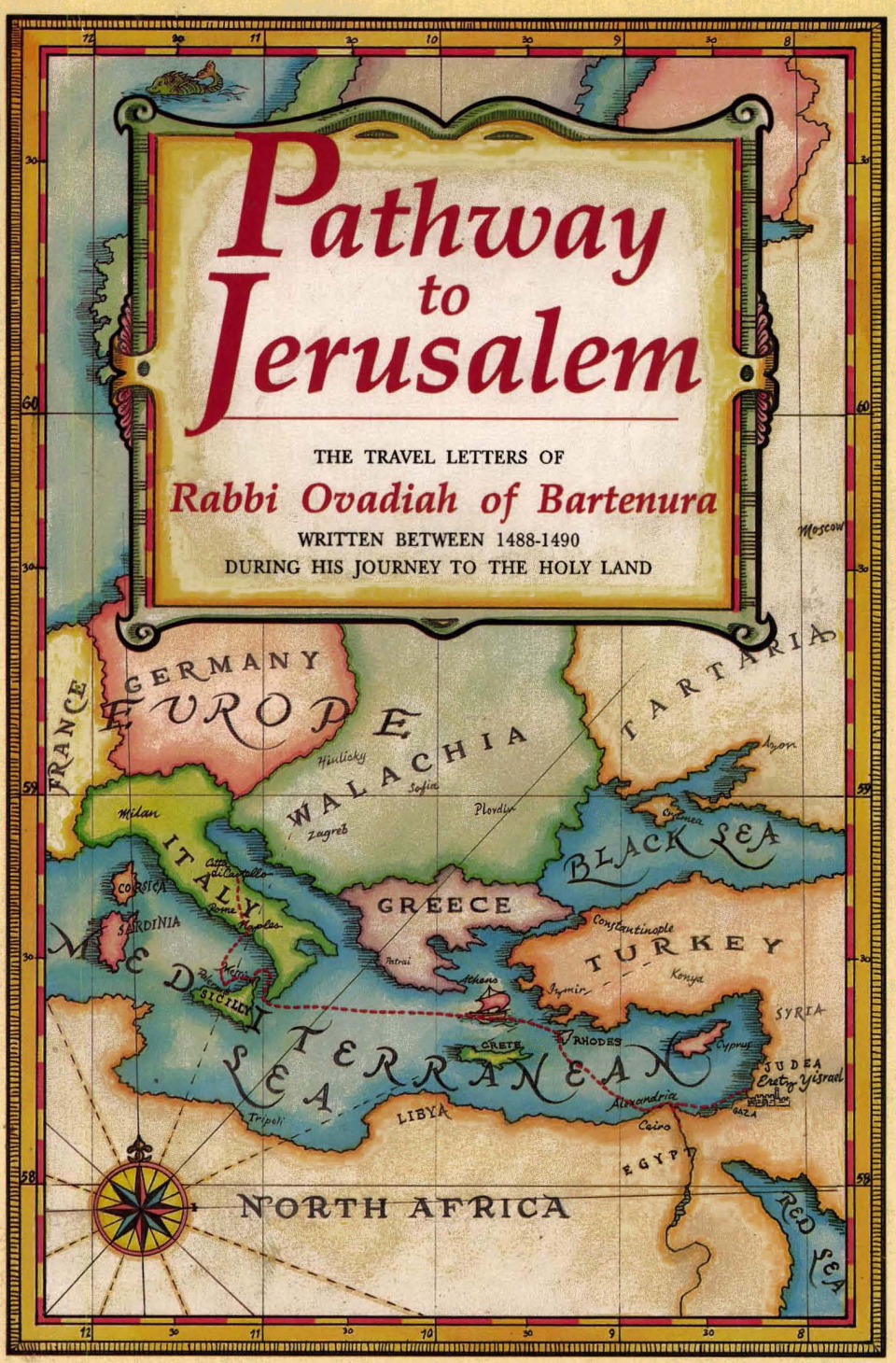

Pathway to Jerusalem
THE TRAVEL LETTERS OF
Rabbi Ovadiah of Bartenura
WRITTEN BETWEEN 1488-1490
DURING HIS JOURNEY TO THE HOLY LAND
GERMANY
EUROPE
FRANCE
WALACHIA
TARTARIA
Moscow
Hulicky
Sofia
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Azov
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translated by

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introduced and edited by

Rabbi Avrohom Marmorstein

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Pathway to Jerusalem

Preface

Throughout the generations of Jewish exile, in all corners of the earth, the longing of every faithful Jew was to see Jerusalem and kiss the soil of the Promised Land. Prominent *talmidei chachamim* abandoned positions of prestige to endure deprivation and discomfort in the Holy Land, confident that the privilege of proximity to the vestiges of the Beis Hamikdash was more significant than all the honors of the Diaspora. The names of those who made this choice are legion.

In 1211, a group of the Baalei Tosfos made their way to the land of Israel. In 1267 the Ramban (Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman of Gerona) left Spain for Jerusalem, and taught and studied in the synagogue which was named after him. In 1306, after the expulsion of Jews from France, many French

rabbis made the long journey to Jerusalem; prominent among them was Rabbi Ashturi Haparchi, the first to write a detailed description of the entire geography of Israel. From among Ashkenazic Jewry, the disciples of Rabbi Yehudah Hachassid settled in their courtyard in the old city, known until today as Churvas Rabbi Yehudah Hachassid—the ruin of Rabbi Yehudah Hachassid. It was to this distinguished roster that the name of Rabbi Ovadiah Yerei of Bartenura was added in 5248 (1488).

Rabbi Ovadiah Yerei was from the town of Bartenura near the city of Forli, in the district of Emilio Romagna. We have no record of the exact date of his birth, nor many details of his early life. We do find it recorded that he was a disciple of Rabbi Joseph Colon, the Maharik, who is cited in his commentaries as his teacher. Although his exact age at the time he elected to leave Italy is unknown, it is clear from his own comments in his letters that he already enjoyed some national prominence.

We do not know why he chose to leave Italy, but we know that the Jewish communities of Italy at that time faced the Renaissance spirit which permeated Italian society at the time. The Maharik left his position as rabbi of the wealthy and prestigious community of Mantua, because of the inroads made there by the new trends. It is possible that his disciple left for Jerusalem because of his disapproval of these new trends, in addition to his desire to settle in a place of such holiness. Certainly, there are several places in his letters where the observation is made that the Italian Jews became more lax than their co-religionists in other countries.

The commentary on the *Mishnah* he wrote, which was destined to become the standard commentary until the present day, has ensured the name of Bartenura a pre-eminence

which transcends time and place. But it is clear from the usage of Arabic words and from many comments that it was completed after he had settled in Jerusalem.

According to the Chidah (Rabbi Chaim Yosef David Azulai) in *Shem Hagedolim*, Rabbi Ovadiah Bartenura died in 5290 (1530). His burial place is in Jerusalem, and its site was known throughout the generations. We find in the letters of Rabbi Yisrael of Perosa, who came to Jerusalem in 1516, after the conquest of Eretz Yisrael by the Turks from the Mamlukes, that Rabbi Ovadiah of Bartenura was still conducting a *yeshivah* at that time. Apparently he lived and taught in Jerusalem for over forty years!

The introduction to his commentary was originally printed at the beginning of *Mishnayos Kadashim*, the final volume to be printed in the first Venice edition. There it says that the manuscript of the *Mishnayos* commentary was brought back from Jerusalem to Italy by R. Ovadiah ben R. Zechariah Hamoun of Bartenura, a nephew of the author. (This nephew, the younger Rabbi Ovadiah of Bartenura, is the author of the commentary on *Megillas Ruth* printed in the *Mikraos Gedolos* editions.)

The letters translated in this book are mentioned by the Chidah in *Shem Hagedolim*, and he quotes from them at length.

"Rabbi Ovadiah, the interpreter of the *Mishnayos*, a student of the Maharik, about whom the Radbaz writes (Vol. 1, Ch. 108) that he was the greatest of the rabbis of Jerusalem. The author of *Get Pashut* writes that he is buried in a cave at the base of the hill next to the pool of Shiloach in the city of Jerusalem . . . from Bartenura, a city in the province of Romagna. There is a copy of the account that he sent from the Holy City to his father, full of details about his travels

from the time he left his father's house until he reached Jerusalem. And he writes there about the awesome story of the scroll of Ezra the Scribe . . ."

The letters were first published in Kolommea in 1886 with the title *Darkei Zion*—the Paths of Zion. The text as printed there is exactly the same as the passages cited by the Chidah in *Shem Hagedolim*. Subsequently, Abraham Yaari included a new transcription as part of his *Iggros Eretz Yisrael* (Jerusalem, 1957). The third letter, which is by far the shortest, is only found in Yaari's edition, and not in the original *Darkei Zion*. Some historians have mentioned that there are tens of letters from the author's stay in Jerusalem, but if they exist, they have never been published.

In publishing these letters in their entirety, including the critical comments made by Rabbi Ovadiah Bartenura of those people and practices of which he disapproved, the assumption is made that these criticisms were written to instruct the reader and not to denigrate any individuals. Certainly, today's reader derives valuable historical insights, and a depth of respect for the bravery with which *gedolei Yisrael* of a bygone and perilous era clung lovingly to Eretz Yisrael. May we all be returned there speedily.

THE TRAVEL LETTERS OF

Rabbi Obadiah of Bartenura

WRITTEN BETWEEN 1488-1490
DURING HIS JOURNEY TO THE HOLY LAND

A Letter to My Father



5248
(1488)

My dear father, you are my strength, and you give my life its meaning. But now I weep in sadness, because I abandoned you in your old age. Dear father, how shall my soul be comforted when I recall that I left you in your old age and when your strength has declined; my eyes overflow with tears.

But it was G-d's will that I should go on my way. And even though I cannot stand before you and serve you, I can still show you honor here from the land of Israel. When I was in Naples a year ago, you wrote to me and asked that I tell you about all the Jewish communities that I visited on my way to the land of Israel. In this way, at least, I will be able to "make good-tasting things for you, as you have loved."

When I concluded my affairs in Citta di Castello[1] on the first day of *Kislev*, 5246 (November 9, 1485), I travelled through Rome and arrived in Naples on the twelfth. I stayed in Naples for many days, because I was not able to find good passage. I went to Salerno and taught for about four months without pay, and then I returned to Naples.

Finally, on the fast day of the seventeenth of *Tammuz*, 5247 (July 8, 1487), I left Naples on a large, fine ship belonging to Monsieur Blanche. There were nine Jews on board, including me. We stayed at sea for a full five days, because there was no wind, before we arrived in Palermo.

Palermo is the capital of the Sicilian kingdom.[2] About eight hundred Jewish families live there, all together on one street in the best part of the land. They are very poor, however. They are mostly craftsmen, such as coppersmiths, ironworkers and porters, and they also work in the fields.

The gentiles despise the Jews, because they wear torn, ragged clothes. They are downtrodden in many ways. They are forced to wear a red cloth badge, about the size of a golden dinar, on their breasts. They have to pay a high royal tax. When the king has a project, like drawing ships to dry land or constructing dikes, he drafts the Jews to do the work. And finally, if the courts sentence someone to be tortured or killed, the Jews are forced to carry out the sentence.

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1. Town in northern Italy.
2. Sicily is the largest island in the Mediterranean, situated to the southwest of Italy. Jews lived in Sicily from the time of *Chazal*.In 1492 and 1493, all the Jews—a total of about 37,000—were expelled. This was in connection with the expulsion from Spain in 1492. Since then, there has been no organized Jewish community in Sicily.

Among the Jews here, they are quite lax about informing on one another, and this serious transgression has become commonplace. There are even cases of enemies inventing slander, which they will shamelessly tell to the authorities. Even when the fabrication is proven false, nothing happens to the informer, because that is the law of the land.

However, the Jews here are very strict about gentile wine. I will give you an example of something I saw. A Jew was hired by a gentile to transport wine for him, and the other Jews fined him his salary. Not only that, but they said that had he not acted unwittingly, they would have excommunicated him.[3] The synagogue in Palermo has no equal in the entire world, even among non-Jewish buildings. There are two courtyards outside the synagogue, one leading into the other. The outer courtyard is lined with stone pillars on which vines grow. These vines are incredibly large. I measured one and found it to be five finger-lengths thick. Stone steps lead down from the outer courtyard to the inner yard. This inner yard is enclosed on four sides by a portico. In the portico are large seats. These are for the use of the men who, for whatever reason, do not want to enter the synagogue. There is a very handsome well in this courtyard.

The synagogue is square, measuring forty by forty *amos*. Against its eastern side stands a *heichal*, which is a beautiful, domed structure made of stone. The Torah scrolls are not placed in an ark, as in our land, but they are placed in this *heichal*, standing on a wooden board. The scrolls are wrapped in mantles and adorned with crowns, with silver and

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3. Apparently, the Jews of Palermo prohibited even financial gain from gentile wine.

crystal crowns resting on top of the staves. I was told that the silver and crystal, together with the golden embroidery, are today worth four thousand gold pieces.

The *heichal* has two doors, one on the south side, and one on the north. Two respected men are in charge of opening and closing these doors.

In the middle of the synagogue is a wooden platform, the *teivah*, from which the cantors pray. Palermo has five paid cantors, who conduct the services on *Shabbos* and holidays in pleasant voices and tunes. I did not hear their equal in any of the lands that I passed through. On weekdays, few Jews come to the synagogue.

The synagogue is surrounded by many rooms, like the chambers that surrounded the Beis Hamikdash. Some of these are bedrooms for sick people or foreign visitors who have no place to stay. One room has a *mikveh*. Another room, which is large and handsome, is used by the appointed community officials for their meetings. There are twelve such officials, who are appointed annually by the community. These officials are authorized by the king to impose taxes and to fine and imprison people.

Unfortunately, this system has been vulnerable to corruption. Some unscrupulous men bribed the governor to appoint them, and then they gave him all the income from the synagogue and community that they controlled in order to retain their positions and do whatever they wanted. Then they started to oppress the people, and they have caused great suffering to the poor, to the point that "the cry of the city rises to the heavens."

When a person dies in Palermo, his coffin is brought into the courtyard outside the synagogue, where the cantors eulogize him. If he was an important person—in particular,

if he was a Torah scholar—his coffin is brought into the synagogue. A Torah scroll is placed on one of the corners of the *teivah*, and the coffin is placed below the *teivah*, next to the scroll. The person is eulogized, and then the ceremony is repeated three more times, with the scroll and coffin being placed at each corner of the *teivah*. Then the coffin is taken outside the city for burial. When the mourners reach the town entrance, the cantors begin reciting loudly, "Hear this, all the nations." (*Psalm* 49) They recite the entire *Psalm*, and other *Psalms* as well, in loud voices, until they reach the cemetery.

I also saw another interesting custom. After *Maariv* on the eves of *Yom Kippur* and *Hoshanah Rabbah*, the two men in charge of the *heichal* opened its doors and remained there the entire night. All the women entered, family by family. They bowed and kissed the Torah scrolls, coming in through one entrance and leaving through the other. This went on the entire night, until daybreak.

The Jews of Palermo have many customs that differ from ours. They read the entire *Shema* in a loud voice (this is also the custom in Egypt and in the Land of Israel). On *Yom Kippur*, the prayer leader does not interrupt the prayer[4] to say *Selichos*,[5] but instead he says *Selichos* only after having finished his own prayer. Also, the people bow to the ground during each prayer on Yom Kippur.[6]

On *Tishah b'Av*, they say *Vayaavor* and the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy even more than we do on *Yom Kippur*.

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4. I.e., his repetition of the *Amidah*.
5. The *piyutim*.
6. Not only during the *Mussaf* prayer.

And on *Simchas Torah*, they do so many different things that it would tire me out to write them all down.

I stayed in Palermo from the twenty-second of *Tammuz*, 5247, until *Shabbos Bereishis*, 5248 (from July 13 to October 13, 1487). When I had first arrived, the officials had asked me to deliver a talk on *Shabbos* before *Minchah*. That *Shabbos* happened to be the first of *Av*, 5247. G-d gave me grace in the people's eyes to the extent that they insisted that I speak every *Shabbos*.

But this turned out to be a stumbling block. I had intended to travel from Palermo to Syracuse, which is on the eastern coast of Sicily.[7] I had heard that at that time of year Venetian ships touched there on the way to Beirut, which is not far from Jerusalem. But the people misled me, so that I was caught in Palermo like a bird trapped in a net, until after the ships left Syracuse.

And so I remained in Palermo, preaching every *Shabbos* for almost three hours. I spoke out against the informers, those who are not careful about the laws of *niddah*, and the like. I was told by the community leaders that many people had repented. And throughout my stay, the informing came to an end.

I would never want in all my days to live among people who loved, honored and exalted me like the Jews of Palermo. For they honored me as the gentiles honor their saints. The poor people said that I had been sent by G-d to save them from exploitation, and many of them wanted a piece of my clothing, such as my jacket or hat, as a keepsake; and the

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7. Palermo is at the northwestern side of Sicily, and Syracuse at the southeast.

woman who had the honor of doing my laundry was envied by all the other women! They did everything they could to persuade me to stay with them for at least a full year. They even promised to pay me whatever I would ask. But I did not listen to them, because my heart was set on travelling to the land of Israel, "my resting place and inheritance." (*Deuteronomy* 12:9)

On the eve of *Sukkos*, 5248 (October 1, 1487), a French galley landed at Palermo, on the way to Alexandria. Travelling on the galley was the honorable Rabbi Meshullam Volterra, together with his servant.[8] I was glad to meet him, and I decided to join him. On *Motzei Shabbos Bereishis*, we boarded the ship, and the next day we sailed from Palermo at noon. G-d sent a good wind all that day and night, and on Monday morning, we were close to the Straits of Messina.[9] We passed safely through the straits, and at noon we landed in Messina.

Messina is an important commercial center. It occupies a central location along an east-west maritime route, and so ships from all corners of the world land there. Messina has an unequalled harbor, which is so deep that even the greatest ships can anchor right at the shore. Although Messina is not as large as Palermo and its wells are not as good, it is beautiful and very well-fortified.

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8. Meshullam ben Menachem da Volterra was a banker and trader in precious stones. In 1481, he travelled to the land of Israel in fulfillment of a vow, after having escaped trouble in Florence. He subsequently described this journey in his *Massa Meshullam Volterra b'Eretz Yisrael.* In 1487, he travelled to Israel again, during which journey he and Rabbi Ovadiah met.

9. The Straits of Messina separate Sicily from the Italian mainland.

About four hundred Jewish families live in Messina, in their own quarter. They are wealthier than the inhabitants of Palermo. They are mostly craftsmen, and there are a few merchants.

The synagogue consists of a portico roofed on its four sides and open to the sky in the middle. A flowing well is inside the synagogue.

The Jews' customs in Messina regarding appointing officials and other matters are similar to the customs of the Palermo Jews.

I saw a wedding there. After the *Sheva Brachos*, the bride was brought out into the street and put on a horse. All the members of the community walked before her, with the bridegroom among the elders. Young men and children carried lit torches and cried out before the bride so loudly that I thought the earth would split. The people paraded through all the streets and Jewish courtyards. Meanwhile, the gentiles looked on and rejoiced with them, and no one made any trouble.

On the eleventh of *Marcheshvan* (October 29, 1487), our ship left Messina, headed for the Isle of Rhodes.[10] We were joined by eleven Jews: a sugar merchant travelling with his servant; three Jewish shoemakers from Sicarii; and a Spanish Jew with his wife, two sons and two daughters. Together with Rabbi Meshullam, his servant and me, we numbered fourteen.

We passed safely through the straits. Then we sailed through the Gulf of Venice[11] and entered the archipelago.[12]

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10. Greek island in the Aegean off the coast of Turkey. Jews lived there since at least 142 BCE.

11. Actually, the Adriatic Sea.

The Aegean Sea is full of many islands, including Corfu, Candia (the capital of the island of Crete), Negro-ponte,[13] Rhodes and Cyprus.[14] It is said that the archipelago contains three hundred islands, both inhabited and uninhabited.

We travelled with a moderate wind for four days. But on the fourth day toward evening, G-d roused the sea wind, and we were blown back in a great tempest. We sheltered from the great storm in an island's natural harbor, amidst mountains filled with carob and myrtle trees. After three days, we again set sail on Sunday, the eighteenth of *Marcheshvan*. On our way, we saw islands all around us, as well as the mountains of Turkey.

But then, when we were about sixty miles[15] out of Rhodes, the wind turned against us and a storm drove us back about eighty miles. We anchored close to the island of Longo, which is ruled by Rhodes. We stayed there ten days, anchored at sea, for the wind continued to blow against us.

At the time, an unpleasant occurrence took place. One of the sailors insulted Rabbi Meshullam Volterra, who complained to the captain. The captain himself sought out the sailor, whom the other sailors tried unsuccessfully to hide. When the captain caught the sailor, he had him tied to the mainmast and flogged. When the captain saw that the man flogging him was lax, the captain himself beat the sailor and demanded that he publicly apologize to Rabbi Meshullam.

The other sailors were very upset by this episode, and

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12. That is, the Aegean Sea, which is filled with islands.
13. Evvoia, or Euboia, an island southeast of Greece.
14. Corfu is in the Ionian Sea, and Crete and Cyprus are in the Mediterranean.
15. The medieval mile is slightly shorter than a modern mile.

from that day forward, they began to hate us Jews. The atmosphere grew quite disagreeable.

Soon after this episode, a ship passed us, going from Rhodes to Chios. Rabbi Meshullam, accompanied by his servant, decided not to continue with us to Alexandria. Instead, he determined to travel first to Chios and then to Constantinople, and so he left us.

On the second day after Rabbi Meshullam left, a small ship passed and informed us that a very large and heavily-armed Genovese ship was sailing in our direction. The captain was very much afraid, because there was no wind. Normally, with a wind, a galley has nothing to fear even from an entire fleet of large ships.

The captain anchored outside a small town in the Turkish mountains ruled by Rhodes, called Castel San Giovani. This is the only town in Turkey still retained by the Christians, never having been conquered by the Turks.[16] It is very small but strong. The Turkish border begins right outside the town wall. We arrived there on Friday, the first of *Kislev*, 5248.

On *Shabbos* at midday, G-d sent the wind that we had been waiting for, and we travelled the entire day and night. The next day, Sunday, the third of *Kislev*, 5248, after having been on the ship for twenty two days since leaving Messina, we entered Rhodes, and we were greeted with singing and a festive salute of cannon shots.

The reason that Rhodes had received us so warmly was that our captain was close to the governor and, in fact, was related to him. The leaders of the Jewish community received

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16. Referring to the drawn-out wars between the Turkish Ottoman Empire and the European states.

us joyfully, because the sugar merchant Reb Meshullam who was still with us then, before we parted ways, was the brother of Rabbi Nathan the Doctor, a highly-respected member of the community. They provided me with good quarters, furnished with "a bed, a table, a chair and a lamp." The other Jews were each given a small, upper-story room. This was very generous, because the Jews' houses are desolate, after having been destroyed by the first Turkish emperor when he lay siege to Rhodes in the year of his death.[17] Rhodes is very strongly fortified, with tall, reinforced walls and zigzagging gates.

Everywhere there are stones lying about from the Turkish bombardment. This bombardment had destroyed the wall surrounding the Jews' quarter and torn down their houses. The Jews told me that when the Turks entered the city, they advanced until they came to the synagogue entrance. There G-d confounded them and they fell of their own accord, stabbing one another with their swords and fleeing although no one pursued them. Because this miracle took place at the synagogue, the governor built a large church in

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17. In 1480, Mehmed II, ruler of the Turkish Ottoman Empire, assaulted Rhodes in a vain attempt to rid the Ottoman Empire of the presence of the Order of Rhodes (the Knights of St. John), which ruled the island. The Turks were Muslim and the Order of Rhodes was Christian. The Turks attacked the southern part of Rhodes, which was its least-fortified part, and which also happened to be the area of the Jewish quarter. During the 38-day siege, the Jews fought bravely by the side of the gentiles to defend the city. Their homes were torn down to repair the walls. The fighting reached the synagogue before the Turkish forces began their retreat. Although Mehmed II was not the first ruler of Turkey, he was the first ruler of a territorially expanded empire, and so Rabbi Ovadiah calls him the first Turkish emperor.

its place as a memorial, giving the Jews another synagogue instead. At the time I was in Rhodes, he set aside a hundred ducats from the city treasury to build a new synagogue.

Very few Jews are left in Rhodes—no more than about twenty two families, all of whom are very poor and leading troubled lives.[18] They eat mostly vegetables and grains. They do not have meat or wine, because the evil Greeks do not allow them to slaughter or make wine.

The Jews in Rhodes are very careful regarding *kashrus*. When they buy food in the marketplace, they do not touch anything of the gentiles. They are as careful regarding gentile wine as they are of pork.

I never saw Jews with the good qualities possessed by these Jews of Rhodes. Without exception they are intelligent, well-spoken, ethical, cultured and well-mannered. Even the tannery-workers among them wear clean clothing and speak pleasantly. Their hair is well-styled, and they are as handsome as princes. Similarly, there are no women as beautiful. They have taken on the responsibility of engaging in various crafts, such as helping to support their husbands, and "their lamp is not extinguished at night." They do work for the rulers.[19] The rulers like the Jews.[20] They fraternize with

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18. A year after this war, there was an earthquake, which again destroyed the Jewish quarter. Many families left Rhodes, and the remaining Jews lived in poverty, mainly on the earnings of the women.

19. Although Rhodes is a Greek island, it was ruled by the Order of Rhodes (the Knights of St. John), who had assumed control in 1307. These Knights came from eight national groups: Auvergne, Provence, France, Aragon, Castile, England, Germany and Italy. The Knights remained in Rhodes until driven out by the Turks in 1523.

20. But at the beginning of the 1500s, the same governor whom Rabbi

them and spend time in their homes.

When a Jew in Rhodes dies, he is buried only in a shroud. A wooden form of the same shape as the human body is inserted into the earth, which is fresh and keeps its shape. The dead body is then put into the hollow and covered with a wooden board and soil.

I have not breathed air as pure and wholesome as that of Rhodes. Its water is sweet as well, and it is, in short, a very healthful land.

Most of the inhabitants of Rhodes are Greeks, but they are subservient to the ruling Knights.

We stayed in Rhodes from the third of *Kislev* to the fifteenth of *Teves*, because all that time the governor would not allow us to sail to Alexandria. He was afraid that the King of Egypt might do him wrong and confiscate the ship, which was laden with great wares. This was because of the following circumstances: The governor of Rhodes had accepted a 120,000 florin bribe from the King of Egypt. In return, he was to send Zimzim[21] the brother of the Turkish emperor, who lived in France, where the governor had access to him.[22] But the governor of Rhodes double-crossed the Egyptian king out of fear that if he delivered Zimzim to Egypt, then the Turkish emperor would take revenge against him. As a result, the governor now wanted to stay clear of the Egyptian king.

Ovadiah had known slandered the Jews, called for their immediate expulsion, and forcibly baptized their children.

21. Zimzim, or Dschem, was the son of Mehmed II, who died in 1481. He was next in line to become king. When his brother, the Sultan Beizar, had risen up against him, he had fled to Rhodes.

22. The governor was French.

As the days passed, however, the captain and his advisor decided, in agreement with the merchants on the galley, to set sail no matter what.

Therefore, on the fifteenth of *Teves*, after a stay of six weeks, we left Rhodes for Alexandria.[23]

However, we sailed past Alexandria, because the captain was leery of anchoring there until he had a clearer sense of the situation. Instead, we anchored at Abukir,[24] which is between Alexandria and Rosetta,[25] on the way to Cairo. The water there is shallow but quite broad. We anchored about four miles from shore. We were accompanied by a small boat with a two-hundred-barrel capacity, which our captain had bought and loaded with wheat to sell in Alexandria.

The emir, who is second-in-command to the Egyptian king, sent a message from Alexandria promising us safe passage. But the captain did not want to land until he got assurances from the king himself, who was in Cairo. However, the captain did agree that he would trust the emir's word to the extent of sending the boat ashore loaded with wheat, together with a few men. So on the evening of *Shabbos*, we Jews boarded the boat, thinking that it would bring us into Alexandria on *Shabbos*.

But when the emir saw that the captain did not trust him to the extent of bringing the galley to shore, he sent a message refusing entry to the small ship as well. So we Jews remained on the small ship, a short distance from the galley.

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23. Alexandria is in northern Egypt. It was inhabited by Jews from at least the times of Alexander the Great (350 BCE), according to Josephus.
24. Thirteen miles northeast of Alexandria.
25. Also known as Rashid.

As the days passed and the emir's messengers did not return with a message from the king, we began to run out of bread and water, and we began to despair and choose death over life.

"It was at midnight," and a storm blew up on the eighth of *Shevat* (January 22, 1488). Suddenly, two of our anchors were torn away and only one anchor, the worst of them all, remained. The sailors were terrified, and they threw everything overboard in order to lighten the ship. They fired cannons to signal the men in the galley to send a barque to rescue us. But there was no answer, because the sailors on the galley were busy saving themselves. Besides, the sea was so stormy that it would have been impossible for a barque to approach us.

The sea dragged us about, together with our wretched anchor, and the waves washed over us. We were tossed about wildly and were in great danger of sinking, because the ship was old and decrepit. Water breached the ship from above and below. In addition, the entire area was treacherous with rocks. For almost a full day and night, death stared us in the face. Each one of us had to help bail water from the boat, because the boat was swamped with water. With tears in our eyes, we bailed out the boat until G-d finally had compassion on us in His great mercy, and we were miraculously saved from that terrible storm which had no equal.

When the tempest at last calmed down, the captain sent us a barque to rescue us from our broken, foundering ship. We returned to the galley and continued to wait. Finally, though, the messengers returned from Cairo with the king's promise of safe passage.

But then there was no wind to carry the ship from Abukir to Alexandria. At that point, most of the merchants

on board, including the Jews, decided to continue the journey on foot. We went by barque to shore, and from there we set out on the eighteen miles to Alexandria. We had to go by foot, because we could not find donkeys available for such a long distance.

On the evening of the fourteenth of *Shevat* (January 28, 1488), we arrived in Alexandria, bone-tired.

One of the most respected men in Alexandria is Rabbi Moshe Grasso, who is Ambassador of Venice. He is wealthy, and everyone, even among the Muslims, likes him very much. He came out to greet us at the city gates, and thus saved us from the Muslims there who rob and mistreat foreign Jews entering Alexandria.

He brought me to his house and insisted that I stay with him for my entire visit.

I learned with him from a book of *Kabbalah* that he had, because he was drawn to that wisdom. As a result, he grew quite fond of me.

On *Shabbos*, Rabbi Grasso made a great feast for me and the Spanish Jew who had come with his two sons, and "he brought me to the feasting house."

This is how the Jews in all the Muslim lands eat on *Shabbos*. They sit in a circle on mats. There is no table. Instead, a small tablecloth is spread out on a mat, on which are placed many varieties of local fruits.

The host makes *Kiddush* on a cup of wine and drinks the entire cup. A wine-pourer takes this cup from the host and pours wine into it for each of the guests, one after the other, and each guest drinks a full cup.

Then the host eats a few pieces of fruit. He drinks a second cup, and everyone exclaims, "Health and life!" The guest sitting next to the host also eats some fruit, and the

wine-pourer gives him a cup of wine, wishing him, "To your joy!" And all the people repeat, "Health and life!" Then each guest does the same in turn.

Then the host eats another type of fruit and drinks another cup of wine, and all the guests follow suit. This continues until everyone has drunk at least six or seven cups.

Sometimes, they drink over a fragrance. Jasmine is brought in. This is a blossom from a tree that does not give fruit. Its blossoms are very fragrant and spicy. The people smell the jasmine and drink a cup of wine.

The wine, it must be said, is exceptionally strong—particularly in Jerusalem—and they add no water to it.

After everyone has drunk his fill, a large bowl filled with vegetables and meat is brought in. Everyone takes what he wants out of the bowl. The people eat very quickly and quite sparingly.

At Rabbi Moshe's feast, we were brought peaches soaked in sugar, fresh ginger, dates, raisins, almonds and a coriander seed confection. With each of these fruits we drank a cup of wine—sometimes raisin wine, which is very good, sometimes sweet wine from Crete, and sometimes local wine. I drank with him and felt intoxicated.

The Jews in the Muslim lands welcome *Shabbos* in the following manner: On *Shabbos* eve, the men go to the bathhouse. When they return home, their wives give them wine, and they drink liberally. Afterwards, while it is still daylight, they eat the food that was cooked for the evening meal, until darkness falls. Then they go to the synagogue wearing clean, freshly-pressed clothing and chant songs and praises to G-d, stretching out the evening prayers for two hours into the night. Then they return home, make *Kiddush*,

eat a minimal portion of bread and conclude with Grace.

The Jews in these areas do not say *Minchah* in a quorum on Friday afternoon. Jerusalem is the sole exception, for, I have been told, the Ashkenazim annulled that particular custom. The Jews there pray *Minchah* and *Maariv* as we do, and then they go to the evening meal. They never begin *Maariv* before the stars have come out. They keep *Shabbos* much more carefully than do the Jews in our part of the world. No one leaves his house on *Shabbos* to take a walk or for any other reason, unless he is going to do a *mitzvah* or to the synagogue or *beis midrash*. It goes without saying that no one lights a fire or candle that went out in his house on *Shabbos*, by having his gentile servant or maidservant do so. Whoever knows how to read, learns the entire day, after having slept off the wine.

Today there are about twenty five Jewish families in Alexandria. There are two ancient synagogues in Alexandria. One is very large but in disrepair, and the other one is smaller. Most people pray in the small synagogue, for they believe that Elijah the Prophet appeared to the *tzaddikim* in the southeast corner. An eternal lamp burns in that corner. People say that recently as well, less than twenty years ago, Elijah appeared to an old man. Only G-d knows if this is true.

In all the Muslim lands, no one enters a synagogue wearing shoes. Even when visiting a friend's house, people leave their shoes outside by the door. Inside, the people sit on mats.

Alexandria is a large city, surrounded by a wall and, on one side, by the sea. Even though it is now mostly desolate, filled with large, abandoned houses, one can see that it was

once very beautiful. The courtyards where people still live are paved with mosaics, and quince and date trees grow there. Most of the houses are large and handsome.

But few people live here because of the poisonous air that has plagued the area for the past few years. People say that if someone is not used to the air and remains a long while, he will either grow ill or die. Most of the people who live here have eye problems.

People come to Alexandria on business from all over the world. There are four consuls from Christian countries: from Venice, Genoa, Catalonia and Ancona. They are responsible for all the Christian merchants.

Every night, the Muslims[26] lock the Christians into their houses from the outside, and let them out in the morning. They also lock the Christians in on Friday, from midday to evening, which is when the Muslims go to pray in their mosques. If a Christian is found outside at those times, his blood is on his own head.

The King of Egypt receives an extraordinary amount of money from the taxes placed on goods entering and leaving Alexandria. Merchants also have to pay a two-percent tax on cash that they are carrying.

But as for me, G-d helped me and I did not have to pay any taxes . . .

I stayed seven days in Alexandria. I had left my few possessions on the galley, which had not yet arrived from Abukir, because there was still no wind.

I met a Jew who had made a vow to travel to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover there together with his wife and two

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26. From 1250 to 1517, Egypt was ruled by the Mamluk sultans.

children. I joined him, and we left Alexandria together, riding on camels.

Before leaving, I asked Rabbi Moshe Grasso to pick up my things when the galley arrived and to forward them to me in Cairo.

We came to Rosetta, which is on the Nile River, and there we boarded a ship to travel the Nile.

Alongside both banks of the Nile are villages and large, populated areas, which are quite pleasing. However, all these places are unwalled.

We stayed in a place called Puah for two days, because we did not have the wind we needed. This is a beautiful region. Fish and all sorts of vegetables cost next to nothing. We then continued travelling, in a joyous mood, until we arrived at Bulak, which is to the north of Cairo.

On the Nile, I saw a crocodile, a creature larger than a bear, with boil-like protrusions on its skin. People on the ship told me that some crocodiles are more than twice as big as the one we saw. They said that these crocodiles are the remnant of the frogs from the days of Moses, as the Ramban mentions in his commentary. (*Exodus* 10:14) It is true, as people report the crocodile eats but does not excrete. Instead, when it opens its mouth as it basks in the sun, a bird enters its mouth and eats its waste.[27]

The Nile is very wide, its waters sweet and turbid.

Rosetta, where we had boarded the ship, is only one of the Nile's heads. Another head of the Nile is located in a

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27. There are certain birds that feed off parasites that plague the crocodile. Thus, it appears that the bird is eating the crocodile's waste products.

place called Damietta, from which it spills into the Mediterranean Sea.

Before coming to Bulak, we saw two large, ancient pyramids on one side of the Nile. People say that these are the treasure houses that Joseph built. The only entrance is at the top. Although these buildings are in ruins, one can see that they were once large and strong. They lie in an uninhabited area.

We entered Cairo in the evening, twelve days before *Purim*, at the start of the barley harvest. I was told that there had been a terrible famine in all of Cairo, but that it had now begun easing up. The barley in Egypt is of much better quality than that of the surrounding lands, because of the water from the Nile. The present harvest appeared to be very good.

A month after I arrived, the land was filled with plenty, and one could no longer guess that there had been a famine. When the Nile overflows its banks and waters the ground, Cairo yields a sixty, seventy and sometimes hundredfold crop.

Even today,[28] the land is subject to the king, who takes at least a fifth of the produce, if not more, for himself. There is no other country in the world that is in such servitude to its king.

I will not write about the tremendous size of Egypt or its great population, for many others have already told about them.

As people say, Cairo is not surrounded by a wall. However, within it, scattered about, there are many places

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28. As in the days of Joseph.

that are surrounded by fortified walls.

Cairo is a busy metropolis, filled with people speaking languages from all over the world. This is because Cairo is situated between two seas: the Red Sea[29] and the Mediterranean. Merchants from India, West Africa and the lands of Prester John (Ethiopia)[30] travel to Cairo via the Red Sea to sell spices, pearls and jewels, and to buy the merchandise that is brought to Cairo from France, Germany, Italy and Turkey, via the Mediterranean Sea.

The Red Sea is filled with magnetic stones, and ships that sail there are made entirely without metal—without even one nail.[31] The sea floor and the land surrounding the sea are red, as our sages discuss in *Niddah*.[32]

People say that the site where the sea was split at the time of the exodus is still known. Many priests go there, but I did not hear of any Jews that do so.

I was told that the coastline where the merchant ships from the Red Sea[33] anchor, and from where the merchandise is carried by camel to Cairo, is quite close to Mount Sinai. I am also told that it is a five days' journey from Cairo to Mount Sinai.

There are priests who live in a monastery on Mount Sinai, and who travel to Cairo daily.[34] They travel back and

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29. The Gulf of Suez, which feeds into the Red Sea.

30. Ethiopia is referred to in medieval sources as the land of Prester John, a legendary Christian figure who was said to own vast tracts of land in either Asia or Africa.

31. So that the magnetic fields will not drag them off their course.

32. 20a.

33. I.e., the Gulf of Suez.

34. This is Jebel Musa, which has (among other places) been identified

forth in greater safety than any other nationality, including even the Muslims, because everyone knows that they carry no money with them.

All along the way there are Bedouins who rob anyone they come across. But the Bedouins do not bother these priests. The priests had secured their position by paying a large tax to the King of Egypt in return for which he would let them stay on the mountain, and by paying a large sum of money to the Bedouins to insure safe passage. These Bedouins are said to be trustworthy in their agreements with foreigners.

There are about seven hundred Jewish families in Cairo today. Fifty of them are Samaritans, one hundred and fifty are Karaites and the rest are Rabbinic Jews.

The Samaritans only have the Five Books of Moses. Their script is considerately different from the script of our holy Torah. Maimonides has written[35] that the Samaritans use a Hebraic script that the Jews originally wrote in before they were exiled to Assyria, as is mentioned in the Talmud, in *Sanhedrin*.[36] They have the Holy Tongue, as we do, but they read it with a slightly different pronunciation, due to their different writing. Also, wherever the Torah has the Tetragrammaton, they write the word, "Asima." The Jews feel very hostile toward them, because they offer sacrifices and incense on Mount Gerizim.[37]

Many of these Samaritans travelled with us from Cairo

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as Mount Sinai. At the foot of Jebel Musa, monks built a church on the spot that they believed the burning bush appeared.

35. *Mishnah* 4:5.

36. 21a.

37. In addition, the Samaritans frequently fomented anti-Jewish feeling.

to their temple on Mount Gerizim to sacrifice the paschal lamb. They keep *Shabbos* from midday Friday to midday Saturday. Although they used to be many, very few are left. I was told that today there are no more than about five hundred Samaritan families left in the entire world.

The Karaites, as you know, do not believe in the words of our Sages. However, they are knowledgeable in all twenty-four books of the *Tanach*.

They sanctify the new moon with witnesses. Sometimes, due to conflicting testimony, the Karaites in Cairo will make *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur* on a different day than the Karaites in Jerusalem. There are two Karaite householders who live today in Jerusalem, and they see nothing wrong in this.

The Karaites in Cairo send messengers to Jerusalem every year to see when spring has begun. According to the information they receive, they decide whether or not to add a leap month to the year. Again, it could well be that the Karaites in Cairo will add the month, and the Karaites in Constantinople will not. Nevertheless, they see nothing wrong with this, and everyone does what is right in his own eyes.

They fast on the seventh and tenth of *Av*. They always make *Shavuos* on Sunday, as is well-known. On *Sukkos*, they hang a *lulav* (together with the other species) in the middle of their synagogue. Everyone looks at it, and they consider this sufficient to fulfill their obligation. They do not burn any fire in their houses on *Shabbos*, either by day or night. They keep all five laws of slaughtering that we have, even though these are not written in the Torah. Similarly, they prohibit slaughtering an animal with a nicked knife. Finally, they are

more careful than the Rabbinic Jews about refraining from gentile wine.

In all the areas I passed through, with the exception of Italy, the Jews are exceptionally observant regarding gentile wine. For instance, there is an opinion that permits the grape honey made by the Muslims, since they do not trample the grapes meant for honey in the same way that they do the grapes meant for wine. This honey is excellent. I was asked about this in both Gaza and Jerusalem. I found it difficult to side with those who allow it, even though there are many good reasons to do so. Since I saw that the sages before me had not dared to be lenient, I did not want to break precedent.

No one in these lands would dare drink wine that was touched by a Muslim—and, it goes without saying, by an idol-worshipper.[38]

The Karaites keep all the laws of ritual purity. When a Karaite is deathly ill, the others leave his house before he dies. They hire a poor Rabbinic Jew to carry their dead and bury them, for they themselves will not touch their dead for any price. Karaites do not require immersion in a *mikveh.* Instead, Karaites who have touched a dead person, who have had an emission, menstruant women and women who have given birth only wash themselves in water.

I saw some of the Karaite commentaries, such as the commentary of Yafet,[39] whom Rabbi Avraham ibn Ezra

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38. I.e., a Christian.

39. Yafet ben Eli Halevi, Karaite author of the tenth century, who translated all of the *Tanach* into Arabic and composed a commentary on it.

mentions, and the commentary of Rabbi Aharon Kara.[40] The Karaites constantly compose new interpretations of the Torah. Regarding even the most basic understanding of a *mitzvah*, if a contemporary Karaite sage will reinterpret the simple meaning of a verse, they will change the *mitzvah* to conform with his understanding. They do not think that this reflects negatively on either their earlier or later sages.

The Karaites have a synagogue in Cairo. Most of their prayers are drawn from *Psalms* and other biblical verses. Recently, they have begun to read from the Torah on Monday and Thursday, as we do. They have *Kohanim* and Levites. I was told that one of the Karaites in Cairo, a wealthy and respected man named Tzeddakah, is unarguably a descendant of King David. They were going to show me the book of his ancestry, signed by witnesses from generation to generation, but in the end, I did not have time to see it.

The Samaritans are richer than the other Jews in Cairo. They work for the major Egyptian ministers as treasurers and agents. Some have two hundred thousand or one hundred thousand golden florins. The Karaites are wealthier than the Rabbinic Jews. However, there are also wealthy Rabbinic Jews. But Jews in Muslim lands make themselves appear poor. They go about like an impoverished, despised people, with their heads bowed down before the Muslims.

Samaritans in Cairo do not give charity or help to Karaites, nor do the Karaites help them. But they do mix with the Rabbinic Jews, and treat them kindly.

At present, there are in Cairo about fifty families of "*anusim*"[41] from Spain, all of them penitents who have

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40. Aharon ben Eliyahu Hakarai, who lived in the fourteenth century.
41. Jews who were forced to convert to Christianity, or were the

returned to Judaism, most of them are poor. While their fathers and grandfathers in Spain kept the Christian religion, they abandoned their homes and wealth to take refuge under the wings of G-d's presence.

Among the Jews in Cairo, some work as money-changers, merchants and traders, for one can easily make a profit all year round. There is no other land as conducive to business and profit as Cairo. It is filled with foreigners from all over the world. People stay up day and night, and torches burn throughout the night to illuminate all the streets and marketplaces. The people sleep on the ground outside their stores or in the street.

The Jewish quarter is filled with all sorts of cooked dishes for sale. Jews sell meat, cheese, fish, vegetables or whatever else one might desire. One can also find this in Palermo, but not to the same extent, for the Jews in Cairo cook at home only once a week. The rest of the time, they are so busy at their jobs—both men and women—that they buy whatever they need from the marketplace.

Wood is very expensive in Cairo. A camel-load, which is less than the load of a pair of donkeys, costs two-thirds of a ducat, or even more. Meat and fruit are also extremely expensive. However, the meat is very good, especially the ram's fat tail. Incidentally, the Karaites do not eat this, for they believe that it constitutes the type of fat that the Torah prohibits.[42] The only inexpensive foods I saw in Cairo were fish from the Nile, onions, leek, cucumbers, melons and vegetables. The bread is inexpensive when food is widely

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offspring of such Jews.
42. *Leviticus* 7:23.

available. It is not baked but prepared in water. It is moist and very soft.

The *nagid*[43] in Cairo has authority over all the Jews who are ruled by the King of Egypt. He is authorized by the king to imprison and punish any Jew who defies him, and he also appoints judges for every community.

The present *nagid* had lived in Jerusalem for many years, but he left because of the corruption of the elders whom the sultan had appointed to collect taxes from the Jews. His name is Rabbi Nathan Hakohen. He is wealthy, wise, pious and elderly. He comes from the Barbary lands.[44]

When I first arrived in Cairo, he honored me wonderfully and treated me like a loving father. He tried very hard to dissuade me from going to Jerusalem, because of the scheming elders. All the rabbis and scholars who had been in Jerusalem, both Ashkenazi and Sephardi, had fled for their lives, because those corrupt elders had treated them so badly. There had been almost three hundred Jewish families in Jerusalem, but they had all left, one by one, to escape the heavy taxes that the elders had imposed on them. Now, only the poor and women are left in Jerusalem, and practically no one of any stature.

These corrupt elders grew so powerful that they sold all the Torah scrolls to Christian merchants to take out of the

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43. Nagid was the title of the head of the Jewish community in Islamic countries. The title originated in the eleventh century. Egypt had *negidim* for about 500 years. Approved by the Jewish leaders and appointed by the Muslim authorities, the *nagid* was always a Rabbinic Jew. In 1517, with the conquest of Egypt by the Turks (the Ottoman Empire), the institution came to an end in Egypt.

44. The North African coast.

country. The mantles, ark covers, silver crowns and other holy utensils were all sold. Nothing, not a shred, was left. In addition to that, there had been a vast library of Talmudic and *halachic* books donated by the Ashkenazim. The elders sold all of them.

The *nagid* told me that it had been impossible for him to protest, because he had been afraid that they would denounce him, together with all the other Jews, to the suttan.

The King of Egypt is a greedy and ruthless man whose throat is always open to swallow more money and whose eye is never satisfied. There has been great distress in all of Egypt, because the king has been collecting huge amounts of money to support his army that he sent to fight against the King of Turkey in Aleppo (Aram Tzoba), on the Euphrates. He imposed a great tax burden on the Jews in Cairo: a total of 75,000 golden florins on the Samaritans, Rabbinic Jews and Karaites. He imposed this tax on every nationality, including Christians and Muslims.[45]

On *Purim* of that year in Cairo, "there was great mourning for the Jews, fasting and weeping." But I strengthened myself. My heart was firm, and I trusted in G-d.

On the twentieth of *Adar*, I left Cairo together with the Jew who had accompanied me from Alexandria. We came to El-Hamara, which is about two *parsah*[46] from Cairo. Before leaving the city, I went to see Old Cairo.[47] It, too, is populated, but not like Cairo. The old city adjoins the new city.

On the way to the old city is a place where, I was told,

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45. The wars between Egypt and Turkey lasted from 1467 until 1490.
46. A parsah is about four miles.
47. Fustat.

the king and his ministers travel every year to oversee construction of a dike before the waters of the Nile that rise every *Av* and irrigate the land. I heard many things about the rising of the Nile, too much for me to write. However, I myself did not see anything. I did see rainfall in Cairo, but not a great deal. Also, it was very cold in Cairo during *Purim*. Many people were quite surprised and said that there had not been such a frost for many years. According to what I was told, Egypt is a very hot country.

In Old Cairo, there is a very beautiful synagogue with great, handsome pillars, which people call the Synagogue of Elijah the Prophet. It is said that Elijah appeared to *tzaddikim* at the southeastern corner of the synagogue. An eternal lamp burns there. In the northeastern corner of the synagogue is a niche, high up, where the Torah scroll of Ezra the Scribe was stored. People say that many years ago, a Jew from the West bought it illegally from the *shamas* for a hundred golden florin, and carried it to Alexandria to take back to his country. But when he left Alexandria and was still close to shore, the ship sank, and both he and the Torah scroll were lost. As for the *shamas* who sold the scroll, he abandoned his faith that year, died and went into oblivion. The mantle of the scroll still remains in its place in the synagogue, and an eternal lamp there burns before it.

The previous year, the king had wanted to confiscate the synagogue pillars and put them in his palace, for they are large and beautiful. But the Jews redeemed them for one thousand gold florins.

According to the chronicle written on the synagogue wall, the synagogue was constructed thirty-eight years before the destruction of the second Beis Hamikdash.

Nearby is another synagogue, also beautiful and large,

but not the equal of the first. People pray in those synagogues every *Shabbos*. They hire a *shamas* to stay there during the week and guard them.

I did not have the chance to go to Doumu, an area outside of Cairo where, people say, Moses used to pray. There are two synagogues there. One is for the Rabbinic Jews, the other for the Karaites. Occasionally, people pray there on *Shabbos* and holidays. I was told that the Mamluks[48] graze their horses there and that, because the Mamluks beat and rob whomever they find, whether Jewish or Muslim, it was dangerous to go there. Many stores were closed in fear of the Mamluks, who, being in preparation to go to war, had permission to riot and do whatever they wanted.

When we arrived in El-Hamara (Al-Hannakh), we stayed for two days. We hired five camels, because two men and two women had accompanied us from Egypt. We passed a place called Bilbeis,[49] which is a day's journey from Cairo. People say that it is the land of Goshen, where the Jews lived in the times of the *Chumash*. At present thirty Jewish families live in Bilbeis. After that, there are no Jews until Gaza.

Then we came to a place called Al Slakiyah. We camped there for *Shabbos* and awaited a passing caravan to join up with, because the desert begins at that point, and we did not feel confident enough to travel with only five camels.

After three days, a Muslim caravan with eighty camels arrived. We went with them to Qatiah,[50] a city in the middle

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48. The Mamluks were a Muslim, military group that ruled Egypt from 1250 to 1517, and which often persecuted Jews and Christians.
49. On the eastern Nile delta.
50. Southwest Sinai.

of the desert that has only date trees.

The desert between Egypt and the land of Israel is not large. Almost every day, one can find a place for camels built for the convenience of travellers. The desert is all sand; the only vegetation that grows there is the desert tamarisk and, in some places, date trees. One can find water every two days, or sometimes even every day, but it is brackened and not clear.

We came to a place called El-Arish, which, people say, is the biblical site of *Sukkos*.[51]

Some caravans encamp at midday and arise in the evening to travel until midnight; others travel from midnight until the first third of the day. Most caravans travel by night.

We travelled through the desert until we arrived in Gaza safe and sound, thank G-d. Gaza is the first city one comes to when leaving the desert on the road "that leads to the land of the Plishtim." (*Judges* 13:17) It is a beautiful city, and as large as Jerusalem. It has no wall about it. In fact, none of the cities here, nor in the entire kingdom of Egypt—which rules over the Lands of Israel, Gaza and Syria—are surrounded by a wall. The only exceptions are Alexandria (and Aleppo, the large city on the Euphrates).

In Gaza I saw the building that, according to the Jews there, was pulled down by Samson.[52] In Gaza today, there are about seventy Jewish families and two Samaritan families. I did not see any Karaites there.

We stayed four days in Gaza. An Ashkenazi rabbi called Rabbi Shlomo of Prague, who had fled Jerusalem, lives

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51. *Exodus* 12:37.
52. *Judges* 16:21-30.

there. He brought me to his house despite my protestations, and I stayed with him the entire time I was in Gaza. On *Shabbos*, all the elders and community leaders came to eat with us. They brought out raisin cakes and fruits, which is their custom. We drank seven or eight cups before the meal, and we were joyful.

On Sunday, the eleventh of *Nissan*, we left Gaza by donkey, and the same day we came to a small village within two *parsah* of Hebron, where we spent the night.

On Monday, we arrived in Hebron. It is a small city, situated on the side of a hill. The Muslims call it Khalil.[53] It is divided into two parts. One part contains the cave of the Machpelah,[54] and the other is very close by.

I visited the cave of the Machpelah. It is covered by a large mosque. The Muslims treat it with great respect, and come on pilgrimage from all the Muslim lands to worship there. In the cave itself, where the Patriarchs are buried, neither Jew nor Muslim may enter. Instead, the Muslims stand above the cave and lower lit torches through shafts. These torches burn there constantly. The Muslim pilgrims throw money into the cave through the shafts. When the Muslim caretakers want to take the money out, they lower a young boy on ropes into the cave, who gathers the money and is pulled back up. This is what some Jews there told me.

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53. Khalil means "beloved." It is short for Khalil al-Rakhman: "the beloved [i.e., Abraham] of the Merciful [G-d]."

54. In the time of *Chazal*, Herod erected a building over the cave of Machpelah. When the Muslims took over, hundreds of years later, they built a mosque on the site. In the eleventh century, the conquering Crusaders turned this mosque into a church. Later, the Muslims transformed it back into a mosque.

All of populated Hebron, including its fields and pastures, belongs to the cave of the Machpelah. Every day, they distribute bread and lentils, or some other legume, to the poor—whether Muslim, Jew or Christian—in honor of our forefather Abraham.

There is a small window outside the wall of the mosque over the cave. It is said that this window directly faces the grave of Abraham. The Jews are allowed to prostrate themselves and pray next to that window, but they are not allowed to go inside. I myself prayed there.

On top of a hill facing the cave of the Machpelah is a large and beautiful sepulcher covered by a handsome building. It is said that Jesse, father of King David, is buried there. On the same day, we also went there to pray. On the way, we saw a well that the Muslims call Bir Aschak, which, they say, was the well of Isaac. Also, close to Hebron and in the midst of a group of boulders is a spring where, people say, Sarah used to immerse herself.

Hebron is mountainous, with many vineyards and olive trees. At present, about twenty Rabbinic Jewish families live there, half of whom are descended from *anusim* who came recently to take refuge under the wings of G-d's presence.

We left Hebron on Tuesday morning, on the thirteenth of *Nissan*. From Gaza to Hebron is a one-day journey, and from Hebron to Jerusalem is a half-day journey.

We came to the Tomb of Rachel, over which is a round dome.[55] It is right next to the road. We descended from the

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55. The tombstone consisted of eleven stones on which lay one large stone. The dome over the tomb did not have walls, but was supported by four pillars. A walled building was constructed at the end of the 1700s.

donkeys and prostrated ourselves at her grave, and each one of us prayed in his own words.

As one comes to Jerusalem, one sees Bethlehem on one's right, situated on a hill, about half a mile from the Tomb of Rachel. It is a small village, containing a Christian church.

Three miles separate Bethlehem from Jerusalem. The entire road along the way is lined with vineyards and olive trees. The vineyards are like those of Rome, with low, thick vines.

About three-quarters of a mile from Jerusalem, at a place with rough, descending steps, we saw the praised city, the city of our joy. There we tore our garments in accordance with Jewish law. And when we came a little closer and saw our holy and beautiful Beis Hamikdash now in ruins, we again tore our garments.

We arrived at the gates of Jerusalem and entered at noon on the thirteenth of *Nissan*, 5248. On that day, "our feet stood within your gates, O Jerusalem!" (*Psalms* 122:2)

We were met by an Ashkenazi rabbi who had grown up in Italy, Rabbi Yaakov of San Colombano (in other versions, Rabbi Capomano). He brought us to his home, and we stayed there with him for the Passover holiday.

Most of Jerusalem is in ruins, and it goes without saying that there is no wall about it. According to what I was told, a total of four thousand families live in Jerusalem. But of these, only seventy are Jewish, the poorest of the poor, who earn no money. Almost everyone lacks basic food items. If someone has enough food for the year, he is considered wealthy. There are many old and lonely widows, Ashkenazi, Sephardi and from other lands, "seven women to a man."

At present, the land is quiet, because the elders regret their previous actions, seeing that nothing is left and that they

have themselves lost money. Now they encourage people to return to Jerusalem. They apologize profusely for having done what they did, saying that they had only been interested in punishing those who had tried to take power away from them.

To this day, I must say that those elders have treated me very well and fairly. Blessed be G-d day by day.

The Muslims do not oppress the Jews at all here. Wherever I travelled, through the length and breadth of the land, no one said a word to me. The Muslims are very kind to foreigners, and, in particular, to someone who does not speak the language. Even when they see many Jews gathered together, they are not hostile.

I think that an astute Jew could rule both the Muslims and Jews here. But none of the Jews here are capable of that. They do not know how to mix and speak easily with others, because they are simple people, rather indifferent to others, and in the main concerned with their own welfare.

I became a burier of the dead in Jerusalem, because there are not enough people to carry a coffin or accompany a funeral procession.

In one instance, a woman died, and halfway to the cemetery, women had to be called to carry the coffin, for there were not enough men. In fact, if not for the women who were following the coffin and a few of the *anusim*, the dead woman would have been left unburied, for the native people would not have had enough pity to help.

I saw a grave evil in this land, which is most serious. When a foreign Jew is taken ill, his friends, neighbors and acquaintances are afraid to enter his house. They are afraid that the elders will accuse them of stealing or holding his property . . . The elders wait eagerly for the death of a

foreign merchant, for they claim that they are in charge of charitable funds and that the property left by immigrants who have no inheritors—belongs to the charitable fund. As it happens, most of the men and women in Jerusalem are immigrants without known heirs. Even though their property legally belongs to the king, the elders divide the property with the Muslim administrators and the princes of the land, and do as they please. Every day, the property of the deceased comes into their hands, sometimes large amounts and sometimes small amounts, the property of the old people of Jerusalem who have passed away. All of it is kept by the elders, who say they use it to repay the debts incurred in the building of the synagogue many years ago. According to them there are still debts of more than a thousand gold florins.

There are very few Torah scrolls in the synagogue now. I was told that there had once been more than three hundred Torah scrolls. It goes without saying that the remaining scrolls do not have golden mantles or silver ornaments, for the elders sold them and used the money according to their wishes.

The synagogue in Jerusalem[56] is built on pillars. It is long, narrow and dark, the only light source being the entranceway. Inside is a water reservoir.

Very close by, in the courtyard outside the synagogue, is a mosque. That building had originally belonged to a Jew who, because of a dispute he had with other Jews, had converted to Islam. When his mother saw this, she turned her house into a mosque, to spite the Jews.

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56. The Ramban Synagogue.

This led to the unfortunate chain of events that destroyed the synagogue, claimed a great deal of money and almost drove the Jews out of Jerusalem. But G-d had mercy and influenced the king to treat the Jews well, despite the advice of his ministers and servants, and he commanded that the synagogue be rebuilt more beautifully than before.

The synagogue courtyard is very large and contains many houses, all of which were donated by the Ashkenazim for the use of Ashkenazi widows. There are many courtyards in Jerusalem in the Jews' quarter. All of them were donated, and with one exception, all of them were sold by the elders. The exception is the property donated by the Ashkenazim, because it was set aside specifically for the Ashkenazim, and no one else has access to it.

The Jews' quarter is very large. In the past, they had many houses. However, these were destroyed, and they have not been rebuilt. The law states that a Jew cannot build or rebuild a house or courtyard without permission. Sometimes obtaining permission costs more than the house itself.

All the houses in Jerusalem are covered with domes made of stone, not with roofs of wood and cement.

The Jews of Jerusalem pray in a wonderful manner, praiseworthy and pleasing to G-d, whose like I have not seen anywhere else. Every day, even on *Shabbos*, the Jews rise one or two hours before dawn. They recite praises to G-d until daybreak, and then they say *Kaddish*. Two regular cantors recite the blessing on the Torah, the section on the *tamid* sacrifice and all the *Psalms* in pleasing, heartfelt voices, and they finish *Shema* just as the sun is rising, in accordance with the custom of the most pious Jews. Every day, both on weekdays and *Shabbos*, the *kohanim* bless the

people. At *Shacharis* and *Minchah*, *Tachanun* is recited with great feeling after the *Amidah*, together with the Thirteen Divine Attributes (*Shelosh Esrei Midos*). The only distinction made between Monday and Thursday and the other days of the week is not *Tachanun* but the reading of the Torah.

There are no incidents of immorality, gambling or false oaths here. In general, the people are exceptionally careful regarding behavior between man and G-d. Even the elders are scrupulous regarding prayer and other such *mitzvos*.

I have noticed that the Jews in these Muslim countries have been brought up for many generations to be more G-d-fearing than the Jews back home. It would be impossible to find either a Jew or Muslim here who was a heretic or held other harmful beliefs. One cannot even find anyone here who philosophizes in the manner of Aristotle and his colleagues "may the name of the evil rot." As it happens, someone did come to Cairo from North Africa and began to philosophize and disseminate harmful opinions, but the *nagid* treated him quite strictly and took care of the matter.

As for the Muslims, their sages still hold the opinions that Maimonides mentions in his *Moreh Nevuchim*.[57] One cannot find even a single Muslim who curses G-d or speaks against Him, as the Christians do.

If not for the Muslims' fear of G-d, in fact, it would be impossible to live among them. This is because the government here is so ineffective and disorganized. And besides, the Muslims have absolutely no fear of what little government does exist.

In addition to that, the legal system is unfair and allows

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57. 1:71.

the Muslims to twist things any way they like. For instance, a Muslim in Jerusalem murdered his own mother. When he was brought to trial, he claimed that he had acted under the influence of alcohol. The judges decided that the Jews and Christians were responsible, because they are the only ones here who make wine. So the Jews were fined six golden florins, the Christians twelve florins—and the Muslim went free. And I could tell you many other such stories.

Also, false witnesses are quite common among both the Christians and Muslims. The Muslim courts do not cross-examine witnesses, and the witnesses do not even have to testify under oath. The courts believe and immediately act on their testimony. If such laws existed in the Christian countries, people would swallow each other alive.

Despite its many ruins, Jerusalem is graced with four long, handsome marketplaces, whose like I have never seen. These are at the end of Zion, and are completely roofed over by a series of domes. Skylights are set in the domes to let in light. The stores are open from all directions, with the merchandise set up on display. These four marketplaces are for merchants of spices, vegetables, cooked food and bread.

When I first came to Jerusalem, it was suffering from a heavy famine. One meal's worth of bread cost a *derham*—which is the same as a *bolognino*[58]—and it still would not satisfy a person. But I am told that this famine, at any rate, was not as bad as the one that occurred the year before.

Many Jews died in the famine. A day or two before their death, they would ask for bread but there would be none to give them; and the next day, they would be found dead in

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58. An Italian coin.

their homes. Many people wandered through the fields, eating the grasses.

There is an Ashkenazi rabbi left here alone, a man who grew up in Jerusalem. I have never seen his equal for modesty and fear of G-d. During the day, he works as a weaver, but the minute he finishes his work, he learns Torah. For six months this year, he ate bread only on *Shabbos*. He sustained himself on turnip heads and the parts of the carob that are thrown out after the sweet part is used. Incidentally, there are many carob trees here, and their fruit is used to manufacture honey. In all, three types of honey are sold: bee honey, grape honey and carob honey.

However, I myself did not see any date honey. In fact, I have not seen any dates at all. I met a reliable man who had been to Jericho, which is only a half-day's journey from Jerusalem. He told me that although Jericho is called "the city of date trees" (*Deuteronomy* 34:3), one can only find three poor date trees outside Jericho, which give no fruit. At any rate, the wheat harvest has been gathered, and the famine has come to an end; there is enough to eat, thank G-d.

I have seen various types of fruit that do not grow back in Italy. For instance, there is a tree whose leaves are larger than a person. It gives fruits only once a season, and then it shrivels up. Then a new tree grows from its roots, and that gives fruit the next year.[59]

Grapes here are much larger than those in Italy. However, other fruits are the same. There are no cherries, neither sweet nor sour; nor are there *chamashios*, sorbe, almonds or chestnuts.

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59. I.e., the banana tree.

Meat, wine and oil are very inexpensive in Jerusalem. One can get both olive and sesame oil. Sesame oil is better than olive oil in cooked dishes, but otherwise olive oil is superior.

The land is good and fertile. However, unless one works as a shoemaker, weaver or smith, one cannot hope to make a living. And even in such professions, one can only eke out a bare living. The same holds true for village peddlers.

Jerusalem is constantly filled with men from all over the world, both Muslim and Christian, speaking their various languages, men from Syria, Babylon and Ethiopia.

The Muslims come here from very distant lands to bow down at the site of the Beis Hamikdash, which they regard with great awe. The Christians come to visit their churches.

I gave a sermon concerning the Sambatyon River. I have heard here exactly what you have heard.[60] However, it was no more than hearsay. But I do know one thing: One of the borders of Ethiopia is a mountainous countryside, with great mountain ranges that, people say, are a ten days' journey in length. There is no doubt that Jews live there. They have five princes or kings. People say that for more than a century they have fought great wars against Prester John. Lately, however, the followers of Prester John have gotten the upper hand. They have dealt a crushing defeat to many of the Jewish forces, destroyed the Jews' land and nearly exterminated the Jews. Those Jews who have survived have been subjected to terrible decrees forcing them to give up their faith, like the Greeks' decrees in the days of the Hashmonaim.[61] But in the

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60. Apparently, he had heard it was in Ethiopia.

61. For instance, the leader Zar'a Ya'kob (1434-1468) called himself

end, G-d had mercy, and kings from India, who are not as cruel, came to power. Now, people say, conditions have almost returned to normal; the Jews have recovered and their population is growing. They still pay a tax to Prester John, but they are not as persecuted as they had been before.

For the last four years, these Jews fought against their neighbors. Their neighboring countries beat them, captured many Jewish men and women and sold them as slaves to distant nations. Some were brought to Cairo, where the local Jews ransomed them.

I myself saw twelve of these Ethiopian Jews in Cairo. They were somewhat dark, but not as dark as gentile Ethiopians. I could not determine whether they were Karaites or Rabbinic Jews. In some matters, they appeared to be Karaites; for instance, they apparently did not have any fire in their houses on *Shabbos*. But in other matters, they seemed to follow rabbinic laws.

People claim that these Ethiopian Jews claim to be descended from the tribe of Dan. People also say that most of the pepper and spices sold by the Ethiopians comes from the land of the Ethiopian Jews. I learned these things by seeing and hearing the Ethiopians myself, although only two of them spoke Hebrew and very little at that, and the Egyptians could barely understand their Arabic.

It is also quite well-known here that the Muslims who travel from Cairo to the mosque in Mecca pass through a great and terrible desert.[62] They always travel in caravans of

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"Exterminator of the Jews." His son Baeda Maryam (1468-1478) massacred the Falashas. Many Falashas were forcibly baptized but continued to practice Judaism in secret.

62. Apparently, Saudi Arabia.

at least four thousand camels. At times, they are attacked in the desert by a mighty nation, tall as giants, one of whom can pursue a thousand. The Muslims call these people Alaribis Benei El Sadai, which means, "The Arabs who are the sons of the Almighty G-d." The Muslims call them this because of their habit of calling out "Almighty G-d!" when they battle. The Muslims claim that one of them can carry on one shoulder what a camel can carry and at the same time do battle with a sword in his other hand. It is well-known that this nation follows the Jewish faith. People say that they are the sons of the Rechavim.[63]

No Jew enters the site of the Beis Hamikdash. Many times, the Muslims wanted to hire Jews to work there as woodcutters, smiths and so on, but the Jews refused to do so because of their ritual impurity. I was not able to determine whether the Muslims go into the Holy of Holies.

I asked about the *even shesiah*, the rock that marks the spot where the sacred ark had stood. Many people told me it is enclosed within a tall, beautiful, domed mosque that the Muslims built on the site of the Beis Hamikdash, and that no one is allowed to come before it. According to rumor, the site of the Beis Hamikdash contains great wealth, for all the kings who have ruled over Israel have built rooms there lined with gold. It is said that the present king built a beautiful structure of gold and precious stones without equal.

The site of the Beis Hamikdash today has twelve entrances. The entrance called the "Gates of Compassion" consists of two sealed, metal gates on the eastern side of the Beis Hamikdash. The bottom half of these gates is sunk into the

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63. *Jerimiah* 45.

earth. It is said that the Muslims tried to pull them out a number of times, but were not able to do so.

The Western Wall, a part of which is still standing, is made of great, thick stones larger than any I have seen in buildings of antiquity in Rome or in other lands. At the northeastern corner of the site of the Beis Hamikdash is a tower built of great stones. I went under that tower. There I saw a large hall, supported by a great number of tall pillars. I grew weary walking through there, because it is so extensive. It is filled with dirt that was dumped there during the time of the destruction of the Beis Hamikdash.[64] The structure of the Beis Hamikdash is supported by those pillars. Each pillar has a ring attached to it. People say that this is the place where people used to tie the rams and cows they brought as sacrifices.

Under all of Jerusalem, including the fields and vineyards surrounding the city, are large, man-made caves, connected to each other.[65] On the Mount of Olives, there is

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64. There are many caves beneath ancient Jerusalem. A visitor of the nineteenth century described an immense hollow extending from the northwest corner of the Beis Hamikdash to the northern wall of Jerusalem. The rock roof is about thirty feet high, even above huge heaps of dirt, and held up by large, shapeless columns of rock. This chamber continued for a great distance, and the visitor concluded that there was room to hide the entire population of Jerusalem there. This visitor also discovered chambers below the Mosque of Omar and the El Aksa Mosque. These continued for a great distance, and their roof was supported by long rows of pillars. Since 1967, more extensive excavations have revealed many more of the subterranean passages and caves hewn out of the Temple Mount.

65. Many sepulchers are hewn perpendicularly into rock faces. Some are single rock-graves; others small rooms with a few niches for bodies, and

a chain of more than ten such caves at the burial site of Haggai the Prophet. The cave of the seven elders is just over two thousand *amos* from Jerusalem and exceptionally beautiful, and nearby is the cave of Shimon Hatzaddik. In short, both in the city limits and outside them, under houses and fields, there are many caves.

The waters of Siloam are below the mountain on which Jerusalem stands, in the Valley of Yehoshafat. It is not a river, but rather a spring that comes out of the mountain. The flow becomes stronger every morning until noon, and then it gradually diminishes. The water passes under the mountain, and flows to a place close by where a very large ruin stands. People say that this is where Solomon built a coin mint. Now, however, that place is a tannery.

The Valley of Yehoshafat is a small cleft between the site of the Beis Hamikdash and the Mount of Olives. At present, it is a Jewish cemetery. The old graves are situated both at the foot of the Beis Hamikdash site and on the other side of the valley. Close by, beneath the Mount of Olives, is the cave containing Zechariah's grave.[66] People go there to pray on fast days and to say Lamentations on *Tishah b'Av*. Next to Zechariah's cave is Yad Avshalom.

The Mount of Olives is a tall, desolate mountain with very few olive trees. From its top one can see, a far way off, Sedom and Amora, which are now a salty marsh. Those who have gone there say that all the ground is covered with salt.

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still others are catacombs, with several niches for bodies within each room.

66. This is a block of stone about twenty feet in each direction, and topped by a ten foot high pyramid. Land & Book 632-3

I asked about Lot's wife and was told that the ground is covered with salt formations, and that there are so many salt pillars that it is impossible to tell which one is Lot's wife.

From Jerusalem, one can see Mount Avarim, where Moses is buried, and the far side of the Jordan River—the land of Amon, Moav and Mount Seir—where the tribes of Reuven and Gad lived. These lands are all desolate and abandoned, and there are no inhabited towns or cities. This is because the Bedouins swarm over everything. They come to the gates of Jerusalem and rob people on the roads. They fill the entire land, and one cannot get rid of them. As a result, the country has turned into an uninhabited wasteland which no one is able to farm.

Jericho is at present a small village with about twenty or thirty houses.

Beitar, which was once a great city, is today a shepherds' village, with about twenty houses. It is about a half day's journey from Jerusalem.

The other great cities of old are still known, and their remains can be located, but they are all uninhabited and desolate.

Toll collectors are situated alongside the roads in the mountains and hills. They claim that they are guarding the roads, but they take as much money from the Jews as they want, and no one can protest. Twenty toll collectors line the roads from Egypt to Jerusalem. I myself paid them a total of about a ducat.

When a Jew travels from Egypt, he has to pay about ten silver *bolognini* when he enters Jerusalem. But someone coming via Jaffa has to pay a golden ducat.

Every Jew living in Jerusalem has to pay an annual tax of two or three silver *bolognini* (old florins) from the time he

is old enough to grow a beard. In addition, the Jews pay the governor of Jerusalem fifty golden ducats for permission to make wine, because the Muslims are repelled by this.

These are the official annual taxes. However, the elders demand extra taxes, claiming every week that they are suffering losses, and increasing the tax burden to whatever extent they want to. If someone refuses to pay, they hire a gentile to beat him. So far, G-d has helped me and they have not asked me for anything, but I do not know what the future will bring.

Five Christian sects live in Jerusalem today: Roman Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Coptics, Armenian Orthodox and the Ethiopians, or Prester John. Each sect dismisses the beliefs of the others. Each sect has its own room in the Sepulcher, which is a large church with a bell tower but no bell. Two representatives of each sect are always there.[67]

In Zion, close to the grave of the kings,[68] is a large church belonging to the Franciscans. For a long time, they controlled the graves of the kings. Then a wealthy Ashkenazi Jew came to Jerusalem. He wanted to buy this gravesite from the king, and he got into a dispute with the priests. From that day on, the graves were taken away from the priests and put under the Muslims' control. When the Christians in Venice learned that a Jew from the Christian countries had caused the graves of the kings to be taken out of the hands of the

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67. Each one of these groups adamantly maintains its rights, to the extent that a line down the middle of a pillar marks the border between two chapels.

68. A series of tombs where Queen Helena is believed to be buried. It is also believed to be the burial site of Kalba Savua, father-in-law of Rabbi Akiva.

Christians, they passed a decree forbidding Jews from Jerusalem to pass through their land. But now, thank G-d, this decree has been nullified.[69] Every year, Jews come on Venetian galleys together with Christian pilgrims. There is no other route as sure and as short. I wish I myself had known about it earlier. If I had, I would not have had such a long journey. These galleys make the journey from Venice to Israel in forty days at the most.

I rented a house close to the synagogue. I have an upper-story room, built into the wall of the synagogue. The courtyard that my house faces has five other inhabitants, all of them women. The one exception is a blind man, whose wife I have hired to serve me.

I give thanks to G-d for keeping me in good health, for all the people who came here with me fell ill. In fact, most people who come to Jerusalem from distant lands become ill because of the change of atmosphere, and also because of the rapid change of temperature, from cold to hot and back again.

All the winds in the world blow through Jerusalem. It is said that before a wind goes to its destination, it first comes to bow before G-d in Jerusalem. Blessed is the One who knows the truth.

My dear father, I have asked you before, and I ask you again, that you do not grow sad and that you do not grieve

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69. The graves of the kings are about half a mile north of Jerusalem's Damascus Gate. There is a similar story that in 1428, a German Jew attempted to acquire the room above the supposed tomb of King David, within the city of Jerusalem itself. The Christians complained to the pope, who in turn directed the Italian ships sailing for the land of Israel not to take Jews as passengers.

that I have travelled so far away. Do not weep for me, particularly since G-d has been so good to me and brought me to the place of His Beis Hamikdash, and I am sure that you will rejoice over my finding such joy. G-d is my witness that I have completely set my troubles behind me, and that the unhappy thoughts I had on the way here have vanished from my mind without a trace. The only image that remains in my mind, and that stands before me constantly, is that of you, my dear father.

When I recall that I abandoned you in your old age, I have to weep. I am afraid that the sorrow I have caused you will keep my own sins from being forgotten.

Father, please bless me. Let this letter serve to take my place, and when you read these words you will see the spirit of your son and no longer be upset with me. G-d willing, I will write to you again each year when the galleys come, and my letters will console you. Do not worry, and do not think about me all the time. Take pleasure in your sweet children and grandchildren who are living with you. They will give you happiness in your old age. I have prayed for their well-being here, close to the Beis Hamikdash—may G-d rebuild it in our days, and may you come to Zion in joy, together with the *Mashiach*.

In haste, here in Jerusalem (may it be rebuilt speedily and in our days), on the eighteenth of *Elul*, 5248 (August 15, 1488).

A Letter to My Brother



5249
(1489)

My dear brother, thank you for your sweet words, which cheered me more than the best spices.

I received your three letters together with a long letter from Rabbi Emanuel Chai of Camerino.[70] They were given to me on the fifteenth of *Elul*, 5249 (1489) by the captain of a pilgrim ship.

With G-d's help, I will answer all your questions in general and some of them in detail. First and most important, I have to praise G-d and thank you for the news about the well-being of our elderly father, about whom I am constantly

70. A Jewish banker in Florence with whom R. Ovadiah invested his money before departing to Israel.

concerned. May G-d keep him well for many days to come.

But my gladness was mixed with great sorrow to learn of the death of your eldest daughter and of your son, who was born after I left. May G-d only treat us well. May He send you a blessing and comfort you. We can only pray for those of us who are still alive.

You asked me about the miracles that you have heard about that are supposed to occur at the site of the Beis Hamikdash and at the gravesites of the *tzaddikim*. What can I tell you? I myself did not see any such miracles. Regarding the story you were told that there are burning candles in the Beis Hamikdash that go out on *Tishah b'Av*, I also heard such rumors, but was unable to learn anything more definite. And it goes without saying that the entire story of the Sephardi who found an old man wrapped in a robe inside the Beis Hamikdash is a complete fabrication. An intelligent person like you should be able to understand what is true and what is not.

The tomb of Shmuel Hanavi is still under the Jews' control.[71] Jews from all the nearby areas go there every year on the twenty-eighth of *Iyar*, which is the anniversary of his death. In addition to the eternal lamp, they light large torches. The Muslims respect the site and are afraid to touch anything connected with it. It used to be adorned with many silver utensils and gold-embroidered tapestries, but the elders sold all the charitable property, both utensils and furnishings, and left nothing behind.

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71. The traditional site of the Tomb of Samuel is located on Nabi Samuel, the highest mountain overlooking Jerusalem. However, the veracity of the site is in question.

I did not see any miracles there, nor did I hear of any, besides the stories that many barren women had children and sick people were healed after going there and making a vow, giving charity or praying.

Since my arrival here, I have not left Jerusalem to do any travelling. As a result, all that I can write about the Galilee and other areas is what people have told me.

People say that the Jews in Safed, Kefar Kaneh[72] and other areas of the Galilee live in peace and that the Muslims do not persecute them. Villagers are in the main poor people who make a living as travelling peddlers.

But I heard that the Jews in Damascus are wealthy merchants. At present, no other country has been so blessed by G-d. Its houses, gardens and orchards are said to be unrivaled. But the air is not so good, and so all foreigners who live there eventually fall ill.

People are constantly travelling here from Egypt, Damascus and Aleppo, as well as other countries, to worship G-d. Lately, Jews have been coming from Aden,[73] which is where the Garden of Eden was located. Aden is in the southeast, near Ethiopia, but separated from Ethiopia by the Red Sea.

These Jews say that Aden has a large community of Jews ruled by a competent Muslim king who is very friendly to them. Their land is very great and beautiful, with varieties of fruit that we do not have.

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72. Four miles northeast of Nazareth.

73. Aden is a major port city, now the capital of South Yemen. The Jews of Aden are a distinct group, with different customs and traditions than Yemenite Jews.

They do not know where the Garden of Eden is located.

They sow in *Adar* (March-April) and reap in *Kislev* (November-December). Their rainy season extends from Passover (April-May) to *Av* (July-August).

The people of Aden are somewhat swarthy. They do not have copies of the books of the Talmud, but they do have the books of Rabbi Alfasi (the Rif), with commentaries on it, as well as the writings of the Rambam. All of them, from the smallest to the greatest, are knowledgeable in the writings of the Rambam, because they learn nothing else.

These Jews told me that they had heard reputable reports from Muslim merchants that about a five days' journey from Aden through a desert is the famous Sambatyon River, which completely surrounds a land inhabited by Jews. This river shoots out rocks and dirt, and only rests on *Shabbos*.[74] No Jew ever leaves that land, for to do so would entail violating *Shabbos*. They have a tradition that the people within the circle of the Sambatyon are all the offspring of Moses, as holy as angels and sinless.

Then, beyond the Sambatyon, there are as many Jews as the sands of the sea, with their own kings and ministers. However, they are not as holy as those Jews surrounded by the river.

The Jews from Aden reported all this quite positively,

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74. The Sambatyon is the river across which part of the ten tribes were exiled by the Assyrian king, Shalmaneser. The Talmud states that on weekdays, it flowed with great force, carrying great stones, and rested on *Shabbos*. Ramban (*Deuteronomy* 32:26) identifies the Sambatyon with the Gozan River in II Kings 17:6, located in Media (Iraq). Pliny the Elder (24-79 CE) described the river in his Natural History, and his observations agree with the rabbinic sources.

claiming that it was very well-known to them. I was told by an elderly Ashkenazi rabbi who had been born and brought up in the Land of Israel that in his youth, other Jews had come from Aden and reported the exact same stories.[75]

You will recall that in my first letter I wrote about the Jews who live at the extremity of Ethiopia, and who are at war with the followers of Prester John, some of whom were captured and brought to Egypt, where I saw them with my own eyes. The Jews of Aden claim that these Jews are a month's journey through the desert from the Jews who live beyond the Sambatyon River.

Every day, we are told by Christians coming from Ethiopia that these Jews have suffered a terrible defeat at the hands of the followers of Prester John. We are very much afraid that this news might be true, G-d forbid, because so many people are reporting it. May G-d guard His people and those who serve Him, Amen.

The *nagid*[76] put me in charge of his house here in Jerusalem, and so this is where I am now living. I deliver a sermon to the community twice a month in the synagogue in Hebrew, which most of the people understand.

Unfortunately, however, the people regard my speeches primarily as entertainment. They praise my sermons but they do not really change.

As for the elders, they have not treated me unfairly. Although every week they burden the people with various taxes, they have left me alone and asked me for nothing.

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75. The author is simply reporting the existence of these reports, not endorsing their credibility.

76. Rabbi Noson Hakohen Shulal.

They did not even want me to pay the annual poll tax, since it is my first year here. That is my situation right now, and G-d knows what will happen in the future.

Rabbi Emanuel Chai of Camerino sent me a hundred Venetian ducats, as I had asked him to, which is the profit on the capital that I had left with him. He promised to continue doing this every year. I gave ten percent to the ship captain who brought it to me. In addition, Rabbi Emanuel sent a gift of twenty-five ducats to be used partly for lamp oil at holy sites and partly for the poor.

I am happy with my work here in Jerusalem, and no one bothers me. We gather in the morning and evening to learn *Halachah*. Two Sephardi students learn with me regularly, and now two Ashkenazi rabbis have joined us.

Maybe this holy land can now be developed and rebuilt, since conditions have recently become more favorable. The king has made a permanent decree that the Jews in Jerusalem do not have to pay more than the current tax. Previously, the king had demanded that the Jews pay four hundred ducats a year, regardless of the number of Jews living here, causing each one to be at the other's throat. But G-d has had mercy and influenced the king to charge a poll tax—that is, to tax each individual separately, and not the community as a whole. This is a great improvement which has made things better than they have been for fifty years. Many people who had left Jerusalem are now returning. Perhaps, with G-d's help, the city will be rebuilt, the palace restored to its glory, and the dispersed Jews will return to bow before G-d on the holy mountain of Jerusalem.

Let this suffice for now, for I am very busy.

In haste, here in Jerusalem, *Elul* 27, 5249 (August 24, 1489). Your brother, Ovadiah Yerei.

A Letter to My Friend[77]



5250
(1489)

Honored Sir, may G-d be merciful to you, grant you long life and allow you to see the rebuilt Beis Hamikdash, Amen.

When the Florentine ambassador arrived with your kind letters, I was not in Jerusalem. I had gone to Hebron for an extended period. I ultimately came to enjoy living in Hebron more than Jerusalem, because Hebron is populated by a small elite of Jews with excellent traits. They comprise about twenty families in all, living together on a closed street

77. It has been speculated that this letter may have been addressed to Rabbi Emanuel Chai Camarino in Florence, Rabbi Ovadiah's banker. He is always referred to in the other letters as "the Master."

through which no Muslim or Christian is allowed to pass. There is, incidentally, a tradition among all the Jews here that burial in Hebron is superior to burial in Jerusalem.

There is a very old building here in Hebron, built of extraordinarily large stones over the graves of the Patriarchs. On top of this is a new structure built by the Muslims.[78]

The site where the angels appeared to Abraham is still known. It is called Mamrei. In Mamrei is a small cave, inside of which is a stone on which, people say, Abraham was circumcised. A small distance outside Hebron is a large well that the Muslims call Bir Avraham—the Well of Abraham—and a little distance from that is another well that they call Bir Ischak—the Well of Isaac. Somewhat farther on is Nachal Eshkol,[79] which is still called by that name. The grapes that grow there are to this very day larger than any other grapes in the region.

Even now, there are many villages around Hebron with the same names that the prophets called them.

You asked me if Damascus is considered to be part of the land of Israel. Our sages' words are well-known, particularly those of Rambam in the Laws of *Terumos*,[80] to the effect that Damascus is considered part of Syria. All the inhabitants of the Galilee are in agreement on this to this day. They say that the border of the land of Israel is very close to Safed and Banyas,[81] which are not far from Damascus.

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78. The Moslems built a mosque on the foundation of a building built by Herod.

79. The Biblical spies came as far as this area.

80. 1:9.

81. At the foot of Mount Hermon, on the main road between the land of

Tripoli, the Syrian harbor and trading city, is considered the border of the Land of Israel.

People say that Damascus is a wonderful city with more fruits and other things than the land of Israel itself. People go there from the corners of the earth. Today, about a hundred Jewish families live there in peace. Many people have remarked to me that were an intelligent Italian to move there, he could become extremely wealthy in a short period of time by dealing with the Italian merchants who are always passing through the area.

The war between the King of Turkey and the King of Egypt has already been forgotten.[82] Many say that a two-year pact of non-aggression was signed. The present king[83] has ruled Egypt for over twenty years. He is very old. He does not trouble the Jews, but he does take a great deal of money from them, as he does as well from the Muslims and Christians.

I have no other news to tell you.

At the gravesite of our holy Patriarchs and at the site of the Beis Hamikdash, I will pray that you may always have peace. May you have peace at home, and may G-d bless you in all you do.

Signed, Ovadiah Yerei, resident of Jerusalem, the holy city (may it be rebuilt), in great haste here in Hebron, *Teves* 22, 5250 (December 17, 1489).

Israel and Damascus.

82. This war came to an end in 5246 (1486) but was renewed in 5250.

83. Ashraf Tsif Aldin Kait Bei, who became king in 5228 (1468).

A Student's Letter



5256
(1495)

I must begin by blessing and thanking G-d, Who treats His creatures with compassion. Thank G-d, we sailed across the sea with no problems. I must thank G-d again and again, and I will also pray that He bring you here as well to visit His holy city and the place of the Beis Hamikdash. But in the meantime, may He bless you where you are.

Now I will reply to your letter and describe our journey from its beginning to our arrival here in the holy city of Jerusalem (may it be speedily rebuilt).

On August 5, 5250 (1495), we left Venice in good spirits. On *Shabbos* afternoon, at four o'clock, we arrived at

Palo,[84] which is a small but good city. In Palo, meat, fish and delicacies are readily available and quite inexpensive. We stayed there two days in a mansion that belongs to Yaakov Ashkenazi, may G-d bless him. He invited us into his home, prepared meals for us and provided for all our needs as in a royal palace—nothing was lacking and there is no other Jew living there. He lends money generously, for he lives like a king with a private army. It is a distance of 150 miles from Venice to Palo, which is usually a journey of a day and night. However, because we had no wind, we were delayed.

We left Palo with a fair wind, and arrived in Corfu on Monday, the seventeenth of the month. Corfu is a large city on the coastland. It is rundown and dirty—particularly, in the Jewish quarter. However, it has good fruits. We bought bread, cheese, grapes and peaches for the journey. Corfu is 600 miles from Palo. Since we only stayed there overnight, I cannot tell you anything more about it.

We travelled from Corfu with a strong wind and arrived in Modon on Friday morning, on the twenty-first of the month. This is also a large city, and more handsome than Corfu. There are many merchants there. Modon is a land of olives, grapes, figs and pomegranates. However, the land is not as good as Venice, and its inhabitants are quite primitive. It is a distance of five hundred miles from Corfu to Modon.

We left Modon and came to Rhodes on Thursday evening, on the twenty-seventh of the month. No one disembarked until Friday midday, for fear of pirates. Rhodes is a gathering spot for pirates, because they give the governor

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84. Situated at the bay of the Adriatic Sea. Presently part of Yugoslavia.
85. Corfu is actually an island.

a portion of their booty in return for safe passage.[86] The captain wanted to be sure that the situation was completely safe before anyone disembarked. One has to be very careful, particularly if one is a Jew.

Rhodes is a very well-fortified city, and most of its houses are made of large stones. Many well-known merchants of all nationalities live here. In particular, many Frenchmen live here, because the governor himself is French. Rhodes is a distance of five hundred miles from Modon.

At midday on the twenty-ninth of the month, we travelled from Rhodes and arrived at Famagusta, on Thursday, the third of September, 5250 (1495). We stayed there three days. It is a good city. I never before saw such a plenitude of bread, meat and everything. We bought a large, fat *samas*[87] for one and a half *marcello*.[88] A man can support himself there comfortably for six ducats a year and maybe even less. However, it is "a land that eats its inhabitants," for its air is very bad and its water is poor. As a result, few people live there. I saw large communities in all the areas that I visited, except for Famagusta. Also, in all the lands that we passed through, there are no Jewish financiers who live off interest, except in Famagusta. There is an Ashkenazi named Reb Shabsai who lends money at interest, and they see nothing wrong with that for this is the local custom. Otherwise, the people work as craftsmen and businessmen. They live in peace, and no one bothers them. Famagusta is on the

86. The Order of Rhodes, which ruled Rhodes, was notorious for engaging in piracy.

87. Meaning of word unclear.

88. An Italian coin.

island of Cyprus, three hundred miles from Rhodes.

On the sixth of September, 5250, toward evening, we left Cyprus. On Tuesday, the eighth of the month, we arrived at Beirut, and on Wednesday morning we disembarked in good spirits.

All in all, the trip from Venice to Beirut took thirty four days, even with our stops in all the places that I mentioned.

Now I will tell you everything that happened to us and about the cities that we passed through from the time we left the ship, to the day that we came here to the holy city of Jerusalem.

Beirut is a harbor that serves the trade between Venice and Damascus. It is a small and good city, with many springs and fine fruits. The Jews pay the governor a tax of one and a quarter ducats per person, which equals thirty-two *marini*. Two *marini* equal one *marcello*, and the Venetian ducat is equal to thirteen and a half *marcello*.

No Jews actually live in Beirut itself. I do not know why that is so, for the Muslims in Beirut are better than the Muslims elsewhere, and they treat the Jews very well. On our travel to Beirut, Jews boarded our ship at all the ports where we docked. When we arrived in Beirut, there were one hundred fifty Jews on our ship and another one hundred fifty who had come on the other galley. All the Jews were poor and downtrodden. The Muslims treated us with a great deal of kindness. They distributed money, wheat, bread, fruit and so forth. A number of times, the Muslims cursed the Christians, but they did not say a word against the Jews. So I cannot understand why Jews do not live here.

We rented space in the company of the truly righteous

Rabbi Yosef of Saragossa,[89] who is a Spanish Jew and a truly pious person. We stayed with his family for seven days, trying to decide which route to take. We were not sure whether to go via Damascus or Sidon. Sidon, which is part of the land of Israel, is only a half day's journey to the south of Beirut. Finally, Rabbi Yosef decided to go by sea to Sidon. He and his family were accompanied by the elder Rabbi Yekusiel of Vigatzuli and his wife Nobella, Daniel of Borgo and others. But since we had heard that pirates infested that route, my brother and I decided not to accompany them. Instead, we decided to travel on land via Damascus.

When the others arrived in Sidon, the governor and the community offered Rabbi Yosef fifty ducats a year to stay, of which the governor would pay twenty ducats.

But now, with a great deal of pain and a broken heart, I must tell you of a terrible event that occurred. After *Sukkos*, Rabbi Yekusiel, his wife, Daniel of Borgo and others boarded a Muslim ship bound for Jerusalem. But when they were some distance from Acre, G-d sent a great storm on the sea, and all the Jews, with the exception of one man from Sicily, were drowned. This man made his way to Safed and told what had happened. The community sent people to the site where the ship had gone down. They found the bodies of the drowned victims cast on shore and buried them. I must pour out my soul in pain and mourning over these people who died before their time. My brother and I almost shared their fate, for we had considered travelling with them. (So I must also give my thanks to G-d for saving us.) As long as I live, I will be thankful to G-d and I will praise him for this.

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89. Founder of the Sephardi community in Safed.

Venetian trading ships deliver silver, gold, tin, refined metal and thick garments to Beirut and Damascus. They carry back in return pepper, ginger, spices, silk, cordovani (a type of woven material) and sometimes jewels and pearls. I hear that there are few precious stones in Damascus, but that one can obtain silver and sapphires.

In Beirut, we came to an agreement with a donkey-driver to accompany us to Damascus and protect us on the road from the toll collectors. We made this agreement with the help of a local scribe. The donkey-driver charged us twenty *marcello* per person. On Tuesday night, the sixteenth of September, 5255, we left Beirut. After a short distance, the drivers stopped to give straw and feed to their donkeys, as well as to avoid the toll collectors. At midnight, we arose and travelled throughout the night, passing two toll collectors without trouble. In the morning, we arrived at the third toll collector, who treated us well. There we bought bread and grapes, and we ate our fill. The donkey-drivers paid the toll-collector a reasonable sum, and we continued in peace. Thus did we continue travelling the entire day and night until we arrived in Damascus.

In this area, there are no camps along the roads with places to stay. Instead, at the end of a day's journey, one sometimes comes across an enclosure called an *alchan*, where one can buy bread, fruit and eggs. But there is no place to sleep. Instead, the people sleep in the middle of the courtyard together with their donkeys.

On Friday morning, the day before *Rosh Hashanah*, we arrived in Damascus safe and sound, thank G-d. The well-respected Moshe of Kran brought us to his home, where we stayed for five days. In all the places I mentioned above, no one helps foreigners in the way they do back in our country.

When a stranger comes to Damascus and does not know the language, no one moves a finger to help him other than Reb Moshe of Kran. May G-d repay him for his good deeds.

Damascus is a large city with broad roads. It contains fine houses and courtyards with many springs. There are three separate Jewish communities there, for it is a large and prosperous country. Altogether, there are five hundred Jewish families. Some Jews deal in clothing and other goods, and some are craftsmen. Also, some Jews lend money at twenty four percent interest to the Venetian merchants.[90] Some Jews place their money in contracts, and earn a minimum of eighteen percent. In short, from what I heard, one can easily earn a good living here. I can only tell what I heard, for on *Rosh Hashanah* I was stricken with an eye disease and I remained inside the house until we left. This was a result of my exposure to the cold on the way.

On Wednesday, the fifteenth of October, 5256 (1495), we left Damascus with a donkey-driver whom we had agreed to pay ten *marcello* each to accompany us to Safed. This was to cover payment to the toll collectors and other expenses. On Friday morning, we arrived in Safed. We rented a small room in the house of an impoverished Jew, where the two of us stayed there for over a month. We paid a silver coin a day, to cover both the rent and food.

Safed is a large town built on the side of a mountain. The houses are small and rundown. When rain falls, it is impossible to walk through the city, because of the dirt. In fact, since Safed is on an incline, it is very difficult to walk

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90. The standard rate of interest was twenty-five percent. Even such rates as fifty, sixty and a hundred percent were not unheard of.

there even in the summer, for one is constantly climbing up and down. At any rate, the land is good and healthy, and the water excellent. I saw many very elderly people, aged sixty and seventy years. Among them was a man one hundred and thirty years old, still vigorous and healthy.

The community consists of about three hundred families. Most of the Jews are storekeepers selling spices, cheese, oil, legumes and fruits. I heard that a storekeeper can earn twenty five ducats a year, with which he can support five people. Food is inexpensive.

The scholar Rabbi Peretz Colombo is one of the leaders of the city. He treated us kindly and spoke well for us to others. He wanted us to stay with him and learn with him, at the cost of twelve ducats a year for each of us. The community supports him—I do not know how much they pay him. But he also has to run a store to support his family.

There are many caves around Safed, where many great and pious people are buried. Most of these sites are within six miles of Safed.

I saw some of them, and I will tell you what I saw.

First of all, in Safed itself, near the Jews' quarter, is the burial site of Hoshea ben Bari the prophet. Instead of a tombstone, it has a large rock on the mouth of the cave. As soon as I came to Safed, I prayed at this grave. About four thousand feet outside of Safed, in the vicinity of a small village called Ein Ziton, is the burial site of the Talmudic sage, R. Yehudah ben R. Ilai. A fine stone marks the grave, and candles burn there. I prostrated myself and lit candles.

I spoke with a Muslim woman who had fallen from an almond tree that hangs over the grave. This woman had spoken insultingly of R. Yehudah. She had climbed up the tree and had with her own eyes seen some other worldly

beings, young men in appearance, come and push her off the tree, throwing her a distance of about forty cubits from the tree, which broke both her arms. People say that the pious one (Eliyahu) came to this woman in a vision of the night, after which she repented and lit candles on Rabbi Yehudah's grave, as a result of which she was healed. The Muslims revere the site, and many others light candles there.

Six miles from Safed is a village called Al Ahran, where a number of great and pious people are buried. Before I arrived at the village, I saw three gravesites at the cross-roads. The first was of R. Yehudah the Punished. On his grave there is only a small marker made of a heap of stones. A little farther on is the grave of Rabbi Tarfon, with a handsome marker on it. And a bit farther on is the burial site of R. Yosef ben Kisma, also covered by a heap of stones.

Then we came to the village and saw the cave of Hillel and his twenty four students.[91] Next to this, we entered a cave where twenty two Torah scholars are buried. I was told that they were the students of R. Shimon ben Yochai in Acre. Not far from that spot, on the slopes of the mountain, there is a beautiful memorial, visible all the way to Safed. Their wives are buried next to them and there is nothing over their graves. It is said that they built many houses over them, only to find them destroyed at night. I do not know if that is true.

Afterwards, I saw the burial site of Shamai and his wife, buried in a great rock, the like of which I have not seen. Under the rock is a cave where the students of Shamai are buried. I also saw the synagogue of R. Shimon bar Yochai.

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91. This tomb is a chamber cut in solid rock, with thirty niches for bodies and several real sarcophagi with enormous lids.

It is built of large stones, but it is now in ruins and only one wall is left standing. The people of Safed have a tradition that when that wall falls, the Messiah will come (may it be soon and in our day). I was told that in the year that the Jews were exiled from Spain, the *sheitah*[92] began to fall, and the people of Safed organized a day of joy and feasting.

There is another village close to Safed called Kefar Acco[93] and another called Almah, as well as many others, where many sages are said to be buried. Unfortunately, I did not get to see these, for while I was in Safed, I was constantly sick in bed . . . But in those places I mentioned, I recited prayers according to the best of my abilities.

Before we left Safed, we paid another golden ducat each for the annual poll tax. The women and young men without beards do not pay that tax. Also in Beirut, women and beardless young men do not pay the poll tax.

If one pays the poll tax in one place, he does not have to pay again even in another area, as long as he has a receipt.

On Friday, the twelfth of *Marcheshvan*, 5256, we travelled from Safed in the company of Sicilian Jews, after coming to terms with a group of Jewish, Christian and Muslim donkey-drivers. These Sicilians needed so many donkey-drivers because they had a great deal of luggage. The donkey-drivers took one hundred and two silver pieces per traveller to go to Jerusalem, in addition to the payment to the toll collectors and other expenses . . . On Friday late afternoon, as *Shabbos* was beginning, we arrived at Kefar Kaneh, and we stayed there until Tuesday. We came to an

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92. Meaning unclear.
93. This name is corrupt.

agreement regarding which route to take.

You should be aware that the road from Kefar Kaneh to Jerusalem is very dangerous, both because of highwaymen and because of the toll collectors who can easily kill someone.

In addition, one can be cheated. Sometimes the toll collectors force the Jews to pay extra. Also, although the donkey-drivers are responsible to pay the toll collectors, they sometimes refuse to do so, and the travellers must pay. Then, when they come to a city, the travellers lodge a complaint against the donkey-drivers, but they always lose, because in these lands there is no justice whatsoever, especially if one is a Jew facing a Muslim judge. And sometimes, the donkey--drivers run off and abandon the Jews, together with all their animals, to the toll collectors. Because of all this, the Jews usually travel with Christian donkey-drivers, who are expert and honest.

Even the Christian travellers with us did not want to carry luggage with them, out of fear that it might be confiscated. The leader of the Sicilians, a very powerful man named Rabbi Rabbah, insisted that my brother Yekusiel remain behind in Kefar Kaneh to guard the luggage and belongings of the Sicilians. We had no alternative but to agree, because we had already left Safed, and Rabbi Rabbah had initially hired the donkey-drivers.

On Tuesday, we began travelling. We travelled the entire night without speaking at all. We passed two toll collectors without any trouble. On the road leading to Dosan, I saw the pit where Joseph had been cast. We continued travelling through the mountains the whole day, until the stars came out. On the second night, we passed outside Shechem, which is between Mount Gerizim and Mount Eival. Mount Gerizim

is fertile and good, whereas Mount Eival is desolate. During the entire trip we only travelled at night, particularly out of fear of the toll collectors.

But we finally ran into trouble. Servants of the toll collectors from Shechem confronted us on the road and escorted us back to the camp near Shechem, which was a half-day's journey. We stayed there the entire night in fear. The next morning, on Thursday, the Jews and donkey-drivers came to an agreement with the toll collector and paid him fourteen ducats, my portion of which was fourteen silver coins. On Thursday night, we left the camp and travelled the entire night in fear that the inhabitants of Shechem might pursue us, for most of them are violent men. But G-d led us well. As dawn broke, our feet stood at the gates of Jerusalem, on Friday morning, the eighteenth day of *Marcheshvan*.

From afar, I saw the ruined city and the desolate site of the Beis Hamikdash. When I saw how it had become a field for wolves, I was desolate and I poured my soul out in weeping. I sat and cried and tore my shirt in two places, according to *halachah*, and I prayed overlooking the site of the Beis Hamikdash. May G-d in His mercy return the Jews to their dwelling place quickly and in our days, and may we see the beautiful Beis Hamikdash rebuilt. So may it be His will.

After entering Jerusalem, I went to the house of the praiseworthy and exalted light of the exile, the leader of Israel, Rabbi Ovadiah. I opened my heart to him I told him how lowly my situation was and how I felt like an untamed calf, but I had travelled here to learn Torah. For the love of G-d, I had abandoned my family and the land of my birth in the hope that he would accept me as his student and teach me Torah and *mitzvos*.

Then he revealed himself to me as an elder, full of mercy, as is his righteous custom, and said, "I will look out for you as for a favorite son . . ." For this I am grateful.

Rabbi Ovadiah is very great, with a good deal of influence. No one dares raise a finger against him. Jews stream to him from the ends of the earth and obey his every word. When he makes a decree it is enforced as far away as Egypt and Babylon. Even the Muslims honor and fear him. I have heard that he once killed a wicked man simply by saying something. He is a very humble man, and he knows how to deal with people in a pleasant way. All peoples praise him, and of him they say, he seems greater than any other mortal.

When I first came to Jerusalem, I had a great deal of trouble finding a house to live in, because many people had come here, and it was quite crowded. I rented a room for a month until I could find a permanent place. In particular, I very much wanted to live together with Abraham Messina, Moshe of Borgo and another young man from Spain, who is very good-natured, who lived together in one courtyard and learned Torah together, day and night. When I told my wish to Rabbi Ovadiah, he did all he could to help me. With pleasant words, he persuaded a woman who lived in that courtyard to move elsewhere, explaining that for the sake of our learning, it would be preferable that we live together in the same courtyard. Furthermore, he promised us that before long he would find us a place in the courtyard where he himself lives, so that we could be close to him. He said that if he wouldn't live in a small apartment, he would have invited us to live with him, for he is fond of us.

Rabbi Ovadiah also did something else for me. Every year, the Muslims take fifty ducats to allow the Jews to make

wine, an occupation that the Muslims find contemptible. There are three tax levels: wealthy people pay twenty silver pieces per *kantro* of wine; middle-income people pay sixteen silver pieces; and poor people—even those collecting charity—pay twelve silver pieces. The people in charge of collecting this tax demanded that I pay forty silver pieces per two and a half *kantro* of wine. I complained to the honored rabbi, for this seemed very unfair to me. As soon as Rabbi Ovadiah heard my complaint, he turned aside from everything else and came outside with me. He himself took ten silver pieces back from the tax collector and returned them to me. He was quite upset that the collector had taken that money in defiance of all justice and law, cheating me because I am a foreigner and completely alone.

Rabbi Abraham of Sienna and Rabbi Moshe of Borgo are quite overwhelmed that we have been so warmly accepted by Rabbi Ovadiah. I pray that G-d may give him long life and fill his life with good.

There are about two hundred Jewish families in Jerusalem. They are very careful not to commit any transgressions, and they are punctilious about doing *mitzvos*. Evening, morning and noon, they gather together, the well-off and the poor, to pray with a great deal of feeling. There are two G-d-fearing cantors who pray carefully and slowly. Twice a day, the entire community gathers to hear words of Torah in the *beis midrash* delivered by an eighty-year-old man, a wise and intelligent rabbi named Zechariah of Spain. He speaks every day for about a quarter of an hour after *Shacharis* and *Maariv*, keeping his talk short so as not to impose upon anyone.

Rabbi Ovadiah himself only speaks two or three times a

year, such as *Pesach*, *Shavuos*, *Sukkos*, or the days of penitence. In a pleasant voice, he speaks pure and well-chosen words that contain nothing unsound and that are all words of the living G-d. Even though he only speaks rarely, everyone, from the smallest to the greatest, listens to him with complete concentration, so that one cannot hear the slightest sound.

I cannot adequately praise Rabbi Ovadiah, for he is beyond all admiration. I am a lowly person, unable to understand how great he is. Therefore, I will not even try, for "silence is his praise."

Every day, after *Shacharis* and the sermon, the people sit down in the *beis midrash* to learn *Mishnah* or Talmud for about three hours. Afterwards, they go from strength to strength. They visit sick people and give charity, even if they do not have much themselves. There are many poor people in Jerusalem, and in fact, most of the people in the community rely on charity. May G-d have pity on us and bless our sustenance.

Of all the cities here, it is most difficult to earn a living in Jerusalem. If a person is a craftsman, such as a refiner, blacksmith, weaver of linen or a tailor, he can eke out a living. This is in great contrast to Damascus, Cairo, Alexandria and Aleppo, where a person can earn as much as he desires. And one can really earn a great deal if one sets aside one's own language and speaks the Arabic language. But here, one can barely earn a living. The most lucrative craft is metalwork.

However, food is not expensive here. This year, bread and wine are quite cheap, thank G-d. It appears to me that a person can support himself on ten ducats a year.

We arranged with Aharon Loazi, who lives in our

courtyard, to purchase our needs and launder our clothing for the sum of forty silver pieces from each of us per month. He does not provide us with wine and candle oil, does not pay the rent, and does not provide our bed linen. However, he is responsible to give us a meat, fish or dairy meal every evening, and breakfast. We were told that he is overcharging us, but we decided to agree to these terms anyway. This way, we do not have to bother preparing food, which would cause us to lose time from learning Torah. The two of us together pay six silver pieces a month for the rent.

We have estimated that we are spending four ducats a year, besides taxes, charity and daily expenses.

All the Jews under this government must pay one and a half ducats annually. Women and youths without beards do not pay anything at all.

Legally, we do not have to pay any other tax. However, we are at times forced to pay such heavy payments that we can hardly bear it. This happens whenever a new governor is appointed. For instance, if oil, sugar, honey, soap or other such items are inexpensive, the governor will force the people to buy them at double their worth. Whoever complains that he does not even have enough money to live is beaten on his feet until he either agrees to pay or dies.

In this, Jews, Christians and Muslims are treated equally by the Turkish authorities. The gentiles here do not hate the Jews to the point of cursing us, as they often do back in our country.

One of the city entrances is close to the quarter of the poor Jews. The Jews hold the key to that gate. However, the Jews must appear servile before the Muslims, lowering themselves and bowing their heads. If they are wealthy, they dare not appear conspicuous, in order to keep the Muslims

from manufacturing false accusations against them so as to confiscate their property.

All the houses in Jerusalem are built of stone—none of wood. They do not have as many stories as they do in our country. The houses have no beams. Wood is quite expensive here, and is sold by weight. I believe that this is the reason why upper stories are not built here. Instead, buildings are constructed around one courtyard, surrounded by five or six rooms, all made of *mituleito*.[94]

Also, there are no wells. Instead, every courtyard has a cistern for rainwater. When there is a dry spell, the cisterns dry up. Sometimes, when this happens, the Muslims gather against us and spill out our wine. They claim that the rain has not fallen because the Jews have sinned against Heaven by drinking wine.

Sometimes, water is brought from a nearby spring that flows from Hebron. But this is a sparse trickle, and besides, it dries up completely in the summer.

Animals are used to grind wheat, for there are no watermills here as there are in Venice.

In the middle of Jerusalem, near the *beis midrash*, there is an empty spot where the entire community goes after prayers to pray in view of the holy and awesome Beis Hamikdash.

Next to this spot is the *beis midrash* of King Solomon. Only Muslims are allowed to enter there. The lady Stella, the wife of Moshe of Borgo, was given a description of what is inside the *beis midrash* by a prominent Muslim woman who lives nearby. Mrs. Stella reported to me that it is constructed

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94. Meaning not clear.

of very handsome stones that are gilded with pure gold. However, she herself did not see it. I have heard also that it is exceptionally beautiful, and that the king of Egypt spent a fortune on it.

The Muslims gather there every Friday at noon time to say their prayers. Incidentally, on Friday the Muslims only refrain from work for the half hour that they go to pray on the site of the holy Beis Hamikdash.

Below the *beis midrash* is the Valley of Yehoshafat and Gei ben Henom. Beyond the valley is the burial site of Zechariah, son of Yehoyadah the Cohen. Next to that is a tower called Yad Avshalom. It is half-buried in stones that have been thrown at it over the years, because it is the site of the building of Avshalom, where he rebelled against his father.

Next to this is the Mount of Olives. When one stands on the Mount of Olives, one can see Mount Everim, Sedom, Amorah and the Dead Sea. There is a large, handsome cave on the Mount of Olives where Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi are buried.

A half day's journey from Jerusalem is the burial place of Shmuel of Ramat, at the top of a mountain. There is a handsome synagogue there. Every *Shabbos*, the community sends a man with a *menorah* to light the eternal lamp.

Also, the burial site of the Patriarchs in Hebron is a one day's journey from here. Along the way, one passes Rachel's Tomb.

I still have not gone there, for the roads are not safe because of the Bedouins. Just a few days ago, a Jew came here from Hebron with his family, and the Bedouins stole everything he had.

I heard that during Passover, however, Jews come to

Jerusalem from Cairo and Damascus and travel to Hebron in safety. Then, G-d willing, I will accompany them.

I have no news to tell you, because I only came here recently. I realize that I have gone on at length writing about unimportant things. I would like to write more to you about the practical things I have learned, such as how to find a ship to sail on, and everything else that someone coming to Jerusalem has to know.

The name of Rabbi Ovadiah of Bartenura is familiar to every Torah student. His classic commentary is the key to the understanding of the *Mishnah* and is the constant companion of all those who study *Mishnayos*. But as his letters reveal, he was also an intrepid traveller who exposed himself to the dangers of disease and pirates in order to live in the Holy City of Jerusalem.

In the late fifteenth century, Jerusalem was at one of its lowest points, depleted by war, plague and rapacious authorities. Rabbi Ovadiah's arrival brought hope and encouragement to the existing communities and gradually attracted newcomers–many of them Italian Jews who sought to be his students. One of these students is the author of the final letter in this volume.

Thanks to a promise made to his father to describe all the communities he visited, we have a remarkable record of the Jewish communities of Italy, Greece and Egypt, as well as those of Eretz Yisrael. These travel letters, originally published in Hebrew under the title *Darkei Zion*, are now presented in English, for the first time, in a lucid and highly readable translation entitled *Pathway to Jerusalem*. It is one of the most valuable historical sources for the period, as well as a very interesting book for the lay reader. The bravery and dedication of Rabbi Ovadiah of Bartenura and his contemporaries makes for fascinating and inspirational reading.

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