
Leiden Brill, 2019

Simmering tensions between the Palestinian and Babylonian rabbinic leaderships boiled over into a calendrical schism in the year 921–922 CE. In the summer of 921, the Palestinians, led by Gaon Aharon ben Meir, announced by two days from the calendar the forthcoming year that differed from that of the Babylonians. The resulting mess and later sources from the following centuries. The schism over the calendar caused such a fundamental break between the Palestinian and Babylonian Gaonates that relations never fully recovered. This new treatment of the controversy is long overdue and very welcome.

Melanie Schmierer-Lee
Genizah Research Unit

The responsa literature (Heb. she’elot u-teshuvot, questions and answers) has been an important Jewish literary genre since the eighth century. As its name suggests, the responsa literature is a vast collection of queries sent by individuals or communities to important individuals or groups with religious authority, and the responses that the latter sent back. Questions dealt with every facet of Jewish life: law, philosophy, language, interpretation of the Bible, interpretation of the Talmud, and more. From their location in Baghdad, the capital of the Abbasid caliphate,

not suppose that any of them can be said to savour of importance, like the Holy Fire, but to our colder Northern natures, pomp and display when came so far, make devotional feelings well-nigh impossible. The more gorgeous a Bishop’s robes and the more homage he receives, the less he becomes like a follower of the meek and lowly Saviour whose minster he is.

Perhaps Margaret, though appearing to be so non-judgemental, could not in the end, resist commenting on how their religious sensitivities had been very deeply shocked by what they had witnessed.

Catherine Ansorge
Cambridge University Library

The Genizah as an untapped source of Geonic responsa

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the Yeshivah maintained a wide-reaching network of communication with the Diaspora through the ninth and tenth centuries and responded to numerous queries. Many responsa were translated into medieval Hebrew and transmitted in Europe, but such copies, which formed the bulk of the collections that were published to the middle of the nineteenth century, often omitted large portions of the responsa. In contrast, the responsa preserved in the Cairo Genizah have by and large maintained the original language and style.

In a new project, a joint venture between the T-S Genizah Research Unit of Cambridge University Library, the Research Authority of Orot Israel college, and Machon Jerusalem, made possible through the generous support of an anonymous donor from the US, four researchers, Dr. Amir Ashur, Dr. Ezra Chwat, Dr. Dan Greenberger and myself, will discover, transcribe and translate the Geonic responsa preserved among the Genizah hoard. The team is instructed by Prof. Robert Bodary and Prof. Mordechaia Akiva Friedman. To date, nearly 100 new Geonic responsa from the Cairo Genizah have come to light. Some of the most interesting findings include ancient quires made by R. Hayya (d. 1038). This manuscript was copied in the eleventh century perhaps during the lifetime of the author. Some parts of this rotulus were previously published while others were discovered by our researchers.

The Genizah Research Unit is grateful for the support of the British Academy, other smaller or anonymous donations, and those made by friends of the Genizah.


The Sisters of Sinai in Jerusalem

Agnes Lewis and Margaret Gibson, the Scottish twin sisters often known as ‘The Westminster Sisters’ or the ‘Gibbews’ are best known for their expeditions to St Catherine’s Monastery in Sinai between 1892 and 1906 to photograph and decipher biblical manuscripts.

In the archives of Westminster College in Cambridge, which they helped to found, are two unpublished travelogues written by Margaret in which she gives an account of the only expedition they made to the Middle East specifically to collect manuscripts. In the first account ‘Cairo to Jerusalem by Land’ Margaret gives a lively account of an overland trek by camel from the Suez Canal via Al Arish and Gaza to Jerusalem. In the second account ‘Jerusalem in 1896’ she describes their subsequent one-month stay in the Holy City where they visit many religious buildings and archaeological sites and meet dignitaries from all walks of life. Margaret records all this with great accuracy in her rather disciplined and detached style.

One particularly colourful account is given of their attending the ancient Greek Orthodox ceremony of the Holy Fire in the Holy Sepulchre Church. In this tradition, which takes place within the tomb of Christ, a sacred flame is said to erupt spontaneously during the Easter celebrations, a tradition dating back to an original miracle from the second century when water in lamps carried by the priests was said to have been miraculously transformed into oil. In 1009, Al Hakim bi-Amr Allah, the Fatimid Caliph, ordered the destruction of the Holy Sepulchre Church as he regarded the ceremony as fraudulent, and controversies surrounding this ceremony rumbled on through history. The sisters had already witnessed the ceremony on an earlier visit to Jerusalem in 1869, and had vowed not to go again, but as Margaret explains, ‘we did not intend to see the Holy Fire, having done so on our previous visit, but the Greek Patriarch kindly sent us tickets, and we wended our way on Saturday at 11 o’clock to the upper gallery of the church, just under the dome’. But on this particular occasion they did not stay until the end due to the crowds of people, who were only kept in check by Turkish soldiers. The raucous behaviour of the crowd and an altercation with other observers blocking their line of sight, caused the sisters to leave early. All of this is captured by Margaret in her lively narrative.

Controversy surrounds the ceremony as it is thought by many to be based purely on magical belief, the church dignitaries themselves sometimes having differences of opinion. This had led to disturbances, sometimes violent, between the different religious factions. Among the Greek Orthodox congregation opinions varied as to whether the Holy Fire is really of Divine origin – Margaret reports – ‘the Patriarch himself preached a sermon about two years ago in which he told the people that there is no miracle in it, but a superstition upheld for centuries is hard to uproot’.

In 1896, the dates of Easter in the Greek and Roman churches coincided and Margaret emphasises that the Turkish authorities were afraid that as – the members of the various Oriental churches, Greek, Roman, Syrian, Armenian and Copt had a strong mutual antipathy to each other, besides thinking that they do God service by hating all the Jews and Mohammedans, a feeling which is heartily reciprocated, so a little spark is sufficient to light so much tinder and produce a fatal conflagration’.

Both Margaret and Agnes are great observers and during their travels appear to be content to observe and comment on life around them, their reactions are rarely critical. There is a sense that they enjoyed theriot of colour, noise, smells and complexities of the ritual of the eastern Christian churches so much in contrast to their own, much plainer, Presbyterian background.

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Zvi Stampfer Orot College, Israel

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Introduction

In 921–922 CE, a historic controversy over the Jewish calendar took place. The controversy, which was known as the Jewish Calendar Controversy, was a significant event in Jewish history and has been the subject of much scholarly research. The controversy was caused by a calendrical disagreement between two factions: the ben Meir faction, led by Aharon ben Meir, and the Rabbanite faction, led by Saadya Gaon.

The conflict was precipitated by the circulation of a letter written by Ben Meir, which contained new calendrical calculations and proposed changes to the existing system. This letter was widely distributed, and the Rabbanite community, led by Saadya Gaon, condemned it as heretical and condemned the Gesenius family for publishing it. The resulting tension between the two factions led to the schism in the Jewish community and the development of two different calendrical traditions.

In the summer of 921–922 CE, Aharon ben Meir announced that the Jewish community should move to a new calendrical system for the forthcoming year that differed by two days from the calendar of the Rabbanite community. This move, which was based on the calculations presented in the letter, was seen as a fundamental break between the two factions and led to the development of two different calendrical traditions.

The controversy was a significant event in Jewish history and has been the subject of much scholarly research. It has been the focus of a number of recent publications, including Sacha Stern’s book “The Jewish Calendar Controversy of 921/2 CE.”

The Ben Meir letter and its impact on the Jewish community is discussed in detail in Stern’s book. Stern’s research has been widely praised for its thoroughness and its contribution to our understanding of this important event in Jewish history.

In conclusion, the Jewish Calendar Controversy of 921–922 CE was a significant event in Jewish history and has been the subject of much scholarly research. It has been the focus of a number of recent publications, including Sacha Stern’s book “The Jewish Calendar Controversy of 921/2 CE.” Stern’s research has been widely praised for its thoroughness and its contribution to our understanding of this important event in Jewish history.