

Pilgrimage and Charity in the Geniza Society

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As is attested by many Geniza documents, pilgrimage was a widespread phenomenon in Jewish society in the medieval Islamic world. While it was clearly integral to religious discourse and practice, it also played important social roles. In what follows I show how pilgrimage was embedded, primarily through the communal charity system, in the social fabric of Jewish life. I start by describing the reverent attitude toward pilgrims, manifested in the overwhelming eagerness to support them without hesitation or regard for their socioeconomic status. I go on to show that this attitude was not a one-sided act of pure altruism, but rather part of a reciprocal exchange through which the donors and ancillaries of charity could also benefit. As supporters of meritorious acts of piety and by virtue of their assurance of the pilgrims' privileged prayers at the holy sites they acquired both symbolic and spiritual capital. Finally, I argue that the charitable approach to pilgrims was an effective way of coping with the growing numbers of itinerant poor. As a result of their integration into the charity system as pilgrims, they could be controlled and also used for the purposes of facilitating communication.

Who is a Deserving Pilgrim and Why?

Medieval Jewish pilgrimage crossed both geographical and social borders. Pilgrims came from a variety of places and from every stratum of society. Some came in order to participate in specific events, like the annual celebration on the Mount of Olives during the high holidays. Others came for limited, though at times quite protracted, periods, usually in order to fulfill a vow or to repent. Many came alone, though others traveled with organized groups of like-minded seekers. Some pilgrims were well-off and could even afford to donate money to the pilgrimage sites. Some were celebrated dignitaries or scholars, who were usually received by local communities with much honor. Many others were penniless. All of them, however, regardless of their socioeconomic status, were supported by public charity and by personal donations.¹ Support

1 Moshe Gil, *Palestine during the First Muslim Period (634–1099)* [Hebrew], 3 vols. (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University and the Ministry of Defense, 1983), 1:499–517; S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo*

was provided by the local community at the point of departure, by the many communities the pilgrim passed along the way, and by the community at the pilgrimage site itself.

A pilgrim's unqualified entitlement to charity is demonstrated in David b. Binyamin's impatient letter to the judge R. Pinḥas, in which he firmly demands the balance of a pledge drive (*pesiqa*) that had been arranged on his behalf in order to finance his pilgrimage:

We are on the road to the Land of Israel and the only thing that is delaying me is the balance of the *pesiqa* that is in your honor's hands. From here on, there should be no giving up. Rather, have it collected today, and tomorrow I shall depart in honor of you. Similarly, I sent a letter to his honor my lord, the Rav and judge R. Ḥanan'el. For the sake of the Creator, please do not keep me waiting another minute beyond today, because we are about to leave. Also speak to the collector (*gabbai*) about a small *pesiqa* for my son today. Don't make me delay till tomorrow to depart for there. Know that your reward will be very great in this world and in the next. I pray for your honor at all times . . .²

David b. Binyamin was a learned man, as is demonstrated by both his elegant style and the short panegyric he added on the reverse of his letter. The confident tone of his words hints at the fact that he was not a needy person either, but instead was demanding what was considered to be his rightful due as a pilgrim to the Holy Land.

Even R. Yehuda ha-Levi, the celebrated poet-philosopher, was supported by the local community in Alexandria upon his arrival there en route to Jerusalem. This is explicitly mentioned in a letter by Abū l-'Alā, a local dignitary in Alexandria, to ha-Levi's sponsor, the merchant and philanthropist Ḥalfon b. Netan'el: "One of the members of your faction said: 'He [Yehuda ha-Levi] was offered by the best men in Spain to eat bread, but he didn't, while here he does not stop eating and composing panegyrics for us.'³ "Eating

Geniza, 6 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967–93), 5:18–25; Miriam Frenkel, "Politics and Power in Jewish Pilgrimage to Jerusalem in the Fatimid Era" [Hebrew], in *Ut Videant et Contiguant: Essays on Pilgrimage and Sacred Space in Honor of Ora Limor*, ed. Yitzhak Hen and Iris Shagrir (Raanana: Open University Press, 2011), 135–56.

2 Cambridge University Library, Mosseri Collection L 291 (1a, 21), in Jacob Mann, *Texts and Studies in Jewish History and Literature* (New York: Ktav, 1972), 1:463–64. English translation: Mark R. Cohen, *The Voice of the Poor in the Middle Ages: An Anthology of Documents from the Cairo Geniza* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 101 (doc. 55).

3 Cambridge University Library, Taylor-Schechter Collections (T-S) 13J24.8, in Miriam Frenkel, "The Compassionate and Benevolent": *The Leading Elite in the Jewish Community of Alexandria*

bread" (*akl al-khubz*) is a common Arabic expression, equivalent to the English idiom "earning one's bread," i.e., making a living. The Alexandrian Jews who criticized Yehuda ha-Levi grumbled that the celebrated and wealthy pilgrim, who could easily earn a living at home in Spain, preferred to stay in Alexandria and impose great expenses on the local community. Its members supported him as a pilgrim, while he did nothing but compose laudatory poems for them. Ha-Levi himself was aware of the criticism, since in his letter to the Nagid, Shemu'el b. Ḥananya, he found it necessary to point out that he came to Egypt without any needs and intended "not to be a burden on anyone."⁴

Financial support for pilgrims regardless of their economic position was not only imperative, it was also considered to be a pressing need that could not be delayed. The impatient tone in David b. Binyamin's letter above can be discerned in most letters concerned with support for pilgrims. An illustrative example is a letter of recommendation written for R. David, a religious scholar (*ben Tora*) on pilgrimage to Jerusalem. It urges attendants of the Fuṣṭāṭ synagogue to hasten the collection of money and not cause R. David, who is ready to depart, any delay. In order to stress the plea for urgency, a line was added at the last minute in the margin: "Do not hold him back for he is all ready for the journey."⁵ The urgency associated with pilgrimage was no doubt related to the logistics of arranging for travel, especially when one needed to embark on the next ship setting sail or join the next overland caravan.⁶ But it was also connected to the perception of pilgrimage as a vital irresistible drive, an ardent religious passion that should not be obstructed.⁷

in the Middle Ages [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 2006), 552–56 (doc. 76), and the discussion on 96–101. For another interpretation, see Moshe Gil and Ezra Fleischer, *Yehuda ha-Levi and His Circle: 55 Geniza Documents* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 2001), 217–57, 462–66. Gil and Fleischer assume, following Goitein, that the letter was sent to Yehuda ha-Levi himself. They base their assumption on the intimate tone of the letter, which suits correspondence between two equals. I would suggest that the writer uses an intimate tone of writing because the letter is meant to be secret.

4 Ḥayim Brody, ed., *Dīwān des Abu-l-Ḥasan Jehuda ha-Levi*, 4 vols. (Berlin: Mekize Nirdamim, 1894–1930), 1:73. Shraga Abramson, "R. Yehuda ha-Levi's Letter on His Emigration to the Land of Israel" [Hebrew], *Kiryat Sefer* 29 (1953–54): 141.

5 T-s 8J17.13. English translation: Cohen, *Voice of the Poor*, 197–98 (doc. 94). The letter bears the signature (*ʿalāma*) found on Joshua Nagid's official correspondence.

6 Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, 1:275–81, 309–13.

7 As was the case with Christian pilgrimages in late antiquity; see Pierre Maraval, "Le Temps du Pèlerin (IV^e–VII^e siècles)," in *Le Temps chrétien de la fin de l'Antiquité au Moyen Âge (III^e–XIII^e siècles)* (Paris: Editions du Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1984), 479–88.

The Reciprocal Aspects of Pilgrimage

The Jewish establishment's commitment toward pilgrims was not a one-sided undertaking of benevolence, but rather part of a reciprocal relationship in which both sides benefited.

As in other religious traditions, pilgrimage in medieval Jewish society was laden with significant symbolic value. People embarked upon a physical journey in order to achieve spiritual goals and draw nearer to their core religious beliefs. The donors, as well as the impresarios of charity, were thus enabling the accomplishment of these worthy goals. As such, they were engaged in a praiseworthy religious activity and would be rewarded by God in this world and the next. They would, as well, accrue benefit from the pilgrim's prayers on their behalf at the holy places, prayers that were perceived to be more powerful and efficacious than those offered elsewhere inasmuch as they were performed at sites believed to possess cosmic significance. There, among the graves of prophets and saints, the channels to heaven were short and open, and the most direct connection to God was available.⁸ Pilgrims prayed for themselves, but they also had the opportunity to act as transmitters of divine blessings through their prayers on behalf of others. By supporting pilgrims and helping them reach their goal, donors and organizers of charity assured for themselves the benefits of the pilgrims' privileged prayers at the holy places. In most letters of recommendation and requests for charitable support this is stated explicitly. A clear example is found in a pilgrim's letter to R. Pinḥas the Judge:

Know that your reward will be very great in this world and in the next. I pray for your honor at all times, and may the Omnipotent save you from every trouble and injustice and reward your actions in this world and in the world to come and reward you with sons who study Torah, as I, your beloved and admirer, who prays for your honor, wish.⁹

Pilgrims or Itinerant Paupers?

Charity given to pilgrims was not simply a matter of exchange and reciprocity; it also served as a means of control. As stated above, while pilgrims came

⁸ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1959), 20–65; idem, "Symbolism of the 'Centre,'" in *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism* (Kansas City: Sheed Andrews and McMeel, 1961), 27–56.

⁹ Mosseri Ia 21 [L291]; Cohen, *Voice of the Poor*, 101 (doc. 55).

from all levels of society, most were part of a growing population of the destitute: refugees, captives, and paupers who were compelled to travel in search of a way of making a living. The vast territories between the Maghrib, Egypt, Palestine, and Babylonia were crowded with wandering paupers who survived through the charitable benevolence of the various Jewish communities scattered across that region.¹⁰ Many were called “pilgrims” and declared their intention to visit the holy places, often those in Jerusalem. But a closer examination of these cases reveals that the designation “pilgrim” was often just another way of obtaining alms. This is especially apparent in the following letter of recommendation for Shelomo b. Binyamin, written by the leader of the Jewish community of Ascalon:

He is a good and deserving man, crowned with humility, a modest person from a good family of noteworthy householders whose table was always set and whose houses were always wide open. However, on account of the many troubles that befell them they lost their wealth, became poor and were forced to turn in their need to others. This man left as a war refugee //wishing to go up to Jerusalem the holy city, may God sustain it forever//. Because of his poverty, he has been forced to travel around in search of sustenance for himself. //He will go there later.//¹¹

Shelomo b. Binyamin was a refugee of war, possibly the 1096 Rhineland massacres,¹² who wandered around seeking occasional charity. Natan ha-Kohen b. Mevorakh, the writer of this letter, chose, however, to present Shelomo as a pilgrim, adding between the lines some additional information (marked above by double slashes) about his unfulfilled intentions to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, intentions he still hoped to carry out in the future. Since he was a potential pilgrim, Shelomo’s chances of obtaining charity were significantly increased. Shelomo was actually an itinerant pauper in the guise of a pilgrim.

Additional examples abound: Rawḥ b. Pinḥas the cantor set out from Babylonia, allegedly en route to perform the pilgrimage in Jerusalem, but was

10 This phenomenon was general and not particular to Jewish society. It was a consequence of frequent wars, piracy, and natural catastrophes. See Ronnie Ellenblum, *The Collapse of the Eastern Mediterranean: Climate Change and the Decline of the East, 950–1072 AD* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). For the Muslim underworld, see Boaz Shoshan, *Popular Culture in Medieval Cairo* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

11 T-s 18J4.4, published in Alexander Scheiber, *Geniza Studies* (Hildesheim and New York: Georg Olms, 1981), Hebrew section, 79–81. English translation: Cohen, *Voice of the Poor*, 39–42 (doc. 14).

12 This is Cohen’s suggestion, *ibid.*, 38–39.

robbed on the way and wandered between Damascus, Tyre, and Fustāt. Rawḥ carried with him correspondence addressed to communal leaders and officials in those towns, and the latter repaid him for his services with letters of recommendation that enabled him to carry on his peripatetic begging in an easier and more dignified manner.¹³ One of these letters emphasizes the fact that Rawḥ was not an ordinary beggar, but an unfortunate pilgrim: “This is not his way He intended only to go and pray in Jerusalem, to see the Holy Land and to go back to his country.”¹⁴ Still, the letters of recommendation were designed to help him continue his life as an itinerant beggar. Yet another unfortunate stranger, the survivor of a shipwreck who found refuge for a time from the tax collector in the house of a kind Jew, is described as having been “on his way to the Holy City.”¹⁵

Not all paupers who were presented as pilgrims were frauds. The lines between the two categories were indeed blurry and the distinction between a pauper and a pilgrim was vague. This ambiguity was not just a clever way of deceiving the communal charity system, but neither was it entirely unintentional. In many ways it constitutes the reaction of normative Jewish society to the growing mass of itinerant poor. Those perpetual wanderers, cast out of all social and familial frameworks, lived a liminal existence in the uninhabited open spaces on the roads in between cities and communities. The vast dimensions of this growing phenomenon received literary representation in the works of Yehuda al-Ḥarīzī, an itinerant poet without resources who himself depended on the generosity of others. Themes of poverty, wandering, and begging loom large in his work, especially in his most renowned book, *Taḥkemoni*, whose hero, the wandering pauper Ḥever the Qenite, serves as a literary double for al-Ḥarīzī himself.¹⁶ *Taḥkemoni* is by no means a historiographical work, but, like other literary texts, it does reflect the spirit and discourse of its time. Large portions of al-Ḥarīzī’s works contain cynical, bitter, and subversive messages that point to a growing alienation between normative society and the expanding numbers of itinerant poor. It is no wonder, then, that those wandering

13 T-S NS 320.9, published in Gil, *Palestine*, 2:388–89 (doc. 211); Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, Elkan Nathan Adler Collection (ENA) 4020.48, *ibid.*, 390–92 (doc. 212).

14 *Ibid.*, lines 1–11.

15 Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Papyrussammlung Erherzog Rainer H 17 B, in Gil, *Palestine*, 2:748–49 (doc. 403).

16 See, for example, Joseph Yahalom and Naoya Katsumata, eds., *Taḥkemoni or the Tales of Heman the Ezraḥite by Judah Alharizi* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 2010), chapters 11, 17, and 27.

paupers, some of whom were, like al-Ḥarīzī himself, in possession of impressive rhetorical skills, aroused the anxiety of the civil sedentary population, which in turn sought ways to control and supervise them. Their integration into the system of charitable support as praiseworthy pilgrims was a useful way to establish a measure of control over them, to keep them within society but on its margins. As I have shown in a previous article,¹⁷ the mechanisms for charitable support played an important communicative role in Jewish society. The needy were the bearers of the letters of recommendation written on their behalf to which additional letters were often appended. They carried these missives over remarkably long distances, thus acting as human lines of communication. In this way, charity established channels of easy communication so desperately needed by the scattered communities and their leaders. Itinerant paupers were integrated into the charitable support system as pious pilgrims with the result that Jewish society not only gained a measure of control over the poor, but also, by taking advantage of their constant mobility, was in a position to address its communication needs.

In sum, in this article I show the intricate connections between pilgrimage and charity in the Geniza society as well as the way both operated within the broad system of social exchange. In his seminal study of charity and poverty in the Geniza, Mark Cohen established a field fertile enough to allow future research to strike root and yield new fruits. This is what it means to be a great scholar. It is my hope that this short article, offered in his honor, will be considered one of these new fruits.

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17 Miriam Frenkel, "Charity in Jewish Society of the Medieval Mediterranean World," in *Charity and Giving in Monotheistic Religions*, ed. Miriam Frenkel and Yaacov Lev (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 343–64.

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