A FIFTEENTH CENTURY LETTER ADDRESSED
TO THE DAYYANIM OF ZARAGOZA

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In the past years a substantial number of Hispano-Jewish fifteenth century historical documents in Hebrew script, written in La’az and/or in Hebrew, have been systematically recovered either from the binding of manuscripts or within the notarial protocols to which they were attached. In the absence of Jewish archives, these scattered materials could well fill a gap because of the valuable information on lesser known historical aspects they may provide. Therefore, an accurate edition of the texts may help to expand the rather modest extant corpus of Jewish documents, opening new perspectives for the historical analysis, through the analysis of a variegated typology of texts.

Among these documents in Hebrew script preserved in Aragonese archives, I have chosen as a sample a letter dated in the late spring of 1470, sent by the dayyanim (judges) and leaders of the Jewish aljama (community) of Teruel to their counterparts in Zaragoza, concerning the collection of the remaining assets of the late David Cohen, who had recently passed away – a further document explains – as consequence of the plague.

The letter, a leaf of paper, was preserved attached to the notarial protocol volume housed at the Archivo Histórico de Protocolos Notariales de Zaragoza that contained the mandate of the treasurer of the royal exchequer of Aragon, Luis de la Caballeria, dated in 25 June 1470, to the dayyanim of Zaragoza, to assist don Levi Ḥasday, the šaliaḥ (representative) of the aljama of Teruel in the collection of the remaining assets of the deceased that were eventually being kept by the former. Levi Ḥasday had been assigned the task of transferring these assets in order to hand them out among the brothers of the deceased, which were resident in Teruel.

Though brief, this piece may present interest because of several reasons. On the one hand, the documentary evidence published concerning the Jews of Teruel in the middle decades of the fifteenth century is scant and scattered. Better known for the previous century, we hardly have data concerning this community, and then indirect, until the mid-1480s. On the other hand, the letter provides additional evidence for illustrating the issue of communication between the aljamas of Zaragoza and Teruel, more than
one hundred miles distant from each other within the kingdom of Aragon, especially concerning the procedures followed for dealing with transfer-
ence of assets in a rather, initially, obscure matter. As it had happened with other aljamas in Aragon, Teruel’s Jews were closely related to the aljama of Zaragoza,1 not least because of the latter’s central role within the Jewry of the kingdom.2 Moreover, it is a sample of the rhetorical devices used in Jewish official letters that were written in a mixture of La’az and Hebrew.

While it has become a cliché to recall—as an illustration of cultural backwardness—the complaint lodged in the late fourteenth century by R. Yiṣḥaq Perfet, then in Zaragoza, to hakam R. Yiṣḥaq Lapapa, of Teruel, because of the errors contained in a document sent to the former,3 the fact is that Teruel, its sages and muqqademim (communal leaders) appear mentioned in late fourteenth century rabbinical responsa as proof of their integration into a regional social network that involved their participation into major social events,4 even if throughout the fifteenth century Teruel is not among first rank communities in the kingdom from either a demographica or an economic perspective.

Description of the Letter

The paper leaf containing the letter has the same quarto size as the notarial protocol within which it was contained. Originally, it had been ten-fold and pierced with a needle on a side, eventually for sewing it up. The outer fold contains a three-verse addressing heading to the judges of the aljama of Zaragoza.

The text has seventeen lines, in addition to the signatures of six individuals, judges and leaders of the Teruel aljama. Except for the salutation

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1 Expressed, for example, in the letter sent at the beginning of the century by Šelomo de Piera, on behalf of the aljama of Zaragoza, to Teruel, regarding the internal conflict over the lack of agreement in the way to distribute the tax burden, see Fritz BAER, Die Juden im christlichen Spanien. Urkunden und Regesten. I / 1. Aragonien und Navarra (Berlin 1929) [hereinafter: BAER, Aragonien], doc. 469.

2 As specified in a royal letter in 1438, “[...] por la copiosidat e calidat de sus singulares es como exenplo e spiello [...],” cf. Manuel SERRANO Y SANZ, Orígenes de la dominación española en América (Madrid 1918), doc. 30.

3 Perfet complaints in his responsa no. 452 (ed. Responsa Project online, 2010), that he had shown in Zaragoza a last will in [Judeo-]Arabic to persons mastering that language, yet they were not able to understand it, due to the errors contained.

4 As, for instance, the participation of Perfet, Ḥasday Crescas and Biona Desmaestre in a wedding in Teruel, in Tašbeḥ, responsa no. 3:30 (ed. Responsa Project online, 2010), perhaps the same event mentioned in the letter Perfet sent to Moše Gabbay, then in Teruel (cf. Perfet, responsa no. 308).