

EARLY MODERN WORKSHOP: Jewish History Resources

Volume 9: Cross-Cultural Connections in the Early Modern Jewish World, Brown University, Providence, RI, February, 26-27, 2012

A Jewish Merchant Family and a Moroccan Ruler

Daniel J. Schroeter, University of Minnesota

Introduction

These three documents are from the Lévy-Corcós archives, a private collection of family documents in Paris, which I photographed in 1985. A few comments on what Jewish family archives reveal about Muslim-Jewish relations in Morocco: It was not uncommon for elite Jewish families to pass down from generation to generation various kinds of Muslim and Jewish legal documents, including Arabic decrees of rulers (*dahirs*) and letters from Muslim governmental officials. Such documents were kept as records of property, debts, or special privileges. Significantly, literate Jews did not read or write in the Arabic script, and thus could not read the documents in their possession. None of these three letters are addressed personally to the individual Jews in question, though they are intended as commands to be followed by both the Jews and Muslim officials. The first document is a letter sent from Sultan Sulayman's brother to his son, 'Abd al-Malik (the latter was governor of Agadir), pertaining to the Jewish merchant, Meir Macnin. The description in Judeo Arabic erroneously states that the document was from the sultan. Why, then, was the document in possession of descendants of the family? One can assume that it was customary (or required) for government officials to give such documents to the individuals concerned for safekeeping. The other two documents are royal decrees that would have been sent to the governing officials in the port of Essaouira (Mogador), one pertaining to Shlomo Macnin (the brother of Meir), and the second to the "children of Ibn Macnin." Likewise, it must have been expected that once communicated to the governing authorities, the Macnins would keep these documents in their possession.

From the 1780s to the 1820s, Meir Macnin and his brother Shlomo were at the center of Morocco's very modest trade with Europe, as merchants and diplomatic agents of several sultans of the Moroccan 'Alawid dynasty (the rulers were *sharifs*, meaning that they claimed descent from the Prophet Muhammad). They were crucial in the development of what became Morocco's principal seaport, Essaouira (Mogador), in the latter half

of the 18th century. With the growth of Essaouira, Agadir was closed to foreign trade. There was a short-lived attempt by the new sultan, Sulayman (1792-1822) to revive foreign commerce in Agadir (see doc. 1), amid a dynastic struggle that divided Morocco. From 1797-1798, Sulayman managed to gain control and recognition of his rule, and again he closed Agadir to foreign commerce, dismissing his nephew, ‘Abd al-Malik, who was acting independent of central authority. Henceforth, Moroccan foreign trade was (again) concentrated in Essaouira, royal port of the southern capital of Marrakesh, and conducted by a small group of royal merchants, almost entirely Jewish.

These documents raise a number of questions about Muslim-Jewish relations in Morocco and, more generally, the Islamic world in pre-modern times. While the letters pertain to the relationship of elite individuals (court Jews may not be the best concept here), they reflect the larger tensions embedded in the concept of *dhimmi*, which is both a contract between the individual Jew (in the Maghrib there were no *dhimmi* Christians), and the Muslim ruler, and between Jews as a collectivity and the Muslim community writ large. The patrimonial relationship between ruler and ruled revealed in these letters might in one context have little to do with religious difference, but in another context be shaped by the differences between Muslim and Jews as separate religious communities. These documents show commonalities between Muslims and Jews as well as the recognition of cultural and linguistic boundaries. They also reveal the interdependency of Muslims and Jews, and how each participant understood the benefits and liabilities of that relationship.

Finally, I would like to discuss the implication of these texts to the period, and their relevance to questions of periodization. In a study of similar types of documents for the 19th century, Michel Abitbol, sees in these royal merchants (using the neologism, *tujjar al-sultan*) a significant departure from the past, one in which their activities are no longer represented as individuals, but rather, as a social class belonging to members of different religious communities. In my critique of how much these texts reflect changes in the “modern” period, I would like to question the relevancy of the mainly European construct “early-modern” in relationship to Jewish history for at least parts of the Mediterranean basin.

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Professor Khalid Ben Shrir of the Université Hassan II (Morocco) generously helped in deciphering and translating these documents.

A letter from Mawlay ‘Abd al-Salam to Mawlay ‘Abd al-Malik

Praise God the One. God bless our Lord Muhammad and his family.

Our blessed son ‘Abd al-Malik, may God guide you to the right way; peace be upon you, and mercy and blessings of God be upon the welfare of our sovereign [the sultan] and brother, made victorious by God, may God strengthen his power. As follows: When the *dhimmi* in our sharifian [royal] service, Meir b. Macnin, will reach you, we order you to provide him with a house that he can live in and fill with commerce because he [Meir b. Macnin] wishes to conduct commerce in Agadir as an agent of the merchant Zuzaf [Joseph], his associate. Take care of him and make it a point that he be given favor and privileges over the other Jews there since he is our *dhimmi* and our chattel. You will carry out this order. May God guide you to the right way and be pleased with you. Peace. 13 Rabi‘a II, 1209 [=7 January 1794].

Seal: ‘Abd al-Salam b. Muhammad...God...God with His grace.

[Judeo-Arabic description]: letter of Sulayman, [when] the merchant Meir b. Macnin went to Agadir in 1209.

***Dahir* of Mawlay Sulayman**

[Seal of Sultan Sulayman]: Sulayman b. Muhammad, may God forgive him with His grace.

Praise God the One. We authorized the *dhimmi* Shlomo ibn Macnin to open the mill that was owned by al-Tahir b. Sulayman; he [Shlomo] purchased it from the man who was designated by us [the sultan] to sell or to liquidate his [al-Tahar b. Sulayman’s] properties that are in the new *mellah* of the port of

Essaouira (God protect it); and to gain as profit from the various assets: from rent, etc. From this time on, no one should prevent him [Shlomo Macnin] from exercising the right to dispose of these assets whenever that may be. Because he purchased it from his personal money, whoever from our governing authorities is in charge should strictly implement this order without any alteration to it. Our full sharifian order was authenticated and must be executed. At the end of Jumada I in year 1224 [=14 July 1809]

***Dahir* of Mawlay Sulayman**

In the name of God, Everything is realized by what God wills. I cannot achieve success [in doing good] but in God.

[Seal of Sultan Sulayman. In middle of star]: Sulayman b. Muhammad b. ‘Abdallah, may God forgive him and guide him; [inside corners of star]: Muhammad, Abu Bakr, ‘Umar, ‘Uthman, ‘Ali; [outside star]: I cannot achieve success [in doing good] but in God, in Him I trust and to whom I turn.

We order our servants, the merchants, the children of Ibn Macnin in the port of Essaouira (may God protect it), to take care of the bearer [of this order], the rabbi Rafael, and to undertake [helping] him in different ways, such as advancing to him money [with the view of sharing profits with him*], and to be charitable with him, so that he can recover from his financial crisis, God willing. Thus, our sharifian command was issued, on the first of the sacred month of Muharram, the first of the year 1231 [3 December 1815].

*The term, *qirād*.

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A letter from Mawlay ‘Abd al-Salam to Mawlay ‘Abd al-Malik

الحمد لله وحده وصلى الله على سيدنا محمد وءاله
 ولدنا الأَرْضَى مولاى عبد المالك اصلحك الله، وسلام عليك
 ورحمة الله وبركاته عن خير مولانا واخيना المنصور بالله اعلا
 الله امره، وبعد فحيث يرد عليك ذمي خدمتنا الشريفة مير
 بن مقنين نامرك ينتقد له داره ينزل بها ويعمرها بالتجارة.
 لانه اراد التجارة باجديرناأبا عن التاجر زُزاف صاحبه.
 وتهلا فيه واستوصي به خيرا وميزه عن تجار اليهود هناك
 لانه ذميना ومتاعنا فعلى هذا يكون عملك والله يصلح،
 ويرضى عنك. والسلام في 13 من ربيع الثاني عام 1209.

seal [whole text unclear]:

عبد السلام بن محمد...الله...الله بمنه

ברא דלצלמאן באס מסא תאזר מאייר ן מקנין לאגאדיר

תאריך 1209

Dahir of Mawlay Sulayman

seal: سليمان بن محمد غفرالله له بمنه

الحمد لله وحده

اذنا للذمي شلوم ابن مقنين ان يفتح الطاحونة التي كانت في ملك الطاهر بن سليمان واشتراها ممن اسندنا له امر بيع اصوله الكاينة بملاح ثغر السويرة صانها الله الجديد ينتفع بانواع الانتفاعات من كراء وغيره وحينئذ فلا يمنعه احد من التصرف فيها، كان من كان، حيث اشتراها من ماله الخاص به. فمن وقف عليه من ولاة اعمالنا، يعمل بمقتضاه، ولا يحيد عنه اذنا تاما به صدر الامر الشريف، وهو ثابت الامرنا فذ الحكم. في متم جمادى الاولى عام

1224

Dahir of Mawlay Sulayman

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ مَا شَاءَ اللَّهُ كَانَ، وَمَا تَوْفِيقِي إِلَّا بِاللَّهِ

seal:

سليمان ابن محمد بن عبد الله، غفر الله له وتولاه

محمد، ابو بكر، عمر، عثمان، علي

وما توفيقني الا بالله، عليه توكلت واليه انيب

نامر خدامنا التجار اولاد بن مقنين بثغر الصويرة حرسه
الله، ان يستوصوا خيرا بحامله الحزان رفاي ويتهلوا فيه
ويعاملوه بقراض وبشبهه ويبروا به كي ينجبركسره إن شاء
الله تعالى. وبه صدر امرنا الشريف في فاتح محرم الحرام
فاتح عام 1231

S. M. Moulay Sliman

année 1231