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Fragment of the Month: October 2009

Vis, liber zun, ikh hob dir vil brif geshribn: Yiddish letters in the Genizah

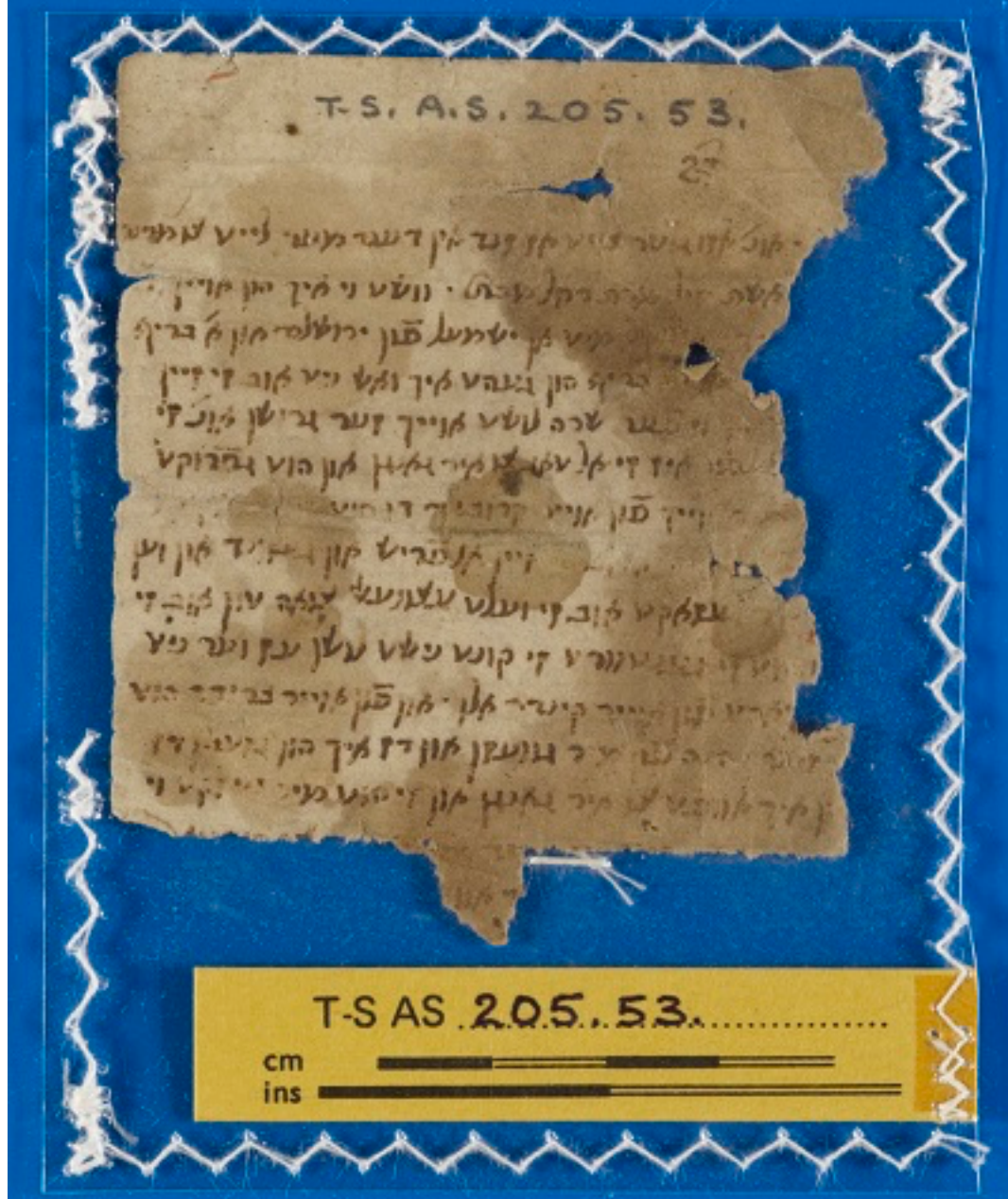
Esther-Miriam Wagner

It is not surprising that Yiddish, the language of medieval Ashkenazic Jewry, is rare in the Arabic-speaking world of the Genizah. Only a few leaves and a single — and highly significant — codex in Yiddish have been found in the Collection. Among the leaves are five letters dating from the 1560s, written by a woman living in Jerusalem called Rachel Zusman. Four of the letters were sent to her son in Cairo and one was intended for a rabbi in Venice.

Alerted by my colleague Dotan Arad to the presence of Yiddish fragments in the Additional Series, I was surprised to find four more pieces of letters there. The handwriting of the first of the fragments (T-S AS 202.383) seemed very familiar and it turned out to be the missing right-hand part of a letter sent by Rachel Zusman to her son Moshe (T-S NS 298.18). The fragment greatly improves our understanding of the letter, in which Moshe's mother complains about her son's failure to write to her, איך האב קיין בריב ניט בון דיר גיהט ... מיר איז בעו' זיר בנג אונ' האב קיין her, ('I have not had a letter from you, I am scared and have no rest in my heart'). She pleads with Moshe to leave Cairo and settle in Jerusalem because he can learn so much more in the Holy City, דען לערנשט דיר דארט מיט דינר חברות ('than what you learn there with your fellowship'), and will have no problem in making a living, דו ווערשט דיך היא וואל קינן מחיה זיין ('you will be able to support yourself here'). She talks up the city's

popularity, עז איז אזו וויל וואלק היא אונ' אל טאג קומן מער הער, ('there are so many people here and every day more are coming'), and prosperity, איך זיך של' דז זיך די לויט היא וואל גינירן לנג מיט ליב, ('I see that the people are all feeding well; may it stay like that'), apparently brought on by the arrival of a new leader: גוטר שלו' זינט איין חכם אויז דער טירקיי איז הער ('good peace since a wise man from Turkey has come here'). He should bring his wife's parents מיט דיין שוועהר אונ' שוויגר דז זי הער קומן זי ווערן זיך היא ... וואל קינן, טוט ('(talk) with your in-laws, that they come here; they will be able to have a livelihood here with a shop').

The other three fragments (T-S AS 205.53, T-S AS 205.64 and T-S AS 224.165) together form a new letter to Rachel Zusman from an as yet unidentified man (as evidenced by the remark מײן גרושן, 'my wife sends greetings to you') who addresses Rachel as a ליב פריינדן ('dear friend'). The letter is short and touches upon a relative's illness and minor business matters. Verso contains a note, perhaps in the hand of Moshe, Rachel's son, whose job it was to forward her letters on to Venice. It is likely, therefore, that this is a reply to Rachel from her correspondent, the Venetian rabbi Jacob Katz. The fact that this letter, Rachel's note for Rabbi Katz and a letter from Moshe himself were all found in the Genizah, indicates that they probably never reached their destinations. We can only speculate about the reasons for that. But perhaps it is the son's negligence in these matters that causes Rachel to scold him in another letter: הקב"ה זול דיר עז מוחל זיין דז דו מיך האשט אוזו מצער גיוועזן ('may God forgive you that you made me so sad'), before adding a somewhat more enraged איך וויל דיר שטראפן איך שטירב ('I want to punish you before I die').



T-S AS 205.53, recto: an unidentified man writes to Rachel Zusman in Jerusalem

Readers are invited to send comments to genizah@lib.cam.ac.uk. The Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit is not under any obligation to acknowledge or to publish comments.

Bibliography

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S. Assaf, *Text and Studies in Jewish History* (Hebrew), Jerusalem 1946, p. 230–237.

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Ch. Turniansky, 'A Bundle of Yiddish Letters from Jerusalem from the Seventh Decade of the Sixteenth Century' (Hebrew), *Shalem* 4 (1984): 149–210.

With thanks to Professor Chava Turniansky for her valuable comments.

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