

## **Iberian Jewish Tales of the Sea and Seafaring: Letters and Poems *in* the Medieval Mediterranean**

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*Abstract: This paper suggests that the Mediterranean Sea and the journeys taken over its depths are presented or invoked with striking similitude between the poetic stylings of medieval Andalusí poets and the commercial letters of Jewish Geniza merchants. Ibn Ezra invokes his exile through the sea as a violent wind that swept away his peers and left him forsaken and alone, while Judah ha-Levi seized opportunity, traversing the raging and perilous seas to find salvation, stopping momentarily in Alexandria just long enough for us to catch him before the scented breeze carried him east. And al-Harizi, who himself left his native Andalus for the wonders and wisdom of the east, presents the reader with the poet-merchant reduced to panic-stricken jettisoning and the invocation of talismanic amulets in an attempt to salvage both self and sales in the midst of the ocean's wrath. Though these descriptions are the poetic renderings of prolific litterateurs, the vision they depict has much in common with the historical reality of their co-religionists who traveled those same seas in search of profit and gain. In their letters, merchants describe terrible storms, suffering and disfigurement, shipwrecks and damaged cargo. All reveal the great risk of venturing out onto the seething sea. More importantly, the selected source evidence presents a remarkable ensemble of travelers who weighed these risks and benefits and yet decided to make the voyage. The evidence presented suggests a maritime society that was not only familiar with the sea, but a culture of impassioned and persevering travelers who truly perceived blessing in movement, whatever the risks.*

### ***Introduction***

Even today, the return to one's native land from a long voyage is cause for great celebration. If a medieval traveler returned from the perilous space of the sea, such joy was increased. A common Hebrew benediction for those who returned from such a voyage reminds us of the dangers for

those who left *terra firma*: 'Blessed be He who resurrects the dead.'<sup>1</sup> Yet also well-known to medieval Jews was the Arabic maxim *fi'l-haraka baraki*: 'there is blessing in movement.'<sup>2</sup> There were many reasons for medieval Iberian Jews to venture onto the sea. The political turmoil of eleventh and twelfth-century Iberia forced many into exile. Fleeing from invading Muslim-Berber tribes, some headed northward into the lands of the Christians, while others fled to the south and east, deeper into the *dar al Islam* (House of Islam). Some set sail in search of the knowledge and culture lost with the destruction of *al-Andalus* (Muslim Spain), while for others, profit was their goal.

This paper attempts to show how the Jews of the Medieval Mediterranean shared more than a passing interest in the tension between the dangers and blessings of travel. I begin with a discussion of twelfth-century Andalusí scholar and poet Mose Ibn Ezra followed by a reading of selections from the poetic corpus of his friend and fellow Andalusí poet, Judah ha-Levi. Both men were eventually forced into exile by the disruption and violence of Almoravid rule and both chose to represent their exile and suffering using maritime tropes. While Ha-Levi is well known for his sea poems and sea travel, Ibn Ezra is not. And since the latter apparently never travelled at sea, it is all the more intriguing that he would choose the sea as a medium for his poetic vision. However, though both poets employ similar descriptions of the harsh realities of seafaring, ultimately they reveal unique perspectives of the sea as an historical or imagined space of exile. After a discussion of these poets, I continue with a reading of selections from Judah al-Harizi's *Sefer Takhemoni*. As a poet from the generation following Ha-Levi and Ibn Ezra, the work of al-Harizi serves not as commentary on a present threat of political unrest, but as nostalgic longing for the lost prestige of Hebrew letters, which he finds in the work of Ibn Ezra and Ha-Levi. It is these two poets who he names as the last great poets of the Golden Age.<sup>3</sup> The work of these three poets will be discussed in relation to extant contemporary merchant letters which give historical context to their verse and rhymed prose.<sup>4</sup> The images and tropes employed by these poets, and

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<sup>1</sup> S.D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: the Jewish communities of the Arab world as portrayed in the documents of the Cairo Geniza*, Vol. 1, Univ. of California Press, Berkeley, 1967, pp. 351-352. Found, for example, in TS 12.386v, 1.3 and TS 13 J 14. F. 2, 1.6.

<sup>2</sup> S.D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, p. 275.

<sup>3</sup> Arie Schippers, 'Medieval Opinions on the Spanish School of Hebrew Poetry and its Epigons,' *Studia Rosenthaliana*, 40, 2007-2008, pp. 427-438.

<sup>4</sup> Though I look at the literary productions of two types of travelers who ventured across the sea- poets and merchants- these categories cannot be easily separated. As recent scholarship on Mediterranean identities has

the lyrical realities they reveal, do not differ greatly from the merchant letters of those, who like them, traveled the Middle Sea. To the contrary, the descriptions and images that flow from the poets' pen seem to come from the very experiences born out of the trials and hardships of maritime travel, with the exception of Ibn Ezra. As a selection of documents from Cairo Geniza records demonstrates, both the lack of comfort and the danger involved in seafaring were in the end insufficient to discourage travel across the great sea. Perhaps most importantly for our purposes, many who travelled wrote to us in letters and poems.

### *Mose Ibn Ezra*

Born in Granada around 1055, Mose Ibn Ezra (d. after 1138) enjoyed relative affluence and tranquility until the Almoravid invasion of 1086. Though his brothers fled, he remained for a time with his wife and seven children; eventually he too would flee to the north leaving his family behind.<sup>5</sup> His departure into exile was not onto the sea but to the Christian north. Peter Cole writes of the poet's exile: 'He spent the rest of his life wandering the Christian north, bemoaning the loss of his Andalusian world and its glories.'<sup>6</sup> The little we know about the poet's life and the extant poems that comprise his *diwan* (poetic corpus) seem to demonstrate that the historical circumstances surrounding his exile led him to perceive his diasporic movements as that of a seafarer at the mercy and whim of the wind and waves.<sup>7</sup>

Though he apparently never travelled at sea, he seems to have been well aware of the sea's nature and its usefulness as metaphor, and it is likely that Ibn Ezra invoked the ship at sea because it was historically the means by which many of his friends and colleagues would leave

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shown, there was considerable overlap between the two. (See Mercedes García-Arenal and Gerard Wiegers, *Entre el Islam y Occidente: Vida de Samuel Pallache, judío de Fez*, S.A. Madrid, España, 1999.) Consequently, the aim of this paper is not (necessarily) to compare and contrast merchants and poets, but to navigate the imagery of merchant letters in order to better understand the historical context of medieval Iberian Hebrew poems which lyricized a similar reality.

<sup>5</sup> Raymond P. Scheindlin, 'Moses Ibn Ezra' in *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature*, María Rosa Menocal, Raymond P. Scheindlin, and Michael Sells (eds.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000, p. 252.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Cole, *The Dream of the Poem: Hebrew Poetry from Muslim and Christian Spain 950-1492*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2007, p. 122.

<sup>7</sup> 'Time' is generally used to describe the external force acting upon the poet in exile. Ibn Ezra writes, 'Why does Time hound me so / and wake to drive on the wandering sparrow' (Peter Cole, *The Dream of the Poem*, p. 128).

him as they too moved into exile, forced or otherwise.<sup>8</sup> Their departure became his departure, a separation not from the land of Sefarad (Iberia) but from those he loved.<sup>9</sup> What is more, Ibn Ezra writes not about historical maritime journeys, but invokes maritime tropes as metaphor for his personal exile in the north of the Iberian Peninsula, on land. His conception of exile as seafaring can be summarized as follows: the ship at sea moves away from life towards death, denying the traveler (and poet) any hope of salvation.

In his short poem, 'Let Man Remember', Ibn Ezra cautions the reader to remember that life's journey leads inevitably to death.<sup>10</sup> This may be difficult, however, for the traveler's movements are at times so small and incremental that he appears to be motionless: 'each day he travels only a little / so he thinks he's always at rest.'<sup>11</sup> The poet compares the journey to that of a traveler at sea, 'like someone sitting at ease on a ship / while the wind sweeps it over the depths.'<sup>12</sup> The ship does not move on its own volition, but rather the winds carry it across the surface of the waters, with unknown origin and unknown purpose. The traveler, likewise, does not willfully move; instead, he is at the mercy of the ship which is commanded by the winds: he is twice removed from any self-determining act or agency. The traveler's direction and pace is not of his own choosing; his fate is dictated by external forces, and those on board the vessel experience relative calm, unaware they are being swept along.

The emphasis on the traveler's near complete lack of volition and lack of awareness of direction or velocity appears to reflect Ibn Ezra's personal experience with historical forces beyond his control. The image of the depths conveys a sense of danger, yet the traveler is ignorant of the danger in his surroundings; he is unaware of the vast space that surrounds him and the peril it

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<sup>8</sup> See Ross Brann, 'The Arabized Jews', in *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature*, María Rosa Menocal, Raymond P. Scheindlin, and Michael Sells (eds.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000, pp.435-454.

<sup>9</sup> The term *Sefarad* (ספראד) is the Spanish Jewish name for the Iberian Peninsula. It is a place name of unknown origin, having its only biblical reference in Obadiah 1:20. Jonathon Decter, *Iberian Jewish Literature: Between al-Andalus and Christian Europe*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2007, p. 41. Ibn Ezra's *qasida* reads: 'I yearn for inhabitants, not dwellings, / for the people of good grace, not living chambers, / And for people of understanding, not bricks, / for those who come, not entryways' (Jonathon Decter, *Iberian Jewish Literature*, pp. 40-42.) For the purposes of time and space, a discussion of this *qasida* has been omitted.

<sup>10</sup> זכור גבר בימי הייו / כי למות הוא לקוח Hebrew text from T. Carmi, (ed.) *The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse*, The Viking Press, New York, 1981, p. 327. All Translations from Peter Cole, *The Dream of the Poem*, p. 127.

<sup>11</sup> ולאט יסע כל יום מסע / אכן יחשב כי ינוח

<sup>12</sup> דומה אל איש שוקט על צי / אך ידא על כנפי רוה

threatens. Why is the traveler at ease? By the logic of the poem, traveling is a pleasant but deadly journey. The poet says that the traveler only *thinks* that he is at rest; the traveler is unaware that he is headed towards certain doom. Though the poem omits any explicit mention of the locus of death, such appears to be the destination of the ship at sea. And though death does not seem to be the traveler's intended terminus, the depths remain an ominous threat to the seafarer's life. The sea, then, is not what the traveler thinks it is, for he has forgotten the journey's end; it does not carry him to safety, but leads him into grave peril. As such, life is a sea of whelming forces and circumstances beyond control, depriving the seafarer of both destination and origin.

In 'The Day to Come,' Ibn Ezra explicitly describes the end that is only implied in 'Let Man Remember.'<sup>13</sup> Man is depicted at such ease here – 'smug and complacent' - that even death is forgotten; they fear it no more.<sup>14</sup> And though the poet is well aware that the traveler will be met with terrifying seas, the seafarers 'lie there pleased' unaware that 'destruction will take them.'<sup>15</sup> The description of destruction is housed in wine imagery. Disheartened by the end that awaits him, the poet-sailor looks back to the shores of al-Andalus and laments its ruin. Departure into forced exile is a journey at sea, where still, sweet wine becomes tainted with brackish sea water: the violent sea turns to 'foaming wine.'<sup>16</sup> Here wine does not enliven travelers' spirits but confounds them and will 'hasten their sleep / which will last forever.'<sup>17</sup> Similar imagery is present in 'The World' where lost man, the wanderer, thirsts for the world, yet finds only salted water that never satisfies.<sup>18</sup> The poet writes,

as though its water turned to salt  
when a parched heart called out to them—  
they pour it from buckets into their mouths

כאלו נתנו מימיו למלח  
ולב צמא שתות אותם קראם  
אלי פיהם המוניהם יגיחון  
ואך לא ישברו לעד צמאם

<sup>13</sup> Hebrew text from Jefim Schirmann, *ha-Shirah ha- 'Ivrit bi-Sefarad ube-Provans*, Mosad Byalik, Jerusalem, 1960, p. 406. All translations of this poem are from Peter Cole, *The Dream of the Poem*, pp. 134-35.

<sup>14</sup> שוקט ובוטח

<sup>15</sup> שואה תבואהו and ושוכב שמה

<sup>16</sup> יין חמר

<sup>17</sup> ממחר תנומתו / לעדי-עד שנתו For further studies on Arabo-Hebrew wine poetry, see Raymond Scheindlin, *Wine, Women, and Death: Medieval Hebrew Poems on the Good Life*, The Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, 1986; Arie Schippers, *Spanish-Hebrew Poetry and the Arabic Literary Tradition: Arabic Themes in Hebrew Andalusian Poetry*. Brill Academic Publishers, Leiden, 1994.

<sup>18</sup> Hebrew text from Jefim Schirmann, *ha-Shirah ha- 'Ivrit bi-Sefarad ube-Provans*, p. 401. All translations from Peter Cole, *The Dream of the Poem*, p. 130.

but their thirst is never quenched

Indeed, due to poetic inversion, the sweet waters of the flowing stream are tainted with the non-potable salted sea and what is meant to sate thirst is its very cause and origin. The poetic voice speaks of abandonment and laments not only the land of *al-Andalus* but those who left him for greater things across the sea—he mourns the loss of the men of letters and learning that made Iberia home. Whereas Jonathan Decker interprets nostalgia for the nectar of the garden's vine as a lament for lost Andalusian culture, here exile's flight across the sea has rendered even its poetic memory undrinkable. The sea is presented as an admonition to those who seek its depths as a means to assuage the thirst of exile. Ibn Ezra combines his rebuke with a lament of abandonment: the sea is nothing but a malediction for the poet; it holds no hope or blessing.

### ***Judah ha-Levi***

Whereas fellow Andalusian poet Ibn Ezra conceives of the pain of exile as a lament of one having been abandoned, Judah ha-Levi writes of his abandoning *al-Andalus* and his journey across the sea in search of salvation. Born in the north of the Iberian Peninsula in 1075, Judah ha-Levi (d. 1141) would later move to the south, *al-Andalus*, in search of a vibrant literary and academic community. His time there, however, would be abruptly cut short due to the political turmoil unleashed on the peninsula during the same Almoravid rule which displaced his friend Ibn Ezra. Sadly, he would be forced to choose between the perils of his beloved Sefarad and that of the sea; he would choose the latter and exile. As such, his sea poetry reveals the space of the sea to be filled with equal parts terror and hope.

A poem which begins, 'I cry to God with a melting heart' depicts the poet as he journeyed on the open sea, crying in anguish at the torment the seas have brought to those traveling over the deep.<sup>19</sup> The poet's sense of helplessness at the sea's wrath and rage are heightened by the failure of oarsmen and pilots to guide the ship: they 'find not their hands.'<sup>20</sup> In the midst of the tumult of the ocean's tempest, the ship and sailor are 'tossed about,' and riding the writhing waves they

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<sup>19</sup> אצעק בלב נמס Hebrew text and English translation from Heinrich Brody (ed.) *Selected Poems of Judah Halevi*, Arno Press, New York, 1973, p.29.

<sup>20</sup> לא ימצאו ידיים

are 'suspended between waters and heavens,' revealing the storm-tossed sea to be a liminal space of existential wandering.<sup>21</sup> However, one notices a carefully crafted conflict in Ha-Levi's experience with the sea: it is both poison and cure; it pains his heart yet leads him to salvation; though it is fraught with peril, it is filled with hope, and the violence and peril he experiences are in the end 'but a light thing' compared to the promise of Jerusalem.<sup>22</sup> We see this promise again in the poem, 'In the Heart,' where the providential hand of the divine brings the poet comfort, causing him to urge the ship (sailor), the 'heart in the heart of the sea,' to stand firm in faith, for salvation is for the true believer that weathers the storm.<sup>23</sup>

If your faith is firm in the Lord who made  
the sea—whose name endures for eternity—  
the deep won't frighten you with its swells,  
for He who sets its bounds is near<sup>24</sup>

אִם־תֵּאֱמַן בְּאֵל אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה  
הַיָּם וְעַד־נִצְחָה שְׁמוֹ קַיָּם  
אֶל־יִחְרִידֶךָ יָם בְּשׂוּא גְלוּיֹו  
כִּי־עֹמֵךְ הַשָּׁם גְּבוּל לַיָּם

Scholars familiar with the poetic corpus of Judah ha-Levi would have followed his verses from the Christian north to the turmoil of the Andalus south, from Sefarad to Cairo, where, as mentioned, he would remain while awaiting favorable winds to carry him to his destination, Jerusalem. In a Geniza letter from May 1141, we read:

All the ships going to Spain, al-Mahdiyya, Tripoli [Libya], Sicily, and Byzantium have departed and have encountered a propitious wind. However, the ship of the ruler of al-Mahdiyya [which was on its way eastward to Palestine] has not yet moved. Our master Judah ha-Levi boarded it four days ago, but the wind is not favorable for them. May God grant them safety.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>21</sup> תלוי בבין מים ובין שמים and אחוג ואנוע

<sup>22</sup> ונקל זאת עדי

<sup>23</sup> אמר בלב ימים, ללב רגז Hebrew text from Heinrich Brody (ed.) *Selected Poems of Judah Halevi*, p. 28

<sup>24</sup> Translation from Peter Cole, *The Dream of the Poem*, p. 168. Hebrew text from Heinrich Brody (ed.) *Selected Poems of Judah Halevi*, p. 28.

<sup>25</sup> Geniza document ULC Or 1080 J258v, margin, Trans. S.D. Goitein.

While waiting for adverse winds to turn in his favor, Ha-Levi pens one of his last known poems.<sup>26</sup> 'This Breeze' sings praise to the western wind that will carry him on to Jerusalem. In an Andalusi style, evocative of friend and fellow poet Mose Ibn Ezra, Ha-Levi longs for a scented breeze and rebukes the gales that storm the sea; and though he longs for the east, it is the Andalusi-scented western winds that he awaits. He has abandoned Sefarad, yet seems to look fondly over his shoulder and compose one last verse to its laud.

This breeze of yours is scented, West—  
its wings are fragrant with apple and balm;  
you've clearly come from the spice-traders' chests  
and not from the heavens' stores of wind.  
You spread the feathers of birds, and free me,  
like scent wafting from purest myrrh.  
We've all longed and waited for you,  
prepared to ride the sea on a board,  
so do not lift you hand from the sails,  
whether the day declines or dawns,  
but pound the deep and rend its heart  
until you've reached the holy hills,  
rebuking the East and its gales which cause  
the sea, like a cauldron, to swell and seethe.  
But what could one do, held back by the Lord,  
bound today and tomorrow released?  
My prayer's answer is in His hand—  
who forms the mountains, and fashions the wind.<sup>27</sup>

זה רוחך צד מערב רקוח  
הנרד בכנפיו והתפוח  
מאוצרות הרכלים מוצאך  
כי אינך מאוצרות הרוח  
כנפי דרור תניף ותקרא לי דרור  
וכמר-דרור מן הצרור לקוח  
מה-נכספו לך עם אשר בגללך  
רכבו בגב ים עלי גב-לוח  
אל נא תרפה ירך מן האני  
כי יחנה היום וכי יפוח  
ורקע תהום וקרע לבב ימים, וגע  
אל הררי קדש ושם תנוה  
וגער בקדים המסער ים עדי  
ישים לבב הים כסיר נפוח  
מה יעשה אסור ביד הצור אשר  
פעם יהי עצור ועת שלוח  
אך סוד שאלתי ביד מרום, והוא  
יוצר מרום הרים ובורא רוח

For the poet, when the winds blow from the east, the sea lashes in torment, but the gentle winds from the west calm the sea. The western winds and the sea are no longer enemies united against the poet, stripping him of volition, sending him into exile, and crushing him in the depths—as we

<sup>26</sup> Peter Cole, *The Dream of the Poem* and S.D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*.

<sup>27</sup> Translation from Peter Cole, *The Dream of the Poem*, p. 170. Hebrew text from T. Carmi, (ed.) *The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse*, p. 350-51.

read in Ibn Ezra. Rather, the wind from the west—a sweet breeze emanating from the heart of *al-Andalus*—and the sea become allies of the poet and traveler, carrying him onward to salvation. Thus, though the poet laments his exile and wandering, his memory of Spain reveals a greater hope for the holy hills of Jerusalem. Under the spell of the enchanting wind-swept aroma of Andalusi spices, Ha-Levi attempts to reconcile his nostalgia for the west and his longing for the east. Moreover, the perils of the deep are calmed ultimately in his recognition of the sea as an ethical space over which only the Lord and his providential hand hold sway.<sup>28</sup> With divine guidance, the wind and sea are allies of the poet and traveler, carrying him to salvation.

### ***Merchant Letters***

With or without the hand of God, the images of hope and helplessness before the power of the sea are not isolated to poetic construction. A few merchant letters from this period offer similar tales of travail. A selection of merchant letters support and give historical weight to the assertion that seafaring was indeed filled with danger, and perhaps, more importantly, that people travelled despite the risks. In general, however, merchant letters of the Geniza demonstrate that most of the seasoned travelers and merchants were not considerably sentimental in their descriptions of terror or tragedy at sea. A letter sent from Alexandria to Spain states simply that a trader 'arrived safely in Alexandria, after having experienced trials and suffering, which would take too much time to describe.'<sup>29</sup> A trip along the Palestinian coast could sometimes be very rough, and yet a scholar, who had had an unpleasant experience, writes without further description: 'On the sea, I endured great hardships.'<sup>30</sup>

A few merchant writers, however, are more specific, if not more sentimental in their descriptions of the perils of seafaring. In a letter to Abu Yahya Nahray ben Nissim, an unknown merchant writes:<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Similar ambivalence in his hope of salvation is found in 'Stop the surging of the sea,' (which the Arabic heading tells us he wrote aboard ship) where he simultaneously thanks the eastern wind for keeping him at port so he can stay with his benefactor, but pleads for the Lord not to stop the blowing of the western wind: 'Break not, Lord, the breakers of the sea', ים תשבר משברי ים See Joseph Yahalom, *Judah Halevi: Poetry and Pilgrimage*, p. 158.

<sup>29</sup> Geniza document Bodl. MS Heb. C 28 (Cat. 2876), f. 31 11. 5-8, Trans. S.D. Goitein.

<sup>30</sup> Geniza document TS 13 J 36, f. 6, Trans. S.D. Goitein.

<sup>31</sup> Abu Yahya Nahray ben Nissim is a frequent figure in the Cairo Geniza records. Over 200 letters addressed to him have been preserved in the archives. According to relevant correspondence in the Geniza record, he appears to have

Water seeped into a ship and I worked the pumps from the very day we left Alexandria. Each man had to bail fifty buckets of water a shift, each bucket being the size of half a Byzantine barrel. Our turn came two or three times during a day and a night...a great quantity of linen got wet, and the merchants quarreled with the owner of the boat until he remitted a part of the fare. My own linen became only slightly damaged by water.<sup>32</sup>

As Goitein contends, if we consider the immense number of references to the sea and seafaring in the Geniza papers and the relatively scarce amount of information concerning shipwrecks, one could justifiably conclude that medieval shipbuilding was 'not altogether unsuitable for the task.'<sup>33</sup> That being said, comments like 'all ships have arrived safely' are also conspicuously absent.<sup>34</sup> While existing evidence may suggest that shipwrecks were uncommon, excerpts, such as the one above, demonstrate that they did indeed occur and were at the very least a source of concern for travelers weighing the risks of whether or not to venture onto the open sea.

Another example of disaster is seen in a letter from Abu Sa'id to his brother, Abu al-Barakat ben Tariq, in Fustat concerning a short trip from al-Mahdhiyya to Palermo.

On my travel to Sicily I was overcome by events the like of which I have never witnessed. A great storm seized us on the sea and we were forced to land on an island called al-Ghumur. We stayed there for twenty days with no food other than nettles. When we set out from there we did not have any more the look of human beings. The seas tormented us for thirty-five days and we were regarded as lost. For we sailed in four barges (*qarib*), but only ours survived. After arrival in Sicily we were so exhausted from our sufferings on sea that we were unable to eat bread or to understand what was said to us for a full month.<sup>35</sup>

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been a prominent businessman, scholar, and community leader who emigrated from Tunisia to Cairo around 1045 and remained there until his death in 1095.

<sup>32</sup> Geniza document TA 12.241, 11. 4-11, *Nahray* 215, Trans. S.D. Goitein. Dated between 1045 and 1095.

<sup>33</sup> S.D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, Vol. I, p. 321.

<sup>34</sup> Geniza document TS 16.7, 1.5; TS 20.76, 1.28 (from Qayrawan), Trans. S.D. Goitein.

<sup>35</sup> Geniza document TS 13 J 26, f. 10, 11. 13-19, Trans. S.D. Goitein. Dated ca. 1060.

Though I have provided here only a fragment of this letter, further reading of Abu Sa'id's correspondence reveals that he has no intention of abandoning the sea or his trade. That is, though he had never witnessed such suffering and travail, it was not enough to keep him from the profit and benefit the sea offers those who dare to traverse its depths. Similar graphic depictions of ships and men floundering at sea, juxtaposed with merchants singing the praises of travel's recompense, is brilliantly displayed in the rhymed prose work of another Andalusí scholar and poet, Judah al-Harizi.

### *Judah al-Harizi*

Judah al-Harizi (d. 1225) was not a merchant; rather he is known primarily for his work as a translator of Arabic and Hebrew theological and philosophical texts.<sup>36</sup> His literary productions claim, at times simultaneously, both the blessings and travails of travel at sea. His *Sefer Tahkemoni* is a dynamic presentation of the nature of the sea and seafaring through the varied and conflicting experiences of his merchant-poet protagonists, which emulate the paradoxical nature of medieval travel and maritime movement in general.

Like Ha-Levi and the above Geniza merchants who write in some detail about the troubles of travel, in Gate 26 of the *Sefer*, concerning the vicissitudes and benefits of travel, al-Harizi briefly follows a familiar pattern when his rogue trickster protagonist (Hever) asserts that 'Anyone who journeys away from his land and goes forth from his beloved home will find that his soul will be sated with evils.'<sup>37</sup> Al-Harizi presents the sea as a complex space: it is friend and foe, cure and poison, life and death. This Gate's opening lines employ familiar tropes concerning the sea and travel: wind and time, wandering, and the ship on a bitter sea. 'The wind will drive him,' Hever recites, '...plunging through waves and billows.'<sup>38</sup> Similar to Mose Ibn Ezra's 'Let man remember;' it seems the traveler in Hever's tale lacks agency and succumbs to the whim of the

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<sup>36</sup> His most notable translations are of Moses Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed* and al-Hariri's *maqamat*.

<sup>37</sup> חפצו, תשבע ברעות נפשו, ולא ישא ראשו, וכל הגוסע מארצו, ויצא ממחוזו Translation from Judah ben Solomon al-Harizi, *The Tahkemoni of Judah al-Harizi*, Trans. Victor Emanuel Reichert, Vol. 2, R.H. Hacoben Press Ltd., Jerusalem, 1973, p. 130.

<sup>38</sup> אני הגבר, ראיתי בארצ נוד כל יגון יכל שבר, וכמעט ירדתי אל הקבר Translation from *The Tahkemoni of Judah al-Harizi*, p. 128.

winds. Here, however, the traveler is cognizant of his circumstances; he does not think he's always at rest nor is he deceived into believing so, but rather, he seems fully aware that he is at the mercy of the perilous seas as he wanders in confusion—like a cork tossed about by a raging sea, to use David Segal's interpretation of this episode.<sup>39</sup> However, much more than implicitly dictating his departure, Time enslaves the traveler and renders him helpless before the might and terror of the open sea. The seafarer recalls, 'Wandering is confusion. Traveling is misfortune. Separation is a terror.'<sup>40</sup>

In Hever's account, the vast ocean is presented as a space devoid of the limits of land where the sea completely envelops the traveler. The traveler is isolated but not alone as the sea holds him in its grip. Whereas Ha-Levi sings welcoming praise to the western winds that will carry him to Jerusalem, for Hever only terror is held in the wind, and there is little hope of escaping its grasp. The wind is against the poet and desires only to drown him in the depths; the sea and 'its waves and billows will raise themselves up. They marshal the weapons of their wrath against him.'<sup>41</sup> Time, Sea, and Wind, are united against the traveler, depriving him of will and volition, disorienting him and leading him towards death. But a watery grave is not certain. However, while Ha-Levi invokes the divine, here the merchant is forced to throw his goods overboard in order to save both the ship and his life. As Hever tells us: 'he will finally throw all his wares overboard into the midst of the sea in order to deliver his soul from death.'<sup>42</sup>

As I have already emphasized, such occurrences and experiences are not isolated to the poet's imaginative pen. Not only did we see this above in a Geniza merchant's account of his ruined linen, but in the following document we again encounter peril on the seas and practical methods to mitigate its damage. In another letter written to Nahray ben Nissim, Ya'qub ben Salman al-Hariri states:

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<sup>39</sup> Judah ben Solomon al-Harizi, *The Book of Tahkemoni: Jewish Tales from Medieval Spain*, Trans. David Segal, The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, London, 2001, p. 128.

<sup>40</sup> והפרידה הרדה, והנסיעה מאורעה, וההליכה מבובה, Translation from *The Tahkemoni of Judah al-Harizi*, p. 130.

<sup>41</sup> ונשאו גליו ודכים ויוציאו עליו כלי זעמו Translation from *The Tahkemoni of Judah al-Harizi*, p. 131.

<sup>42</sup> עד יטיל אל תוך הים מחורתו, להציל ממות נשמתו Translation from *The Tahkemoni of Judah al-Harizi*, p. 131.

We set sail for Jaffa, the port of Ramle. However, a wind arose against us from the land. It became a storm and drove us out into the midst of the sea, where we remained for four days, giving up all hope for life. We were without sails and oars and the rudder was broken. Likewise, the sailyards were broken and the waves burst into the barge (*qarib*)... We threw part of the cargo overboard and I gave up all hope for my life and for all that which I carried with me... my clothes and goods were completely soaked.<sup>43</sup>

According to this letter, it seems that al-Harizi's poetic rendering of Hever's travails is quite a realistic depiction of medieval merchant ventures on the Mediterranean Seas. Mediterranean merchants frequently escorted goods in order to ensure their safe arrival, and in order to prevent a ship from floundering at sea, in desperate situations, many were forced to throw their cargo overboard. Goitein reminds us that this recourse of jettisoning cargo was common for medieval sailors in a heavy storm. The practice was so common, he asserts, that when merchants arrived in port, it was standard practice to ask whether any part of the cargo had been thrown overboard.<sup>44</sup>

Another intriguing episode of al-Harizi's *maqama* involves the use of magic at sea. Gate 38, entitled 'A Ship. Storm-tossed, at Sea,' is dedicated specifically to the travails of sea travel.<sup>45</sup> It tells the tale of how the sea can turn in a moment and overwhelm the traveler with its terror. The story begins with calm and gentle seas. The ship sails smoothly and the salty deep is rendered as a flowing stream of honey. The bitter poison of Gate 26 is here reversed, such that the briny sea has the sweetness of a flowing river. This calm, quiet, and rejoicing is short-lived, however, when unexpectedly a tempest seizes the ship and the wind returns to join the sea in its violent assault: 'the waves of the sea were turned against us as enemies' and 'The emissaries of the wind sped like a sent envoy, and the sea was turned into a seething pot.'<sup>46</sup> As the ship literally begins to disintegrate, the travelers cry in pain and howl in their calamity. At this point in the story, the travelers notice a man sitting calmly in the midst of the turmoil. They consider him mad, but he

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<sup>43</sup> Geniza document TS 8 J 19, f. 27, 11. 3-8, Trans. S.D. Goitein. Dated between 1045 and 1095.

<sup>44</sup> S.D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, Vol. I, p. 321.

<sup>45</sup> Hebrew text from Judah ben Solomon al-Harizi, *Takhemoni*, Istanbul, 1578., p. 306-307 (The National Library of Israel, Microfilm FI 9582). Al-Harizi adds to the title, the following: 'On a ship, tempest-tossed at sea, / From the roaring of its waves and their fury.' Translation from *The Takhemoni of Judah al-Harizi*, p. 235.

<sup>46</sup> ושלוחי הרוח, מהרו כציר שלוח, והפכו הים [כסיר נפות] and ונהפכו לנו לאויבים גלי המים respectively. Translation from *The Takhemoni of Judah al-Harizi*, p. 236.

claims to have a book of amulets that contains the names of the angels of the sea, that when invoked, will calm the tempest. Indeed, the seas calm and the rest of the Gate tells of how the mysterious man makes a profit selling magical scrolls to frightened seafarers.<sup>47</sup>

Though Hever's tale of magical amulets may seem far-fetched and relegated to the realm of the imagination, such literary devices are not only ubiquitous in medieval Iberian literature, they are found amongst the merchant letters of the Cairo Geniza. Research by Joseph Naveh and Shaul Shaked demonstrates that not only in Late Antiquity but well into the Middle Ages, Jews of the Mediterranean were producing such amulets and practicing similar magic.<sup>48</sup> Though most of such fragments found in the Cairo Geniza concern incantations and formulas for passion to overwhelm lovers or sickness to overtake enemies, they reveal the complexity and familiarity of medieval Jewish attitude towards magic.<sup>49</sup> More relevant to our purposes of maritime magic, Goitein cites an instruction written in the eleventh century containing the 'holy names' that were to be inscribed on a new earthen vessel, which when thrown into the sea would calm the violent storms.<sup>50</sup> Such instructions reveal to us a historical reality for the twelfth-century Jews of the Cairo Geniza, a reality not far from the poetic verses of their Iberian co-religionists. Not only did the sea strike fear into the hearts of those who passed over its depths, but those who took the risk were apt to hedge their bets with a little help from beyond.

### ***Conclusion***

This paper suggests that the Mediterranean Sea and the journeys taken over its depths are presented or invoked with striking similitude between the poetic stylings of medieval Iberian Hebrew poets and a selection of commercial letters from Jewish Geniza merchants. Mose Ibn

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<sup>47</sup> Al-Harizi's 38<sup>th</sup> Gate is strongly reminiscent of Hamadhani's 23<sup>rd</sup> entitled 'The Amulet,' which describes a violent storm at sea and panicked sailor, save one. After the storm subsides, the traveler who had remained still is questioned about his actions, after which he produces a silk cloth inscribed with the names of the angels of the sea.

<sup>48</sup> See Joseph Naveh and Shaul Shaked, *Amulets and Magic Bowls: Aramaic Incantations of Late Antiquity*. The Magnes Press, Jerusalem, 1987; Reimund Leicht, 'Some Observations on the Diffusions of Jewish Magical Texts from Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages in Manuscripts from the Cairo Geniza and Ashkenaz,' in Shaul Shaked (ed.), *Officina Magica: Essays on the Practice of Magic in Antiquity*, Brill, Boston, 2005, pp. 213-232; and Gideon Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic, A History*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008.

<sup>49</sup> See for example, Geniza documents T-S K 1.73 and T-S A.S. 142.174 in Joseph Naveh and Shaul Shaked, *Amulets and Magic Bowls*, pp. 215-240.

<sup>50</sup> Geniza document TS Box K 1, f.117. Cf., Trans. S.D. Goitein.

Ezra invokes his exile through the sea as a violent wind that sweeps away his peers and leaves him forsaken and alone, while Judah ha-Levi seizes opportunity, traversing the raging and perilous seas to find salvation, stopping momentarily in Alexandria just long enough for us to catch him before the scented breeze carries him east. Judah al-Harizi, who himself left his native Andalus for the wonders and wisdom of the east, presents the reader with the poet-merchant reduced to panic-stricken jettisoning and the invocation of talismanic amulets in an attempt to salvage both self and sales in the midst of the ocean's wrath. Though these descriptions are the poetic renderings of prolific litterateurs, the vision they depict has much in common with the historical reality of their co-religionists who traveled those same seas in search of profit and gain. In their letters, merchants describe terrible storms, suffering and disfigurement, shipwrecks and damaged cargo. All reveal the great risk of venturing out onto the seething sea. More importantly, the selected sources present a remarkable ensemble of travelers who weighed these risks and benefits and yet decided to make the voyage. As Goitein aptly asserts, 'Nature's caprice and perfidy vied with the lawlessness and rapacity of man to render any journey a hazardous undertaking... Yet, Mediterranean man in the Middle Ages was an impassioned and persevering traveler.'<sup>51</sup> The Iberian Jew was no exception.

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<sup>51</sup> S.D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, Vol. IV, p. 273.

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