

Cambridge University Library

- Home
- Using the Library
- Research
- Teaching & Learning
- What's On
- Search & find
- Collections**
- About
- Giving
- Contact

- Cambridge University Library
- Collections
- Collections & departments
- Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit
- Fragment of the month
- FRAGMENT OF THE MONTH ARCHIVE
- Archived FOTM 2013**
 - > Fragment of the Month: September 2013
 - > Fragment of the Month: August 2013
 - > Fragment of the Month: January 2013
- Archived FOTM 2012
- Archived FOTM 2011
- Archived FOTM 2010
- Archived FOTM 2009
- Archived FOTM 2008
- Archived FOTM 2007

Help

Fragment of the Month: January 2013

The preacher who speaks like a parrot: two versions of a letter by R. Joshua ha-Nagid

By [Dotan Arad](#) and [Esther-Miriam Wagner](#)

The Genizah documents reveal numerous details regarding the day-to-day lives of Jews in medieval Cairo, painting a bright picture of commerce, social and religious affairs, family connections and pan-community relations. They also inform us about the goings-on at the heart of Jewish communal life, of matters happening within the walls of the synagogue.

One of the main events in the synagogue was the weekly *deraša* (sermon) delivered on the Sabbath. Some of these sermons were written down and became widely-copied, 'bestselling' compositions. The fact that dozens of fragments of the *Midraš Rabbi David ha-Nagid*, sermons in Judaeo-Arabic by Maimonides' grandson, were preserved in the Genizah and other collections, reflects the popularity of the genre in Jewish society of the Mamluk period. But how were these sermons delivered? Who chose the person to give it? And did someone supervise the content of the sermon?

We can glean partial answers to these questions from a letter composed by Joshua ha-Nagid (1310–1355), grandson of the David Maimonides mentioned above. This letter has been preserved in two copies in the Genizah: in a draft version (Mosseri IV.85) and a final scribal copy (T-S 12.608). [1] We will discuss the differences between the two versions further below.

The letter indicates that in Joshua's time an elderly man by the name of Halfon orated sermons in Fusṭāt. The synagogue's beadle (*šammaš*) became dissatisfied with the old man's performance and appointed in his place a young man, who was newly arrived in the city, to deliver the weekly sermon in his place. The Nagid Joshua, on the other hand, clearly preferred Halfon and strongly condemned his replacement.

The letter shows us what the ideal characteristics for a preacher were in the eyes of Joshua Maimonides. The Nagid wrote in his letter: 'You should know that when Rav Halfon came to you [...] he was accustomed to delivering sermons, and he knows what he is talking about. He is well-aged and wise, so we were happy for you on his account'. Halfon is described by the Nagid as a venerable man with a broad knowledge of Jewish texts. In contrast, Halfon's replacement is portrayed as young and ignorant: 'Now you have somebody who does not know what he is talking about, and, particularly, he speaks of *sodot* (mystical matters), things which he does not understand. He is like a parrot who speaks but does not understand his own words. And he does not know what is forbidden (according to Jewish law) and what permitted'.

Based on Joshua's words, we understand that Halfon's youthful replacement addressed mystical subjects in his sermon. The document does not specify the matters discussed, but it could have been topics related to Sufi mysticism, which leaked into the thinking of Jewish pietism in Egypt, as suggested by Goitein. Another possibility is that these mystical matters related to the *qabbala*. Joshua's son, David, was among the first in the East to include in his writings concepts imported from the Zohar and other kabbalistic works. It could be that kabbalistic concepts had spread this far east already in the first half of the 14th century, and were integrated into the sermons of this anonymous young preacher in Fusṭāt.

It appears that the Nagid Joshua wished to avoid tearing the esoteric veil that covered these matters. His approach to the revelation of 'hidden' subjects is typical of the followers of Maimonides, whose academic writing style was characterised by artful concealment and an esoteric approach that continued in the writings of his followers. For example, Obadiah Maimonides, the Rambam's grandson, wrote a mystical philosophical work, 'The Treatise of the Pool', which is in a deliberately opaque and difficult manner and relies heavily on hints: 'Know that it is impossible to expound and discuss the subject to which I have hinted... by reason of its extreme abstruseness, the intricacy of its meaning and the remoteness of its essence... For these questions are at (first) manifest and then hidden...' (Fenton, 1981: 96–97). Joshua Maimonides does not give details in his letter of what, in his view, constitute the proper contents of a sermon, but apparently he saw the teaching of religious law to the public as at least one of the its principal functions. He condemned Halfon's replacement as someone who 'does not know what is forbidden and what permitted'. In the Nagid's view, one who delivers a sermon must have a deep knowledge of religious law and must instruct the public how to behave in a practical manner. The secrets should remain with the chosen ones.

The Nagid's letter is not only interesting for its contents, but also for the process of literary copying and scribal practice itself. We can see that the original draft (Mosseri IV.85) was written by Joshua himself, in a slightly untidy hand and not in the most beautiful of hands. The final scribal copy, on the other hand, is neater and more professional looking, and has the Nagid's motto ('*alāma*') at the top.

The scribe also alters some of the draft's language. For example, not satisfied with the Nagid's construction *fa-kunnā farahnā lakum*, he replaced it with *kunnā farahnā lakum* (line 5). The reason here is that the Nagid's construction *kāna fa'ala* in Classical Arabic really designates the pluperfect, i.e. 'we had been happy' for you. The scribe however probably felt that the Nagid really wanted to say 'we were happy for you', thus replacing the second perfect with the predicate adjective *farahnā* 'happy'.



A similar correction towards Classical Arabic conventions is manifested in the Middle Arabic form *ḥawṭ* 'copy' becoming *ḥawṭa* in the scribal copy (line 8), furnished with two dots to indicate the *tā' marbūṭa*. Likewise, *ḥawṭa* is corrected to *ḥawṭ* in line 16, and an extra *aydan* is added for stylistic reasons (line 17), as well as *huwa* before the realis clause (line 18) to clarify the subject of the apodosis.

Another sentence included in the draft letter in lines 6–7 ('and he was in a position to speak only with permission', probably to be understood that he could easily be controlled) is left out entirely. Perhaps the scribe felt that this was a view best not expressed in writing and would be seen as authoritarian interference on the part of the Nagid.

The changes are aimed at correcting the language of the letter toward norms regarded as more literary and of a higher standard, to help intelligibility and improve the style of the epistle. This shows that the scribal cast had confidence in its own linguistic norms, independent from the respected leader of the community.

All in all, Joshua Maimonides' letter presents us both with the opportunity to investigate the mechanism by which members of the community were appointed to give sermons and a rare window into the writing and issuing of documents at the highest level of Jewish affairs in Mamluk Egypt.



The two letters, with the final copy above (T-S 12.608) and the draft copy below (Mos.IV.85)

Footnote

[1] S. D. Goitein published a partial translation (into Hebrew) of T-S 12.608 in *Sidre Hinukh*, pp. 134–135 and again, in a revised edition with the Judaeo-Arabic original in *Tarbiz* 54 (1985), pp. 97–99. He seems not to have used the draft letter from the Mosseri collection for his transcription, which would have aided to improve some of his readings.

Bibliography

- Fenton, P. B. (ed.), *The treatise of the pool = Al-Maqāla al-Hawdiyya, by Obadyāh b. Abraham b. Moses Maimonides* (London 1981), pp. 96–97
- Goitein, S. D., *Sidre Hinukh bi-yeme ha-Ge'onim u-vet ha-Rambam* (Jerusalem, 1962), pp. 134–135.

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