

A North African Judaeo-Arabic letter from the Prize Papers Collection

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Resumen

Este estudio ofrece una edición, traducción y análisis lingüístico de carta judeo-árabe de la colección Prize Papers. La carta presenta documentos judeoárabes argelinos previamente inexplorados de la colección Prize Papers y que constituyen una oportunidad única para estudiar la historia, la lengua y la cultura del comercio judío en el Mediterráneo y en el norte de África a fines del siglo XVIII.

Palabras clave

Judeo-Árabe, Prize Papers, Judíos de Argelia, Árabe, Hebreo.

Abstract

This paper presents an edition, translation and linguistic analysis of a Judaeo-Arabic letter from the Prize Papers Collection. The letter introduces previously unexplored Algerian Judaeo-Arabic documents from the Prize Papers Collection, which constitute a unique chance to study the history, language and culture of Jewish trading across the Mediterranean and North Africa during the late 18th century.

Keywords

Judaeo-Arabic, Prize Papers, Algerian Jews, Arabic, Hebrew.

Introduction

Most extant business letters written in Judaeo-Arabic are preserved in the Cairo Genizah and are from the Ottoman period, written between the late 18th and early 19th century. These letters are not only important to the study of Jewish socioeconomic history, but they also constitute an important corpus to study the epistolary and linguistic features of the time.¹

¹ Geoffrey Khan, "A Judaeo-Arabic Document from Ottoman Egypt in the Rylands Genizah Collection," in *Journal of Semitic studies. Supplementary*, vol. 31, *From Cairo to Manchester: Studies in the Rylands Genizah Fragments*, ed. Renate Smithuis and Philip S. Alexander (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

The Prize Papers Collection at the National Archives in Kew also holds a considerable number of Judaeo-Arabic business and personal documents written between 1783 and 1799. These documents, which have remained unread for more than two centuries, constitute a unique opportunity to study the socioeconomic history and language of North African Jews during the Ottoman period. The collection sheds light on the Algerian Jewish business network in the late 18th century, and opens up new avenues of research and the possibility of making comparisons to the business correspondence from the Cairo Genizah.

This paper presents a letter from the recently discovered Algerian Judaeo-Arabic letters in the Prize Papers Collection. The collection was discovered by the author of this article in the National Archives in Kew under the classmark HCA 32. The author is currently working on an edition of all the letters in the collection with an English translation and commentary for publication in three volumes.²

The paper analyses letter No. 22 from the collection. Hebrew and Arabic scripts are provided followed by an English translation with linguistic commentary on the language in the letter. The letter was sent from Algiers by Yehoshua Beniste to Shlomo Bū Sha'ra in Constantine. The year is not mentioned in the letter, although it is estimated to have been written between 1792 and 1797, based on the dates found in other letters in the same collection with the same sender and recipient. Most of the letters in the collection, which contains more than 280 pieces of correspondence, were addressed to Shlomo Bū Sha'ra. In the letter here, Yehoshua Beniste is asking Shlomo for help regarding the marriage of a third person, whose name is not mentioned. The letter refers to a plague that was preventing people from taking part in trade activities at the time in Algeria.³

² A book proposal submitted to Brill under the title *Three Algerian Jews and the Ship 'Venus': Judaeo-Arabic Documents Intercepted in the Year 1800*.

³ A longer and more detailed version of the article was submitted to another journal and is currently under review. That article provides a linguistic and historical analysis of a sample of 15 letters written in Arabic and Judaeo-Arabic scripts.

The Letter HCA 32/1208/22

Hebrew Transcription
envelope

1. ליד אבחור אנחמד שלמה
2. בו שערה יצ"ו⁴
3. מן גזאייר לקסמטינה
4. פגי"ן⁵

recto

1. בע"ה⁶ כטיב יום ג' יב פי מנאחים
2. ליד אבחור אנחמד ל־שלמה בו שערה יצ"ו⁷
3. לברה ולך מן ענדי אנה ח'מ'⁸ מסלם עליך כטיר מן אסלם ובעד אסלם
4. וליום סמענה ביך אללי כנת מוריד וסמענה עלה מה גאז עליך ובקה
5. קלבנה מחאייר יאסר חאתה סמענה פי בריית בן דאנן באללי סבת לרוחך
6. ש'ל'⁹ אלה יכאמל עליך בלכיר ותבקה תחרס תרסלנה ברייא מן יאדך
7. באש יתאנה קלבנה ולוכאן תנדר נאנך מה תעקלה מן תכמיס חין
8. סמעת ביך וחתה דלוק ש'ל'¹⁰ נאנך ראי תסלם עליך ודנינה וסטיטרו
9. יסלמו עליך וסגאר יסלמו עליך כבאר וסגאר וכטך עזיזה תסלם עליך
10. וליום יא שלמה אסמע לאד לכלאם אדי ראני נקלך מושי עיב עליך
11. חאתה אלי נשקה נכטבלך לאיין לערוס וקפ באש יזאווג וחתה דרא[ה]ם
12. מאסב לא באש ירפד ולה באש יחת ונתי עמלת קלבך פי ראחה לוכאן
13. מאכאנש ענדו כנת אנטינה לאזם עליך תעטילו באש יזווג לה לעסך
14. ענדו נתעו וידא סלפטו קהי בוגו מן גמלת אנאס אלי ראך טסאל[פ]ום

⁴ ישמרהו צורו ויחיהו

⁵ פורץ גדר ישקנו נחש

⁶ בעזרת השם

⁷ ישמרהו צורו ויחיהו

⁸ חותם מטה

⁹ שבה לאל

¹⁰ שבה לאל

15. חראס ושיו ראוו ענדך מרון צידמאן תקבד לאיין יא שלמה עלה
16. כתרי באלך תחרת¹¹ פי אד לכלם ואנה וחק אד לחרופ לוכאן כאן
17. תרחי מוסע חטה כנת נסלפו אלה אסעה מה פיאה תמע לגנאיין
18. מה כלונה פלוס לה באש נכלו ולה באש נסלפו ולייום יא שלמה
19. למען אשים פי מתחרס תרסלי קהי בוגו בידמן ולוכאן סבנה
20. עלה יד ברהם תמים סלעה כנה נכדואה אלה אלמרד מה כאן
21. לא מן יביע ולה מן ישרי מן גארת אלמרד ולחרופ בקסור
22. ולה רית בהש¹² נטול עליך אלה בלכיר שלם רב {ע' ה' ¹³ ישועה }
{ בינשתי ס ט }
- 23.

Arabic transcription¹⁴

envelope

1. ליד אבחור אנחמד שלמה
2. בו شعרה יצ"ו
3. من جزاير لقسمطينه
4. פגיון

recto

1. בע"ה כטיב יום ג' יב פי מנאחים
2. ליד אבחור אנחמד ל שלמה בו שערה יצ"ו
3. لبراه ولك من عندي أنه ه'م' مسلم عليك كطير من اسلم وبعد اسلم
4. وليوم سمعنه بيك اللي كنت مرید وسمعنه עלه مه جاز عليك وبقه
5. قلبنه محايير ياسر حاته سمعنه פי بريية בן דאנן בללי סבט לרוחק
6. ש'ל' אלה יכامل عليك بلخير وتبقه تحرس ترسلنه بريיה מן יאדך

¹¹ This should be תחרס.

¹² This should be באש.

¹³ עבד אלוהים.

¹⁴ I have transcoded the letters into Arabic to enable comparison with other contemporary texts and to make them accessible to Arabists not familiar with the Hebrew script. I follow the methodology used by Diem in this regard, see: Werner Diem, "Ägyptisch-Arabisch im 17. Jahrhundert Die arabischen Zeugenaussagen in Mordechai ha-Levis Sefer Darke no'am (Venedig 1697)," *Mediterranean Language Review* 21 (2014): 1-89.

7. باش يتانه قلبنا ولوكان تندر نانك مه تعقله من تخميس حين
8. سمعت بيك وحته دلوق 'ش'ل' نانك رايبى تسلم عليك وذنينه وسطيظرو
9. يسلما عليك وسجار يسلما عليك كبار وسجار وخطك عزيزه تسلم عليك
10. وليوم يا 'ش'ل'م' اسمع لاد لكلام ادي راني نقلك موشي عيب عليك
11. حاته الي نشقه نكطبلك لايبين لعروس وقف باش يزاوروج وحته در[ه]م¹⁵
12. ماسب لا باش يرفد وله باش يحت (يحت) ونتي عملت قلبك في راحة لوكان
13. ماكانش عندو كنت انطينه لازم عليك تعطيلو باش يزوروج له لعسك
14. عندو نتعو ويذا سلفطو קהי בوجو من جمלת اناس الي راك طسال[ف]وم
15. حراس وشيو راوو عندك مروون بيدمان تقيد (تقبض)¹⁶ لايبين يا 'ش'ل'م' عله
16. ختري بالك تحرت (تحرس) في اد لكلم وانه وحق اد لحروف لوكان كان
17. ترحي (طرحي) موسع حطه (حته) كنه نسلفو اله اسعه مه فياه تمع (طمع) لغنايين
18. مه خلونه فلوس له باش نخلو وله باش نسلفو وليوم يا 'ش'ل'م'
19. למען אשים في متحرس ترسلي קהי בوجو بيدمان ولوكان سبینه
20. عله يد ברהם חמים سلعه كنه نخدواه اله المرد (المرض) مه كان
21. لا من يبيع وله من يشري من غارت المرد (المرض) ولحروف بقسور
22. وله ريت باش نطول عليك اله بلخير שלם רב {ע' ה' ישועה}¹⁷
23. {בינשתי ס ט}

Translation

envelope

1. To the hands of the nice young man Shlomo
2. Bū Sha'ra, may God protect him and prolong his life
3. From Algiers to Constantine
4. 'He who breaches the fence will be bitten by a snake'¹⁸

recto

1. By the help of God written on Tuesday the 12th of Menachem Av.

¹⁵ The characters between [] are suggested by the author.

¹⁶ The words between () are added by the author of the article.

¹⁷ {} appears in the original letter.

¹⁸ Kohelet-Ecclesiastes (10:8).

2. To the hands of the nice young man Shlomo Bū Sha'ra, may God protect him and prolong his life.
3. This letter is for you from me, the one who signs below, with many greetings. After greetings,
4. now, we understood what you were demanding, and we knew about what happened to you, and our heart
5. was much worried (about you) until we read the (good) news in Ben Danan's letter concerning you.
6. Thanks to God. May God help you in achieving your wishes in wellness, and make sure to send us a letter by your hand
7. in order to rest our heart. If you had seen your grandmother (back then) you would not have recognized her because of the *taḵmīs*¹⁹
8. at the time she recently heard about you, and even nowadays. Thanks to God. Your grandmother sends you greetings. Zvena and Stitro
9. send you greetings. All your friends, including children and adults, send you many greetings. Your sister 'Aziza sends you greetings.
10. Now Shlomo, listen to what I am telling you. It is such a shame
11. that you make me write to you (asking for help), this is because the marriage was suspended, even Dirhams (money)
12. were impossible to save. That is not acceptable by any means. You did not concern yourself. If
13. he had no money you should have given him some in order to get married. Though, be aware that
14. he might have money. If you lend him 115 Budju,²⁰ as you do with other people to whom you give money,
15. be careful. If you have Maron Bidman²¹ do not lose it. Because, Sholom, you are in my
16. mind. You better be warned about that. I swear by these letters that if I had had enough
17. money, I would have lent it to him. However, I do not have any money currently. The greedy
18. people did not allow us to make money, neither to save nor to lend. Now Shlomo,
19. for God's sake, please make sure to send me 115 Budju Bidman. If I had left

¹⁹ *taḵmīs*, or the Hamsa hand, a symbol that some people in the Middle East believe protects them from evil forces and envy.

²⁰ Or Riyyāl Budju; this was a currency made of silver and used in Algeria until 1848. In the 1820s, one Budju weighed about 10 grams. See S. Pamuk, P.E.H.S. Pamuk, and D. Morgan, *A Monetary History of the Ottoman Empire* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 183–84.

²¹ Possibly a currency.

20. merchandise with Barhām Tamīm, I would have deducted the money from it. However, the plague²² did not allow
21. anyone either to buy or to sell, only because of the plague's attack. Words are brief,
22. and I would not add more for your sake, but kind words. Many greetings. (from) the slave of God, Yehoshua Beniste,
23. A Pure Sephardi.

Grammatical notes and linguistic features in the letter

Orthography

The words in this letter are written using modern Hebrew script. Below is a discussion of some cases where the convention of Arabic script is used in the Judaeo-Arabic letter.

1. *tā'* - ت

The Arabic consonant *tā'* is represented by ת and ט interchangeably, e.g. כטיב 'written in', recto, line 1; כטיר 'much' recto, line 3; כנה 'you were' recto, line 4; תרסלנה 'to send us' recto, line 4. This inconsistency even applies to the same word, e.g. וחתה 'even that' recto, line 8; חטה 'that'.

2. *ḏād* - ض

The Hebrew ד represents both the *ḏād* and *dāl* consonants in the letter, e.g. בעד 'after', recto, line 3; אלמרד 'the illness', 'the plague' recto, lines 20, 21.

3. *jīm* and *ḡayn* - ج , غ

The *ḡayn* and *jīm* consonants are represented by ג and ג with or without an underdot, e.g. יזאוג 'to get married' recto, line 11; גמלת 'the total of' recto, line 14; גארת 'attack' recto, line 21; לגנאיין 'greedy people' recto, line 17; סגאר 'children'.

4. *kā'* - خ

This consonant is represented by כ with a superscript diacritic dot, e.g. בלכיר 'in wellness' recto, line 22; נכדואה 'we take it' recto, line 20.

²² In the late 18th century, the plague known as the 'black death' struck Algeria. See Louis A. Berbrugger, *Mémoire sur la peste en Algérie depuis 1552 jusqu'en 1819* (Paris, 1847).

5. *shadda*

shadda is represented by writing the Hebrew consonant twice. However, it appears in few other examples, e.g. יוּוֹגַ 'to foster the marriage'/'to pair' recto, line 13. אַלְלִי (demonstrative pronoun) recto, line 4. There are some cases in which the *shadda* is represented without repeating the consonants, e.g. כּוּנָה *kunnā* 'we would have...' recto, line 20.

6. Word-final *matres lectionis*

The ending vowel /a/ is mainly represented in the corpus of this study by the *mater lectionis* ה, e.g. קִלְבְּנָה 'our heart' recto, line 5; חָתָה 'that' recto, line 8; לֵה 'no' recto, line 18. However, in other cases the final /a/ is represented by the *mater lectionis* א, e.g. יֵה 'hey' recto, line 15; לֵה 'no' recto, line 21.

7. *Scriptio Plena* of the long vowel /ā/

The long vowel /ā/ is represented in the letter by א, e.g. יֵאֶסֶר *yāsir* 'very much' recto, line 5; כְּבָאֵר *kbār* 'adults' recto, line 9; רֵאֵנִי *rānī* 'I am' recto, line 10. There are few other cases where the long vowel is not represented in the letter, e.g. לְכֵלָם *leklām* 'words' recto, line 16.

8. Definite article ال

In the Algerian Arabic dialect, the definite article *el* is pronounced *le*, e.g. לְהַרְוֵף *lehrūf* 'the words', literary: 'the letter' recto, line 21; לְכֵלָם *leklām* 'words' recto, line 10. However, some letters in the correspondence do not follow the same rules, e.g. אֵלְסֵלָם 'greetings' recto, line 3.

Verb

The *n* prefix is used with the present tense for the first person singular, e.g. נִכְטְבֵלְךְ 'I write to you' recto, line 11; נִסְלַפּוּ 'I lend him money' recto, line 17. The present tense in this example shares some dialectical features of verb conjugation in Algerian Arabic. The particle *rānī* comes before the verb to represent the present continuous, e.g. רֵאֵנִי נִקְלֵךְ 'I am telling you' recto, line 10. The plural verbal ending, *ūna*, in classical Arabic is shortened in the letter, e.g. the verb יִסְלְמוּ in this example: וְסִגְאֵר יִסְלְמוּ עֵלֶיךְ 'children are sending you greetings' recto, line 9.

Syntax

1. Verbal syntax

The passive verbal derivation in the letters reflects colloquial Algerian Arabic, e.g. כתיב/כטיב *kteb* 'written in', in comparison to the classical Arabic كُتِبَ *kuteba*. Most of the letters in the collection begin with the verb כתיב/כטיב, followed by the date of the letter. There are some examples in the letters of using the verb *baqā* as an auxiliary verb, which is a common feature in Arabic dialects, e.g. ותבקה תחרס תרסלנה 'and make sure to send us' recto, line 6. Another obvious dialectical form is the use of the particle *rā* plus personal pronouns to represent the form of 'to be', e.g. راني نفاك 'I am telling you' recto, line 10; راك طسال[خ]-وم 'to whom you give money' recto, line 14.

2. Demonstratives

The main demonstrative pronoun used in the letter in this study is אד, e.g. תחרס פי אד לכלם 'be warned about that' recto, lines 16; וחק אד לחרופ 'I swear by these letters' recto, line 16.

3. Relative particle

The relative particle used in the letter in this study is אללי, which is not inflected for number or gender, e.g. כנת מוריד אללי 'what you were demanding' recto, line 4.

4. Possessive pronouns

Possessive construction is conveyed by the use of the particle נתע, e.g. ענדו נתעו 'he has his money' recto, line 14.

5. Negation

The particle לא is used before verbs in some constructions in the letter, e.g. לא מן יביע ולה מן ישרי 'either to buy or to sell' recto, lines 20–21.

Lexicon

The letter contains a considerable number of words which are part of the vernacular lexicon of North African Arabic, e.g. *yāsir* 'a lot' recto, line 5; *briyyā* 'a letter' recto, line 6; *bāsh* 'to' recto, lines 7, 12, 18, 22; *mūshī 'ib 'alīk* 'It is such a shame' recto, line 10.

Code-switching

Written code-switching is a common feature in Judaeo-Arabic business letters from the Cairo Genizah. The letter here, too, contains some examples of Hebrew elements incorporated into the text. The examples are mainly divided into two types. The first is the use of Hebrew formulaic abbreviations: ח'מ' (חותם 'the one who signs below' recto, line 2; של' (שבח לאל) 'Thanks to God' recto, lines 6 and 8; יצ"ו (ישמרהו צורו ויחיהו) 'may God protect him and prolong his life' recto, line 2; פגיון (פורץ גדר יִשְׁכְּנוּ נחש) 'He who breaches the fence will be bitten by a snake' envelope, line 4. The second type of Hebrew elements in the letter is complete Hebrew words, e.g. למען אשים²³ 'for God's sake' recto, line 19; שלם רב 'many greetings' recto, line, 22.

²³ Note the use of the Arabic consonant // instead of the Hebrew /ה/ in השם. The same applies to these Hebrew words אבהור; אבהמד, recto, line 2.