



2022

The Aachen Inscription: A Draft Dedication Written in Hebrew on an Early Modern Ream Wrapper

Louis Meiselman

University of Pennsylvania, lmei@upenn.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.upenn.edu/mss_sims



Part of the [European Languages and Societies Commons](#), and the [Jewish Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Meiselman, Louis (2022) "The Aachen Inscription: A Draft Dedication Written in Hebrew on an Early Modern Ream Wrapper," *Manuscript Studies*: Vol. 6: Iss. 1, Article 7.

Available at: https://repository.upenn.edu/mss_sims/vol6/iss1/7

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. https://repository.upenn.edu/mss_sims/vol6/iss1/7
For more information, please contact repository@pobox.upenn.edu.

The Aachen Inscription: A Draft Dedication Written in Hebrew on an Early Modern Ream Wrapper

Abstract

This annotation is about a newly cataloged manuscript at the University of Pennsylvania Libraries with an inscription about leaders and institutions in Aachen, Germany during the first decades of the 18th century. Some historical background and manuscript material cited. Includes photos and script analysis.

Keywords

Manuscript Studies, german history, german jewish history, early modern history, ream wrapper, hebrew manuscripts, manuscripts

MANUSCRIPT STUDIES

A Journal of the Schoenberg Institute for Manuscript Studies

VOLUME 6, NUMBER 1

(Spring 2021)

Manuscript Studies (ISSN 2381-5329) is published semiannually
by the University of Pennsylvania Press



The Schoenberg Institute
for Manuscript Studies

UNIVERSITY of PENNSYLVANIA LIBRARIES

MANUSCRIPT STUDIES

VOLUME 6, NUMBER 1
(Spring 2021)

ISSN 2381-5329

Copyright © 2021 University of Pennsylvania Libraries
and University of Pennsylvania Press. All rights reserved.

Published by the University of Pennsylvania Press,
3905 Spruce Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104.

Printed in the U.S.A. on acid-free paper.

Manuscript Studies brings together scholarship from around the world and across disciplines related to the study of premodern manuscript books and documents, with a special emphasis on the role of digital technologies in advancing manuscript research. Articles for submission should be prepared according to the *Chicago Manual of Style*, 16th edition, and follow the style guidelines found at <http://mss.pennpress.org>.

None of the contents of this journal may be reproduced without prior written consent of the University of Pennsylvania Press. Authorization to photocopy is granted by the University of Pennsylvania Press for libraries or other users registered with Copyright Clearance Center (CCC) Transaction Reporting Service, provided that all required fees are verified with CCC and paid directly to CCC, 222 Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA 01923. This consent does not extend to other kinds of copying for general distribution, for advertising or promotional purposes, for creating new collective works, for database retrieval, or for resale.

2021 SUBSCRIPTION INFORMATION:

Single issues: \$30

Print and online subscriptions: Individuals: \$40; Institutions: \$94; Full-time Students: \$30

International subscribers, please add \$19 per year for shipping.

Online-only subscriptions: Individuals: \$32; Institutions: \$82

Please direct all subscription orders, inquiries, requests for single issues, address changes, and other business communications to Penn Press Journals, 3905 Spruce Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104. Phone: 215-573-1295. Fax: 215-746-3636. Email: journals@pobox.upenn.edu. Prepayment is required. Orders may be charged to MasterCard, Visa, and American Express credit cards. Checks and money orders should be made payable to "University of Pennsylvania Press" and sent to the address printed directly above.

One-year subscriptions are valid January 1 through December 31. Subscriptions received after October 31 in any year become effective the following January 1. Subscribers joining midyear receive immediately copies of all issues of *Manuscript Studies* already in print for that year.

Postmaster: send address changes to Penn Press Journals, 3905 Spruce Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104.

Visit *Manuscript Studies* on the web at mss.pennpress.org.

The Aachen Inscription: A Draft Dedication Written in Hebrew on an Early Modern Ream Wrapper

LOUIS MEISELMAN
University of Pennsylvania Libraries

CAJS RAR Ms 515 is part of the Moldovan Family Judaica Collection at the University of Pennsylvania Libraries, and was part of a subset of manuscript and print items presented to the library by Joseph T. and Susan Alcalay Moldovan in December 2018. Many of the manuscript items in this ensemble bear witness to Jewish life in Provence, and included within it are several liturgical manuscripts from the Four Communities (Arba'ah Kehilot Kedoshot) of the Comtat Venaissin, a territory that, from 1274 to 1791, was a papal enclave within the kingdom of France. These manuscripts concern the rites of the market towns of Carpentras and L'isle sur la Sorgue, and often mention the specific local *minhagim* (customs) on a title page or colophon. While the items that form the 2018 donation are not exclusively focused on the Jews of the Comtat Venaissin, that region is their primary focus.

However, the Moldovan Family Judaica Collection also includes a fair number of previously uncategorized manuscript fragments. This portion of the gift, being only loosely related to the rest, was stored in a large document binder prior to its accession by the University of Pennsylvania Libraries. The document that is the subject of the present annotation was not

liturgical in nature, and, in cataloguing the collection, it was therefore set aside rapidly. Although initially I thought to catalog it as a fragment, the significance of this manuscript as a distinct item became clearer as its historical layers began to unfold.

The Aachen Inscription

The document consists of a single sheet of spongy paper with a printed image on one side and eighteen long lines of Hebrew text written on the reverse. The printed image, which represents the coat-of-arms of the city of Lille flanked by lions, confirms that the sheet was originally a ream wrapper, a type of envelope used to package a bundle of paper for storage and delivery, which often bore visually noteworthy images as advertisements of the paper maker, the paper mill, or the locale in which the paper was made (fig. 1).¹ The material is grayish and more fibrous than traditional rag paper. Analysis of the ream wrapper imagery suggests that it dates to the seventeenth century. This appears to be the only standalone ream wrapper in the collections of the University of Pennsylvania Libraries.

The Hebrew inscription on the reverse side of the printed image is what renders the item noteworthy; it shows that this ordinary piece of packaging traveled from its original place of production and was subsequently reused (fig. 2). Clearly, the repurposing of an old ream wrapper was advantageous for economic reasons, since the wrapper was essentially a disposable piece of scrap. This use of a cast-off sheet indicates that the inscription was perhaps a trial version or a draft. In any case, the survival of such an informal document is unusual. The cursive Ashkenazic script of the inscription indicates an early eighteenth-century date and a localization in the German-speaking lands of northwest Europe. As will be discussed below, the inscription can be contextualized with precision, as it mentions the city of Aachen, in northwest Germany, as well as individuals and locations pertinent to the Jewish

1 For this genre, see Henk Voorn, *Old Ream Wrappers: An Essay on Early Ream Wrappers of Antiquarian Interest* (North Hills, PA: Bird & Bull Press, 1969).



FIGURE 1. University of Pennsylvania, Library at the Herbert D. Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies, CAJS Rar MS 515, verso.

community based there. It thus transpires that the inscription is a unique witness to the presence of Jews in Aachen during the early modern period.

Surviving documents attest to the presence of Jewish merchants in Aachen as early as the ninth century. By the eleventh century a “Jews’ street” is attested, and by the thirteenth century a small but permanent community was active.² Documents from the Middle Ages consist mainly of financial records pertaining to the local community. An important example is that of an entry in the *Judenschreibsbuch* of Cologne, a document from the late thirteenth century, which, though from a neighboring city, mentions Jews from Aachen: the document outlines the ownership of a property in Cologne inherited through heirs of Aachen-based Jews, and the land is accordingly cited as “the Aachen property” (הקרקע הנקרא מאכא).³

2 For further reading, see Otto Dresemann, *Die Juden in Aachen* (Aachen: M. Jacobi, 1887), especially 10–12.

3 See entry 121 in *Judenschreibsbuch der Laurenzpfarre zu Köln*, ed. Moritz Stern (Berlin: Simion, 1888), for the full text. The *Judenschreibsbuch* also mentions Isaac and Jacob of Aachen in subsequent entries (nos. 141–43) as property owners. For more on the *Judenschreibsbuch*, see the *Corpus der Quellen zur Geschichte der Juden im spätmittelalterlichen Reich* project of the Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur, Mainz: <http://www.medieval-ashkenaz.org>, accessed 2 February 2020.

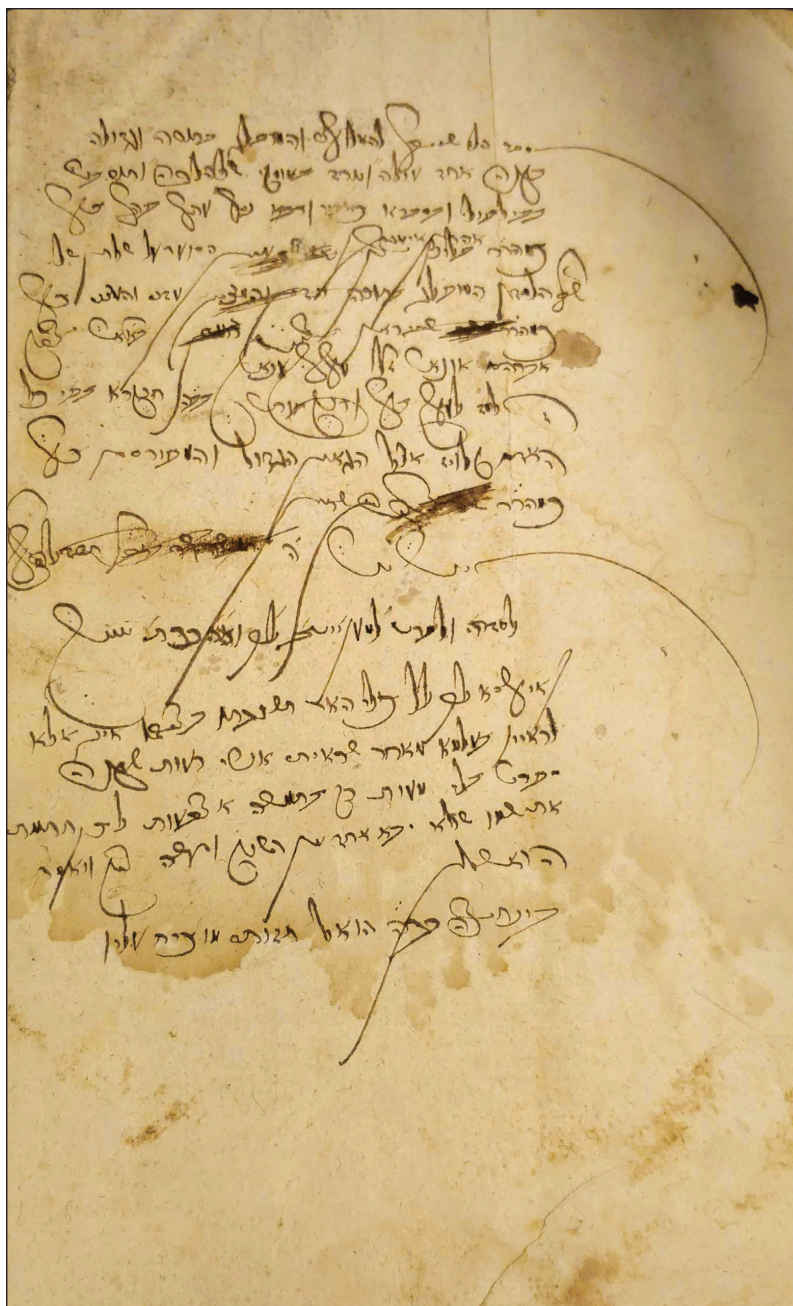


FIGURE 2. The complete Aachen inscription. University of Pennsylvania, Library at the Herbert D. Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies, CAJS Rar MS 515, recto.

Aside from other brief mentions of Jews in Aachen, principally related to the conversions of the fourteenth century and the general expulsion of the city's Jewry in 1629, the surviving documentary record is scant. Records of the Aachen Jewry largely follow this pattern into the early modern period. Not only are extant records very thin, but they are also frequently cursory and mention members of the city's Jewish community only in passing.⁴ The same holds true for Jewish institutions in Aachen, of which there are no new records prior to 1750, well after the 1629 expulsion.

Transcription and Translation

Before further discussing the significance of the inscription, I will provide a transcription and translation of its text.

The Hebrew text:

הספר הלז שייך להאלוף והמופלג בתורה וגדולה | בקנה אחד עולה ויורד באסוקי
הלכה ותושיה | בבי לעולי וכברא כגברא רבא (?) נטע אהל באהלו של תורה |
כמוהר"ר כערכינ אהרן איביש---- הסועד של שארית של שיל הלמדן המופלג
בתורה הדיין והקצין עניו והמצויין של | כמוהר"ר שפירא הר' --- בא"א הק' |
אברהם אונא זל"ל דק"ק עכאן | הלומד לילות -- כיום (?) -- בב"ה הנקרא צבי רל
| הארמ"ס קלויז אצל הגאון המפורסם כ"ת | כמוהר"ר אברהם שטיין | האיש משה
איש הישר בעניו תעשה לפ"ק | נוסדה ולפרט למען ייטב' לך וארכ' ימיד |
אילפא נלך (?) יליל כולי האי תשובתא בצידא אין אלא | לראיין בעלמא מאחר
שראיתי אנשי רעות לעתה | יפרט כלי מעות כל בחמישה אצבעות ולכך חתמתי |
את שמי שלא יבא אחד מן השוק ועלה בה ויאמר | הוא שלי | תינח לה כב"ה
הואיל חדו"ת מוכיה עליו."

The translation:

This volume here is owned by the prominent, outstanding in [his understanding of] Torah | with ease rising about in law [decisions]

⁴ See, for example, the information printed on the Jüdische Gemeinden under "Aachen: Nordrhein Westfalen," available at <https://www.xn--jdische-gemeinden-22b.de/index.php/gemeinden/a-b/103-aachen-nordrhein-westfalen>, accessed 22 October 2020.

and arguments . . . high [in stature], the highly important individual . . . his tent is planted in the tent of Torah, the honorable teacher of great value, Aharon Eibeś [or Abisch], the supporter of the remnant of the synagogue of the great learner, excellent in Torah, the judge, important, R. Shapira son of the generous, . . . learned, outstanding in Torah, the dayan, the prominent . . . Avraham Unna of the holy community of Aachen . . . who studies in the synagogue called Tsevi Rol heims [likely Rüllheims] kloyz . . . with the ga'on [Torah scholar, literally “genius”] the honorable Rabbi Avraham Štein / the man Mosheh [from Numbers 12:3], [in the year of] each man does that which is upright in his eyes [a chronogram from Judges 17:6], organized in the specific [year of this chronogram, borrowed from Deuteronomy 22:7] that I may bestow good upon you and lengthen your days, in the small count [of the Hebrew year sequence; this equals 1717]; where am I going, all of this [excessive writing], the answer is at the side [of the question, i.e. here's the answer; a Talmudic expression, such as that of Babylonian Talmud Sotah 30b]. It is only for a regular proof [of ownership]. After I have witnessed these bad men [meaning, dishonesty or unscrupulousness], one should count all monies [or, all valuable items] with five fingers [meaning, be diligent about one's assets] and therefore, I sign my name so one doesn't come from the street and seize it, and claim that “it's mine.” It is settled like B.H. [referring to Bet Hilel, or the House of Hillel, explained below], since his Torah is prominent about him [meaning he is known for his Torah ideas].

Understanding the Inscription

The ideas expressed by the author of the inscription are not immediately clear, but I have used what I have been able to gather from clues within the inscription and from the larger context to provide a preliminary explanation. As such, this annotation will analyze clues in the language and writing of the Aachen inscription, and will attempt a partial decipherment of the document's dense and arcane language.

The inscription, though rather long and complicated, is a fascinating example of rabbinical *melitsab*, or prose. In this genre, phrases and idioms were taken from a wide range of Jewish religious sources to express a single point. For example, the way the author's name—Mosheh—is indicated is threefold: there is the large Heh (ה) at the opening of the line where his name is mentioned, beginning a new section as if to explain the writing (the Heh is repeated for the beginning of both sequences in the inscription; fig. 3); the explanation below the chronogram about why he must sign his name at all; and his use of the verse in Judges, “each man does what is upright in his eyes,” which is a way of giving oneself credit for an action (in this context at least, for often in rabbinic *responsa* it is used differently).

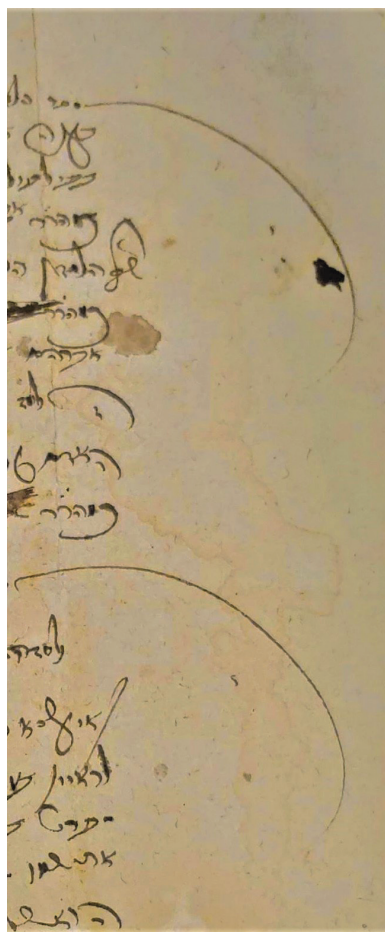


FIGURE 3. University of Pennsylvania, Library at the Herbert D. Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies, CAJS Rar MS 515, recto (detail).

If Mosheh, as author of the inscription, had written the point he was trying to convey in simple terms, there would of course be no mystery or ambiguity to decode, and yet the document would have held far less interest had it been merely a prosaic receipt or the listing of an address.

The inscription was likely a draft, produced in careful preparation for a larger and more refined version—its presence on the reused Lille ream wrapper, in fact, would seem to confirm its ephemeral, preparatory purpose. The finalized epitaph was perhaps intended to be written into a very elaborate gift volume, either print or manuscript, dedicated to a Hebrew scholar and teacher in Aachen named Aharon Eibeś Unna.⁵ Unna was apparently associated with a small synagogue (*kloyz* in Yiddish); it is unclear if this *kloyz* was in Aachen or elsewhere. From the inscription we also learn that Unna studied with a scholar (Śtein) who was known in Aachen (although he may have not lived there, as I was unable to discern any clues related to this question). Rabbi Unna was compared to the House of Hillel at the end of the inscription, likely because he issued rulings for Halakhic queries and was widely respected. This comparison shows that Unna was likely a halakhic—a legal decision-maker—for the community in Aachen, and that the importance of his guidance was being acknowledged through this planned gift dedication.

The fascinating information about individuals and institutions recorded on prosaic manuscript fragments such as this, as with that found on much older genizah items, is often unrecorded elsewhere. The Aachen inscription is an example of this phenomenon: the people, synagogues, and scholarship that it records may not be reflected in any other surviving documents. While there are records of Jews in Aachen at this time, they are very piecemeal, and previously there has been no evidence of this level of rabbinic authority being present in the city.

One additional point of interest regards the spelling of Aachen in the inscription. The traditional names used for the city in other Hebrew documents range from אַא to אַאא, which are phonetically spelled variants of the name Aix (short for Aix-la-Chapelle, the French name for Aachen). However,

5 *Unna* was a noteworthy surname in Germany during the early modern period.



FIGURE 4. View of Aachen, anonymous print after Matthäus Merian I's *Topographia Westphaliae* (1647), 18th century. London, British Museum, 1992, U.72. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

CAJS Rar MS 515 spells the name עֶאָחֵן; this is a new spelling for the city in a Jewish source. In fact, it is the earliest spelling in Hebrew that I have been able to locate of the city's German name, Aachen. The significance of this point is that the new, post-expulsion resettlement of the Jewish community in Aachen was reflected by the introduction of a new Hebrew spelling of the city's name (fig. 4).

Script

The Aachen Inscription contains a notable variation of script that is likely the result of a merger of a number of principal scripts. This combination may have to do with the city of Aachen being situated far west within the Holy Roman Empire, and likewise suggests that at this period there was a great deal of upheaval for the Jews of Aachen; the wide array of influences present in the script indicates the scribe's broad geographic horizons. The character of the script hints at the range of Jewish travelers and the varied

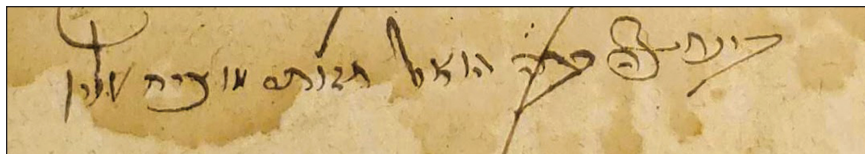


FIGURE 5. University of Pennsylvania, Library at the Herbert D. Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies, CAJS Rar MS 515, recto (detail).

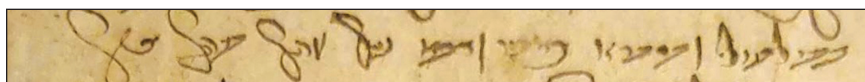


FIGURE 6. University of Pennsylvania, Library at the Herbert D. Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies, CAJS Rar MS 515, recto (detail).

backgrounds of Jewish residents in Aachen at the time. This multitude of influences was likely due to Aachen's unique geographical and historical situation as a place of Jewish communal reintroduction.

The last line of the inscription (fig. 5), for example, demonstrates a wide scope of letterforms: the letter *lamed* (ל) seems to show an Italian influence, perhaps from the northern part of the peninsula or the Tyrol. The *alif* (א) seems distinctly western Ashkenazic; the letters *ayin* (ע), *tav* (ת), and *bet* (ב) are also typical of most contemporary Ashkenazic scripts. Lines 5 and 11 from the inscription have distinctive final loops that are specifically rabbinic, and strictly Ashkenazic (fig. 6).

Finally, next to the principal inscription, there is another Hebrew manuscript annotation present on the document, which consists of a written paragraph of the *Ḥidushim* (novellae) briefly commenting on the Talmud and on the medieval commentaries of the Tosafists (fig. 7).⁶ This much shorter inscription is signed Frankfurt-am-Main, 1778, with a chronogram by a certain Yosef from Saarbrückenheim (Saarbrücken). This is the final element that informs us about the journeys undertaken by this document in its first centuries of existence.

⁶ Talmud Bavli, Zevahim 22a, with the Tosafot in Ḥulin 108a.

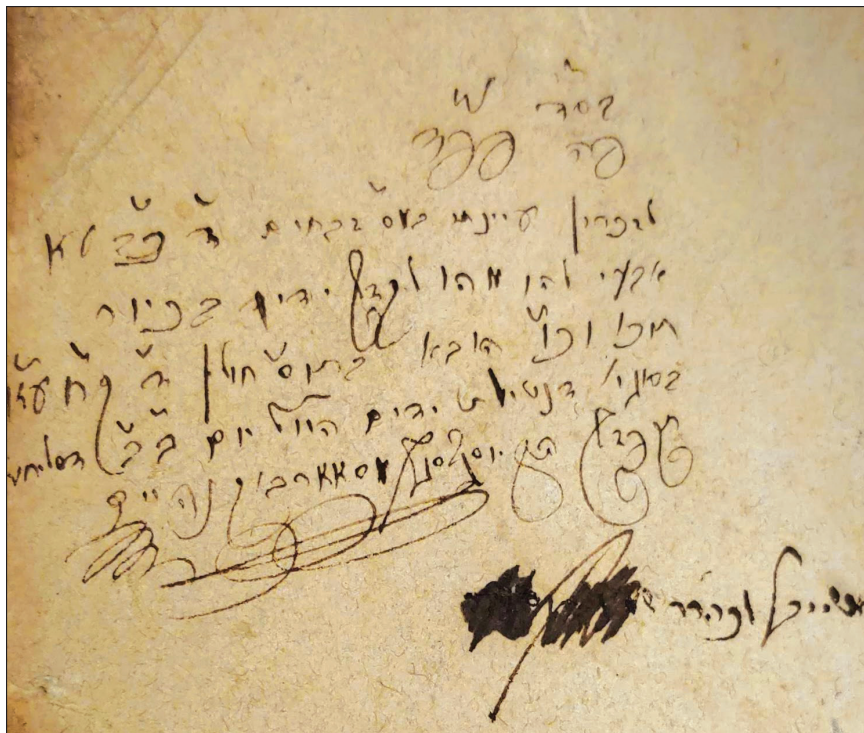


FIGURE 7. University of Pennsylvania, Library at the Herbert D. Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies, CAJS Rar MS 515, recto (detail).