CHAPTER 4

A Look at Women’s Lives in Cairo Geniza Society

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Women’s lives in medieval Mediterranean society as based on Cairo Geniza documents were first deemed significant by S.D. Goitein. The insightful chapter, which he entitled “The World of Women”, provided a first glimpse into the rich and varied lives of these women. Goitein’s perspicacious approach would capture the imagination of generations of researchers to follow. His open-mindedness made him an unnamed pioneer of women’s studies in the rather gender-blind field of Jewish history in the mid-twentieth century.

Although Goitein covered a vast amount of material to which he referred in the six volumes of *A Mediterranean Society* and in his numerous publications in Hebrew and English, he could not possibly unearth, analyze and delve into each and every document. Nor could he possibly have accessed all of the material that deals with women’s lives. Today, with the aid of the Friedberg Project, the material he analyzed, transcribed or translated in full or in part is available along with additional documents that had yet to be transcribed or identified during his life time. Various students of Goitein specialized in specific aspects of women’s lives: among Mordechai Akiva Friedman’s in-depth publications are those dealing with ketubot (marriage contracts) and documents related to marriage contracts and women’s lives. Arieh Leo Motzkin published a number of articles that included documents concerning women, and Mark Cohen included many relevant documents in his research on poverty.

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2 The six volumes were published between 1967 and 1993.

3 Mordechai Akiva Friedman, *Jewish Marriage in Palestine: A Cairo Geniza Study* (Tel Aviv and New York: Tel Aviv University and JTS, 1981), 2 volumes; eadem, *Jewish Polygyny in the Middle Ages: New Documents from the Cairo Geniza* [Jerusalem: The Bialik Institute, 1986; (Hebrew)].


is also an impressive new dissertation analyzing the lives of girls in Geniza society\(^6\) as well as detailed research by Amir Ashur on engagement and wedding conditions.\(^7\) A serious effort at expanding our understanding of the world of women has been made by Joel L. Kraemer, who published a number of excellent articles in Hebrew and English; he concentrated on analyzing women’s letters, the language appearing in them and the family relationships reflected there.\(^8\)

It is surprising to discover how many letters were sent by and to women, and how many extant court documents actually involved them. Goitein’s favorite and most documented woman was none other than Wuhsha al-Dallala, the successful agent in Fustat at the close of the eleventh century.\(^9\) In the notes he prepared for a talk in 1964, Goitein recounted how he happened to have discovered her existence:\(^10\) He had found a written record concerning a public reproach of Wuhsha because she had not appeared in court as ordered. The non-appearance needed to be explained and justified. This maverick daughter of a banker from Alexandria was a woman who dealt in serious amounts of money, some of which were loans. She clearly had a steady income, which enabled her to contribute to charity, especially as manifested by the figures listed in her will. Essentially she chose not to appear in court at that time because the claims and sums involved were insignificant in her eyes; it was simply not worth her time. Goitein was also surprised to see how flippantly she spoke of her competitor in this document. He realized that unlike the average woman who needed to be formally presented in court so that those present would be made aware of her identity, Karima (Wuhsha’s given name) was already known by sight by the three eminent judges involved in this court transaction; thus any introduction was superfluous.


\(^7\) Amir Ashur, “Engagement Documents from the Cairo Geniza” [Hebrew] M.A. Thesis, Tel Aviv University, 2000 and “Engagement and Betrothal Documents from the Cairo Geniza” [Hebrew], Ph.D. Dissertation, Tel Aviv University, 2006.


\(^9\) His most comprehensive piece about her was “A Jewish Business Woman of the Eleventh Century,” in The Seventy-Fifth Anniversary Volume of the Jewish Quarterly Review (Philadelphia, 1967), 225–42.

\(^10\) A copy of these notes was passed on to me by Joel Kraemer, March 2013.