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Judeo-Arabic and Hebrew as Competing Languages in the Mamluk Period

Tanḥum of Jerusalem, a Bible commentator and lexicographer (d. 1291), discussed in the introduction to his great work *Al-Murshid al-kāfī* (The sufficient guide), a Judeo-Arabic-Hebrew lexicon for Maimonides's *Mishneh Torah,* the different languages used by Jews in religious literature. Tanḥum considered the inability of many Jews to read and write in Hebrew as a sign of weakness and decline:

> It is known that the Mishna[1] [is written] mostly in Hebrew because it was the common language among them at that time, not like our condition nowadays, when we are a nation without a language and a people without a tongue *(naḥnu qawm bi-lā lughah wa-ummah bi-lā lisān).* Every nation among the nations has no existence without its language, and has no substance without its tongue, as it is said: "by their [clans and] languages, in their [territories and] nations,"[2] "each with its own language";[3] "using his native tongue."[4]

These words reflect the inherent tension felt by Jewish writers in Muslim lands.[5] On the one hand, they felt more fluent in Arabic than in Hebrew and found the former's rich vocabulary appropriate for clearly expressing their thoughts. On the other hand, they felt a duty to prove that Jews were not "a nation without a language" and that their holy language was alive and had a promising future. While some fragments of Judeo-Arabic texts predate the

[1] The Mishna is the most important source of the oral tradition in Jewish law. It was edited in Palestine in the beginning of the third century by R. Judah the exilarch. The Mishna, with its commentary, the Talmud, has been the basis of the Halakhah (Jewish law) through today.

[2] Following Genesis 10:20 and 10:31.

[3] Genesis 10:5.

[4] Esther 1:22; Hadassa Shy, *Al-Murshid al-Kāfī, ha-Madrikh ha-Maspiq: Milono shel tanḥum ha-yerushalmi le-mishne tora la-rambam* (Jerusalem, 2005), 6.

[5] The discussion that follows relates only to the Arabic-speaking world. Jews in other parts of the Muslim world spoke and wrote in other languages, such as Ladino and Greek (in the European districts of the Ottoman Empire), Judeo-Persian, Juhuri or Judeo-Tat (in Azerbaijan and Dagestan), Karaim (a Turkish-Kipchak dialect spoken by the Karaites of Crimea), and Judeo-Berber or Judeo-Amazigh (in some parts of Morocco).

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tenth century,[6] the significant emergence of works in Judeo-Arabic began only during that century.[7] From that point forward, the option to write in Arabic was "on the table" for Jewish writers.

The considerations for choosing either Arabic or Hebrew for a particular composition have been examined by R. Drory, who demonstrates that the choice of language typically depended on the type of text. Arabic was typically chosen for communicative texts with a referential function, while Hebrew was preferred for texts aimed at expressing festivity and linguistic splendor.[8] Later, another consideration came into play: the expansion of the readership. Maimonides (d. 1204), who wrote most of his works in Arabic, chose to compose his legal code *(Mishne Torah)* in Hebrew to gain acceptance among the broader European Jewish audience who did not read Arabic.[9] In contrast, the Andalusian poet Judah al-Ḥarīzī (d. 1225), who wrote most of his poems in Hebrew, chose, during his travels to the East, to also compose panegyric poems in Arabic with the intention of dedicating them to Muslim patrons as a source of livelihood.[10]

The linguistic dilemma preoccupied not only scholars and poets but anyone who could write, as they had to decide in which language to compose lists, accounts, and, most importantly, letters. In this article, I will analyze the considerations for choosing a specific language in the realm of everyday texts. What was the attitude among the Jews towards their linguistic dilemma in everyday life? Which language was considered appropriate for writing letters? Which language was given priority by the court scribes in legal documents? And what was

[6] See Joshua Blau and Simon Hopkins, *Ha-ʿaravit ha-yehudit ha-ḳeduma bi-khtiv foneṭi* (Jerusalem, 2017).

[7] The emergence of Jewish Arabic literature, which is distinct from Hebrew literature influenced by Arabic models, is discussed in Rina Drory, *Reʾshit ha-magaʿim shel ha-sifrut ha-yehudit ʿim ha-sifrut ha-ʿaravit ba-meʾa ha-ʿaśirit* (Tel Aviv, 1988); idem, "Le rôle de la littérature karaïte dans l'histoire de la littérature juive au Xe siècle," *Revue des études juives* 159, nos. 1–2 (2000): 99–111.

[8] "The choice of languages for the new models of writing was not accidental: each of the two languages served for a different function of writing.... While Arabic served for the referential function...Hebrew served for festive and grandiloquent writing...in other words, for the literary-aesthetic function.... The purpose of writing in Hebrew was to prove command of the language and to produce a text that would arouse admiration at its beauty and elegance; while writing in Arabic was intended to produce a clear and understandable text." (Rina Drory, "Bilingualism and Cultural Images: The Hebrew and the Arabic Introductions of Saadia Gaon's 'Sefer Ha-Egron,'" *Israel Oriental Studies* 15 (1995):11–12. See also idem, *Reʾshit ha-magaʿim,* 41–54; idem, "Words Beautifully Put: Hebrew Versus Arabic in Tenth-Century Jewish Literature," in *Genizah Research after Ninety Years: The Case of Judaeo-Arabic,* ed. Joshua Blau and Stephan C. Reif (Cambridge, 1992), 53–66.

[9] Isadore Twersky, *Introduction to the Code of Maimonides (Mishneh Torah)* (New Haven, 1980), 324–36.

[10] Joseph Yahalom, "'Ivrit ve-ʿaravit ki-lshonot shir ba-ḥevra ha-ʿaravit-yehudit bi-(y)me ha-benayim: rabi yehuda al-ḥarizi ben mizraḥ u-maʿarav," *Lĕšonénu* 74 (2012): 305–12.

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the role of Aramaic in this field? In this article I will examine these questions, focusing on the Mamluk period. I will show that the linguistic patterns in Jewish society during the Mamluk period were varied, and that a distinction should be made between most of the Mamluk period and the last decades of the Mamluk Sultanate. I will argue that the late Mamluk period was a crucial turning point in the balance between Hebrew and Arabic and will explain the background to this shift.

Jewish Communities in the Late Mamluk Period

To comprehend the linguistic processes that affected Jewish society in the late Mamluk period, we shall first briefly describe the Jewish community of this era from social and demographic perspectives. Jewish society during the Mamluk period exhibited a greater degree of homogeneity compared to preceding eras. In the Fatimid period, Jewish society in Syria, Palestine, and Egypt was comprised of three primary groups: two congregations of Rabbanite Jews—the Palestinian and the Babylonian—alongside the Karaite community.[11] Over time, the distinctions among Rabbanite Jews became less pronounced. The ancient Palestinian halakhic tradition disappeared, and the Babylonian Halakha prevailed. By the Mamluk period, these two congregations had merged. The division into two streams, Rabbanites and Karaites, however, persisted. Nevertheless, Karaite Judaism gradually diminished, with some Karaites transitioning to the Rabbanite side. While the number of Karaites in the Jewish population decreased, the presence of Jews of European origin in Jewish communities increased during the late Mamluk period. Following the Black Death (1348) there was a certain migration of Jews from western and central Europe to the eastern Mediterranean. This process intensified between 1391 and 1415, when many Iberian Jews fled from their land southward and eastward due to persecution, including to Egypt and Palestine.[12] The greatest and most influential wave of immigrants took place after the expulsion from Spain (1492). Thus, throughout the Mamluk period—and especially at the end of the period—significant social and demographic changes occurred. The impact of these processes at the linguistic level will be discussed below.

From a demographic perspective, the Mamluk period was one of decline for Jewish communities. Natural disasters, epidemics—chief among them the Black

[11] Marina Rustow, *Heresy and the Politics of Community: The Jews of the Fatimid Caliphate* (Ithaca, 2008).

[12] See Joseph R. Hacker, "The rise of Ottoman Jewry," in *The Cambridge History of Judaism,* vol. 7, *The Early Modern World, 1500–1815,* ed. Jonathan Karp and Adam Sutcliffe (Cambridge, 2018), 77–80.

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Death in the mid-fourteenth century—and instances of voluntary or forced conversion to Islam led to a numerical decrease in Jewish society. The central and largest Jewish community in the Mamluk Sultanate was situated in Cairo. During the Fatimid period, the Jews had been concentrated in Fusṭāṭ; however, the Mamluk era witnessed increased Jewish migration from Fusṭāṭ to the new city, Cairo, and primarily to the Zuwaylah quarter.[13] By the 1480s, the city housed between 650 and 750 Jewish families, of which 150 were Karaites.[14] In addition to Cairo, smaller urban Jewish communities existed throughout Egypt, such as in Alexandria and Bilbays, each comprising several dozen Jewish families. The Bilbays community suffered severe damage during the riots of 1354 against non-Muslims, resulting in the conversion of many of its Jewish residents to Islam.[15] In the fifteenth century, however, several dozen Jewish families still resided in the town.[16] Alongside these communities, numerous small Jewish settlements existed in the Nile Delta region.

The most significant urban centers in Syria were Aleppo in the north and Damascus in the south. An Italian-Jewish traveler found approximately four hundred Jewish families in Damascus in 1480,[17] and another Italian-Jewish traveler reported five hundred Jewish families in the city in 1495.[18] It can be assumed that the demographic growth is related to the arrival of Jewish exiles from Spain. The Aleppo community suffered during the Mongol conquest in 1400 but recovered throughout the fifteenth century. The precise size of the community during the Mamluk period is unknown; however, a Judeo-Arabic letter sent from Aleppo to Cairo in the third quarter of the fifteenth century reported that two hundred community members perished in an epidemic in a single year,

[13] Amir Mazor, "The Jews in Medieval Egypt under the Mamluks (1250–1517)," in *The Jews in Medieval Egypt,* ed. Miriam Frenkel (Boston, 2021), 250.

[14] Eliyahu Ashtor, *Toledot ha-yehudim be-mitsrayim uve-surya taḥat shilṭon ha-mamlukim* (Jerusalem, 1944–70), 2:419.

[15] Yosef Sambarī, *Divre Yosef,* ed. Shimon Shtober (Jerusalem, 1994), 235.

[16] In 1481, approximately fifty Jewish households were reported in the city (*Masa' Meshulam mivoltera be-erets yisra'el bi-shnat 5241 [1481],* ed. Abraham Yaari [Jerusalem, 1949], 60), while by 1488 this number had decreased to about thirty (*Me-'iṭalya li-(y)rushalayim: igroṭav shel rabi 'ovadya mibarṭenura me-erets yisra'el,* ed. Menahem E. Hartom and Abraham David [Jerusalem, 1997], 61).

[17] Abraham Yaari, *Igrot erets yisra'el* (Tel Aviv, 1943), 91.

[18] This was also their number in 1522; see Bernard Lewis, "A Jewish Source on Damascus Just After the Ottoman Conquest," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies* 10, no. 1 (1939): 180–82. In a census conducted during the time of Sulaymān I (1520–66), 214 Mustʿarib Jewish households and 201 European Jewish households were counted, along with 53 households whose communal identity was not recorded (total: 468 households); see Bernard Lewis, *'Ale histṭoria, ḳovets meḥḳarim* (Jerusalem, 1988), 237.

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suggesting that the community comprised at least several hundred families.[19] The first Ottoman census conducted in the city in 724/1518 recorded 373 Jewish households.[20] Other substantial Jewish communities in Syria included Hama, where, according to a traveler who visited the city in 1441, approximately three hundred Jewish families resided,[21] and Tripoli, which was home to about one hundred Jewish families in the late Mamluk period.[22]

In Palestine, there were two large urban communities: Safed and Jerusalem. Safed, which became an important administrative center after its conquest by Baybars in 1266, also developed into a religious and intellectual center. During this period, three mosques were built in the city, and influential Sufi scholars congregated there.[23] Safed also became an important religious and intellectual center in Jewish society, attracting Rabbis and Kabbalists. In the late Mamluk period, the presence of Jewish immigrants in the city intensified, coming from the Iberian Peninsula and North Africa. An Italian Jewish traveler, Joseph della Montagna, reported about three hundred Jewish householders in the city in 1480.[24] A similar number was reported in 1521 by another Italian Jewish traveler, Moses Basola. According to him, there were then three synagogues in the city: Sephardi, Mustaʿrib, and Maghrebi.[25] The second large community in Palestine, Jerusalem, was also a very heterogeneous community. Throughout the Mamluk period, Jewish immigrants arrived in the city from various territories (Germany, Italy, Spain, and the Maghreb), including famous rabbis who served in community leadership. Towards the end of the Mamluk period, Spanish and Maghrebi immigrants were particularly prominent in Jerusalem.[26] In 1481, the traveler Meshullam of Volterra reported two hundred fifty Jewish householders in the city.[27] Two years later, Felix Fabri reported that there were more than five

[19] London, British Library MS Or. 5545, fol. 4.

[20] Lewis, *ʻAle hisṭoria,* 237.

[21] Abraham Yaari, *Masʻot erets yisraʼel* (Tel Aviv, 1946), 101.

[22] According to a report by an Italian Jewish traveler from 1488 (*Me-ʼiṭalya li-(y)rushalayim*, ed. Hartom and David, 90). An identical number is reported by another Italian Jewish traveler in 1521; see *In Zion and Jerusalem: The Itinerary of Rabbi Moses Basola (1521–1523),* ed. Abraham David (Jerusalem, 1999), 56.

[23] On the mosques, madrasahs, and Sufi institutions in Mamluk Safed, see Taha al-Tarawneh, *Mamlakat Ṣafad fī ʿahd al-mamālīk* (Beirut, 1981), 258–62.

[24] Yaari, *Igrot,* 91.

[25] *In Zion and Jerusalem,* 61–62.

[26] Joseph R. Hacker, "Yehudim magrebim be-mitsrayim uvi-(ye)rushalayim, be-sof ha-teḳufa ha-mamlukit," in *ʻAtara le-ḥayim, Meḥḳarim ba-sifrut ha-talmudit veha-rabanit li-khvod profesor ḥayim zalman dimitrovski,* ed. Daniel Boyarin et al. (Jerusalem, 2000), 573–603.

[27] Yaari, *Masaʻ Meshulam,* 71.

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hundred Jews in the city, probably referring to individuals rather than families.[28] In contrast, R. Obadiah of Bertinoro found, five years later, only seventy Jewish families there.[29] This sharp decline was probably due to both natural disasters and drought, as well as the economic-social crisis that the community underwent in these years following its heavy debts. The community recovered in the coming years, and in 1495 an Italian traveler reported two hundred Jewish householders in the city.[30] The third largest urban Jewish community in Palestine was Gaza. Meshullam of Volterra found fifty or sixty Jewish families there in 1481,[31] and in the Ottoman census of 932/1525–26, ninety-five Jewish families were counted.[32] Along with the urban communities of Palestine, rural communities existed in the Galilee. The most prominent among them was Kafr Kanna in Lower Galilee.[33]

In the following discussion, special emphasis is given to the Jewish elite, from which most of the written texts originated, and to the central Jewish leadership. Changes were also evident in this area at the end of the Mamluk period, which also influenced the linguistic reality. The leader of the Jewish communities was the nagid (pl. *negidim*), the head of the Jews in the sultanate,[34] a position originating in the eleventh century and continuing until the dissolution of the Mamluk Sultanate in 1517.[35] The nagid represented the Jews before the Muslim authorities, ensured that his community paid the jizyah tax regularly and observed the stipulations of their dhimmi status, and was considered the supreme judicial authority in Jewish society. For most of the Mamluk period,

[28] *The Book of the Wanderings of Brother Felix Fabri,* ed. Aubrey Stewart (London, 1893), 2:226.

[29] Elkan Nathan Adler, *Jewish Travellers in the Middle Ages: 19 Firsthand Accounts* (London, 1930), 234.

[30] Yaari, *Igrot,* 157.

[31] Yaari, *Masa' Meshulam,* 64, 68.

[32] On the Ottoman censuses of Gaza during the sixteenth century, see Amnon Cohen and Bernard Lewis, *Population and Revenue in the Towns of Palestine in the Sixteenth Century* (Princeton, 1978), 117–28.

[33] There is no information about a Jewish community in this village before the second half of the fifteenth century, and it is difficult to know if Jews also lived there in previous centuries. In 1473, a Jewish traveler reported that eighty Jewish households lived in the village (Yaari, *Mas'ot,* 112); in 1481 seventy were reported (Yaari, *Igrot,* 92); and in the Ottoman census of 1525–26, fifty Jewish families were counted in the village; see Wolf-Dieter Hüetteroth and Kamal Abdulfattah, *Historical Geography of Palestine, Trans-Jordan and Southern Syria in the Late 16th Century* (Erlangen, 1977), 187.

[34] In Arabic: *Ra'īs al-Yahūd* or *Ra'īs ṭawā'if al-Yahūd* (head of the religious communities of the Jews, i.e., Rabbanites, Karaites, and Samaritans, who were considered Jews according to the Mamluk administration).

[35] Mark R. Cohen, *Jewish Self-Government in Medieval Egypt: The Origins of the Office of Head of the Jews, ca. 1065–1126* (Princeton, 1980).

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the office of the nagid was held by the Maimonidean family, descendants of Maimonides. Their familial lineage bestowed upon them considerable prestige and helped solidify their status. In the early fifteenth century, this dynasty disappeared under circumstances that remain somewhat unclear. Our knowledge of the nagidate in the first half of the fifteenth century is limited, but from the latter half of the century, particularly from 1484 to 1517, during which Nathan and Isaac Sholal (or Sholel) served as nagids, there is an abundance of sources on this central Jewish leadership. As we will see below, Jewish leaders and nagids in the late Mamluk period had different linguistic norms than their predecessors.

SOURCES

The main source of knowledge about the world of the Jews in the Mamluk state is the Cairo Genizah documents,[36] but the Mamluk-era documents in this corpus have not been systematically studied. For about 120 years, since the discovery of the Genizah at the end of the nineteenth century, historians have mainly focused on documents from the Fatimid and Ayyubid periods. Thousands of documents from this period written in Hebrew letters (Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic)[37] were published in various volumes.[38] A genre

[36] On the Cairo Genizah see Adina Hoffman and Peter Cole, *Sacred Trash: The Lost and Found World of The Cairo Geniza* (New York, 2011); Rebecca J. W. Jefferson, *The Cairo Genizah and the Age of Discovery in Egypt: The History and Provenance of a Jewish Archive* (London, 2022).

[37] A few corpuses in Arabic script were also published: 72 letters of Jewish traders, almost all of them in Arabic script, were published by Ṣabīḥ ʿAodeh, "Ha-mikhtavim ha-ʿarviyim shel ha-soḥarim ha-yehudim bi-gnizat ḳahir ba-meʾa ha-aḥat-ʿeśre (Ph.D. diss., Tel Aviv University, 1992); 159 legal documents in Arabic script were published by Geoffrey Khan, *Arabic Legal and Administrative Documents in the Cambridge Genizah Collections* (Cambridge, 1993) (most of them are from the Fatimid period, while only a few are from the Ayyubid period or the first decades of the Mamluk period). On these Arabic documents see also Marina Rustow, *The Lost Archive: Traces of a Caliphate in a Cairo Synagogue* (Princeton, 2020).

[38] Comprehensive collections of Genizah documents from this period were published already 100 years ago by Mann: Jacob Mann, *The Jews in Egypt and in Palestine under the Fatimid Caliphs* (London, 1920–22); idem, *Texts and Studies in Jewish History and Literature* (vol. 1: Cincinnati, 1931; vol. 2: Philadelphia, 1935). The most prominent researcher among the scholars publishing Genizah documents is Gil. See Moshe Gil, *Documents of the Jewish Pious Foundations from the Cairo Geniza* (Leiden, 1976) [147 documents]; idem, *Erets yisraʾel ba-teḳufa ha-muslemit ha-rishona, 634–1099* (Tel Aviv, 1983) (3 vols., 619 documents); idem, *Be-malkhut Yishmaʿel bi-tḳufat ha-geonim* (Tel Aviv, 1997) (4 vols., 846 documents). The documents in the last two publications are available only in Hebrew translation, but the comprehensive introductions of these publications are also available in English: idem, *A History of Palestine, 634–1099* (Cambridge, 1992); idem, *Jews in Islamic Countries in the Middle Ages* (Leiden, 2004). Among the recent publications of documents from the Fatimid and Ayyubid periods, one can mention for example Mark R. Cohen, *The Voice of the Poor in the Middle Ages: An Anthology of Documents from the Cairo Geniza* (Princeton, 2005) (94

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that has attracted particular attention is traders' letters, which shed light on the economy and commerce of this period.[39] In addition, a comprehensive monograph of six volumes describing the life of the Jews in and around Egypt in the light of these documents was published by Goitein.[40] In comparison to this abundance, research on Jews during the Mamluk period still lags. Many documents from this period remain unexplored. In addition, most of the letters in the Genizah are not dated. There are many dozens (and maybe more than a hundred) of unpublished Judeo-Arabic letters in the Genizah which can be dated roughly to the fifteenth or sixteenth century, but it is often hard to determine, based on our current knowledge, if a specific letter of this corpus is from the late Mamluk or the early Ottoman period.[41]

The most important and comprehensive research on Jews in the Mamluk Sultanate is the three-volume *History of the Jews in Egypt and Syria under the Rule of the Mamlūks,* written in Hebrew by Eliyahu Ashtor.[42] Although some of Ashtor's conclusions and insights are outdated (and some now considered to be inaccurate), there is no alternative yet to his extensive survey of Jewish life under the sultans. The first two volumes, published in 1946 and 1951, are a historical analysis of different aspects of Jewish existence in the Mamluk state. The third volume, published in 1970, is a corpus of documents from the Cairo Genizah. It is the largest collection of Jewish documents from the Mamluk period, containing

documents. 8 of which are from the Mamluk period); Philip I. Ackerman-Lieberman, "A Partnership Culture: Jewish Economic and Social Life Seen through the Legal Documents of the Cairo Geniza" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2007) (105 documents); Oded Zinger, "Women, Gender and Law: Marital Disputes According to Documents from the Cairo Geniza" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2014) (19 documents). A full survey of major document editions Genizah documents from the Fatimid and Ayyubid periods can be found in "Documentary Geniza Studies in the 21st Century," special issue, *Jewish History* 32, nos. 2–4 (2019).

[39] For publication of traders' letters see S. D. Goitein, *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders* (Princeton, 1973) (80 documents); S. D. Goitein and Mordechai A. Friedman, *India Traders of the Middle Ages* (Leiden, 2008) (177 documents). See also 'Aodeh, "Ha-mikhtavim ha-'arviyim"; Gil, *Be-malkhut Yishma'el.*

[40] S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza* (Berkeley, 1967–93).

[41] The dating to this period is based on names mentioned in them that are known from other dated documents or are characteristic of this period, on the use of expressions typical of this period, and on paleographic and codicological data.

[42] Eliyahu Ashtor, *Toledot ha-yehudim*. Because of the rarity of this edition, a new facsimile edition was published recently (Jerusalem, 2021). In this edition a few introductory chapters (by B. Z. Kedar, Yaacov Lev, and Miriam Frenkel) and a selected updated bibliography (by Dotan Arad) were added.

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74 documents, most of which were written in Judeo-Arabic.[43] With the exception of some Hebrew sentences in legal documents and Hebrew components of the Judeo-Arabic texts, Judeo-Arabic is the dominant language within this corpus. There is not even one document in Ashtor's volume written mainly in Hebrew.[44]

Another anthology of texts from the Mamluk period was published by Abraham David.[45] This corpus is more limited in its scope and consists exclusively of letters written from or to Jerusalem, almost entirely in Hebrew. A third collection of documents from the Mamluk period was published recently.[46] These documents originate from the personal archive of Moses ben Judah of Alexandria, currently located in the Bodleian Library at the University of Oxford. Moses ben Judah was a prominent local Jewish leader and the dragoman of the Venetian Consul in Alexandria during the second half of the fifteenth century. He was a wealthy individual and a skilled merchant who successfully established a commercial network in several Mediterranean ports involving Jewish, Christian, and local Muslim traders. The archive of Moses ben Judah comprises a collection of literary works, presumably from his private library, as well as letters and one legal document. This last publication raises the possibility of reevaluating the role both languages played in the field of correspondence and legal documents.

Letters

The letters of Jews in the eastern Mediterranean and North Africa from the eleventh–thirteenth centuries preserved in the Genizah were written in both Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic. A precise linguistic-historical description must take into consideration social status, gender, education, location, and other factors. We can, for example, find more use of Hebrew among the letters of elites, such as heads of yeshivas *(geonim)* and judges, and a near com-

[43] As shown by Goitein, two documents that Ashtor dated to the Mamluk period (Cambridge MSS T-S 6J2.1; T-S 16.287; Ashtor, *Toldot ha-yehudim,* 3:100–5) are actually from the Ayyubid period. See S. D. Goitein, "Kitve geniza min ha-teḳufa ha-mamlukit," *Tarbiz* 41 (1972): 68–69.

[44] A group of 14 documents of this corpus were written in Aramaic due to their genre. I will discuss this point later.

[45] Abraham David, *Sha'alu shelom yerushalayim, Asupat igrot 'ivriyot be-'inyanah shel ḳehilat yerushalayim ṿe-yehude'a ba-teḳufa ha-mamlukit* (Tel Aviv, 2003). He also published some other letters from the late Mamluk period, all of them in Hebrew, in two anthologies: idem, *'Al bamote erets ha-tsevi, meḳorot u-meḥḳarim be-toledot ha-yishuv ha-yehudi be-erets yisra'el be-shalhe yeme ha-benayim* (Jerusalem, 2013); idem, *Ḥevra yehudit yam-tikhonit be-shalhe yeme ha-benayim* (Jerusalem, 2016). These books contain letters and documents from the late Mamluk period and (mainly) the early Ottoman period.

[46] Dotan Arad and Esther-Miriam Wagner, *Wisdom and Greatness in One Place: The Alexandrian Trader Moses Ben Judah and His Circle* (Cambridge, 2025).

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plete absence of Hebrew in the letters of ordinary people. However, anyone who surveys the huge collections of Genizah manuscripts will easily get the impression that the dominant language in the letters is Judeo-Arabic. For instance, the largest collection of Genizah documents contains 846 documents, most of which are letters, and the rest are legal documents with a few that do not fall in either category.[47] Only 81 of them (9.57%) are in Hebrew (or Aramaic). In addition, it is noteworthy that, as Mark Cohen has demonstrated convincingly, even the Hebrew letters of the Jewish elite contain numerous influences and clear imitations of the Arabic epistolary. Many typical Arabic phrases (such as "your servant kisses the ground [*yuqabbil al-arḍ*] before my master") were transmitted into Hebrew.[48]

What were the linguistic preferences of Jewish letter-writers in the Mamluk period? Ashtor's documents volume contains fifteen letters from the Mamluk period, all in Judeo-Arabic.[49] Most are from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, while only three are from the fifteenth century or later. Another collection of Judeo-Arabic letters from the fourteenth century was published in 1985 by Goitein.[50] David's anthology contains twenty-six letters, all in Hebrew. While the documents in Ashtor's volume span the whole Mamluk period, only five letters in David's volume date to before the fifteenth century. Fifteen of twenty-six letters are from the last decades of Mamluk rule (1473–1517). The linguistic distribution of the letters of these corpuses may seem to indicate a decline in the status of Arabic and a growth in the use of Hebrew towards the end of the Mamluk period, but this conclusion should be proposed with caution, as I will argue.

First, a careful examination must differentiate between local Jews and foreigners. David's anthology contains many letters that were addressed to persons

[47] Gil, *Be-malkhut Yishma"el*. Aside from letters, the corpus contains around 50 accounts lists, around 30 legal documents, 3 responsa fragments, 3 chronicles, 1 book list, and 1 genealogical list.

[48] Mark Cohen, "On the Interplay of Arabic and Hebrew in the Cairo Geniza Letters," in *Studies in Arabic and Hebrew Letters, in Honor of Raimond P. Scheindlin,* ed. Jonathan P. Decter and Michael Rand (Piscataway, 2007), 17–35. I would like to thank Dr. Oded Zinger for bringing this article to my attention.

[49] Ashtor, *Toledot ha-yehudim,* vol. 3, doc. 2, 18, 27, 30, 31, 32, 36, 48, 49, 56, 57, 59 (this letter is actually from 1208 and not from 1408), 65, 69, 71.

[50] S. D. Goitein, "Dimdume 'erev shel bet ha-rambam: demutu shel rabi yehosu'a ha-nagid ufe'ilutu ha-tsiburit," *Tarbiz* 54 (1984): 67–104. Seventeen letters were published in this article (without the originals, only in Hebrew translation, and sometimes partial), and thirteen others (plus one list of donors) were only summarized.

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or communities in Europe who did not know Arabic.[51] Some other letters within this corpus were addressed to Jewish residents in the Mamluk state, but most of the writers of these letters were newcomers who did not know, or at least were not fluent in, Arabic.[52] Nevertheless, the book also includes letters from people whose mother tongue was Arabic and whose letters were sent to recipients who knew Arabic, but who chose to write in Hebrew.[53] When examining the linguistic features of letters written by Jews during the Mamluk period, it is crucial to identify the social strata to which the writer belonged. A precise delineation of linguistic processes in Jewish society during the Mamluk period necessitates not only distinguishing between migrants and locals but also recognizing distinctions among various groups within the local population that spoke Arabic, as individuals from different social strata may attribute different meanings to linguistic choices.

The Arad and Wagner corpus is a useful database for such an analysis.[54] Its documents represent a very limited period (around 1480–90) and a defined social group: Moses ben Judah's circle. Most of the writers belonged to Moses's commercial network. We divided the letters in Moses's archive into two parts: the first contains letters about community affairs, while the second contains private letters to Moses and a few other people, dealing mainly with business and family matters. Table 1 presents the linguistic distribution of the letters in the corpus.

Most of the letters addressing community affairs were written in Judeo-Arabic. Among them, four letters were not specifically addressed to Moses ben Judah but were instead sent from the nagid to the community's leadership in Alexandria.[55] These public letters were intended for widespread distribution among the general public, hence their composition in Judeo-Arabic is understandable. On the other hand, in the private letters we see a higher prevalence of Hebrew. Two of the letters in this category were sent from Crete to Egypt and may have been written by a Jew who did not know Arabic.[56] The remaining letters, however, were written by individuals who were proficient in Arabic, as deduced from

[51] For example: David, *Sha'alu shelom yerushalayim,* doc. 1 (to Spain, 1267); doc. 5 (to the region of Austria, second half of the fourteenth century); doc. 7 (to Ferrara, Italy, 1438); doc. 8 (to Corfu, 1454); docs. 10–12 (recommendation letters to European communities, 1472–75); doc. 13 (to Lombardy, 1480).

[52] For example: ibid., doc. 4 (Iberian origin, 1388); doc. 24 (Italian origin); doc. 25 (Iberian origin).

[53] For example: ibid., doc. 14 (around 1482) and doc. 20 (late fifteenth or early sixteenth century). Both letters were sent from Jerusalem to Cairo.

[54] Arad and Wagner, *Wisdom and Greatness.*

[55] Arad and Wagner, doc. C.1a–C.1d.

[56] Ibid., doc. P.5a, P.5b.

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Table 1: Linguistic distribution of Moses ben Judah's archive

Letters in Moses ben Judah's archive	Communal letters	Private letters
Arabic	7	8
Hebrew	2	12
Mixed	—	2

the writers' origins. In these cases, the decision to use Hebrew was not due to a lack of Arabic knowledge but was a deliberate choice. While some writers in this corpus preferred to write in Arabic, others aimed to showcase their proficiency in Hebrew. In doing so, they expressed their affiliation with the Jewish intellectual elite who possessed extensive knowledge of canonical sources. The ability to write in Hebrew served as a symbol of status, indicating scholarly expertise and elevated social standing.

Among the writers of the archive's letters are two prominent leaders of Jewish society in Egypt: Solomon ben Joseph and Nathan Sholal, who both served as nagid. In what follows, I will examine the linguistic choices of the latest *negidim* and of one of their associates.

The Correspondence of the Negidim

A Jewish leader in the Middle Ages moved between two poles in his public correspondence. On the one hand, the realm of such letters was a place for him to demonstrate his mastery of the canonical sources of Jewish culture. The choice of Hebrew allowed for absorption and inspiration from the Bible and other classical sources and the heritage of Hebrew poetry and *piyyuṭim* (liturgical poems). On the other hand, he wanted to remain understandable to his readers. Choosing Hebrew would likely have reduced the number of people who could read his words. Even in letters written to a single addressee and not to a wide group, the choice of Hebrew was a limiting factor that might have made it difficult for the writer to express himself freely and present his ideas precisely.

What was the linguistic choice of the heads of the Jews in Egypt? Unlike the *geonim,* who wrote a significant portion of their letters in Hebrew, the letters of the *negidim* mostly did not adhere to this linguistic ideal.[57] The letters

[57] The ratio of Hebrew to Arabic in the *geonim*'s letters depends on the personal stance of the writer, and on whether a letter is formal or personal (personal letters tend more towards Arabic), so the linguistic patterns of each *gaon* should be examined individually. The tendency to choose Hebrew is particularly prominent among the *geonim* of Palestine. For example, about

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of Maimonides[58] and his son Abraham (d. 1237), who both served as heads of the Jews, were written mainly in Judeo-Arabic, which appears to have been their default choice as a language of writing.[59] Their letters in Hebrew are addressed consistently to European Jews in Europe or to European immigrants in the east.[60] As mentioned above, the Maimonidean dynasty was in power until the early fifteenth century. Our data on the correspondence of the heirs of Moses Maimonides and Abraham Maimonides is limited, but it is clear that they kept the tendency of their forefathers.[61] A corpus of letters written by Joshua ben Abraham (d. 1355), one of the Maimonidean *negidim,* was published by Goitein.[62] Another selection of Joshua's letters, focused on charity and support for the needy, was published by Mark Cohen.[63] All of these letters were written in Judeo-Arabic. We have only one letter from Joshua's son

85% of the letters of Solomon ben Judah, who served as head of the academy in Jerusalem from 1025 to 1051, were written in Hebrew, and only about 15% were written in Arabic (his letters were published in Gil, *Erets yisra'el,* 2:81–299).

[58] Although he served as the head of the Jews, Maimonides was not given the title *nagid* in the Geniza documents. All his successors, however, until the abolition of the nagidate in 1517, were called *nagid*.

[59] For Maimonides's correspondence, see *Igrot ha-Rambam,* ed. Itzhak Sheilat (Ma'ale Adumim, 1987–88). Abraham's letters are being prepared for publication by Mordechai A. Friedman and Amir Ashur. In the meantime, see Mordechai A. Friedman, "Responsa of R. Abraham Maimonides from the Cairo Geniza: A Preliminary Review," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 56 (1990): 29–49. For Judeo-Arabic letters of Abraham, see for example Oxford Bodleian MS Heb. a.3/15 (partially published in Goitein, *Mediterranean Society,* 5:489); Cambridge MSS T-S 10J14.5; T-S 10J30.11; T-S 18J13.11; T-S Ar. 7.23; T-S NS J 190.

[60] See for example Miriam Frenkel, *"Ha-Ohavim veha-Nedivim": 'Illit manhiga be-ḳerev yehude aleksandriya bi-(y)me ha-benayim* (Jerusalem, 2006), 122. On the European immigrants in the east in the Ayyubid period see Ephraim Kanarfogel, "The 'Aliyah of 'Three Hundred Rabbis' in 1211: Tosafist Attitudes toward Settling in the Land of Israel," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 76 (1986): 191–215; Alexandra Cuffel, "Call and Response: European Jewish Emigration to Egypt and Palestine in the Middle Ages," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 90 (1999): 61–101; Miriam Frenkel, *"The Compassionate and Benevolent": Jewish Ruling Elites in the Medieval Islamicate World: Alexandria as a Case Study* (Berlin, 2020), 156–83.

[61] For letters of David ben Abraham, Maimonides's grandson, see for example: Cambridge MSS T-S 16.343; T-S AS 148.9; T-S AS 155.317; 13J27.1. For a Judeo-Arabic letter addressed to him, see Cambridge MS Mosseri II 194.4.

[62] Goitein, "Dimdume 'erev."

[63] Mark R. Cohen, *The Voice of the Poor in the Middle Ages: An Anthology of Documents from the Cairo Geniza* (Princeton, 2005), 191–98. Another letter of Joshua was published by the same scholar earlier: idem, "Correspondence and Social Control in the Jewish Communities of the Islamic World: A Letter of the Nagid Joshua Maimonides," *Jewish History* 1, no. 2 (1986): 39–48.

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David, which was also written in Judeo-Arabic (with opening poetic verses in Hebrew).[64]

After the disappearance of the Maimonidean dynasty, the subsequent *negidim* continued the linguistic patterns of their predecessors, and they too wrote their letters in Arabic, as we see from an unpublished letter by Joseph ha-nagid (mid-fifteenth century),[65] and several letters by his son Solomon (d. around 1482), which were published by Arad and Wagner, all of them in Judeo-Arabic.[66] In the last three decades of the Mamluk regime, however, a tremendous change occurred, as detailed below.

The last two to serve as *negidim* were Nathan Sholal (1484–1502) and his nephew and brother-in-law Isaac Sholal (1502–17). Nathan and Isaac were in close contact with the Jewish sages of European origin who settled in in the Mamluk state, and even founded yeshivas and financially supported selected sages. The period of their tenure can be depicted as a renaissance in the spiritual and cultural life of the Jews of the Mamluk Sultanate. Many documents related to these two and some of their correspondence were published by Abraham David.[67] Unlike the *negidim* who preceded them, Nathan and Isaac were of North African origin.[68] In light of their foreign origin, it is necessary to determine which language Nathan and Isaac spoke as a mother tongue. Their ancestors probably came from Spain and settled in the Maghreb after the severe acts of violence against Jews in Spain in 1391. At some point, some members of the family arrived in Egypt.[69]

There is no doubt that Isaac and Nathan had a good command of Arabic. It seems that their native tongue was not Judeo-Spanish (Ladino) but Judeo-

[64] Oxford Bodl. MS Heb. b.13/44; published by Abraham Haim Freimann, "Mikhtav preda shel rabi david ha-nagid ha-aḥaron mi-tse'etsa'e ha-rambam el ḳehal mitsrayim," in *Minḥa li-(Y) huda, Festschrift in Honor of Yehuda Leyb Zlotnik,* ed. Simha Assaf et al. (Jerusalem, 1950), 175–78. A letter in Judeo-Arabic addressed to him from a Cairene Jewish woman was published by Goitein: S. D. Goitein, "A Jewish Addict to Sufism in the Time of the Nagid David II Maimonides," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 44 (1953): 37–49.

[65] London, British Library MS Or. 5545.4.

[66] Oxford, Bodl. MS Heb. c. 72/21+ 72/40+72/30; MS Heb. c. 72/28 +72/41; MS Heb. c. 72/53; MS Heb. c. 72/14bis (Arad and Wagner, *Wisdom and Greatness,* doc. 1a–1d).

[67] David, *Ḥevra yehudit,* 141–248.

[68] Evidence of the tenure of an earlier nagid of North African origin was discovered by Arad: Dotan Arad, "Mi'uṭ be-tokh mi'uṭ: ḳara'im ba-'imperya ha-'othmanit be-tsilam shel yehudim rabbaniyim," *Historia* 46–47 (2021): 79. According to a *waqfīyah* from 825/1422, Isaac al-Fāsī, the *ra'īs al-yahūd,* endowed a property in Cairo (Cairo, Community Archive, doc. 42), but we do not have any additional information about this person.

[69] On the North African Jews in the Mamluk state see Hacker, "Yehudim magrebim."

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Arabic, as evidenced by two Judeo-Arabic letters addressed to Nathan.[70] His command of Arabic is also illustrated well by the fact that his private library contained books in Arabic. An anonymous writer who took care of the nagid's library, which was left in Jerusalem after the migration of Sholal from Jerusalem to Cairo, reported that he found among them "commentary on Psalms in Arabic *(be-lashon hagri);*[71] and commentary on [Mishnah, tractate] Avot of R. Israel b. Israel,[72] also in Arabic."[73] Nevertheless, unlike their predecessors letters, all of Nathan and Isaac's letters preserved in the Genizah were written in Hebrew.

Despite the evidence from the Genizah, there is no doubt that the two also wrote letters in Judeo-Arabic to individuals and communities in the Mamluk state, even though these letters have not been preserved. The dual usage of languages among the Jewish heads in the late fifteenth century is reflected well in a Hebrew letter written by Solomon ben Siman Ṭov to an anonymous wealthy Jew in Egypt. Solomon was an emissary of the community of Jerusalem. In his letter, he blamed the addressee for an attempt to obstruct his appointment and informed him of the support he got from one of the *negidim,* probably Nathan or Isaac Sholal:

> His Excellency the nagid commanded the notable minister *(ha-śar ha-ṭafsar)*[74] R. Solomon the physician, "that he might see his

[70] Cambridge MSS T-S 16.216; T-S Misc. 28.166.

[71] The term *lashon hagri* (following Psalms 83:7) or *leshon ha-hagri'im* (following I Chronicles 5:1) appeared in medieval Jewish sources as a term for Arabic, based on the identification of Haggar as the matriarch of the Arabs. However, among Ashkenazi Jews in recent centuries the term *hagri* was used to mean "Hungarian" due to phonetic resemblance.

[72] R. Israel Israeli was active in Toledo in the second half of the thirteenth century and the beginning of the fourteenth century. His work is one of the latest compositions in Judeo-Arabic written in Christian Spain. In addition to the testimony in the letter, evidence of its acceptance in the eastern Mediterranean is fragments from three different manuscripts of it preserved in the Geniza (Cambridge MS T-S Ar. 18[2].175; New York, Jewish Theological Seminary MSS ENA 1069.1–3; ENA 908.1–2; ENA 1498.2). Another fragment, Cambridge MS T-S Ar. 18(1),179, was published by Nissim Sabato, "Keṭa' geniza ḥadash mi-perushu shel rabi yisra'el yisra'eli mi-toledo," *Ginzei Qedem* 4 (2008): 35–59.

[73] Cambridge MS Or. 1080J246; published by David, *Sha'alu shelom yerushalayim,* 125–30.

[74] The phrase *ha-śar ha-ṭafsar* is common in letters from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (Cambridge MSS T-S 16.291; T-S 8J14.23, T-S 8J31.1; T-S 10J12.10, T-S 13J18.19). It appears also in Hebrew letters probably written in the sixteenth century (Oxford MS Heb. b.13/45; Cambridge MS T-S 8J37.7. In the last one *ha-ṭafsar* is written with *śin* [*ha-ṭafśar*] rather than *samekh*). *Ṭafsar* is a rare Biblical word with a Sumerian-Akkadian origin, appearing only twice in the Bible (as *ṭafsar* in Jeramiah 51:27 and *ṭifsar* in Nahum 3:17), and used only in poetic texts. In Modern He-

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> seed, prolong his days,"[75] to bring back my clothes and return the donkey to his owner, and pay its rent fees and expenses until Jerusalem, and so it was done immediately...and he took the pen *(ha-ḳulmus)* and wrote for me letters in the holy language [i.e., Hebrew] and Arabic *(ve-khatav li ketavim bi-lshon ha-ḳodesh uve-lashon ʿaravi)* to all the holy communities.[76]

This letter teaches us that the nagid used both Hebrew and Arabic in his official correspondence. It is hard to know whether these letters mentioned by Solomon were addressed solely to communities in the Mamluk Sultanate or also to other communities in the Jewish diaspora. It is possible that Solomon planned to collect money for the Jerusalemite community in non-Arabic speaking communities (for example, in the European regions of the Ottoman Empire or in Italy), but it is also possible that the Hebrew letters were sent within the Mamluk Sultanate. If the second option is correct, it can be assumed that the nagid sent Hebrew letters to central communities that were characterized by a large presence of European immigrants, such as Jerusalem and Safed, and Arabic letters to smaller communities that were populated mostly by native Jews. Nathan's preference for writing in Hebrew continued with his successor, Isaac Sholal. Thus, the three last decades of the Mamluk period show a prominent shift from Arabic to Hebrew in the leadership's epistolary production.

Ṣedaqah Nis's Correspondence

Ṣedaqah Nis was likely a commercial agent operating within Moses ben Judah's extensive commercial network. Within Moses's archive, seven letters from Nis have been preserved. In addition, there is another letter written by Nis that was sent to Nathan Sholal (Table 2, no. 8).[77] Let us examine the division between Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic in Nis's correspondence (Table 2):

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brew this word is used for a high rank in the fire and rescue services, equivalent to a general in the army.

[75] Isaiah 53:10.

[76] Cambridge MS T-S G1.17; published by Abraham David, "'Ha-ba'im mi-ḳtse ha-ʿolam li-(y) rushalayim 'im mamonam u-vonim batim,' pereḳ be-toldote'a shel ha-ḳehila ha-yehudit bi-(y) rushalayim be-mifne ha-me'ot ha-ḥamesh-ʿeśre veha-shesh-ʿeśre," *Le-'ot Zikaron: Memorial Volume for Aaron Mirski,* ed. Ephraim Hazan and Joseph Yahalom (Ramat Gan, 2007), 455–62.

[77] The upper part of this torn letter (Cambridge MS T-S 10J24.3) was published eighty years ago by Assaf: Simha Assaf, "Le-Toledot ha-negidim ha-aḥaronim be-mitsrayim," *Zion* 6 (1941): 116–17. David identified the missing part of the letter (Cambridge MS Or. 1080J174), and republished the whole text in 1999: Abraham David, "Me'oravutam shel aḥarone ha-negidim be-mitsrayim be-ʿinyane ha-ḳehila ha-yehudit be-erets yisra'el," *Te'uda* 15 (1999): 293–332.

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Table 2: Linguistic distribution of Ṣedaqah Nis's Letters

	Language	Shelfmark	Publication	Addressee
1	Hebrew	Oxford, Bodl. MS Heb.c.72.11	Arad & Wagner, doc. P.4a	Moses ben Judah [=MbY]
2	Mixed	Heb.c.72.12	Ibid., doc. P.4b	MbY
3	Arabic	Heb.c.72.13	Ibid., doc. P.4c	MbY
4	Hebrew	Heb.c.72.15	Ibid., doc. P.4d	MbY
5	Hebrew	Heb.c.72.25	Ibid., doc. P.4e	MbY
6	Hebrew	Heb.c.72.26	Ibid., doc. P.4f	MbY
7	Arabic	Heb.c.72.27+c.72.43	Ibid., doc. P.4g	MbY
8	Hebrew	Cambridge MSS T-S 10J24.3+CUL Or. 1080J174	David 1999, doc. 1	Nathan Sholal[78]
Total	5 Hebrew; 2 Arabic; 1 Mixed			

The findings demonstrate that Ṣedaqah Nis made a significant effort to write in Hebrew. Out of the eight letters, one used both languages, five were composed in Hebrew, and only two were written in Judeo-Arabic. There is no thematic difference between the Judeo-Arabic letters and the Hebrew letters, as they all discuss similar subjects (mainly commercial affairs). As such, the linguistic differentiation can only be explained by an intentional preference of Nis to write in Hebrew.

Switching Languages

The most interesting of all of Nis's letters is one written in a mixture of Hebrew and Arabic (Table 2, no. 2). The letter opens in Hebrew, but the writer switches from one language to another over the course of the document (see Figure 1).

Because of the widespread presence of code-switching in Judeo-Arabic documents, a sociolinguistic approach to such texts is particularly productive.[79]

[78] It will be insightful to mention here another letter addressed to Nathan Sholal, which was written by David ha-Cohen Nis (Cambridge MS T-S 16.216). This letter was written in Judeo-Arabic. It is likely that the writer is R. David ha-Cohen, mentioned in a Hebrew letter from the same time (New York, Jewish Theological Seminary MS ENA NS 35.12). Ṣedaqah Nis and David Nis were apparently relatives, although Ṣedaqah spelled his name *Nis* and David spelled his name *Nṣ*.

[79] Benjamin H. Hary, *Translating Religion: Linguistic Analysis of Judeo-Arabic Sacred Texts from Egypt* (Leiden, 2009), 10.

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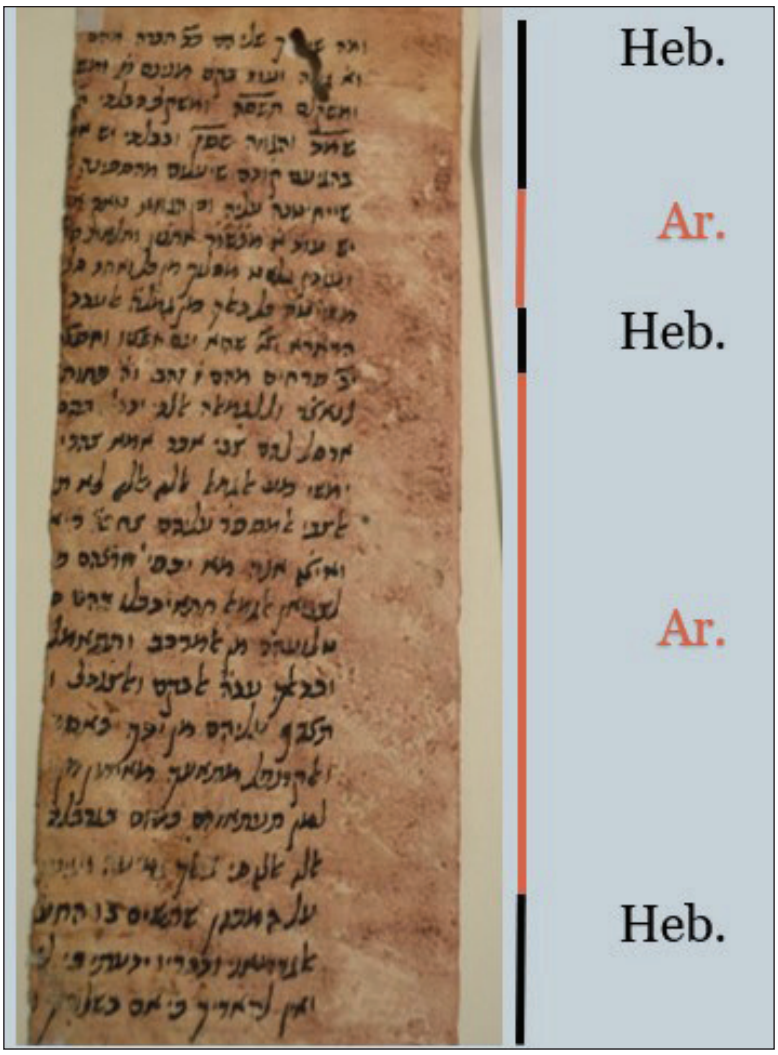

Figure 1: A mixed letter by Ṣedaqah Nis (Oxford Bodl.MS Heb.C.72.12)

Several types of code-switching in Judeo-Arabic texts have been examined by scholars: (a) registers (of standard Arabic and Judeo-Arabic); (b) scripts (Judeo-Arabic in Hebrew script and in Arabic script);[80] and (c) languages (Judeo-Arabic and Hebrew). I will focus on the third type, namely, switches between Judeo-Arabic and Hebrew (both written in Hebrew script). J. Blau has described the

[80] See Meira Polliack, "Dual Script Mixed Code Literary Sources from the Cairo Genizah," *Journal of the Intellectual History of the Islamicate World* 7 (2019): 325–50; Esther-Miriam Wagner, "Script-Switching between Hebrew and Arabic Scripts in Documents from the Cairo Genizah," *Journal of the Intellectual History of the Islamicate World* 7 (2019): 351–80.

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characteristics of Judeo-Arabic and showed how the proportion of Hebrew depended mainly on the author's education.[81] M. Polliack has analyzed different kinds of code-switching in literary sources and shown how scribes differentiated between the two languages in different ways, such as different sizes of characters.[82] E. M. Wagner has analyzed Judeo-Arabic letters and shown that the content of the letter had a crucial influence on the ratio of Hebrew to Arabic.[83] Focusing on the Fatimid period, Wagner states that:

> The amount of Hebrew language they used in their writings was determined by the text genre: religious texts and legal texts show high reliance on Hebrew. More secular professions, such as traders and probably also doctors, would avoid the use of Hebrew loanwords, while still writing in Hebrew script... Markedly Jewish forms were actively avoided within the sphere of trade, although all documents investigated were composed in Judeo-Arabic script and sent between Jewish merchants.[84]

This distinction regarding the tendency of religious texts to transition from Arabic to Hebrew is also illustrated in the corpus of Moses ben Judah's archive. One of the letters in this collection was sent from an anonymous sage to Moses.[85] This letter is unique, as, unlike the other letters in this corpus, it does not discuss trade, family, or communal matters. Rather, it deliberates upon exegetical questions such as the different meanings of the word *lev* (heart) in the Bible.

[81] See for example his statement: "The extent of Hebrew elements depends on the personal style of the author, as also on the literary genre and especially on the presupposed Hebrew knowledge of the audience addressed. Yet, however large the ratio of Hebrew elements, they do not alter the basic structure of the text, which still remains Arabic...as a rule, the Hebrew elements adapt themselves to the structure of Arabic to a quite surprising degree" (Joshua Blau, *The Emergence and Linguistic Background of Judaeo-Arabic: A Study of the Origins of Middle Arabic* [Jerusalem, 1999], 133).

[82] Meira Polliack, "Single-Script Mixed-Code Literary Sources from the Cairo Genizah and Their Sociolinguistic Context," in *Jewish Languages in Historical Perspective,* ed. Lily Khan (Leiden, 2018), 65–91.

[83] Esther-Miriam Wagner, *Linguistic Variety of Judaeo-Arabic in Letters from the Cairo Genizah* (Leiden, 2010), 110–14; idem, "Codeswitching in Yiddish and Judaeo-Arabic," in *Dat ih dir in nu in huldi gibu,* ed. Sergio Neri, Roland Schuhmann, and Susanne Zeilfelder (Wiesbaden, 2016), 495–504; Esther-Miriam Wagner and Magdalen M. Connolly, "Code-switching in Judaeo-Arabic documents from the Cairo Geniza," *Multilingua* 37, no. 1 (2018): 1–23.

[84] Esther-Miriam Wagner, "Language and Identity in the Cairo Genizah," in *Israel in Egypt: The Land of Egypt as Concept and Reality for Jews in Antiquity and the Early Medieval Period,* ed. Alison Salvesen, Sarah Pearce, and Miriam Frenkel (Leiden, 2020), 525.

[85] Oxford, Bodl. MSS Heb.c.72.12+ Heb.c.72.24.

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The writer started his letter in Hebrew,[86] switched to Judeo-Arabic,[87] and then switched back to Hebrew.[88] According to Wagner, a significant shift can be identified starting from the thirteenth century onward:

> The later medieval period, however, sees a return to Jewish values: Markedly more Jewish linguistic customs start to appear in documents. The observed linguistic data may indicate a general detachment of the Jewish communities from general Egyptian society. It may also point to increasing segregation between the different religious communities in Egypt in the later Ayyubid and early Mamluk period.[89]

The mixed language letter of Ṣedaqah Nis discussed above illustrates that this process was in full force towards the late Mamluk period. The choice of language was not related to the content of the letter, which exclusively addressed commercial matters. Nevertheless, the Hebrew presence in it is very high (about 72% of the words), which is consistent with his overall inclination to choose Hebrew in his correspondence. The inconsistency in Nis's epistolary may reflect a tension between his adherence to the cultural-social norm that preferred Hebrew as a written language and the ease of writing in Arabic. It appears that the frequent code-switching here is related to Ṣedaqah's effort to write in Hebrew, an effort that sometimes succeeded and sometimes failed.

The desire to write in Hebrew is also reflected in the writers' struggle with the appearance of Arabic words or sentences in their letters. Despite the linguistic choice, even in letters written in Hebrew Arabic sometimes breaks out for a moment and then disappears. Sometimes writers showed awareness of the linguistic exchange and tried to correct it while writing. I will illustrate this phenomenon using another letter of Nis. In one of his Hebrew letters he wrote *u-meʿinyan ha-ṣābūn veha-nuḥās sheshalaḥta* ("about the soap and the copper that you sent"), but a few lines later he writes: *ve-omnam meha-borit veha-neḥoshet sheshalaḥta, ʿaśe kol hishtadlutkha* ("However, concerning the soap and the copper you said 'do your best'..."). [90] In my view, we can observe here Nis's commitment to the Hebrew language. He made a consistent effort to use Hebrew terminology. It appears that during the writing process, there was a moment when Ṣedaqah

[86] Oxford, Bodl. MS Heb.c.72.24, lines 1–7.

[87] Ibid., lines 7–16.

[88] Ibid., lines 17–23. From here onward the letter is basically in Arabic but contains many quotations in Hebrew from several sources.

[89] Wagner, *Language and Identity,* 525.

[90] Oxford, Bodl. MS Heb.c.72/12.

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paused and remembered that he knew Hebrew words for the *ṣābūn* and *nuḥās*. He then corrected himself and utilized Hebrew alternatives to the Arabic terms.[91]

The replacement of an Arabic word with a Hebrew word is evident in another letter in the corpus. The letter, sent by Moses ben Judah's commercial agents, contained information concerning his business affairs as well as some scrolls and books he expressed interest in buying. The writer updated Moses that the Pentateuch that was bought for him was "most beautiful, very much so, and very praiseworthy as much as there could possibly be in the world. So to speak, it is appropriate to call it 'Ezra's scroll' *(sefer Ezra)*."[92] When he wanted to emphasize the uniqueness of the manuscript he used the words *kathīr kam efshar alladhī yakūnu fī al-dunyā ʿolam* ("as much as there could possibly be in the world"). Aside from the Hebrew word *efshar* (possible), the writer felt that the Arabic word for "world" *(dunyā)* did not quite convey the concept as much as the Hebrew word *(ʿolam)* and replaced the Arabic word with its Hebrew alternative.

It can be observed, therefore, that during the first two centuries of Mamluk rule Hebrew experienced a decline as the preferred language for writing letters. However, in the latter half of the fifteenth century there are indications that the status of Hebrew was growing. Although Arabic continued to be used for correspondence well into the Ottoman period, it became the language of the common masses while Hebrew emerged as the preferred language for the elite. This shift was influenced by changing elites, as the Maimonidean dynasty disappeared, giving way to a new elite shaped by the norms of migrating scholars. The mystical writings of the Maimonideans were predominantly in Arabic, showing the deep influence of Sufism.[93] In the fifteenth century, however, the intellectual

[91] It is noteworthy that Modern Hebrew did not follow the path of Ṣedaqah Nis, as it opted for the word *sabon,* like several other European languages, instead of the Biblical term *borit*.

[92] Oxford, Bodl. MS Heb.c. 72/23. The writer does not refer here to the Biblical book with this name, but means "Ezra's book," i.e., the Torah scroll that was written by Ezra the scribe. In the Middle Ages, some old Biblical manuscripts were attributed to Ezra, and one copy of this manuscript was kept until the late Mamluk period in Fusṭāṭ. It seems that the writer wanted to praise the value of the Torah scroll he bought by comparing it to the famous "Ezra scroll." Regarding the perception of Ezra and the narratives surrounding him among the Jews in the Mamluk period, see Dotan Arad, "Samuel, Elijah and Ezra: The Cult of Biblical Saints among the Jews in the Mamluk and Early Ottoman Periods," in *The Sacred in Mamluk Society,* ed. Tetsuya Ohtoshi (Tokyo, forthcoming).

[93] The Judeo-Sufi writings of the Maimonidean dynasty have been extensively studied in the works of Fenton: see Paul B. Fenton, "Sufis and Jews in Mamluk Egypt," in *Muslim-Jewish Relations in the Middle Islamic Period: Jews in the Ayyubid and Mamluk Sultanates,* ed. Stephan Conermann (Bonn, 2017), 41–62; idem, "Asceticism among the Judeo-Sufis of Egypt: The Cases of R. Abraham Maimonides and R. David II Maimonides," *Jewish Thought* 3 (2021): 67–97. Fenton has also published some of the mystical works of this pietistic school: see ʿObadyāh b. Abraham Maimonides, *The Treatise of the Pool = al-Maqāla al-Ḥawḍiyya,* ed. Paul B. Fenton (London, 1981);

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taste of Jewish scholars shifted, ushering in a new trend: Kabbalah.[94] Kabbalah presented itself as a spring of ancient and authentic Jewish secrets, leading its compositions to be written specifically in Hebrew (and sometimes Aramaic). An Italian Jewish traveler, hosted by Moses ben Judah in February 1488, admitted to his attraction toward and enthusiasm for the world of Kabbalah.[95] This change of intellectual preference also contributed to the strengthening of Hebrew's position in elite circles. The disappearance of genres in Judeo-Arabic, such as Judeo-Sufism and philosophy, and the adoption of genres written in Hebrew, like Kabbalah, reinforced the perception among the Jewish elite that Hebrew, rather than Arabic, was the suitable language for literary expression, and this trend was reflected also in the epistolary field.

Legal Documents and Court Deeds

The language of Jewish courts in late antiquity was Aramaic, and this linguistic situation persisted even after the Arab conquests. For instance, Saadia Gaon's guide for scribes, written in Judeo-Arabic in the beginning of the tenth century, included 54 samples of legal documents, all of which were written in Aramaic.[96] It seems that Aramaic started to disappear in the tenth century, and that

Obadiah et David Maïmonide, Deux traités de mystique juive, ed. Paul B. Fenton (Lagrasse, 1987); idem, "A Mystical Commentary on the Song of Songs in the Hand of David Maimonides II," in *Esoteric and Exoteric Aspects in Judeo-Arabic Culture,* ed. Benjamin H. Hary and Haggai Ben-Shammai (Leiden and Boston, 2006), 19–53. This pietistic movement was also researched at length by Russ-Fishbane: see Elisha Russ-Fishbane, *Judaism, Sufism, and the Pietists of Medieval Egypt* (Oxford, 2015); idem, "Situating Medieval Pietism," in *The Jews in Medieval Egypt,* ed. Miriam Frenkel (Boston, 2021), 175–90.

[94] For Kabbalistic works copied in Egypt in the fifteenth century, see for example Vatican MS Ebr. 103 (1435–36); Paris, BNF MS Heb. 853.3 (Alexandria 1437).

[95] "He took me in his house, and there I had to remain while I stayed in Alexandria. I read with him in a book in Cabbala, which he had in his possession, for he dearly loved this science" (Adler, *Jewish Travellers,* 220–21). Moses's correspondence also provides evidence of his interest in Kabbalah. In a letter that was probably written by him he asks the author to check whether someone "could give me the book of the Zohar" (New York, Jewish Theological Seminary MS ENA 4101.6A). Two letters sent to him by his commercial agents described Kabbalistic books that were purchased for him (Oxford, Bodl. MS. Heb. c. 72/23; New York, Jewish Theological Seminary MS 2331, fols. 217b–18a).

[96] Saadia Gaon, *Kitāb al-shahādāt wa-al-wathāʾiq,* ed. Menahem Ben-Sasson and Robert Brodi (Jerusalem, 2021).

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scribes replaced it with Hebrew. Goitein assumed that Aramaic was no longer well known in the tenth century, and that Hebrew became a natural alternative for composing legal documents.[97] Hebrew did not persist as the preferred language by court scribes for an extended period, however. In the eleventh century, a new trend emerged as Arabic began to increasingly appear in documents, becoming the preferred language for writing legal documents for hundreds of years thereafter.

Despite the preference given to Arabic, Hebrew did not disappear from the legal documents of the eleventh to thirteenth centuries. Both languages were in use during that period for writing deeds, contracts, testimonies, and court records. The division between the two languages was not sharp. Arabic documents frequently contained Hebrew phrases, especially at the beginning and end. In addition, scribes also regularly included Aramaic formulas taken from the ancient tradition that was used in Jewish courts. Even in mixed-language documents, however, it is possible to determine which language was used to establish the linguistic frame of the text in addition to most of the content. In most bills, it was Judeo-Arabic.[98]

As an illustration of the priority given to Judeo-Arabic in the field of legal documents in the eleventh to thirteenth centuries we can examine the volume dedicated to Joseph al-Lebdī, a trader who was active in trade between India and the Fatimid caliphate in the second half of the eleventh century.[99] The volume contains dozens of court records, deeds, and some letters regarding the al-Lebdī

[97] Goitein, *Mediterranean Society,* 1:15; idem, "Arba' ketubot 'atiḳot mi-gnizat ḳahir," *Lěšonénu* 30 (1966): 198. For Hebrew legal documents from the tenth and early eleventh centuries, see for example Cambridge MS T-S AS 146.66 (Damascus, 933); Oxford, Bodl. MS Heb. b 12/6 + Bodl. MS Heb. b.12/29 (Fusṭāṭ, 959); Cambridge MSS T-S 12.515 (Fusṭāṭ, 967); T-S 12.468 (Kairouan, 978); T-S 16.142 (Fusṭāṭ, 982); T-S 12.496 (probably Fusṭāṭ, late tenth century); Oxford, Bodl. MS Heb. e 108/70 (1020); Cambridge MS T-S 13J14.24 (Zoar, near the Dead Sea, 1032).

[98] Nevertheless, there were some sages and scribes who demonstrated some inclination towards Hebrew, especially in the first half of the eleventh century. The legal documents from the court of Efraim ben Shemaria, head of the Palestinian community of Fusṭāṭ in the first half of the eleventh century, were written in both languages, with a certain priority to Hebrew. Efraim's archive was researched by Bareket: Elinoar Bareket, *Yehude mitsrayim 1007–1055, 'al-pi 'arkhiyon ha-te'udot shel efrayim ben shemarya* (Jerusalem, 1995). This corpus contains 15 Hebrew documents, 11 Judeo-Arabic documents and 2 Aramaic documents. More documents from the Palestinian court in Fusṭāṭ were published by Gil. See for example Gil, *Erets yisra'el,* doc. 313, 325, 329 (Judeo-Arabic); doc. 331 (Hebrew).

[99] S. D. Goitein and Mordechai A. Friedman, *Yosef al-Lebdī soḥer hodu ha-gadol: te'udot mi-gnizat ḳahir* (Jerusalem, 2009). Some of the documents were translated to English, while many others were only summarized (see Goitein and Friedman, *India Traders,* 167–281).

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family business, almost all of them written in Judeo-Arabic.[100] The same reality appeared in a corpus of hundreds of traders' letters from the Fatimid period, which contains mainly Judeo-Arabic legal documents and only five in Hebrew.[101] Another illustration is the corpus of documents from Alexandria in the Ayyubid and Fatimid periods. All the legal documents in it were written in Judeo-Arabic—none of them in Hebrew.[102]

In the area of family status, Aramaic remained prominent. Due to the great strictness of the laws regarding writing the *geṭ* (divorce document, pl. *giṭṭin*), the *geṭ*'s language has remained, to this day, Aramaic.[103] For Karaites, on the other hand, there was a special linkage with Hebrew that influenced their linguistic choice. Karaites consider only the Hebrew Bible as canonical literature and view the study of Hebrew as mandatory and as one of the foundations of Judaism.[104] In light of this principle, their family legal documents were written in Hebrew. The Karaite *geṭ* is written, to this day, in Hebrew. This linguistic difference between the two groups is evident in documents related to marriage. The Karaites wrote their marriage documents *(sheṭar 'erusin)* in Hebrew.[105] J. Schlanger published 57 Karaite marriage documents from the Fatimid period; all but one of them are in Hebrew.[106] On the other hand, the Rabbanites wrote the *ketubah* (pl. *ketubot*), which details the main conditions agreed upon between the groom and the bride, in Aramaic.

[100] A rare example of a Hebrew deed is a power of attorney from the late tenth or early eleventh century by the trader Samuel ibn al-Lebdī (Goitein and Friedman, *Yosef al-Lebdī,* doc. I.43b).

[101] Gil, *Be-malkhut Yishma'el*. Judeo-Arabic: docs. 91, 143, 223, 302, 319, 327, 565, 618, 623, 632 (the 8 opening lines in Hebrew), 633, 649, 665, 799, 800, 811, 812, 819, 821, 823, 824, 844, 845; Hebrew: docs. 105, 106, 213, 229, 822; Aramaic: doc. 303 (a sale deed from 1108).

[102] Frenkel, *"Ha-Ohavim veha-Nedivim,"* docs. 4, 5, 7, 26, 34, 41, 43, 60, 80, 82. One of the documents in the corpus (doc. 7) is from the Mamluk period, written in Judeo-Arabic in 1285.

[103] On the writing of *giṭṭin* in the Fatimid and Ayyubid periods, see Yehezkel David, "Ha-Gerushin be-ḳerev ha-yehudim 'al pi te'udot ha-geniza u-meḳorot aḥerim" (Ph.D. diss., Tel Aviv University, 2000). On *giṭṭin* in the Mamluk period, see also Ashtor, *Toledot ha-yehudim,* 2:360–61.

[104] Daniel Lasker, *Karaism: An Introduction to the Oldest Surviving Alternative Judaism* (London, 2022), 189. For further discussion see Judith Olszowvy-Schlanger, "The Knowledge of Hebrew among Early Karaites, and Its Use in Karaite Legal Contracts," in *Hebrew Study from Ezra to Ben-Yehuda,* ed. William Horbury (Edinburgh, 1999), 165–85; Aaron Maman, "Karaite Hebrew," in *Karaite Judaism: A Guide to Its History and Literary Sources,* ed. Meira Polliack (Leiden, 2003), 485–503.

[105] Some documents contain a list of the dowry's items. This list was written in Judeo-Arabic while the other parts were written in Hebrew.

[106] Judith Olszowy-Schlanger, *Karaite Marriage Documents from the Cairo Geniza: Legal Tradition and Community Life in Mediaeval Egypt and Palestine* (Leiden, 1998). Doc. 7 (dated 1033) was written in Arabic, with Arabic script.

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Aside from marriage documents, there were also prenuptial agreements. A corpus of dozens of deeds and prenuptial agreements concerning polygyny from the Fatimid period was published by M. A. Friedman. Twenty-five of them were written in Judeo-Arabic, while only three were written in Hebrew.[107] The corpus also contains two documents from the Mamluk period: a draft of a marriage agreement for a man who wanted to marry, as a second wife, a captive he freed from captivity (1291–92, Hebrew)[108] and a levirate agreement (1482, Judeo-Arabic).[109]

Hence, in the tenth century and the first half of the eleventh century, Hebrew was present in legal documents at a high rate. Later, the use of Hebrew declined, and Judeo-Arabic became the main language chosen by scribes (except for family status documents). There was a revival of Hebrew in document writing in the early thirteenth century, even if most legal documents were still written in Arabic. Goitein explained the increase in the number of legal documents in Hebrew by the presence of European sages who arrived in the east during the Ayyubid period,[110] and by the publication of Maimonides's *Mishneh Torah,* "which could serve as a model to the scribes of the courts."[111] Phillip Ackerman-Lieberman has criticized Goitein's arguments and proposed an alternative explanation.[112] In Fatimid Egypt, there was a prevailing pluralism in the Muslim courts, and all four schools of sharīʿah were considered legitimate. Legal documents written in Jewish courts were written in Arabic, using formulas recognized in sharīʿah courts. During the Ayyubid period this tolerant approach diminished,

[107] Mordechai A. Friedman, *Ribuy nashim be-yisra'el, meḳorot ḥadashim mi-gnizat ḳahir* (Jerusalem, 1986). The same reality is represented in the corpus of betrothal agreements and prenuptial agreements (and related documents), published by Ashur: Amir Ashur, "Shidukhin ve-erusin ʻal-pi teʻudot min ha-geniza ha-ḳahirit" (Ph.D. diss., Tel Aviv University, 2006). The overwhelming majority of the 74 documents in this corpus were written in Judeo-Arabic, although many of them contain Hebrew and Aramaic components. Some of them mixed Aramaic, Arabic, and Hebrew, and only a few were written mainly in Hebrew.

[108] Friedman, *Ribuy nashim,* chap. 3, doc. 1. The captive was captured by the Mamluks in the conquest of Acre in 1291. The groom claimed that he would have the right to marry two wives other than the captive.

[109] Ibid., chap. 5, doc. 5.

[110] See references above, **n. 60**.

[111] Goitein, *Mediterranean Society,* 1:15. The second argument is puzzling, as the *Mishneh Torah* is not a collection of legal documents but rather a compilation of laws. Maimonides did not include complete formulations of legal documents in it, and those included by him are in Aramaic. (*geṭ: Mishneh Torah, hilkhot gerushin,* 4:12; *geṭ ḥalitsa: hilkoht yibum va-ḥalitsa,* 4:29; *ketubot:* ibid., 4:32–33).

[112] Phillip I. Lieberman, "Legal Pluralism among the Court Records of Medieval Egypt," *Bulletin d'études orientales* 63 (2014): 79–112.

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and Egyptian rulers promoted the Shafiʿi school in the courts. As a result, "the Jewish court seems to have responded to the waning of judicial pluralism and internal control by defensively closing the doors of Muslim courts to Jewish litigants."[113] According to Ackerman-Lieberman, this may explain the increase in deeds written in Hebrew that would not be accepted by Muslim courts as valid documents.

This limited revival of Hebrew was brief. Analysis of the corpus of legal documents collected by Ashtor shows that the decline of the status of Hebrew was most dramatic in the Mamluk period. While Hebrew functioned as a secondary language alongside Arabic from the second half of the eleventh century to the first half of the thirteenth century, in the next two hundred years it almost disappeared. Not even one legal document in Ashtor's volume was written mainly in Hebrew. As in earlier periods, Judeo-Arabic deeds from the Mamluk period usually contain Hebrew and Aramaic components.[114] Aramaic phrases mainly appear in two places: in the date of the document's writing and in the witnesses' declaration that the document is valid and has been prepared according to halachic requirements. The Hebrew components appear mainly in the beginning of the deed, where the scribe mentions that the deed is written under the *reshut* (the jurisdiction area) of the nagid. Mentioning the nagid's name was consistently accompanied by a long sequence of praise in high poetic Hebrew. For example, a promissory note written in 1265 contains 30 lines.[115] Line 1 is an opening, badly preserved, probably in Judeo-Arabic; in line 2 there is a (torn) date, written in Aramaic; lines 3–4 are in Hebrew, declaring that the city (probably Cairo) is under the *reshut* of David ha-Nagid, Maimonides's grandson, with some praises in Hebrew for the nagid. Then, in lines 5–24, we have the deed's content—the loan amount, the repayment rate, etc.—written in Judeo-Arabic. Finally, in lines 25–29 there are Aramaic (and a few Hebrew) formulas declaring the validity of the deed. In addition, the Judeo-Arabic part contains some Hebrew words. For example, the lender is identified (lines 10–11) as *Abū al-majd ha-baḥur ha-yaḳar al-ṣayrafī walad al-shaykh abū al-maḥāsin ha-zaḳen ha-yaḳar al-sukrī nuḥo ʿeden* ("Abū al-Majd, the honorable young man banker [or: money changer], son of Shaykh Abū al-Maḥāsin the honorable elder, the sugar producer, may he rest in peace"). The text is basically written, therefore, in Judeo-Arabic, and the scribe merged into the Arabic some words and legal formulas in Hebrew and Aramaic.

[113] Ibid., 87.

[114] For legal documents from the Fatimid and Ayyubid periods and the embedding of Hebrew and Aramaic components within them, see for example Phillip I. Lieberman, "Methodological Essay on Commercial Contracts," *Jewish History* 32 (2019): 429–35.

[115] Cambridge MS 13J6.11; Ashtor, *Toledot ha-yehudim,* 3:39–40 (doc. 21).

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Of course, Ashtor did not include all the Genizah documents from the Mamluk period, as many had not yet been published, but these documents share the same characteristics. Most of the text in these documents is in Judeo-Arabic, with a small portion of common formulas in Aramaic and Hebrew. This is the case, for example, in a mutual waiver deed from 1377,[116] in a sale deed of a Pentateuch book from 1399,[117] and in an undated torn bill of partnership in cheese production.[118] As in earlier periods, *giṭṭin* continued to be written among the Rabbanites in the Mamluk period in Aramaic.[119] The Rabbanite *ketubot* were also written in Aramaic, but, as was accepted in earlier periods, such documents had some Hebrew components, mainly praises for the nagid. Those praises were written traditionally in high poetic language, using Biblical quotations and puns, and therefore were written in Hebrew. In addition, the *ketubot* of the Mamluk period regularly had a Judeo-Arabic part detailing the dowry.[120] Outside of Ashtor's corpus, other *giṭṭin*[121] and *ketubot*[122] show the same patterns.

The dominance of Arabic in the Mamluk period was stronger among the Karaites. They continued to maintain Hebrew only in legal documents related

[116] Oxford, Bodl. MS Heb. b.3.13.

[117] Cambridge MS T-S 16.129.

[118] Cambridge MS TS 8J27.11 (this fragment has no Hebrew or Aramaic formulas and is only in Judeo-Arabic). For more examples of Judeo-Arabic legal documents from the Mamluk period see Cambridge MSS T-S 13J4.12 (1269; almost without Aramaic and Hebrew formulas); T-S 13J2.18 (1324/5); Philadelphia, Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies, University of Pennsylvania MS Halper 349 (1383/4); London, British Library MS Or. 4856.2 (1466). See also Cambridge MS Mosseri V 387, which I tend to date to the fourteenth century.

[119] Ashtor, *Toledot ha-yehudim,* 3, doc. 3 (Fusṭāṭ, 1248); doc. 5 (Fusṭāṭ, 1250); doc. 6 (Fusṭāṭ, 1252); doc. 47 (Cairo, 1339). The dating of document 47 is uncertain. The date's line is torn: *shenat elef u-sh[...] ve-ḥamishim li-shṭarot* ("year 1X50 of the Seleucid era"). Ashtor reconstructed it as: *ve-sh[shes me'ot]* ("and 600"), which gives the year 1650 Sel. (1339). I checked the manuscript in the Cambridge university library, and it seems there are remains of *mem* after the *shin,* and therefore it should be reconstructed as "*u-sh*[*mone me'ot*]" ("and 800"), which gives the year 1850 Sel. (1539). The language of the text in the margin also fits the sixteenth century.

[120] Ibid., doc. 11 (Baalbek, 1253); doc. 19 (second half of the thirteenth century); doc. 35 (Fusṭāṭ, 1292); doc. 37 (second half of the thirteenth century); doc. 39 (Fusṭāṭ, 1310); doc. 40 (fourteenth century); doc. 41 (fourteenth century); doc. 43 (Fusṭāṭ, 1316); doc. 62 (Alexandria, mid-fifteenth century); doc. 63 (second half of the fifteenth century).

[121] See Cambridge MS T-S 10J2.39 (probably Bilbeis, 1279). For a Karaite *geṭ* from the Mamluk period, see for example a *geṭ* from 1433 written in Hebrew in Cairo: St. Petersburg MS Evr. Arab. I 902 (published by David, "Ha-Gerushin," 358–59. On the Karaite *giṭṭin* in the Ottoman period, see Dotan Arad, "'Ervat Davar: Divorce among the Karaites in Ottoman Egypt," *Michael: On the History of the Jews in the Diaspora* 18 (2025): 31–58.

[122] For example: Cambridge MSS T-S 16.206 (fourteenth century); T-S 13J17.13 (around 1375–85); T-S 16.125 ("Naqāns" [unidentified place], 1492).

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to marriage and divorce, while opting for Arabic in other documents. Their legal deeds from this period show their closeness to Arabic deeds' style by, *inter alia,* the strictness of the Karaite scribes in giving not only Seleucid but also Hijri dates, a characteristic that appears less in Rabbanite documents. Karaite documents from the Mamluk period had no Hebrew or Aramaic formulas, and the text was almost completely in Judeo-Arabic. For example, an agreement from Shawwāl 701/1302 concerning public property that belonged to the Karaite community of Cairo has no Hebrew or Aramaic phrases.[123]

This change in language use during the late Mamluk period was due to the demographic changes discussed above, but despite the arrival of Jewish European immigrants who tended to write their deeds mainly in Hebrew, language use in the courts did not change overnight. Legal documents were still written in Judeo-Arabic in Egypt until the first decade of the sixteenth century. The integration of Sephardi immigrants in the Jewish courts was not so rapid, and deeds continued to be written according to accepted local tradition. For instance, a sale deed of a house in the town of Milīj from 1498 was written in Judeo-Arabic. The praises for the nagid, Nathan Sholal, are in Hebrew as usual, and there are some legal formulas in Hebrew and Aramaic, but most of the deed is in Judeo-Arabic.[124] Other examples are the will of a Jewish woman named ʿAzīzah from 1495[125] and the beginning of a deed in Judeo-Arabic from 1505.[126]

In the last decades of the Mamluk regime, Hebrew legal documents started to appear. In Jerusalem, a multicultural community that attracted foreign sages to settle throughout the Mamluk period, the change occurred more quickly. In the second half of the fifteenth century the scribe of the Jerusalemite community

[123] St. Petersburg MS Evr. Arab. II 1367; published by Dotan Arad, "Being a Jew under the Mamluks: Some Coping Strategies," in *Muslim-Jewish Relations in the Middle Islamic Period,* ed. Stephan Conermann (Bonn, 2017), 22, n.3. For more examples see St. Petersburg MSS Evr. Arab. II 1385 (Ṣafar 699/1299); Evr. Arab. II 1164 (Rabīʿah II 784/1382); Evr. Arab. II 1434 (transfer of ownership, Ṣafar 871/1466); Evr. Arab. II 1590 (Rajab 905/1500); Evr. Arab. II 1401 (Shaʿbān 910/1505). However, a long deed from Iyyar 1337, relating to a house in the Karaite neighborhood in Cairo, has no equivalent Hijri date (Evr. Arab. II 1412). This deed also has no Hebrew and Aramaic phrases.

[124] New York, Jewish Theological Seminary MS ENA 2562.1. Milīj is located approximately 80 kilometers north of Cairo. While a wealth of documents preserved in the Cairo Geniza attest to the Jewish community in this town during the Fatimid period, several contracts written in Judeo-Arabic clearly indicate that a Jewish community persisted there even in the late fifteenth century. See also Cambridge MS T-S Misc. 28.71 (a deed dated 1492).

[125] New York, Jewish Theological Seminary MS ENA NS 47.12.

[126] Cambridge MS T-S AS 151.213.

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was Sephardi and naturally worded the documents in Hebrew.[127] Hebrew legal documents started to appear in Egypt around 1510, and then rapidly grew more common.[128] As of the last decade of the Mamluk regime, Judeo-Arabic began disappearing rapidly from deeds in Rabbanite Jewish society and Hebrew began replacing it. Hundreds of Hebrew deeds from the sixteenth century are kept in the Genizah collections, while Judeo-Arabic deeds from 1510 onward are very rare.[129]

This change did not occur in the Karaite society of Egypt and Syria, whose deeds continued to be written in Judeo-Arabic throughout the Ottoman period. The linguistic difference between the two societies clearly shows the origin of the change. While Rabbanite Jewish society underwent extensive demographic change, Karaite society did not absorb waves of immigrants and did not change significantly. As such, the process of the disappearance of Arabic from the deeds is directly connected with the arrival of Rabbanite immigrants.

CONCLUSION

Hebrew had become more prominent in correspondence by the second half of the fifteenth century, while in terms of deeds the change was slower and only occurred in the sixteenth century. One can assume that the difference in the pace of change between these two types of documents is related to the fact that writing deeds requires integration with the local elite and penetration of the immigrants' elite into the community establishment. A court clerk was an employee of the community, and getting a coveted job in the local establishment could be a lengthy process, particularly for European Jewish immigrants. There-

[127] For example, Cambridge MS T-S NS 99.66, written in Jerusalem in 1483 by the Sephardi scribe Yom Ṭov ben Joseph Ibn Emanuel. His father, Joseph, served as the community's judge in the 1460s.

[128] See for example Cambridge MS T-S NS 323.20 (1509); Cambridge MSS Mosseri VII 126.2 (1510s); Mosseri VIII 446.1 (1511); Mosseri VII 23 (1513); Philadelphia, Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies, University of Pennsylvania MS Halper 368 (1515); Cambridge MSS T-S AS 151.164 (1519); T-S AS 151.104 (1525); T-S NS 323.28 (1525); T-S AS 146.146 (1530); TS AS 150.107 (1532); T-S 10J8.10 (1543); T-S NS 54.17 (1544); Cambridge MS Mosseri VII 16.2 (1545); New York, Jewish Theological Seminary MS ENA NS 53.22 (1545); Philadelphia, Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies, University of Pennsylvania MS Halper 369 (1546); Cambridge MSS Or. 1080J133 (1554); T-S 12.589 (1554); T-S 8J6.20 (1556); T-S 8J6.21 (1558); T-S AS 146.104+T-S AS 146.283+T-S AS 147.159+T-S NS 292.7 (1559); T-S AS 145.90+T-S AS 145.97 (1559); T-S NS 324.37+T-S 13J5.6 (1560); T-S 13J21.10; New York, Jewish Theological Seminary MS ENA 2562.3 (1561); Cambridge MSS T-S 13J4.17 (1561); T-S 8J6.22 (1563); T-S 13J4.18 (1563); T-S 13J4.19 (1564); T-S NS J 528 (1564); T-S 8J8.11 (1566).

[129] For a Judeo-Arabic deed from the Ottoman period, see for example New York, Jewish Theological Seminary MS 91609 (Cairo, 1728).

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fore, the process of replacing Arabic with Hebrew in the courts was not immediate and took place over several decades.

However, this explanation is limited, because the change in the writing of deeds is also evident among the local Arabic-speaking scribes. Among the Jewish scribes who were active in Egypt during the sixteenth century there were several who had names that indicate a local origin. They also wrote deeds in Hebrew. Hence, the transition to Hebrew is not only related to the integration of writers from the Iberian Peninsula (and other regions) in the courts, but also to the fact that the local Arabic-speaking writers imitated the norms of the immigrants and changed the accepted linguistic pattern for generations.

The use of Hebrew by scribes of foreign origin is understandable considering their scribal tradition. By contrast, the adoption of Hebrew among the local scribes needs an explanation. Two possibilities might be proposed as to why Arabic-speaking scribes also adopted Hebrew as a legal language:

1. 1. A deed was written by a person from the elite class, a scribe of the court. In the sixteenth century, the elite already saw Arabic as a vernacular language that was not suitable for texts related to the religious world. Each deed is actually a religious-halachic text, because it was edited according to the rules of Jewish law. At that time, in the scribes' minds, the appropriate languages for writing such a text were Hebrew and Aramaic only.
2. 2. In addition, many deeds and contracts of the local Arabic-speaking Jews involved immigrant partners due to commercial or family relations. The need for the deed to be understood also by the immigrant public dictated that it would be written in Hebrew.

Hence, while political and legal factors can explain the relative increasing use of Hebrew in legal documents in the early thirteenth century, the explanation for the absolute dominance of Hebrew in legal documents in the sixteenth century can be explained by demographic changes that led to cultural shifts in the Jewish elite of Egypt, Palestine, and Syria. It is important to emphasize the fact that Arabic did not disappear as a written language in the Ottoman period. It continued to be used for practical purposes such as account books, calendars, and popular liturgical texts,[130] as well as an extensive popular literature.[131] An-

[130] For example: Benjamin H. Hary, *Multiglossia in Judeo-Arabic: With an Edition, Translation and Grammatical Study of the Cairene Purim Scroll* (Leiden, 1992).

[131] For example: S. D. Goitein, "Townsman and Fellah: A Geniza Text from the 17th Century," *Asian and African Studies* 8 (1972): 257–61; Rachel Hasson-Kenat, "'The Story of Zayd and Kaḥlā': A Folk Story in a Judaeo-Arabic Manuscript," in *Middle Arabic and Mixed Arabic: Diachrony and Synchrony,* ed. Liesbeth Zack and Arie Schippers (Leiden, 2012), 145–56; idem, "A Judeo-Arabic Manuscript by an Unnamed Author: A Story about King Solomon," in *Jewish Biblical Exegesis from Islamic Lands: The Medieval Period,* ed. Meira Polliack and Athalya Brenner-Idan (Atlanta, 2019), 183–91.

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other important distinction is the extent of change between different genres. In the genre of letters, we find a relative strengthening of Hebrew in the late Mamluk period and throughout the Ottoman period, but Arabic did not disappear. Throughout the Ottoman period, letters continued to be written in Judeo-Arabic, especially in areas related to family life and commerce.[132] In contrast, in the genre of court documents Hebrew won overwhelmingly, and the writing of documents in Arabic almost completely disappeared.

The transition from Arabic to Hebrew was mainly evident, therefore, in areas where the norms of the elite layer of Jewish immigrants from Europe, who used to write their letters and formulate their legal documents in Hebrew, were adopted. The linguistic changes thus represent an expression of sociocultural change, and the absorption of a new elite stratum that influenced the long-standing local elite. The traces of this linguistic change cannot be found in literary works, because the fifteenth century is characterized by a dearth of literary production; if there was any, it has not reached us.[133] Unlike previous centuries, in this century there were no works composed in the fields of Biblical exegesis, halakhic ruling, Hebrew poetry, or Judeo-Sufi thought in the communities of Egypt, Syria, and Palestine. However, the change is certainly noticeable in the realm of everyday writing, namely letters and legal documents.

The Jewish people in Egypt, Palestine, and Syria had to choose the appropriate language for each text they wrote, whether formal or informal. In this article we surveyed the linguistic realm of letters and legal documents and showed that a linguistic choice is a complex phenomenon that depends on various factors, and that different linguistic decisions were made by Karaites and Rabbanites, by ordinary people and elites, and for different genres. In addition, we have shown that the last decades of the Mamluk regime witnessed a crucial turning point in the customs of writing among the Jews of the sultanate. The main process was the strengthening of Hebrew's status, but this process happened at different rates among different people and in different genres.

[132] For example: Geoffrey Khan, "Notes on the Grammar of a Late Egyptian Judeo-Arabic Text," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 15 (1992): 220–39; idem, "A Judaeo-Arabic Commercial Letter from Early Nineteenth Century Egypt," *Ginzei Qedem* 2 (2006).

[133] An exceptional example of a work that can perhaps be dated to the late Mamluk period is the collection of midrashim "Metzaḥ Aharon" (Aaron's forehead), which was probably written in Aleppo. This work was written in Judeo-Arabic in a vulgar dialect; see Nahem Ilan, *Perush metsaḥ aharon le-rabi aharon garish* (Jerusalem, 1996).

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