JUDAH HA-LEVI ON WRITING THE KUZARI:
RESPONDING TO A HERETIC

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A Genizah letter (ENA NS 1.5, see plate 7) written in Judaeo-Arabic by Judah ha-Levi contains unique information on the writing of his famous theological opus, the Kuzari, which he calls the ‘Khazarī Book’.1 Ha-Levi also wrote in the letter about his plans to leave Spain and travel to Eretz Israel. The text has been examined and discussed repeatedly since Goitein discovered and published it in 1956.2 Because of ha-Levi’s hyperbolically cursive handwriting and elusive language, the decipherment and interpretation of his letter have stubbornly challenged two generations of scholars. Through a new reading and analysis of the Kuzari passage, I attempt to shed light on ha-Levi’s tolerance towards heretics, among other things. To put his mind-set in perspective, I further consider revisions made by Maimonides in his writings on heretics and a variant known from Genizah manuscripts in the text of Birkat ha-Minin, the malediction of the heretics in the daily Jewish liturgy.

The letter was addressed to Halfon ha-Levi b. Nethanel, an international Egyptian Jewish trader, whose extensive travels took him from India to Spain. The fragments from his archive thus became an important part of Goitein’s ‘India Book’ collection, his incomplete study of hundreds of Genizah documents, mainly from the late-eleventh to the

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1 That is, the book that deals with the Khazars. On the name of the book, see D. Z. Baneth, ‘Some Remarks on the Autographs of Yehudah Hallevi and the Genesis of the Kuzari’ (Hebrew), Tarbiz 26 (1957), pp. 289–303 (297 n. 3); M. Gil and E. Fleischer, Yehuda ha-Levi and his Circle: 55 Geniza Documents (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 2001), p. 182 n. 43; N. Allony, The Jewish Library in the Middle Ages, edited by M. Frenkel and H. Ben-Shamai (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 2006), pp. 152–153, 346, and the literature cited in these studies. This article is based on the paper I delivered at the Genizah Conference in honour of Professor Stefan Reif, Cambridge, 20th–22nd August, 2007, with minor revisions. The research was supported by the Israel Science Foundation (grant No. 815/02-1) and by the Joseph and Ceil Mazer Chair in Jewish Culture in Muslim Lands and Cairo Geniza Studies, Tel Aviv University.

mid-twelfth centuries, that deal with the India trade and India traders, which I have been editing and supplementing for many years. HALFON’S papers form the fourth ‘chapter’ in the India Book. His archive is scheduled to be published in a multi-voluminous study, whose writing I have recently completed. The present paper is a by-product of this research.

Halfon was an intellectual, and wherever he travelled he supported men of letters and cultivated contacts with the Jewish elite. In Spain he developed a close association with Judah ha-Levi. All of ha-Levi’s known holographs have been preserved thanks to Halfon’s archive and Goitein’s India Book research. None of the letters are signed, but the Kuzari passage leaves no doubt as to the author. Neither are any of the letters dated. Due to various considerations, Goitein intermittently assigned this letter to 1129 or 1139. In their recent study, Moshe Gil and Ezra Fleischer concluded that it was written in 1129. For reasons that need not be repeated here, I have dated it to 1139. The question is of some relevance to this study, as the passage analyzed below concerns writing the Kuzari, and the date of this composition is obviously a matter of interest for ha-Levi’s biography.

In his 1956 publication, Goitein transcribed the relevant passage as follows:

1. אל società אלבלמר מונ גאלל נו רוח אלוחים אל зарегистрирова
2. אלגאל מונ וה תוף בברגל עלי באלאגנא עלי מא צדר עלי מון סאלופה
3. אלאה תורית מון תפוזה עליך מואס סלבה סלובה אחלד נההל אלמוב
4. בבלאד אלרימיני סיציימ פי אגראנימ פאוכסלה אליה
5. têm גוחתה ובלאגנאנמונ ערהא גון

3. These volumes are presently scheduled to appear in Hebrew. The reader’s attention is called to S. D. Goitein and M. A. Friedman, India Traders of the Middle Ages: Documents from the Cairo Geniza (‘India Book’) (Leiden, 2008); Goitein and Friedman, India Book I: Joseph Lebdī. Prominent India Trader, Cairo Geniza Documents (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 2009); Goitein and Friedman, India Book II: Madmūn Nagid of Yemen and the India Trade, Cairo Geniza Documents (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 2010); Goitein and Friedman, India Book III: Abraham Ben Yijū. India Trader and Manufacturer, Cairo Geniza Documents (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 2010).
