

## JEWISH TRADERS IN THE INDIAN OCEAN—TENTH TO THIRTEENTH CENTURIES: A REVIEW OF PUBLISHED DOCUMENTS FROM THE CAIRO GENIZAH<sup>1</sup>

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“After asking God, the exalted, for guidance I constructed a boat in Aden and sent goods in it to Ceylon in partnership with the illustrious sheikh Bilal. These of our coreligionists traveled in it: Salim, the son of the cantor, Ibn Hūdada (‘of the art of smithing’) and al-Batiti (‘maker of slippers’), and the goldsmith, who had arrived here in his company, and the two goldsmiths, who came this year, Abu ‘Ali and the Maghrebi. All these traveled in the boat, may God ordain their safe arrival.”<sup>1</sup>

This excerpt from a letter written by the Trustee of Merchants in Aden to a merchant in Fustat (Old Cairo) in about the year 1130 shows the links among Egypt, Aden, and South Asia. Further, it is evidence that there were partnerships between Jews and Muslim Arabs (sheikh Bilal, for example); that Aden was a key intermediate point in trade between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean; that traders came from different professions such as goldsmithing and cantorial families, and that consequently they had limited capital; and that they came from the Maghreb (Tunisia). The references to God required that the letter had to be preserved. And, the most convenient place to preserve it was in the genizah. It is, thus, an excellent example from the Cairo genizah of proof of the presence of Jewish traders in the Indian Ocean.

Between the tenth and thirteenth centuries, Jewish traders—such as the author of the above letter—participated in the reopening of the ancient Roman sea route from Egypt to India by sailing south on the Red Sea to Yemen and then east on the Indian Ocean to the Malabar Coast and Gujarat State. Their letters, court depositions, and contracts give a human face to the interactions between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. Of what relevance is their religious-ethnic identity? Why did the Jews go and not someone else? What routes did they follow? What goods and merchandise were changing hands? What was the relationship between these men and other communities? How did they deal with different governments? Thousands of documents discovered in a storeroom of the Ben Ezra Synagogue in Fustat, Old Cairo, provide the answers.

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A word about the *genizah*, the Hebrew word for "storehouse," "archive," or "hiding place." According to Jewish tradition, it is forbidden to destroy anything with the name of God written or inscribed on it. This obviously includes prayer books, Bibles, and other explicitly religious material; it also includes any direct or indirect references to the "Almighty" in secular letters, contracts, court depositions, prose, and poetry. A religious Jew would never write the Biblical name of God, the Tetragrammaton; rather, he or she would write "*HaShem*" (the Name). Many observant Jews begin personal letters to other Jews with an abbreviated form of "With the help of The Name." In the twelfth century, some word for God would also be written in official correspondence with Muslim authorities. In about 1123, for example, Musa ibn Sadaqa, a Jewish merchant, wrote a petition to the government of Egypt pleading for the release of merchandise he had purchased in India and in Yemen and shipped to Egypt. He terminated the petition with words that guaranteed that the document could not be destroyed: "The blessings and peace of God be upon our lord Muhammad the prophet and his family." The reference to Muhammad shows, of course, that however free the Jews were in Fatimid Egypt, they carefully observed certain Muslim conventions.<sup>2</sup> This letter along with letters between Jews was to be buried in a *genizah*, often located in a cemetery where all texts would disintegrate.

Fortunately, the *genizah* of the Ben Ezra Synagogue of Fustat, Old Cairo, was above ground in the synagogue itself and, because of the dry climate of Egypt, the documents survived. During the nineteenth century, scraps, bits, and pieces of prayers and letters began to appear on the antiquities markets. Scholars recognized their value. Solomon Schechter (1857-1915) and his colleagues from Cambridge University arranged to have the majority of the materials transported to Cambridge at the end of the century. Today, the quarter million documents and fragments of documents retrieved from this and other Egyptian sources are available in the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit of Cambridge University Library, as well as at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, the Freer Collection in Washington, D.C., the Bodleian Library at Oxford, the Heidelberg University Library, the Strasbourg University Library, and elsewhere. They are probably the most important non-Indian archive of primary source materials dealing with the Indian Ocean prior to the arrival of western European explorers, traders, and colonialists.<sup>3</sup>

#### Genizah Materials

Access to most *genizah* material is limited to those who can read Judaeo-Arabic, a variety of Arabic written with Hebrew letters, used for the last 1,000 years by Jews in Arab lands from Spain to Tunisia, to Egypt, to Iraq to Yemen.<sup>4</sup> Hebrew texts are also in the Cairo *genizah*, for Hebrew was always used as the language of sacred books, prayers and, thanks to inspiration from Arabs, as the language of poetry. The Arabic language texts in the collection are mainly Jewish communications with the government. Some Arabic documents found in the *genizah* have nothing to do with Jews, however. They concern relations among Muslims. Using these sources Hassan S. Khalilieh completed a PhD dissertation in 1995 at Princeton University: "Islamic

Maritime Law in the Classical Period 815-1492: A Study Based on Jurisprudential, Historical, and Geniza Sources.”

Scholars have produced a steady stream of publications based on genizah documents, and they have illuminated Jewish secular and religious life in North Africa, the land of Israel, Yemen and points east to India, particularly during the twelfth century. In the process, much has been revealed about the Jews' role in trade. One of the most creative recent examples of the uses of genizah materials in this regard is Amitav Ghosh's historical novel *In an Antique Land*.<sup>5</sup> Ghosh spins an interesting tale from the letters and other materials by and about Abraham Ben Yiju, a Jewish trader and manufacturer.

Ben Yiju was born in Qayrawan, Tunisia; he moved to Fustat and then settled in Mangalore during the 1130s. He stayed in India for 17 years and in Yemen for three years. His factory made and repaired metal pots, which he exported, and he shipped betel nuts and other products from India.<sup>6</sup> Ghosh tells the story of this trader's discovery of India and Indians; in his view, Ben-Yiju's "life is emblematic of the genizah, for it brings together the cultural and economic worlds of the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea."<sup>7</sup>

For example, in 1139 Khalaf b. Isaac b. Bundar wrote from Aden to Ben Yiju in Mangalore to tell him that his shipment of iron, brass vessels, cardamom, vessel covers arrived although the betel nuts did not. The pepper arrived in a different ship, he added. The following excerpt—published by S.D. Goitein, not Ghosh—shows how payment for these items was made:

I sent to you five mann of good silk on my account, for I saw that my master the illustrious elder Madmun, had sent some to Ben 'Adlan and to others and it was reported in his (Ben 'Adlan's) name that it is selling well in Malabar. Therefore, I thought it was preferable to send, instead of gold, merchandise which might bring some profit. Thus, kindly sell it for me for whatever price God, the exalted, assigns and send it to me in any ship, without any responsibility for any risk on land or sea. If there is an opportunity to buy betel-nut or cardamom, kindly do so, but you, my master, need no instructions, for you are competent. Indeed, I cause you trouble every year; but, you, my master, do excuse me, as it has always been your habit, past and present."<sup>8</sup>

The most important book of genizah materials about the Jewish link between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean still has not been published, however. This is, of course, Goitein's "India Book."

Shlomo Dov Goitein was born in Bavaria in 1900. After his university studies in Frankfurt and Berlin, he settled in Palestine where he became the first instructor in Islamic studies at the Hebrew University, which was founded in Jerusalem in 1923. His research into genizah documents focused on Indian Ocean commerce. "By 1957, he had assembled about 200 documents dealing with the trade across the Indian

Ocean."<sup>9</sup> He realized, however, that the Jewish role in Indian Ocean trade was part of a larger picture of Jews in Mediterranean society, culture, and economics.

Goitein then decided to concentrate on studies of Jewish communities in the Mediterranean, particularly during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, as shown in genizah materials, and to return to his India project later. The results of his research, the five volumes of *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World As Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Genizah*, were published between 1967 and 1988. In 1993, the University of California Press produced a sixth volume—*Cumulative Indices*—which his former assistant Paula Sanders prepared.<sup>10</sup>

Goitein always knew his initial project, the "India Book," was important, and he helped Shaul Shaked publish a "tentative" genizah bibliography in 1964 which included letters relevant to India.<sup>11</sup> Shaked's brief descriptions give glimpses of the variety and richness of these documents: a question to Moses Maimonides about Jewish law, e.g. "the rights of the wife of an absent India merchant," on p. 44. An "account of Ibn Yuji's brass factory [in Mangalore], and two copies in Ibn Yiju's hand of a ship's papers relating to the captain Abu Abdallah b. al-Kata'ib, on p. 45. A fragment of a letter from Kalaf b. Isaac, Aden to Halfon b. Nethaneel in Cairo, Oct-Nov 1140, on p. 211. A letter from Madmun b. Japheth of Aden to Ben Yiju, India, on p. 47. A power of attorney against Ibn al-Raqqi who disappeared in India with the merchandise specified (about 1050), on p. 50.

In 1973, Goitein published a few important India-related documents in his *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders*. By the time of his death in 1985, he had collected, translated, classified, and edited about 400 fragments and fairly complete documents left by Jewish traders in the India trade. To this day, his manuscript has not been published, but fortunately, Goitein's students, colleagues, and others have published and continue to publish articles and books based on this collection.<sup>12</sup>

Their publications alongside the voluminous writings of Goitein<sup>13</sup> have brought to light many of the approximately 1,000 individuals mentioned in genizah documents. Of these, a few dozen were actively involved in the India trade.<sup>14</sup> The names include Abu Ya'qub Joseph Lebdi, Abu Zikri Judah Kohen, Joseph Ibn 'Awkal, Madmun b. Yaphet, the Maimonides family (David and Moses), Halfon b. Nethaneel, and Abraham b. Yiju. They appear in court depositions, marriage contracts, deeds of sale, personal letters, business letters, letters to authorities, communal affairs, questions to rabbis and scholars with their responsa, scrolls, poetry, and other forms of creative writing—almost all on paper. They wrote from Egypt, the Maghreb, Yemen, the Malabar Coast of southwest India, elsewhere in the Indian Ocean, and further afield.

Professor Stefane C. Reif's *Published Material from the Cambridge Genizah Collections* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) is of great help in grappling with genizah documents. Reif is director of the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit. Reif and his colleagues are currently updating that book. Thanks to their generosity, I examined the list of published and unpublished items from the Cambridge documents that Goitein collected for his "India Book." According to my count, as of June 1999, the published items number 151, while 191 are not published,

and the publishing history of 30 items is unknown. Thus, the majority of the India materials have not appeared in print.

The single most important source for published genizah materials relating to India are, thus, still Goitein's five volume *Mediterranean Society* along with his *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders*. Even without the very valuable "India Book," which should eventually be published, we can begin to understand how a small group of middlemen participated in what Indian Ocean scholars, Helene Basu and Peter Flugel, have called western India's "historical integration in global networks of trade and migration."<sup>15</sup>

### Why the Jews?

In the European mind, the Jews are the quintessential middlemen, but in every part of the world some group—Chinese in southeast Asia, Armenians in Turkey, Indians in East Africa, Arabs in west Africa, Greeks in Egypt, Parsis in India, Hausas in west Africa, and Japanese in Brazil—plays this role, particularly in times of economic and social change. Theoretical works and case studies are increasing our understanding of middlemen or, more appropriately, of scholar Walter P. Zenner's "intermediate minorities [who are] ethnic groups which are disproportionately represented in commercial or financial occupations."<sup>16</sup>

Other epithets have been used by scholars such as Daniel Chirot, Anthony Reid, Abner Cohen, Philip Curtin, Zenner, and Edna Bonacich. They have made the most recent contributions to a body of literature that began with Max Weber's and Werner Sombart's studies of the origins of capitalism. Max Weber used the rather pejorative "pariah capitalists;" Abner Cohen and Philip Curtin wrote about "trade diasporas;" Zenner coined the term "minorities in the middle;" and Anthony Reid preferred "entrepreneurial minorities."<sup>17</sup> They agree that during times of rapid economic expansion and change, certain minorities are more likely than others to take risks and to find a profitable niche for themselves by entering a new profession or by trading new products which the majority eschews out of ignorance or fear of social disapproval.

Minorities are more likely than majorities to take risks in times of unsettling economic change. They are already somewhat marginalized with less of a stake in the status quo than the majority, which means they are willing to experiment. Because they are also part of a diaspora, they can mobilize capital and use information from other members of their community outside the country. In Europe and southeast Asia:

The Jews and the overseas Chinese were the quickest to exploit the opportunities of the new commercialism because they were uninhibited by feudal traditions or landholding and because they had the necessary international contacts to move capital and goods across boundaries.<sup>18</sup>

From the late Roman Empire, Jews, like Greeks, were dispersed in the Mediterranean. To survive, they had to understand majorities and move carefully around them; they had to have excellent sources of information about economic and

technological change and opportunities; and they had to be innovative. The stakes were high, and they were highly motivated. Braudel puts it best:

“But all Jewish communities were obliged to engage in a dialogue, sometimes in dramatic circumstances when around them the entire nature of the dominant civilization changed. The Moslems replaced the Christians in Spain, then the Christians returned after the belated victories of the Reconquest. Jews who had spoken Arabic now had to learn Spanish.”<sup>19</sup>

With these language skills and an understanding of the different civilizations, they moved from country to country bringing new products and concepts.

The niche the entrepreneurial minority occupies is often temporary because once the majority understands the benefits, it tries to reserve them for itself. In a non-democratic system it is easy for the majority to pass discriminatory laws and create or exacerbate antagonisms toward the minority when it wants to remove them from profitable economic activities. If displacement of the minority is not possible, segments of the majority may from time to time express their jealousies and frustrations in violent actions against the minority. Recent attacks on the Chinese merchants in Indonesia are an example.

Jewish migration in the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean was the result of fears about conflict where they lived, perceived economic opportunities elsewhere in a niche not occupied by others, assurances from local authorities of safe haven, and the presence of a welcoming Jewish community. Since Biblical days, Jews had lived in the eastern Mediterranean; they spread themselves out over the whole Mediterranean Sea during the Roman Empire, but what about the Indian Ocean?

#### **Jewish Migration in the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea**

According to their own oral traditions, the Bene Israel of Maharashtra and the Jewish Malabar of Kerala came to India from Israel or from Persia after the destruction of the First Temple in 586 BCE (Before the Common Era, a nonsectarian alternative to BC) or after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE (Common Era, a nonsectarian alternative to AD). No independent evidence about such an eastward migration exists, but an ancient Jewish awareness of India is evident in the biblical Book of Esther, the first century CE writings of Josephus, and the fifth century CE Babylonian Talmud.<sup>20</sup> Documents such as lists of concessions inscribed on copper plates, inscriptions on tombstones, and testimonies by Arabs and the first European visitors prove a Jewish settlement in India from at least the tenth century.

Babylonian and Persian Jews participated in the trade between the Persian Gulf and India even earlier than that. Beginning with the accession of the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad in the eighth century Jews, along with Muslims, traded from their base in Baghdad and Basra with India.<sup>21</sup> Although documents from Jewish traders of Mesopotamia have not been discovered, as far as I know, Jewish intellectuals in Mesopotamia such as Saadia Gaon (882 to 942) refer to Jews trading in and traveling to India. During the same years, their co-religionists around the Mediterranean were satisfied to trade within the Mediterranean. Each traded within

their own realm, but steady communication persisted between Jews living in the western part of the Muslim empire and Jews living in the eastern part.

Pax Islamica, like Pax Romana, facilitated Jewish international trade, migration, and intra-communal spiritual and secular communications. An interesting document related to the activities of Abraham ben Yiju shows the links between Mangalore, Baghdad, and Fustat. It also shows that there were enough Jews in Mangalore to constitute a court. On October 17, 1132, this court manumitted a slave girl belonging to Abraham b. Yiju.

In the city of Mangalore...the royal city, which is situated on the Great Sea and which is under the jurisdiction of our Lord Daniel, the great prince, the head of the diaspora of all Israel, the son of our lord Hisday, the great prince...and also under the jurisdiction of our Gaon Masliah ha-Kohen, the head of the *Yeshiva Ge'on Ya'aqov* [the Palestinian Academy], the son of Solomon, the head of the Yeshiva...<sup>22</sup>

The reference to Lord Daniel is to the exilarch in Baghdad, who claimed to be a descendant of King David and the leader of all Jews in exile. The reference to the Gaon is to the prestigious spiritual and intellectual principal of the Palestine Academy, then was located in Egypt. In short, the court felt its actions would be legitimate only if it recognized the superior authority of Jewish institutions in Iraq and Egypt with which it had contact. The human side is never absent from genizah documents: Abraham b. Yiju probably went to all this trouble to formalize the freeing of this girl because he wanted to marry her. (This is what Ghosh believes.)

When the center of Muslim power shifted, the Jews moved as well. Their survival depended on understanding and adapting to internal Muslim Empire power struggles and ideologies over which they had absolutely no control. While the Caliphate and the center of Islamic power rested in Baghdad, the Jewish community of Mesopotamia grew and prospered. With the decline of Baghdad, the Jewish presence there almost disappeared. The Jews moved west toward the more stable Mediterranean where new centers of Islamic power and Islamic intellectual activity were established.

In the tenth century, Tunisia was one of the Jews' most important destinations, particularly Qayrawan, a commercial and intellectual center. From their new base in the Maghreb, these middlemen filled a niche in trade trade. However, to Europe agriculture was more important and prestigious than trade. And, according to Robert Lopez, although Islam had a high regard for traders and merchants, Tunisia's lack of individual freedom initially hindered commercial expansion.<sup>23</sup> At the end of the century, Jews followed the Fatimids to Egypt, which the latter conquered in 969. More Jews made the move in the eleventh century after the Bedouin of Banu Hilal invaded and destroyed Qayrawan in 1057. The "Maghrebis," as they were called, settled in Fustat or old Cairo among Jews whose existence in Egypt has been documented since about the sixth century BCE.

According to Ashtor, 12,000 Jews of all origins lived in dozens of different villages, towns and cities in Egypt during the twelfth century.<sup>24</sup> The largest

community was in Fustat, where Stillman estimates about 4,000 Jews lived at the turn of the eleventh century. Another 2,000 lived in Alexandria.<sup>25</sup>

At this time, Jews shared certain characteristics which attracted them to commerce. Since rabbis and other learned men believed they should not take money for teaching religion, they sought other sources of income, but they avoided agriculture because of the risks of land confiscation. The Jews had a high rate of literacy and numeracy so they could keep accounts and understand reports. Because Jews were on the margins of the Islamic world, they were often considered to be "neutral intermediaries" between Christians and Muslims and between different Muslim communities.<sup>26</sup> Jewish dispersion facilitated finding trading partners in the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. Jews who had come from Iraq or who still had relatives and friends in the Persian Gulf could send and receive information about trade with India. And, Jews lived along the route to India, even though Malabar had no Jewish settlements.

Traders would leave Fustat for Qus, a provincial capital in Upper Egypt near Luxor and Aswan 45 to 50 days up the Nile by ship.<sup>27</sup> They stopped in Qus to rest and to find a caravan that would take them overland to the Red Sea coast to get ships to Aden. The 300 Jews of Qus provided hospitality, facilities for religious observances, and information about trade. The traders may not have had to continue beyond Qus because its market was full of Indian goods. Ashtor called the town an "emporium of the Indian trade."<sup>28</sup>

The attitude of the Fatimid regime was a key advantage for the Jews. The Fatimid rulers encouraged Jewish traders and used their services to help transform first the Maghreb and then Egypt into Mediterranean centers of trade.<sup>29</sup> Under Fatimid rule traders were free to trade and move about as they wished and where they wished carrying Egyptian gold dinars, widely accepted as an "international means of payment."<sup>30</sup> The rulers even recruited Jews for high positions in the state bureaucracy, although those in the highest positions, such as vizier, were expected to convert.

In addition to finding new opportunities in commerce, Jews willingly took professions that others eschewed such as tanning animal hides, lending money, collecting, dyeing cloth, smithing gold and silver, and manufacturing textiles. Because of their earlier experiences or family ties in Iraq, they knew more about sugar refining than Arabs in Egypt, and therefore tended to participate fully in that industry. Because of prior Jewish experience in the medical sciences and because the Jews experimented with the spices they received from India, running a pharmacy became a major Jewish occupation in Egypt.<sup>31</sup>

In Fustat, the Jews' religious and secular life revolved around two synagogues, the Ben Ezra or Palestine synagogue, and the Babylonian synagogue. Each person's choice depended on family origins, Palestine/Israel or Mesopotamia. Each community was well organized. Influenced by Islamic Caliphate and the government's encouragement of minority communal structures, the Jews set up their own complex bureaucracy to settle conflicts, assist the needy, enforce rules, deal with the Egyptian state, and communicate with other Jewish communities, both in Egypt and outside Egypt. For example, Jewish officials collected money to send to

institutions of higher learning, Yeshivot, in Palestine and Babylonia.<sup>32</sup> Maghrebis affiliated with the Ben Ezra synagogue used its community structure to resolve disputes, witness contracts, arrange marriages, and enlarge their networks, as well as to pray.

The combination of opportunities and entrepreneurs with capital put Egypt at the center of world trade. By the middle of the eleventh century, Egypt was the principal hinge between the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean basins, the point at which the complex commercial networks of these two zones were knotted together.<sup>33</sup> The Jews operated on both sides of the hinge, often at great risk. As David Maimonides wrote to his famous brother about 1170:

"This is my story: I reached Qus and after Passover I booked for 'Aydhab [the Sudanese port] in a caravan...When we were in the desert, we regretted what we had done, but the matter had gone out of our hands. Yet God had willed that we should be saved. We arrived in 'Aydhab safely with our entire baggage. We were unloading our things at the city gate, when the caravans arrived. Their passengers had been robbed and wounded and some had died of thirst...

To make a long story short: I arrived in 'Aydhab and found that no imports had come here...at all. I found nothing to buy except indigo. So I thought about what I had endured in the desert and how I was saved; then it appeared to me an easy matter to embark on a sea voyage...

My company in the Mala [bar] sea will be...Sallim, the son of the (female) broker and his brother's son..."<sup>34</sup>

After writing this letter David Maimonides died, probably in a ship wreck. More information comes from the documents left by "The House of Ibn 'Awkal." According to Stillman, their letters and business documents form:

The oldest private collection of business documents in the genizah, it is also one of the oldest, if not the oldest, private collection of correspondence from the Mediterranean world during the Middle Ages.<sup>35</sup>

In one letter sent from the Maghreb to Egypt, a buyer of pearls asks Joseph b. 'Awkal to purchase pearls from pilgrims returning to Egypt from the Hajj because pilgrims often obtained pearls originating in the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean. Money, not goods, would be used to pay for the pearls.<sup>36</sup> He informed Joseph that:

"...the pearls which you were kind enough to send arrived—may God make your honored position permanent...As to the cloth which was with it, I sent it on to Spain because it does not sell well for me here this year. ...if—God forbid—it should happen that pearls will be scarce this year, then buy me whatever you can with

half the sum, and with the other half buy some high-grade *istas* (variety of indigo...)."37

In India, traders purchased pepper, cardamom and other spices, indigo and brazilwood for dyeing, brass products, iron, textiles, and precious gems. Indians were less interested in products from the west, but they purchased coral, arsenic, copper, and lead. They also received gold and silver from the traders to make up the difference in trade accounts. Like the Romans, the Mediterranean Arabs had an unfavorable balance of trade with India.

Their relationship with the Jews of Yemen, especially in the port city of Aden, was a key to Jewish success in this trade.

#### The Importance of Yemen to Jewish Traders

Certainly Yemen had been an important destination for Jewish travelers and a place for Jewish settlement since the time of Solomon, king of the United Kingdom of Israel in the tenth century BCE. According to much current scholarly wisdom, southwest Arabia was the Biblical Ophir from which gold was procured for King Solomon and his Phoenician allies. Both Jewish and Arab evidence shows continuous Jewish settlement in Yemen for the last 2,000 years. According to Jewish oral traditions, Jews have lived in Yemen for more than 2,500 years.

The Yemeni port of Aden, located on the channel connecting the Red Sea with the Arabian Sea, was the most important way-station on the sea route to India and east Africa. Caravans from Yemen crossed Arabia to Egypt, Iraq, and Iran. For Jews, Yemen meant India: in many texts in the genizah collection the expression "Yemen and beyond..." refers to India. This phrase meant that traders would leave Fustat hoping they could purchase Indian goods in Aden. If not, they had to be prepared to continue further across the Indian Ocean toward the original source of these precious goods.<sup>38</sup> Jewish traders saw their Yemeni "co-religionists" (a term they often used) as mediators between themselves and the Indian subcontinent.<sup>39</sup>

Yemenite Jews performed many services for the Jews of north Africa and Egypt.<sup>40</sup> Providing for spiritual needs came first. The traders were observant Jews and highly literate. The large Jewish community in Yemen assured Jewish traders from Egypt that they could celebrate holy days, enjoy kosher food, keep the Sabbath in a friendly environment, and maybe find a wife. The Yemenite community provided information as did members of their own diaspora, first, in Ethiopia and later in Cochin. For example, in 1198, a correspondent made the following list about prices in Aden for his co-religionists:

- Pepper, a sack—sold for 52, later went down to 45
- Cinnamon, a sack—45
- Brazilwood obtained different prices:
  - Good Amiri, a sack—18
  - Middle Quality—16
  - End pieces, a sack—16
  - The long variety, a sack—18
- Indian Indigo, a piece—70 din.
- Clove—not to be had; the mediocre—45

The odoriferous woods are of middle quality and expensive.

The price of the copper was—

Copper in fragments, first—72, later—85  
in bars—70; later it attained 90

Tin—70

Corals—11

Antimony (kohl) of Shalwadh, a sack—17

of Madrid, a sack—25 [ndlr: reading doubtful]<sup>41</sup>

Genizah documents show the importance of the Adenese "*wakil al-tujjar*" (Hebrew: *peqid ha-soharim*)—the "representative of the merchants."<sup>42</sup> Madmun ben Japhet was one such representative and, as such, he supervised traders in Aden, he facilitated trade among the Jews, and he made his storehouse available for storage. As a neutral party, he made sure all the traders received their merchandise and divided up the profits as agreed; he provided a place for traders to negotiate. Verbal agreements were considered valid and enforceable if they were made in Madmun's warehouse. When a trader died at sea, Madmun sent condolences to the family along with some material assistance. His acceptability to all Jews depended on his reputation for probity, his astuteness, and probably his reputation as an observant Jew. In a long letter, to India he explained that one of his own ships sank in the Arabian Sea, but he quickly loaded another:

May God the exalted recompense and substitute what has been lost...I asked God for guidance and fitted out a new ship, the M[ubarak], which will sail to Mangalore...May God ordain its safe arrival, I have done so because I dreaded that [my enemies] and whoever has no good in him will gloat over my misfortune.<sup>43</sup>

Jewish communities in Baghdad and Fustat recognized him as the representative of traders and respected his judgments. The fact that he was a business partner of the Arab governor of Aden protected him and the Jews he helped. His wife came from Fustat and her brother married an Aden shipowner. Madmun's son took his place when he died in 1150.<sup>44</sup>

Contacts among the Jewish populations also appear in liturgy and music. For example, Johanna Spector found and analyzed very specific similarities in Jewish music in Mesopotamia, Cochin, and Yemen.<sup>45</sup> Oral histories—about sending brides from Yemen to Cochin and family genealogies—provides more data about the connections.

### Decline of the Jewish Traders

Abraham b. Yiju and his Jewish colleagues were always middlemen operating in the interstices of a potentially hostile environment. The Fatimids had been friendly, but their successors were against the Jews. In 1169, with the advent of the Ayyubids, power began to shift to the Sunni majority, and the role of the Jews began to decline. In 1250, Mamluk slave soldiers seized power, and put an end to Jewish trade activities. The Mamluk regime was centralized and "statist," and trade was no longer free. According to K.N. Chaudhuri and others, the Egyptian regime began to control

which ships could enter the Red Sea by "a system of safe-conduct passes."<sup>46</sup> By this method, they could encourage Muslim traders and discourage all others. Furthermore, special controls were imposed on Jews and Christians: they had to pay higher tariffs on goods than Muslims, opportunities for government employment decreased, guilds restricted membership, and a humiliating dress code was instituted. One reason for Mamluk hostility was their own sense of insecurity: they were recent converts to Islam, and they were threatened by Mongol expansionism; they feared a return of the Christian crusaders.

The rise of the Karimi traders also contributed to the decline of Jewish participation and influence. The Karimi seem to have been large Arab Muslim wholesalers who could easily undercut the Jews, particularly when the regime helped them. Michael Chamberlain wrote:

As far as can be determined, the Karimis were a loose association based on partnerships, who owned their own ships and enjoyed a poorly understood legal status. The Ayyubids provided protection and built warehouses and port facilities for them, but otherwise did not interfere in their activities.<sup>47</sup>

The Mamluks needed the Karimis:

Lacking a navy or merchant marine of its own, the Mamluk sultanate was dependent on the Karimi merchants who monopolized the commerce of the sultanate, especially the spice trade, in the Red Sea and the eastern oceans.<sup>48</sup>

Genizah letters and contracts show that to join the Karimis one needed a great deal of capital. Even rich Jews had difficulty, although some sold goods to Karimi through their representative in Aden.<sup>49</sup> According to a genizah letter, a Jew by the name of Furajallah al-Karimi participated in the Karimi associations, but there is little evidence about other Jews. Ashtor concludes, "the Karimis did not exclude Jewish traders from their activities because of their religious denomination...But, the Karimis thrust the middle class merchants aside, and most Jewish traders had belonged to this group."<sup>50</sup> By the mid-thirteenth century, references to trade in genizah documents declined, implying that Jewish participation was drawing to an end.<sup>51</sup>

#### **Jewish Links in the Indian Ocean**

Jews formed their own network between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea: their ties extended from the Malabar Coast west to Aden or north to Baghdad and then west to Qus and Fustat, Cairo, and beyond. The contacts benefitted the Jewish community by helping maintain a uniformity of religious practice, diffusing new interpretations of Biblical and Talmudic texts by intellectuals such as Moses Maimonides and Saadia Gaon. The Jews made money by filling a niche that no one else seemed to want and by serving as intermediaries between other communities. Genizah documents written by these intrepid traders give us a glimpse of their

motivations, their successes and failures, their conflicts, their pain and joy, and their commitment to their communities and religion.

From the documents left by this "trade diaspora," we can understand more about shipping routes, goods traded, the postal service, travel time from India to Aden and from Aden to Egypt, and the problem of staying away from home for years on end. As yet, scholars do not know enough about Indians from these records, although 20 different ports in India are mentioned.<sup>52</sup> Ranabir Chakrabarti suggests that Indian epigraphic evidence has yet to be fully exploited and may eventually yield interesting confirmation and complementary data about the Jewish traders.<sup>53</sup>

These partially published documents give evidence of what Basu and Fluegel call the "interaction between the local and the global" and prove that south Asia was in communication with the rest of the world during those centuries.<sup>54</sup> Genizah evidence of links between south Asia and the Mediterranean also gives a human face to the entrepreneur minority. They show that among their other qualities, these Jewish traders of the Indian Ocean were creative and courageous.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> S.D. Goitein, *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), pp. 183-4.

<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey Khan, *Arabic Legal and Administrative Documents in the Cambridge Genizah Collections* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of some Indian sources see Ranabir Chakravarti, "Coastal Trade and Voyages in the Konkan: The Early Medieval Scenario," in *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 35, No. 2 (1998), pp. 97-123.

<sup>4</sup> Brian Weinstein, "Judaeo-Arabic in India," in *The Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies*, Vol. II (1999), pp. 53-68.

<sup>5</sup> New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993.

<sup>6</sup> Also, see Goitein, *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders*, p. 39.

<sup>7</sup> Amitav Ghosh, "Tragic and Turbulent," in *Genizah Fragments*, No. 22, October 1991, p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> Reprinted in Goitein, "The India Traders," in S.D. Goitein, *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders*, p. 190.

<sup>9</sup> Abraham Udovitch, "Foreword," in S.D. Goitein and Paula Sanders, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Genizah*, Vol. 5 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. xii.

<sup>10</sup> S.D. Goitein and Paula Sanders, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Genizah*, Vol. 6—Cumulative Indices (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

<sup>11</sup> Shaul Shaked, *A Tentative Bibliography of Genizah Documents*, prepared under the direction of D.H. Baneth and S.D. Goitein (Paris: Mouton, 1964).

<sup>12</sup> For some of the most important scholars of genizah see Joshua Blau and Stefan C. Reif, "Genizah Research After Ninety Years: The Case of Judaeo-Arabic: Papers Read at the Third Congress of the Society for Judaeo-Arabic Studies," in *University of Cambridge Oriental Publications* 47 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

<sup>13</sup> See Robert Attal, *A Bibliography of the Writings of Professor Shelomo Dov Goitein* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1975).

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Prof. Mordechai Friedman, 18 June 1999.

<sup>15</sup> These two German scholars organized a workshop in October 1999 at the annual meeting of the German Anthropological Association. Quoted from their email messages to potential participants, explaining why they thought such a workshop was important.

<sup>16</sup> Walter P. Zenner, comments in *H-JUDIAC DIGEST*, E-mail: H-JUDAIC@H-NET.MSU.EDU, 7-8 June 1999.

<sup>17</sup> See Daniel Chirot and Anthony Reid, eds., *Essential Outsiders: Chinese and Jews in the Modern Transformation of Southeast Asia and Central Europe* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1997). Philip Curtin, *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). Abner Cohen, "Cultural Strategies in the Organization of Trading Diasporas," in Claude Meillassoux, ed., *The Development of Indigenous Trade and Markets in West Africa* (London, 1971). Walter P. Zenner, *Minorities in the Middle: A Cross-Cultural Analysis* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

<sup>18</sup> Anthony Reid, "Entrepreneurial Minorities, Nationalism, and the State," in Chirot and Reid, eds., *Essential Outsiders*, p. 43.

<sup>19</sup> Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, Vol. II (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), p. 808.

<sup>20</sup> See Nathan Katz and Ellen S. Goldberg, *The Last Jews of Cochin: Jewish Identity in Hindu India* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), pp. 8-34.

<sup>21</sup> See Andre Wink, *Al-Hind: The Making of the Indo-Islamic World, Vol. I: Early Medieval India and the Expansion of Islam, Seventh to Eleventh Centuries* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1990), pp. 99-100.

<sup>22</sup> INA D-55, f.10, "India Book 331a," cited by Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, Vol. II, pp. 20-1.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Lopez, *The Commercial Revolution of the Middle Ages 950-1350* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 57.

<sup>24</sup> Eliyahu Ashtor, "Prolegomena to the Medieval History of Oriental Jewry," in Eliyahu Ashtor, *The Jews and the Mediterranean Economy—Tenth to Fifteenth Centuries*, Section II (London: Variorum reprints, 1983), p. 60.

<sup>25</sup> Norman A. Stillman, "The Non-Muslim Communities: The Jewish Community," in Carl F. Petry, ed., *The Cambridge History of Egypt Vol. I—Islamic Egypt, 640-1517* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 201.

- <sup>26</sup> Lopez, *The Commercial Revolution*, p. 62.
- <sup>27</sup> Goitein and Sanders, *A Mediterranean Society*, Vol. I, pp. 287, 299.
- <sup>28</sup> Eliyahu Ashtor, "The Number of Jews," Part IIIa, p. 16.
- <sup>29</sup> Ashtor, "The Number of Jews in Mediaeval Egypt," p. 19.
- <sup>30</sup> Goitein and Sanders, *A Mediterranean Society*, Vol. I, p. 61.
- <sup>31</sup> S.D. Goitein, *The Yemenites: History, Communal Organization, Spiritual Life—Selected Works* (Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 1983), p. 35. Hebrew.
- <sup>32</sup> Elinoar Bareket, "Origins and Society in the Jewish Community of Fustat in the Eleventh Century," in *Pe'amim*, No. 34 (1988), pp. 3-28. Hebrew.
- <sup>33</sup> R. Stephen Humphreys, "Egypt in the World System of the Later Middle Ages," in *The Cambridge History*, p. 449.
- <sup>34</sup> Reprinted in S.D. Goitein, "The India Traders," in S.D. Goitein, *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders*, pp. 209-210.
- <sup>35</sup> Norman Arthur Stillman, *East-West Relations in the Islamic Mediterranean in the Early Eleventh Century—A Study in The Genizah Correspondence of the House of Ibn 'Awkal* (PhD dissertation Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1970), p. 161.
- <sup>36</sup> Stillman, *East-West Relations*, p. 287.
- <sup>37</sup> Stillman, *East-West Relations*, p. 289.
- <sup>38</sup> Goitein, *The Yemenites*, p. 35. Goitein and Sanders, *A Mediterranean Society*, Vol. I, p. 180.
- <sup>39</sup> Goitein, *The Yemenites*, p. 34.
- <sup>40</sup> See Morcechai Abir, "International Commerce and Yemenite Jewry," in *Pe'amim*, No. 5 (1980), pp. 4-26. Hebrew.
- <sup>41</sup> Goitein, *The India Traders*, pp. 214-5.
- <sup>42</sup> Goitein and Sanders, *A Mediterranean Society*, Vol. I, pp. 186-192.
- <sup>43</sup> Taylor-Schechter 20.130, cited by Goitein and Sanders, *A Mediterranean Society*, Vol. V, p. 52.
- <sup>44</sup> This information from Goitein, *The Yemenites*, pp. 39-42; Goitein and Sanders, *A Mediterranean Society*, Vol. III, p. 58.
- <sup>45</sup> Johanna Spector, "Yemenite and Babylonian Elements in the Musical Heritage of the Jews of Cochin, India," in *Musica Judaica*, Vol. VII, No. 1 (1985-86), pp. 1-22.
- <sup>46</sup> K.N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 60.
- <sup>47</sup> Michael Chamberlain, "The Crusader Era and the Ayyubid Dynasty," in Petry, ed., *The Cambridge History*, p. 230.
- <sup>48</sup> Linda S. Northrup, "The Babri Mamluk Sultanate, 1250-1390," in Petry, ed., *The Cambridge History*, p. 285.
- <sup>49</sup> Goitein, *The Yemenites*, p. 36.
- <sup>50</sup> Eliyahu Ashtor, "Levantine Jews in the Fifteenth Century," in Ashtor, *The Jews*, Section VIII, pp. 84-5.
- <sup>51</sup> Goitein, *The Yemenites*, p. 35.

<sup>52</sup> Goitein, *The Yemenites*, p. 34.

<sup>53</sup> Personal communication, Chennai, 26 December 1999.

<sup>54</sup> Basu and Fluegel, communications with workshop participants.

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