

Esther-Miriam Wagner, Ben Outhwaite, Bettina Beinhoff (Eds.)  
**Scribes as Agents of Language Change**

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# Scribes as Agents of Language Change



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Esther-Miriam Wagner  
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## Lines of communication: Medieval Hebrew letters of the eleventh century

**Sources:** The Hebrew letters and other documents discussed in this article come from the Cairo Genizah, a celebrated collection of medieval Jewish manuscripts found in the ‘sacred storeroom’ (genizah) of the Ben Ezra Synagogue, Fustat. The contents of the Genizah are now dispersed worldwide, but the greatest part forms the Taylor-Schechter Collection in Cambridge University Library. Other large collections of Genizah material can be found in the Jewish Theological Seminary, the John Rylands Library, Manchester, and the British Library. Many Hebrew letters of the 11<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> centuries are edited in Gil (1983 and 1997). Most manuscripts from the Cairo Genizah are now freely available to view online (with registration), through the portal of the Friedberg Genizah Project ([www.genizah.org](http://www.genizah.org)).

**Abstract:** Medieval Hebrew has suffered neglect from linguists when compared to other varieties of Hebrew, both more ancient and more modern. Viewed primarily as a literary-liturgical language, without a living native-speaker tradition, it had been regarded as an artificial idiom, not worthy of much scholarly interest. The discovery of a vast amount of documentary material in Medieval Hebrew from the Cairo Genizah, however, points to a vibrant Hebrew language tradition in Palestine and Egypt in the Fāṭimid period, in which Hebrew enjoyed a major role as a language of communication between the traditional centres of Jewish religious governance, the talmudic academies, through to the scattered communities of the Jewish diaspora. The 11<sup>th</sup> century in particular is a flourishing period for Hebrew letters, and through an examination of the writings of a prodigious letter-writer, the Palestinian Ga’on Solomon ben Judah, and some of his contemporaries we can discover the motivation and effect that these champions had on the history of the Hebrew language.

Medieval Hebrew is the Cinderella of the Hebrew language family. Long ignored and rarely given the linguistic status that it deserves, it is overshadowed by its Biblical, Rabbinic and Modern sisters. The lack of a continuous native-speaker tradition for Hebrew through the Middle Ages has resulted in neglect from linguists (Rabin 1970: 325).<sup>1</sup> When interest has been shown, the language has often

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<sup>1</sup> And as Horvath and Wexler (1994: 244–245) point out, Chaim Rabin is himself guilty of just this: “Thus, in a 43-page state-of-the-art survey of Hebrew linguistics (1970), Rabin devoted no

been dismissed as somehow falling short: lacking the underpinning of a regularly spoken idiom, it is less than a real language, nothing but an artificial assemblage put together from the building-blocks of the biblical and rabbinic languages (see Outhwaite 2012: 3–8).

The most comprehensive recent study of the Hebrew language in all its periods described Medieval Hebrew as “not, properly speaking, a ‘language’ comparable to [Biblical Hebrew] or [Rabbinic Hebrew]” (Sáenz-Badillos 1993: 204). There is no doubt that this is a view shared by the authors of other studies of the Hebrew language. Joel Hoffman’s work, *In the beginning: a short history of the Hebrew language* (2004), is a particularly cruel example. It devotes the first one hundred and eighty pages to Biblical Hebrew and the Rabbinic language. Pages 187 onward concentrate on Modern Hebrew from the time of Ben Yehuda to today. Medieval Hebrew is consigned to pages 180–183 as “non-spoken Hebrew”.

Such short shrift has its origins in the scholarship of previous generations. The *Jewish Encyclopedia*, a masterpiece of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* movement published in New York in 1901–1906, is still sometimes a useful work to dip into today, but in particular it acts as a valuable touchstone for late 19<sup>th</sup>-century European and New World scholarship on Judaism. It fell to Caspar Levias, who is now thought of mainly as an accomplished aramaist, to provide the entry on the Hebrew language in volume twelve of the *Encyclopedia*. Since he was writing before the creation of the state of Israel, and thus before the birth of Modern Hebrew as a distinct linguistic entity, Levias divided Hebrew into three, Biblical Hebrew, Rabbinic Hebrew and “Neo-Hebrew”, the latter covering the period of the Amora’im (the scholars cited in the gemara [commentary] of the Talmuds, c. 200 CE onwards) up to the present (as was). To sum up the linguistic value – as opposed to the literary value – of one thousand seven-hundred years of Jewish culture takes Levias but one dismissive moment: “This period is of no interest to the student of Hebrew philology” (*Jewish Encyclopedia* 1901–1906: xii 308).

We should probably excuse Caspar Levias, though perhaps not those who repeat his mistakes many decades later, since he was writing only a few years after the most important discovery of modern Jewish scholarship had been made, a seismic event in the history of Jewish letters and in the philology of the Hebrew

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more than two pages to unspoken ‘Medieval Hebrew’.” This is slightly unfair, given that Rabin is one of the few scholars to have made a linguistic study of Medieval Hebrew, which was belatedly published as *The development of the syntax of post-biblical Hebrew* (Leiden, Brill, 2000); however, despite its broad title, it examines only the syntax of European prose. It is invaluable, however, for its introductory survey of Medieval Hebrew, which, though dated, surpasses anything in the standard reference books.

language, the discovery of the Cairo Genizah. When the lecturer in rabbinics Solomon Schechter brought back to Cambridge University Library nearly two hundred thousand manuscript fragments from the storeroom (“genizah”, a store-room for sacred texts that can no longer be used) of the Ben Ezra synagogue in Fustāṭ, he changed at a single stroke the entire landscape for the academic study of medieval Jewish culture. The scholarly world now had a wealth of material with which to examine minutely the literary and historical “archive” of an influential and rich Jewish community placed at the very centre of a huge network of cultural, commercial and social links.<sup>2</sup> It was too soon, however, for Levias and his fellow scholars, and there are only brief references to early discoveries from Schechter’s collection in the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, but all subsequent scholarship on the medieval Jewish world must take into account the fragments of the Cairo Genizah.

Prior to the Genizah, work like Levias’s on the medieval language had relied on comparatively few texts, and these were mostly the writings of European Jewry from the High Middle Ages, chiefly poems from the golden age of Spain and difficult halakhic commentaries from Germany; the former were triumphs of style over intelligibility, the latter Levias declared aesthetically unappealing (*Jewish Encyclopedia*, 1901–1906: xii 309). The impression given was that Hebrew functioned either as a vehicle for poetry or as a medium for the legalistic wranglings of talmudic scholars. The Genizah, however, provides an enormous slice through the written culture of the Jews of Islamic lands for a period in excess of one thousand years. Given that the vast majority of the world’s Jewish population lived under Islam in the early Middle Ages (Brody 1998: xx), it became clear that previous analyses were utterly unrepresentative of the medieval Jewish world in its entirety, and that the study of the Hebrew language, in particular, had been greatly hampered by a paucity of data.

That Hebrew was the favoured language of medieval Jewish poets, particularly the *payṭanim* [liturgical poets], was well known before the discovery of the Genizah, but the great extent to which Hebrew functioned in other literary and non-literary genres among the Jews of the Mediterranean and Middle East must have come as a surprise to those who, like Levias, had accepted the commonly-

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<sup>2</sup> The Cairo Genizah in origin is not an archive, but a vast heap of discarded written material, most, but not all, of a sacred character (Bibles, prayer books and the like). What makes the Genizah particularly important for historical linguistics is the amount of non-sacred and non-literary texts that were deposited, by accident or design, such as personal letters, legal documents, commercial deeds etc. For the full story of the discovery of the Genizah and its significance for the history of Judaism and for the medieval world in general, see the recent books by Glickman (2011), Hoffman & Cole (2011), and Reif (2000).

held belief (still prevalent in some quarters) that since Hebrew ceased to be the native spoken language of any Jews, it also ceased to function as a productive written idiom. This belief holds that from 200 CE (with the codification of the *Mišna*) until its revival in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century by Ben Yehuda and others as the culmination of the European *haskala* [Jewish enlightenment] movement, Hebrew was a moribund idiom relegated to a relatively few, discrete, written literary-liturgical genres and used for the recitation of prayer. Even recent surveys of Hebrew such as Sáenz-Badillos's *History of the Hebrew Language* dwell upon Hebrew as above all a poetic medium, and as the arabicised pseudo-Mischsprache of the language of translations from Arabic, yet fail to mention its far more straightforward use as a non-literary, communicative idiom. Yet the Cairo Genizah has preserved hundreds of examples of Hebrew being used for everyday written communication between Jews from as early as the 9<sup>th</sup> century up to the 17<sup>th</sup>–18<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>3</sup>

In choosing to examine the linguistic situation in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, we are choosing a period rich in primary sources, the Genizah having preserved examples of all the genres of writing produced by the communities of Egypt, Palestine and other communities with whom the Jews of Fustāṭ kept in communication. The period is particularly well represented in the written record, since at that time the Jewish community of Fustāṭ was flourishing under the relatively benign rule of the Fāṭimids, paper had become easily available, and a considerable proportion of the Jewish community was able to write. Fustāṭ maintained substantive cultural, religio-legal and commercial links with the Jewish communities in other parts of the world, most regularly with the talmudic academies (the *Yešivot*, which provided religious training, guidance and leadership to the diaspora communities, in return for the payment of tithes) in Iraq and Palestine, but also with Europe (Spain, France, the Byzantine Empire) and as far afield as Yemen or central Asia. Communication relied upon the sending of letters along established networks between the academies, through primary communicative hubs (of which Fustāṭ was the most important, but there were also Jewish centres like Damascus, Palermo, Qayrawān, and many more around the Mediterranean) where letters might be copied to be served up to multiple destinations, before eventually reaching their addressees in the scattered Jewish communities of the

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<sup>3</sup> Gil (1997: ii 13–17) has identified Cambridge University Library T-S NS 308.122 as a Hebrew letter from the academy of Pumbedita, Iraq, and dates it to c. 850 CE. On the whole, though, the Genizah does not provide us with much documentary material datable to before the mid-10<sup>th</sup> century. The earliest dated manuscript in the Cairo Genizah is a piece of Bible written in Iran, T-S NS 246.26.2, which contains a colophon dating it to 903–904 CE. The fact that the Genizah is poor in material earlier than this does not mean, of course, that such material never existed.

Diaspora. All this was serviced by the travels of merchants, mostly Jewish but not always, who carried letters as they plied their trade. Hundreds of such letters from the 11<sup>th</sup> century have been preserved alongside the more sacred texts deposited in the Genizah.

When Solomon ben Judah, the embattled, and occasionally embittered, Ga'on [Head] of the Jerusalem Yešiva in the second quarter of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, sent letters to his fellow Jews in the old city of Fuṣṭāṭ, Egypt, to provide news of the Holy City, rule on religious matters, settle political disputes or to solicit funds for his academy, he addressed the official heads of the community there (the heads of the Palestinian or Babylonian factions) or important individuals among its leading citizens. Taking his lead from the ge'onim who served before him, both, it seems in Jerusalem and in the academies of Iraq, Solomon communicated with them mainly in the Hebrew language of his forefathers, the holy language of Judaism. Although today we would classify the product of Solomon's pen as Medieval Hebrew (and perhaps further sub-classify it as "Medieval Documentary Hebrew"), in his eyes and in the terminology of the time he was writing in the *Lešon ha-Qodeš* [The Holy Language], the same language in which the twenty-four books of the Jewish Tanak (Bible) were composed, and which, it increasingly appears, enjoyed an unbroken (though at times considerably attenuated) existence as a medium of written communication from antiquity throughout the Jewish Middle Ages.

A resident but probably not a native of Palestine (contemporary detractors referred to him as al-Fāsi, "the man from Fez"), Ga'on Solomon b. Judah's first language was Arabic and, as was the usual practice of the time among the Jews of Islamic lands, when he wrote Arabic he usually used Hebrew characters, i.e. Judaeo-Arabic, a written vernacular that functioned for a wide variety of text types. The great scholar of the documentary texts of the Genizah, S. D. Goitein, describes this idiom as "a semiliterary language of rather regular usage and considerable expressiveness" (Goitein 1973: 5). This expressiveness enabled it to be turned to all manner of genres, and Judaeo-Arabic serves both for the composition of literary and religio-legal texts as well as functioning as a language for everyday correspondence in this and subsequent periods. The fact that Judaeo-Arabic was written in Hebrew characters (rather than in Arabic script) appears to be less a statement of religious or ethnic identity and more a by-product of an educational system that centered around the teaching of the Hebrew language. Copious evidence from the Genizah suggests almost universal education among Jewish males (at least among middle-class town-dwelling Jewish males, the constituency the Genizah best represents), and its intention was to prepare them for their adult duty of reading the Torah (Goitein 1967–1993: ii 175). Advanced students might go on to study the Jewish law codes of the Mišna and Talmud, but

all children were trained in the recitation of the Pentateuch so that they could stand up in the synagogue and read out the weekly *paraša* [Torah chapter], as required. Beginning with the writing out of the Hebrew characters and the Tiberian vowels that accompanied them, the children eventually moved on to the copying of whole biblical books, not infrequently the pedagogically-important book of Leviticus (Olszowy-Schlanger 2003: 47–56). Once sufficient fluency had been reached in reading, the art of writing was not pursued any further (Goitein 1967–1993: v 177–178).

While Arabic was the language of the rulers of Palestine and Egypt, and knowledge of it was essential even in the Jewish community, it was regarded in this period as a foreign, and not a Jewish language, even when written in Hebrew characters. When Solomon b. Judah and his contemporaries refer to it, they often call it “the language of the Hagri”,<sup>4</sup> a gentilic found in Psalms 83:7 where it originally referred to an unidentified tribe, probably of Aramaean origin. The word is commonly found in the Hebrew of eleventh-century letters to refer to Arabs, and specifically in reference to their language. That Solomon even regards Arabic written in the Hebrew script as a foreign language is made clear by examples such as his *responsum* [a legally-binding answer to a question of religious law] preserved in the Genizah, where he replies to his correspondent in Hebrew (T-S G2.10, recto, ll. 17–18): “This question arrived before us to the gate of the Academy [...] and since it is in the language of the Hagri, we have ordered that the reply be written in the language of the Hagri”, before switching from Hebrew into Judaeo-Arabic to make the ruling on the original query. Other geonic (the period between the early 7<sup>th</sup> century and the middle of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, named after the Geonim, Heads of the Talmudic Academies) contemporaries attest the same practice of marked code-switching, and it is found too in Babylonian *responsa* of the 10<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> centuries (Brody 1998: 189; Outhwaite 2004: 63).<sup>5</sup> Although to our eyes, the use of Hebrew graphemes for writing down Arabic might imply an “ownership” or “judaisation” of the written form of the language, this does not appear to be the case, with Solomon b. Judah and others not noting a distinction between Arabic and Judaeo-Arabic in their replies.

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<sup>4</sup> For instance, Solomon b. Judah refers to the sending of letters, “I have sent three letters: the first, for you, is in the language of the Hagri” (Cambridge University Library T-S 20.181 recto l. 16).

<sup>5</sup> While code-switching is always marked and conscious in Hebrew letters, it is probably less of a conscious act in Judaeo-Arabic contexts, where it is quite usual to find a large number of Hebrew calques, loans and even whole expressions. The reverse is not true for most Hebrew correspondence of this period, which avoids any significant Arabic intrusion.

The clear implication of Solomon's code-switching is that, in his opinion (shared by the other writers of responsa), the fitting language for the written communication of halakhic subjects was not Arabic, but Hebrew, else they would have not felt a great need to comment on it. In an earlier generation it would have been Aramaic, while this was still a spoken language of the Jews in Iraq and Palestine, and indeed the language of earlier responsa is predominantly in this language. But with the decline in knowledge of Aramaic, following the Islamic conquests, and the adoption by the Jews of Arabic as their vernacular, Hebrew reasserted itself as the language of halakha [religious law] and, probably as a result, of much correspondence in general. It is likely, however, that Hebrew never ceased being used as a written medium, halakhic or otherwise, in Palestine and perhaps Egypt even during the pre-Islamic period, since a number of Palestinian literary works are written in Hebrew rather than Aramaic, and that number increases greatly in the geonic era, and although Jewish manuscript finds from this period are extremely rare, there are tantalising glimpses of Hebrew being used in correspondence among the Oxyrhynchus papyri from Egypt, from perhaps the 4<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> century CE (Cowley 1915: 209–213).

The Palestinian Ga'on Solomon b. Judah, however, is remarkable in the number of his Hebrew letters recovered from the Genizah and the range of uses to which he put them. He has left behind ninety-nine letters that he either wrote or signed, and of those only about fifteen are in Judaeo-Arabic.<sup>6</sup> Thus four-fifths of all his extant correspondence is in Hebrew, a non-spoken idiom, rather than in his native language, Arabic. Moreover, it appears that he is following in the footsteps of his geonic predecessors, who have also left behind (though far fewer in number) letters in the holy tongue. His immediate predecessor as Ga'on, Solomon ha-Kohen, served for less than a year as head of the Jerusalem Academy, and as a consequence leaves little trace in the Genizah, but of his four preserved letters all are in Hebrew (Gil 1983: ii 81–91). Before him, Josiah Ga'on (died in 1025), leaves twelve Hebrew letters and two in Judaeo-Arabic (Gil 1983: ii 27–81). The Babylonian ge'onim, beginning with Nehemiah ha-Kohen (died 968 CE), leave less of a first-hand written record in the Genizah, but their extant correspondence (particularly of the earlier ge'onim) is predominantly in Hebrew.<sup>7</sup>

Solomon b. Judah chose to write in the Hebrew language, when the language of the Hagri would have served as (or perhaps more) efficiently as a communicative idiom, given that it was the spoken tongue of both sender and recipient. There is certainly plenty of evidence for the use of Judaeo-Arabic as a medium of

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<sup>6</sup> Most of them are edited in Gil (1983: ii 91–299).

<sup>7</sup> Much of it edited by Gil (1997), vol. ii.

epistolary communication: there is a much greater proportion of Judaeo-Arabic correspondence in the Genizah, from the Classical Period (the late 10<sup>th</sup> to the mid-13<sup>th</sup> centuries CE, the periods of Fāṭimid and Ayyūbid rule in Egypt) up to the arrival of Spanish Jewish exiles in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>8</sup> Throughout the Classical Period, Judaeo-Arabic functions in all literary modes and is used for correspondence of all types. Commercial correspondence, however, probably accounts for the greatest proportion of Judaeo-Arabic letter-writing.

For the Jewish mercantile class of Egypt and North Africa, Judaeo-Arabic was the most effective written medium to do business. The international language of trade was Arabic, and Hebrew, in many cases, was deficient in the necessary vocabulary for the expanding world of commerce. Moreover, commercial correspondence is a more transparent form of writing, and seeks to convey information with the minimum of artistry. While Judaeo-Arabic letter-writing is not devoid of aesthetic qualities, it is noticeable that commercial letters tend to avoid the lengthy openings so commonly found in Hebrew correspondence and dare to broach the business of the letter after only a few standard, formulaic expressions of politeness. Indeed, one of the commoner openings for a Judaeo-Arabic letter of the 11<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> centuries is the straightforward *waṣala kitābuka* [your letter arrived], when it is a reply to a previous letter, or just *kitābī* [my letter]. The communicative function is therefore predominant in the Judaeo-Arabic letter, and where a greater degree of formality or flattery is required, it is sometimes achieved through the use of a Hebrew opening to the letter, before an unmarked switch to Judaeo-Arabic once the formalities are dealt with and the main business is to be discussed.<sup>9</sup> With the numerous examples of successful Judaeo-Arabic correspondence in circulation around him, it is remarkable that Solomon b. Judah maintained an adherence to Hebrew in his correspondence, given that his letters were not simply formulaic expressions of a pastoral nature, and indeed often involved matters of

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**8** The Genizah does not provide a large amount of material that can be reliably dated to the period of Mamlūk rule in Egypt (1250–1517). Texts begin again to be deposited in significant numbers in the Genizah from the Ottoman period onwards, when the Jewish community of Cairo was swollen by the arrival of immigrants from Spain. In this latter period, Hebrew reasserted itself in the written record due to the new arrivals' ignorance of Arabic.

**9** “Unmarked” in the sense that it goes unremarked by the writer, nor is the change delineated by a pragmatic marker of any type. This switching between Hebrew for (essentially empty, formulaic) praise and Arabic for the content of the letter is very frequent in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. For example, T-S 13J15.23, a letter written by Eli ha-Kohen b. Ezekiel the cantor in 1071 CE, opens with eight and a half lines of rhymed Hebrew praises before switching midway through line 9 to Judaeo-Arabic when the real purpose of the letter is reached, “I have already sent your honour several letters”. Edited in Gil (1983: iii 85–87).

intercommunal importance or of the movement of considerable sums of money. There must have been a greater significance to the act of writing in Hebrew, which outweighed any potential communicative benefits that Judaeo-Arabic could provide.

There are probably two interlinked factors at play in the choice of Hebrew over Judaeo-Arabic in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. While Hebrew did clearly bear a greater aesthetic load than Arabic, as evidenced by its use for liturgical and secular poetry of the period, and its appearance, when called for, in the openings of Judaeo-Arabic letters, it was not the case, as Rina Drory (1992: 60–61) has put it, that in the Middle Ages Arabic was a transparent medium of communication whereas Hebrew was an opaque medium of a predominantly literary-aesthetic character.<sup>10</sup> Instead we should be aware that many of the Hebrew letters that we now possess were originally intended for public performance, that is to say, they were intended to be read out before the community, and the usual place for this was the synagogue, after one of the regular services. In a letter to his chief supporter and head of the Palestinian faction in Egypt, Efraim b. Šemarya, Solomon b. Judah writes the instruction “and the long sealed scroll is to be read in the hearing of [lit. “ears of”] all the people to inform them about the man who rejected the title of Ḥaver and chose instead the title of ‘Alluf”.<sup>11</sup> This accounts for why we find notices of excommunication, requests for tithes, acknowledgements of donations, and the sundry pronouncements of the ge’onim all written in Hebrew – public notices all, delivered in the form of a letter – but also why personal letters between family members, or business arrangements between merchants are principally written in Judaeo-Arabic. In this, and previous periods, the language of the synagogue service was Hebrew (with some Aramaic embellishment in the form of the reading of the Aramaic targum [translation of the Bible]). Although in

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**10** There are also frequent examples from the Genizah of Hebrew being used primarily for communicative purposes, simply because the writer clearly did not know Arabic. T-S NS 142.126 is a good example of this, perhaps one of the first letters that the 13<sup>th</sup>-century scholar Yeḥi’el b. Elyaqim wrote on his unwilling arrival in Egypt. He was from Byzantium and, although he subsequently settled in Egypt and achieved a certain status, he was not an Arabic speaker or writer when he arrived, and was thus forced to write in Hebrew (of a particularly biblical character) in order to have his plight understood. See Outhwaite (2009: 207–214).

**11** T-S 20.181 recto ll. 22–23 (edited in Gil 1983: ii 178–180). Solomon b. Judah was insulted by the leader of the Babylonian faction in Egypt who went against tradition, and stirred up factional politics, by disdaining the title of ḥaver [member], which was an honorary title given by the Palestinian Yešiva of which Solomon was head, preferring to use the Babylonian title of ‘alluf [chief] and thus clearly nailing his colours to the wall at a time when inter-factional solidarity was, in Solomon’s eyes, a more important consideration.

much earlier times, other languages had been used for Jewish prayer, for instance Greek (Elbogen 1993: 199), by the time of the ge'onim, Hebrew had become the only acceptable language for public worship and Arabic was not to be used in the synagogue (Goitein 1967–1993: ii 220–221). Thus for the traditional elite of the community, the religious leaders and their local appointees, it was necessary to use the acceptable liturgical language, if their words were to reach their flock. Moreover, in attaching their pronouncements to the formal occasion of the synagogue service, these communications acquired a solemnity and authority that derived from their apparent inclusion in the public display of religious worship.

That only Hebrew was acceptable for reading in public in the synagogue also accounts for the reason why we find the language in use at the opposite end of the social scale. It would otherwise be a strange dichotomy to note that the high variety, non-spoken Hebrew, is the preferred written medium of both the religious elite and the indigent underclass. It is the middle-classes, especially the mercantile class, who adhere to the more intimate mode of Arabic. The very lowest in society, at least in socio-economic terms, emulate their superiors by showing a preponderance of Hebrew in their correspondence. It is the commonest language of begging letters, a popular documentary genre in the Genizah, either written by the poor unfortunates themselves or at their behest by a local scribe. While in some cases these are the foreign poor, often hailing from Byzantium (Cohen 2005: 72–108), where they would be unlikely to have knowledge of Arabic, they are supplemented by many locals, or at least by Jews from other Arabic-speaking lands, down on their luck. The immediate purpose of begging letters is often stated explicitly in them: the writers request a *pesiqa* [collection], a term denoting a public appeal among the congregation for funds to help the author, which would have taken place after the service in the synagogue (Cohen 2005: 220–224).<sup>12</sup> The use of Hebrew reaches across social divisions, therefore, with both the religious elite and the indigent employing Hebrew in their communications in order to most effectively reach the largest audience and maximise the potential benefits.

Not all Hebrew correspondence can be accounted for in this way, through the necessity for it to be read aloud in the synagogue. Drory asserts that Sa'adya, the Ga'on of Sura in Iraq in the second quarter of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, wrote his pastoral correspondence in Hebrew to give “an official, solemn, almost regal complexion” (Drory, 1992: 58). However, I find it more likely that as his pastoral correspond-

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<sup>12</sup> Cohen calls it a “pledge-drive”. A good example is T-S 13J13.16, an 11<sup>th</sup>-century begging letter by a woman who has lost her nose through some disfiguring disease: “May my lord order a charitable collection (*pesiqa*) in any place that our lord desires” (recto, ll. 20–21; edited in Outhwaite 2009: 203–206).

ence was intended for communal consumption it had to be in the language suitable for public recitation. But there are clear cases of Hebrew letters written by Jewish leaders whose contents were probably only intended for a few discreet ears, rather than those of “all the people”. Solomon b. Judah was a prodigious letter-writer and quite a few of his letters appear to lack the tone of solemnity, replacing it with an intimate familiarity, particularly when addressing his regular correspondents such as Efraim b. Šemarya or Sahlān b. Abraham.<sup>13</sup> Moreover they sometimes share details that were probably not for public consumption.<sup>14</sup> It is also not unusual for Solomon or other leading members of the Jewish community to be the recipients of letters in Hebrew, rather than Judaeo-Arabic.<sup>15</sup> In these cases, the choice of Hebrew must have been less a practical matter of public performance, and more a symbolic step that bound the writer and addressee through a common, but exclusive, code in the wider Islamic society.

The Palestinian ge'onim were seated at the head of the scholars who made up the Academy of the “Pride of Jacob”, the Yešiva of Jerusalem. They were the inheritors of an ancient tradition of Jewish religious governance that stretched back to the Great Sanhedrin, and were the final earthly court capable of sitting in judgement on Jewish religious matters. For the Ga'on Solomon b. Judah to have eschewed the sacred, eternal language of Jews in favour of the language of the temporal rulers of the land would have been a step that acknowledged the secondary status of the Yešiva and of his own subservient position within Islamic

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**13** While this can simply be a matter of tone, it can be objectively discerned in the use of the first person singular, instead of the plural of majesty (customary for geonic correspondence), the curtailing of the poetic praises in the opening of the letter, the use of nicknames (some of an amusing or insulting nature), as well as the writer passing on gossip or referring to family matters.

**14** For instance, many of the Hebrew letters written to Efraim b. Šemarya during the dispute over the gaonate with Nathan b. Abraham (1038–1042 CE) contain virulent accusations against third parties that the Ga'on would probably not have wanted to become public knowledge. In other letters the Ga'on relates sorry details of his health or describes melancholy family matters that would be out of place in an open missive. In one fragmentary Hebrew letter to Sahlān b. Abraham in Fuṣṭāṭ c. 1029 he moans that as he is writing he is surrounded by “five women without a man”, the female members of his household having met with different misfortunes, Cambridge University Library Or.1080 J105, recto l. 25 (Gil, 1983: ii 147–149). Solomon b. Judah often sheds his regal complexion in favour of pathos.

**15** When these were formal requests for halakhic rulings (še'elot requesting tešuvot), Hebrew was the preferred medium, as noted above, and were in theory to be read aloud by the members of the Yešiva so that a discussion of the assembled scholars could take place, followed by the Ga'on giving the authoritative ruling (Brody 1998: 46–47). However, this represents only a proportion of Hebrew correspondence.

society. The Palestinian Academy had won the right from the Fāṭimid government to administer many of the legal affairs of the Jewish communities in the Fāṭimid Empire, and it retained much of its original status as the arbiter of Jewish law and custom. To not administer and arbitrate in the Jewish language would have been a lost opportunity, and a recognition of temporal, if not also spiritual, defeat. Moreover, on a personal level, schooling centered upon proficiency in the Hebrew language, and a man could be measured by this ability.<sup>16</sup> It was important therefore for the prime religious authority in Palestine to assert his position as the leading scholar through his mastery of the language. There is a nationalistic character to the use of Hebrew in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, when, sanctioned by the Fāṭimids, the Jerusalem Academy exercised considerable power in the Jewish communities that owed it allegiance. In choosing not to deploy the language of the conquerors when fulfilling his public role, Solomon b. Judah asserted a Jewish identity independent from the Islamic state, and provided a written idiom that bound the members of the religio-ethnic group through a shared linguistic identity. Some of his flock reacted appropriately, and joined in, adorning themselves with two thousand years of shared Jewish culture, and cementing their religious and ethnic bonds through wielding the language of the Torah.

There are others, however, who did not apparently feel a need to mark their membership of this group through the Hebrew language. Solomon b. Judah, for instance, never writes to Abraham ibn Furāt, a physician to the Muslim governor of Ramla, in Hebrew, only Judaeo-Arabic (Outhwaite 2004: 63–64). Ramla was the Fāṭimid capital of Syria-Palestine and thus Abraham was probably the most important Jewish official in Palestine. But as a Fāṭimid courtier, he inhabited a very different world from Solomon, and his acknowledgement to a shared religious identity with Solomon and the Yešiva was probably not something to be stressed, as Solomon must have recognised: they inhabited different social spheres. He was a member of the temporal elite, not the religious, for whom facility in Arabic was a social advantage, and acknowledgement of membership of the Jewish minority was probably a hindrance. There are other courtiers, who tended to inhabit Cairo rather than the Jewish quarter of Fustāt, and overwhelmingly they communicate and are communicated with in the Arabic language which, for them, both denoted and facilitated the exalted social status they had achieved.

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<sup>16</sup> Drory quotes the Karaite philosopher Sahl b. Mašliaḥ as he accused Jacob b. Samuel of linguistic ignorance: “So far I have found nearly sixty errors in your letters, some of spelling, some of meaning; and you do not qualify as one worthy of arguing with Bāne Miqra [followers of the Bible = Karaites]” (Drory 1992: 58–59).

Looking at a contemporary of Solomon b. Judah, we can see the switching of codes, between Hebrew and Arabic, in action and how it represents the social spheres in which each code was preferred. The Genizah preserves correspondence relating to the geonic schism of 1038–1042 CE, when a young pretender, Nathan b. Abraham, tried to usurp the Palestinian gaonate from the incumbent, Solomon b. Judah. We possess a number of letters written by Nathan both before and during the event, and even though it remains a relatively small sample, it is extremely instructive to examine his use of different codes in the multilingual Jewish society. When we first come across Nathan, around 1035, he is in business. The one commercial letter we have from him is, as expected, in Judaeo-Arabic, and it lacks any kind of linguistic adornment, either in the form of a Hebrew preface or any extended opening blessings in Judaeo-Arabic (indeed, it begins abruptly with “your letter arrived”).<sup>17</sup> It is even addressed in Arabic script, something in which Nathan was proficient. The next time we hear from Nathan, he is writing to one of his patrons, a leading Jew in Qayrawān, and so Nathan switches to the register suitable for addressing such a prominent person, and writes his letter in Hebrew, prefaced with about five lines of elegant blessings, which not only praise the recipient but also establish Nathan’s credentials as a scholar, proficient in the sacred language.<sup>18</sup> It is already clear by this stage that Nathan has failed in business and has begun to think about a different career, and for that he must exercise his Hebrew. Further letters follow, some in Hebrew, others in Judaeo-Arabic (but with ornate Hebrew openings), as Nathan corresponds with a number of different prominent men. Like his rival, when he writes to Abraham ha-Kohen ibn Furāt in Ramla, he too writes in Judaeo-Arabic, switching code to best suit this government official. Once Nathan had proclaimed himself Ga’on at a solemn ceremony in a synagogue in Ramla (while Solomon excommunicated him in a different synagogue across town), he writes almost exclusively in Hebrew. Moreover, he places his name and title prominently at the head of the paper, in imitation, it seems, of Babylonian geonic practice (his rival, Solomon b. Judah, does not do this), and to further enrich his Hebrew he adorns his prose with entirely superfluous vowel signs, underlining his religious and scholarly credentials and lending an air of biblical authority to his pronouncements.<sup>19</sup> One can see, therefore, that

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<sup>17</sup> T-S Ar.54.93, edited by Gil (1983: ii 300–302).

<sup>18</sup> T-S 8.3, edited by Gil (1983: ii 305–307).

<sup>19</sup> And indeed, these vowel signs are not only superfluous, since they are used to mark common words the consonantal spelling of which any educated reader would be familiar with, but are also unusual. They are not the Tiberian signs, the dominant system for denoting the vocalisation of biblical and other texts, but the supralinear signs of the Babylonian system, rarely found in Palestine in this, or any other, period. Moreover, they are what appears to be

as Nathan rose (in a particularly ruthless manner) through a society that gave a great weight to the mastery of the written word, he employed the different codes and varieties available to him to suit his changing social status and assist his rise.

The 11<sup>th</sup> century marks the high point for the use of Hebrew in communicative discourse in the High Middle Ages. It is attested in hundreds of letters from the period, and is found as the regular written language of both the religious elite and the lower classes (as well as being the international language of Jews who shared no common tongue). It is employed to be read aloud in the synagogue and asserts and reinforces membership of a defined religio-ethnic group at a time of competing powers and external pressure. Hebrew enjoys a revival as a written idiom, pushed by the traditional centres of Jewish governance, the academies, and the custodians of tradition, the ge'onim, who champion the use of Hebrew in the face of the victory of the Islamic state, and do something to stem the influx of Judaeo-Arabic written culture. Thanks to the centrality of the academies in Jewish life of this period, it is possible that the strength of Hebrew discourse in the 11<sup>th</sup> century excels anything since the language ceased to be spoken. Certainly prior to the 11<sup>th</sup> century we have less evidence of a wide use of Hebrew, although this could just be a symptom of the comparatively smaller number of sources available to us. However, the copious evidence from the Genizah attesting to the linguistic situation in the following centuries clearly shows that there is a sharp decline in the use of Hebrew for correspondence and other non-literary modes. Judaeo-Arabic, and Arabic proper, usurped the roles enjoyed by the Hebrew language at its medieval high-water mark, to the point that Maimonides (died 1205) ruled in his *Mišne Tora* that vernacular languages could be used in place of Hebrew for prayer in the synagogue. It is no coincidence that this decline in the prestige of Hebrew mirrors the decline, and ultimate disappearance, of the traditional centres, the academies in Iraq and Palestine – the authorities that were pushing Hebrew as their idiom of choice. Solomon b. Judah is perhaps the last great ga'on of the Jerusalem Yešiva, as following him the gaonate is mired in disputes and collapses from the powerful pressure of external events in Palestine, as first the Saljūqs and then the Crusaders force the academy to leave the Holy City, before it eventually takes refuge, a shadow of its former greatness, in Egypt. Robbed of its sacred foundations, severed from the heart of the Jewish religion, the Palestinian Academy loses its authority within the vibrant and ambitious Egyptian Jewish community, and leadership passes to the local elite. This elite was employed in

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a personal modification of the Babylonian system, used, I can only suggest, to give an air of scholarly authority (and specifically the more ancient Babylonian geonic authority) to Nathan's mischievous missives. I intend to write further on this interesting matter elsewhere.

caliphal offices and assimilated to Fāṭimid Egyptian culture; they had remained mostly separate from the traditional networks nurtured by the ge'onim. For them, Hebrew was a necessary skill – a language for study or prayer – and a pleasurable diversion – a language of high literature –, but it was not the language they were accustomed to doing business in.

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