

# Head of the Jews in Spain in Comparison to Head of the Jews in Egypt

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# Head of the Jews in Spain in Comparison to Head of the Jews in Egypt

## Abstract

Two big Jewish settlements were sitting on the shores of the Mediterranean in the 11<sup>th</sup> century: one in Fatimid Egypt, mainly in the city of Fustat, close to Cairo, the second in Muslim-Suni Spain, mainly in the cities of Cordova – the capital of the Umayyads caliphs, and Granada – the capital of the Granada Emirate.

How related were those two settlements to each other by means of communication, mutual influences, similar behavior and the main aspect: relying on a Muslim rule which might be similar in its basis but completely different in its outlook. This article aims to look at a certain institution of Jewish leadership in those two settlements, an institution that relies on a Muslim rule while supported by the Jewish community. It aims to inspect the validity of this institution's existence and the sources of its power and authority, and to view the system of connections and mutual influences between the two settlements, in spite of the different conditions within which they operated. The institution referred to is the *nagid* or "Head of Jews" - *ra'is al-yahud*, and methodological questions related to the research.

## Keywords

Head of the Jews, nagid, ra'is al-yahud, Spain, Cordova, Granada, Egypt, Fustat, geonim, Shmuel ha-levi ha-nagid, Exilarch

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## Cover Page Footnote

Notes \* This paper was given, in part, as a lecture at the Conference of the Society for Arab-Jewish Culture, Seville, Spain, June 11, 2007. 1. E. Bareket, "The Head of the Jews (Rais Al-Yahud) in Egypt under the Fatimids: A Reconsideration" (Hebrew), *Zmanim* 64 (1998), pp. 34-44, see p. 42; E. Bareket, "The Head of the Jews (ra'is al-yahud) in Fatimid Egypt: A Re-evaluation," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 67 (2004), pp. 185-197. 2. M. Rustow, *Rabbanite-Karaite Relations in Fatimid Egypt and Syria: A Study Based on Documents from the Cairo Geniza*, Ph.D. diss. (Columbia University, 2004), pp. 203, 212, note 56; M. R. Cohen, *Jewish Self-Government in Medieval Egypt* (Princeton, 1980), p. 291. 3. E. Bareket, "Eli ben Amram – A Controversial Leader, Fustat, the Second Half of the Eleventh Century," *AJS Review* 23/2, (1998), pp. 1-27; E. Bareket, "Avraham ha-kohen b. Isaac ibn Furat," (Hebrew) (*Hebrew Union College Annual*), 70-71 (1999-2000), pp. 1-19. 4. T-S 13J20.1, M. Gil, *Palestine during the First Muslim Period (634-1099)*, (Hebrew), vol. 2 (Tel Aviv 1983), pp. 417-419; and many others such as: Bodl. MS Heb. C 28, f. 67, a letter by Shlomo b. Yehuda to Avraham ha-Cohen, 1030, asking him to intervene on his behalf with the emir, *ibid.*, pp. 188-190; Bodl. MS Heb. B 11, f. 1, a letter by Avraham b. ha-gaon on behalf of his father to Avraham ha-Cohen, 1030, complaining about a conspiracy against the gaon, *ibid.*, pp. 255-277. Avraham's extensive mediation and petition, and financial activities are very reminiscent of those of Hessed ha-Tustari and David ha-Levi b. Yizhak, his predecessors. See S. Sela, "The Headship of the Jews in the Fatimid Empire in Karaite Hands," *Mas'at Moshe; Studies in Jewish and Islamic Culture Presented to Moshe Gil* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 1998), pp. 256-281, see pp. 256-266. 5. Mosseri VA8, Letter from Daniel b. A'zarya to Avraham ha-Cohen, in M. Gil, *Palestine during the First Muslim Period (634-1099)*; Notes', *Te'udah : the Chaim*

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Rosenberg School of Jewish Studies Research Series, Vol. 7: Studies in Judaica: Interdisciplinary volume, p. 329, lines 19-20. 6. The majlis of Hessed ha-Tustari and David ha-Levi b. Yizhak, Gil, Palestine, vol. 2, p. 304, lines 21-23. The majlis of Avraham ha-Cohen: T-S 24.56, p. 2, line 1, *ibid.*, p. 652; see also, Sela "The Headship of the Jews", pp. 262-264. The majlis is the Karaite synagogue; see Gil, Palestine, vol. 3, p. 695, according to the index. 7. E. Bareket, *The Jewish Leadership in Fustat in the First Half of the Eleventh Century*, Tel Aviv University, 1995, p. 30; CUL Or 1080 J 107, Gil, Palestine, vol. 2, p. 216. 8. ENA NS 47.2, a letter from Daniel b. A'zarya to "The Leader of the Nation, the Glory of the Elders." Avraham is asked to act against a rebellious cantor, Gil, Palestine, vol. 2, no. 358, pp. 669-671. See also Bareket, *The Jewish Leadership*, pp. 131-132, T-S 8J22.14, a note from Sahlan b. Avraham, the head of the Babylonian Congregation in Fustat, to Avraham ha-Cohen asking him to take care of a certain poor individual, S.D. Goitein, "The Public Activities of Rabbeinu Elhanan b. Shemariya Rosh ha-Seder of All Israel", in the Joshua Finkel *Festschrift* (New York, 1974), Hebrew section, pp. 126-127. See also, Bareket, *The Jewish Leadership*, pp. 183-184. 9. S. Sela, "The Head of the Rabbanite, Karaite and Samaritan Jews: On the History of a Title," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 57 (1994), pp. 255-267, see p. 257. 10. T-S 13J15.14, line 9, J. Mann, *The Jews in Egypt and in Palestine under the Fatimid Caliphs*, vol. 2 (New York, 1970), pp. 83-84. The identity of the Karaite nasi Zakai b. Yedidya is unknown. See *ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 85; see also Gil, Palestine, vol. 1, note 779. A similar literary analysis was made by S. Sela regarding Paltiel and his son, who may have been the first "Heads of the Jews" under the Fatimid regime; see Sela, "History of a Title," p. 263. 11. Bareket, "Avraham ha-kohen," p. 17; Bareket, "The Head of the Jews," pp. 194-195. 12. Dropsie 401, a rhymed letter by David b. Shekheniya to David ha-Levi b. Yizhak, in Bareket, *The Jewish Leadership*, p. 250, n. 11; *ibid.*, in detailed bibliography; see also, p. 123. See also Sela, "The Headship of the Jews," p. 258, n. 9. On David b. Shekhaeniya, see Bareket, *The Jewish Leadership*, pp. 122-124. 13. Bodl. MS Heb. c28, f. 26, (Bodl.2876.260), Mann, *The Jews in Egypt and in Palestine under the Fatimid Caliphs*, vol. 2 (New York, 1970), p. 340. See S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, vol. 2 (Berkeley, 1967-1993), p. 352, n. 32; p. 604. Goitein's statements (*ibid.*, pp. 353-352) serve as a reinforcement for my assumption about the ra'is al-yahud. It is interesting to note the reference to the four crowns with which the author uses to aggrandize the intended recipient of his letter. The title that is of special interest is: the crown of the kingdom of the Holy One Blessed Be He. Could this be a reference to a royal status of some kind, the title ra'is al-yahud? Ladies refers to the king's mother and wife, the women who have control over the comings and goings of the ra'is al-yahud. Eunuchs (Chamberlains) are senior ministers in the Fatimid government. See Bareket, *The Jewish Leadership*, pp. 30-31. 14. ENA NS 18.38, lines 16-21, Gil, Palestine, vol. 3, pp. 44-45. 15. Bodl. MS Heb. a 3, f. 17, *ibid.*, pp. 669-662, a letter from Daniel b. A'zarya to Avraham ha-Cohen. On page 1, line 12, Daniel says that he is sad that Avraham returned to Egypt from Palestine. In the address, he writes: "To my master and the distinguished teacher Abu Is-hak al-Kahira. (who lives in Cairo)." 16. T-S 24.56, *ibid.*, pp. 655-648, a letter written in c. 1055 by Daniel b. A'zaryah to Avraham ha-Cohen. The date was approximated by Gil. On page 2, lines 26-34 Daniel b. A'zarya mentions Avraham's moving to Egypt and the high office that was offered to him; see the term mentioned in line 29. The gaon again refers to the vizier's support of him thanks to the interventions of Avraham ha-Cohen, page 1, lines 4-10. Abu Nasr is mentioned in the right margin, line 2. This is apparently David ha-Levi b. Yizhak, and this is the last Geniza letter in which he is mentioned. On the death of David ha-Levi b. Yitzhak, see Sela, "The Headship," p. 272. 17. husul awd al-sigil, an official royal decree, see *ibid.*, page 1, right margin, line 16. Gil, Palestine, vol. 3, p. 710, according to the index; Sela, "History of a Title," pp. 258-260; see additional bibliographical notes, *ibid.* 18. Gil, Palestine, vol. 2, pp. 487-490. Although Gil (*ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 489) maintains that these figures did not view themselves as Jewish leaders, and the Fatimid regime did not consider them as ra'is al-yahud either, it seems to me that today we have available to us evidence that indicates otherwise. I already noted my suggestion about the status of Avraham ha-Cohen as ra'is al-yahud in my book; see, Bareket, *The Jewish Leadership*, p. 30, n. 12. I also mentioned the suggestion in my article; see, Bareket, "The Head of the Jews," p. 42. In in both these studies, however, I only noted the possibility and did not discuss it in depth.

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19. BM Or 5544.8, Gil, Palestine, vol. 2, pp. 646-647; for the order of the titles, see lines 2-4; Mosseri V 328, *ibid.*, pp. 671-672, the opening of a letter from Daniel b. A'zarya to Avraham ha-Cohen. 20. Bodl. MS Heb. a 3, f. 17, v. lines 1-2, *ibid.*, pp. 662-669; the words of praise are scattered throughout the letter. Goitein (A Mediterranean Society, vol. 5, p. 579, n. 47) believes that the title "the most senior notable of the people of the Lord" is an additional title granted by Daniel b. A'zarya to Avraham ha-Cohen. Goitein considers this to be a non-religious title. 21. Sela, "History of a Title," pp. 263-264. 22. Bareket, "The Head of the Jews," p. 193. 23. S. D. Goitein, *Palestine Jewry in Early Islamic and Crusader Times in the Light of Geniza Documents* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 1980), pp. 56-60; Gil, Palestine, vol. 1, pp. 419-421; vol. 2, pp. 567-569. 24. Avraham b. David ha-Levi, *Sefer ha-Qabbalah* (The book of tradition), ed., A. Neubauer, *Mediaeval Jewish Chronicles*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (Jerusalem, 1967), pp. 67-73. Quotes translated from *Sefer ha-Qabbalah* are from Gerson D. Cohen's edition, (Philadelphia, 1967). 25. *Sefer ha-Qabbalah*, p. 69. 26. Gil, Palestine, vol. 1, p. 637. 27. *Sefer ha-Qabbalah*, p. 67; M. Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael* (Hebrew), vol. 1 (Jerusalem, 1997), p. 102. 28. E. Ashtor (Strauss), *History of the Jews in Egypt and Syria under the Mamelukes*, (Hebrew), vol. 1 (Jerusalem, 1944), p. 113. 29. *Sefer ha-Qabbalah*, p. 69. 30. *Ibid.* p. 70. See Ashtor, *History of the Jews*, vol. 1, p. 245, n. 22. 31. Neubauer, *Mediaeval Jewish Chronicles*, vol. 2, pp. 84-85. 32. Gil, Palestine, vol. 1, p. 445 (Sasson edition, poem no.143, pp. 101-103); T. Beeri, "Poem of Rebuke by David ha-nasi," *Revue Européenne des Etudes Hébraïques* 8-9 (1995), pp. 89-102, see p. 90. 33. Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael*, vol. 1, p. 112, n. 84. 34. M. Ben-Sasson, *The Emergence of the Local Jewish Community in the Muslim World, Qayrawan, 800-1057* (Jerusalem, 1996), (Hebrew) pp. 347-348. 35. Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael*, vol. 1, p. 197. 36. Gil, Palestine, vol. 1, p. 593, n. 892. 37. T. Beeri, "Eli ha-haver b. Amram, Hebrew Poet in Egypt, 11th century" (Hebrew), *Sefunot* 23 (2003), pp. 279-344, see: pp. 282-283. 38. J. Mann, *Texts and Studies in Jewish History and Literature* (New York, 1972); Gil, Palestine, vol. 1, pp. 420-421. ;pp. 386-387, n. 2. 39. Gil, Palestine, vol. 1, pp. 488-489; Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael*, vol. 1, p. 188. 40. *Ibid.*, p. 131. 41. Gil, Palestine, vol. 1, pp. 638-639, as with the Karaite nesi'im, who always had the title nasi next to their names, based on their origins in the House of the Exilarch (House of King David), or, for example Assaf rosh ha-seder,, see Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael*, vol. 1, p. 131. 42. ENA 3765.8,9, Mann, *The Jews in Egypt and Palestine*, vol. 2, pp. 460-461. The first publication of the entire letter and the fragment at the end of the poem will appear in my book on Eli b. Amram, forthcoming. 43. Gil, Palestine, vol. 1, pp. 410, 419, 593; Mann, *The Jews in Egypt and Palestine*, vol. 2, p.461. 44. ENA 3765.8,9, Gil, Palestine, vol. 1, p. 593. The titles themselves are not listed in detail. In Goitein's opinion, Hay Gaon granted the title nagid to Shmuel ha-Levi, while Daniel b. A'zarya bestowed the title upon his son, Yehoseph, Goitein, *Palestine Jewry*, pp. 163-164. 45. *Sefer ha-Qabbalah*, pp. 72-73. 46. Ashtor, *History of the Jews*, vol. 2, p. 80. 47. S. Stern, "Shemuel ha-nagid," *Zion* 15 (1950), pp. 141-142, p. 142, lines 25-27. 48. Ashtor, *History of the Jews*, vol. 2, p. 15. 49. Y. Lev, *State and Society in Fatimid Egypt* (Leiden, 1991), p. 197. Notes \* This paper was given, in part, as a lecture at the Conference of the Society for Arab-Jewish Culture, Seville, Spain, June 11, 2007. 1. E. 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Gil (*ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 489) maintains that these figures did not view themselves as Jewish leaders, and the Fatimid regime did not consider them as *ra'is al-yahud* either, it seems to me that today we have available to us evidence that indicates otherwise. I already noted my suggestion about the status of Avraham ha-Cohen as *ra'is al-yahud* in my book; see, Bareket, *The Jewish Leadership*, p. 30, n. 12. I also mentioned the suggestion in my article; see, Bareket, "The Head of the Jews," p. 42. In both these studies, however, I only noted the possibility and did not discuss it in depth. 19. BM Or 5544.8, Gil, *Palestine*, vol. 2, pp. 646-647; for the order of the titles, see lines 2-4; Mosseri V 328, *ibid.*, pp. 671-672, the opening of a letter from Daniel b. A'zarya to Avraham ha-Cohen. 20. Bodl. MS Heb. a 3, f. 17, v. lines 1-2, *ibid.*, pp. 662-669; the words of praise are scattered throughout the letter. Goitein (*A Mediterranean Society*, vol. 5, p. 579, n. 47) believes that the title "the most senior notable of the people of the Lord" is an additional title granted by Daniel b. A'zarya to Avraham ha-Cohen. Goitein considers this to be a non-religious title. 21. Sela, "History of a Title," pp. 263-264. 22. Bareket, "The Head of the Jews," p. 193. 23. S. D. Goitein, *Palestine Jewry in Early Islamic and Crusader Times in the Light of Geniza Documents (Hebrew)* (Jerusalem, 1980), pp. 56-60; Gil, *Palestine*, vol. 1, pp. 419-421; vol. 2, pp. 567-569. 24. Avraham b. David ha-Levi, *Sefer ha-Qabbalah (The book of tradition)*, ed., A. Neubauer, *Mediaeval Jewish Chronicles*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (Jerusalem, 1967), pp. 67-73. Quotes translated from *Sefer ha-Qabbalah* are from Gerson D. Cohen's edition, (Philadelphia, 1967). 25. *Sefer ha-Qabbalah*, p. 69. 26. Gil, *Palestine*, vol. 1, p. 637. 27. *Sefer ha-Qabbalah*, p. 67; M. Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael (Hebrew)*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem, 1997), p. 102. 28. E. Ashtor (Strauss), *History of the Jews in Egypt and Syria under the Mamelukes*, (Hebrew), vol. 1 (Jerusalem, 1944), p. 113. 29. *Sefer ha-Qabbalah*, p. 69. 30. *Ibid.* p. 70. See Ashtor, *History of the Jews*, vol. 1, p. 245, n. 22. 31. Neubauer, *Mediaeval Jewish Chronicles*, vol. 2, pp. 84-85. 32. Gil, *Palestine*, vol. 1, p. 445 (Sasson edition, poem no.143, pp. 101-103); T. Beeri, "Poem of Rebuke by David ha-nasi," *Revue Européenne des Etudes Hébraïques* 8-9 (1995), pp. 89-102, see p. 90. 33. Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael*, vol. 1, p. 112, n. 84. 34. M. Ben-Sasson, *The Emergence of the Local Jewish Community in the Muslim World, Qayrawan, 800-1057* (Jerusalem, 1996), (Hebrew) pp. 347-348. 35. Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael*, vol. 1, p. 197. 36. Gil, *Palestine*, vol. 1, p. 593, n. 892. 37. T. Beeri, "Eli ha-haver b. Amram, Hebrew Poet in Egypt, 11th century" (Hebrew), *Sefunot* 23 (2003), pp. 279-344, see: pp. 282-283. 38. J. Mann, *Texts and Studies in Jewish History and Literature* (New York, 1972); Gil, *Palestine*, vol. 1, pp. 420-421. ;pp. 386-387, n. 2. 39. Gil, *Palestine*, vol. 1, pp. 488-489; Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael*, vol. 1, p. 188. 40. *Ibid.*, p. 131. 41. Gil, *Palestine*, vol. 1, pp. 638-639, as with the Karaite *nesi'im*, who always had the title *nasi* next to their names, based on their origins in the House of the Exilarch (House of King David), or, for example *Assaf rosh ha-seder*, see Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael*, vol. 1, p. 131. 42. ENA 3765.8,9, Mann, *The Jews in Egypt and Palestine*, vol. 2, pp. 460-461. The first publication of the entire letter and the fragment at the end of the poem will appear in my book on Eli b. Amram, forthcoming. 43. Gil, *Palestine*, vol. 1, pp. 410, 419, 593; Mann, *The Jews in Egypt and Palestine*, vol. 2, p.461. 44. ENA 3765.8,9, Gil, *Palestine*, vol. 1, p. 593. The titles themselves are not listed in detail. In Goitein's opinion, Hay Gaon granted the title *nagid* to Shmuel ha-Levi, while Daniel b. A'zarya bestowed the title upon his son, Yehoseph, Goitein, *Palestine Jewry*, pp. 163-164. 45. *Sefer ha-Qabbalah*, pp. 72-73. 46. Ashtor, *History of the Jews*, vol. 2, p. 80. 47. S. Stern, "Shmuel ha-nagid," *Zion* 15 (1950), pp. 141-142, p. 142, lines 25-27. 48. Ashtor, *History of the Jews*, vol. 2, p. 15. 49. Y. Lev, *State and Society in Fatimid Egypt* (Leiden, 1991), p. 197.

In the safety treaties that Prophet Muhammad gave to Jewish settlements with which he came into contact beyond the borders of the Arabian Peninsula (630), he recognized them as a protected people (*ahl al-dhimma*) and promised them security for their lives, for their property and the right to live according to the laws of their forefathers (meaning practically an autonomy). The Jews were promised that they will have a leader from among their own, though this is tempered by noting the possibility that a Muslim might rule over them. In exchange they were obliged to pay taxes and to be subjugated, in other words, to be considered second-class citizens.

This pact, given by the Prophet himself, presents the basic view of Islam towards the protected people, including their right to self-rule. According to this perception, the protected people are ruled by one of their own people who receive recognition also from the Muslim government. Emanating from these beginnings and during the span of the whole Muslim rule in the Middle Ages, self-rule for the protected people was the norm. The authorities recognized the leaders that the Jews and the Christians elected for themselves and granted them an official letter of appointment which represented the authority given them by the Caliph.

A number of documents show how this principle was applied in the Muslim state. In Arabic historical writings have been preserved letters of appointment that were given to heads of the protected people. For example, at the close of the eleventh century, the Abbasid Caliph al-Qa'im, issued letter of appointment to the *catholicos*, the head of the Nestorian Christians in the Caliphate. Other letters of this kind are known from Arabic sources and the Geniza. These were given to Jewish and Christian leaders in Damascus and Egypt, during the Fatimid period in the eleventh-twelfth centuries, and later in Mamluk Egypt in the fifteenth century. These evidences leave little doubts that the Muslim authorities maintained a standard ancient tradition in phrasing of such letters. This practice was consistent and uniform, being based on the legal precedent that Muhammad set forth. For each community among the protected people a leader was appointed. He was chosen by them and approved by the government, which issued for him an official letter of appointment. This letter symbolized the power vested in him by the government as well as the power of the government to disqualify him. All the known letters of appointment specify the main spheres of authority of the communal leader. These cover the following crucial matters: overseeing of law and order within his community, management of pious endowments which in effect meant control over public money, the right to make appointments within his community, supervising the regular payment of the poll-tax and of other taxes and supervision of the application of the discriminatory regulations imposed on the non-Muslims. The community is also warned against disobedience to the appointed leader and threatened with punishment for refusal to accept his rule. The representation of the community before the authorities is not discussed in detail in these letters of appointment. However, this can be infer from the wording of these documents and is borne out by other evidence.

Nothing is known about the office of Exilarch before the 2nd century, including any details about its founding or beginnings. It can merely be said in general that the *golah*, the Jews living in compact masses in various parts of

Babylon, tended gradually to unite and create an organization, and that this tendency, together with the high regard in which the descendants of the house of David living in Babylon were held, brought it about that a member of this house was recognized as "head of the *golah*" (Exilarch). The dignity became hereditary in this house, and was finally recognized by the state, and hence became an established political institution, first of the Persian empire, and then by the Muslims. The Muslim rule granted the exilarch the same recognition as the Catholicos, the head of the Nestorian community. A letter of appointment of the Exilarch is not available, but there is reason to assume that his powers and functions were of a similar character. The receipt of this letter of appointment was accompanied by a ceremony in which a delegate of the government participated.

The Muslims regarded the office of Exilarch with profound respect because they viewed him as a direct descendant of the prophet Dawood. Under the Abbasids, the Exilarch ruled over more than 90% of the Jewish nation. The subsequent fragmentation of the authority of the Abbasids resulted in the waning of the authority of the Exilarch beyond Persia. A struggle for leadership between the Geonim and Exilarchs saw the slow relinquishing of power to the Geonim but remained an office of reverence to which Muslims showed respect.<sup>1</sup>

In the eleventh century, there were two large Jewish enclaves on the shores of the Mediterranean: one in Fatimid Egypt – mainly in the city of Fustat, near Cairo – and the other in Muslim-Sunni Spain – mainly in the cities of Cordova, the capital of the Umayyad caliphs, and Granada, the capital of the Granada Emirate. How connected were these two communities? Did they communicate with one another, influence each other? Did they function in a similar fashion? Most importantly, did they rely on the Muslim regimes, which may have been similar in many ways, although completely different in outlook? Was the Islamic tradition of Exilarch in Baghdad acceptable also in Fatimid Egypt or Muslim Spain? How did the Jewish community of Egypt and Spain felt towards an appointed leader, who was not a Davidic descendant? The aim of the present article is to look at a specific institution of Jewish leadership in these two lands, an institution that relied on the authority of the Muslim regime, while at the same time being supported by the Jewish community. We will examine the validity of this institution's existence and the sources of its power and authority, and discuss the links between the two communities and how they influenced one another, despite the different conditions within which they functioned. The institution in question is the *nagid*, or "Head of Jews" (*ra'is al-yahud*). We will also discuss methodological questions related to the study of this institution.

### **The Challenges of the Research**

The topic I am about to discuss is controversial. I will be comparing two eleventh-century institutions, one in Spain and the other in Egypt, although in the opinion of most researchers dealing with this subject, neither of these institutions

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<sup>1</sup> M. Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael* (Hebrew), 4 vol. (Jerusalem, 1997), vol. I, pp. 81-115.

existed in the period under discussion. In a previous article dealing with the issue of the Head of the Jews in Egypt, I stated:

‘There is still no clear, irrefutable proof for this theory. Meanwhile the claim being made is based mainly on a circumstantial analysis of logical assumptions implied from the Geniza writings, without any real written proof. But the Geniza is known for the surprises it contains and it is possible that the day is not far off when some irrefutable, written proof will be found, which indicates that the position of Head of the Jews in the Fatimid government – from the very beginning of its rule in Egypt, Palestine, and Syria – was bestowed upon a Jewish court official by the caliph.’<sup>2</sup>

Regrettably, I cannot say that that day has come, but I still maintain my opinion about the Head of the Jews in Egypt. One of my challengers, Marina Rustow, supports her theory with conviction, relying on the research of her former colleagues, Shlomo Dov Goitein and Mark Cohen: “As Goitein and Cohen argued, an accumulation of impressive titles is meaningless as an indication for an institutionalized office. The existence of an office can only be determined by the number and type of prerogatives its position enjoys. In the case of the headship of the Jews, even the first officeholders in the late eleventh century adopted these prerogatives circumspectly, step by step.”<sup>3</sup> I am in complete agreement with this opinion, advanced by Goitein, Cohen, and Rustow. It is true that in the articles where I deal with this issue, I rely, for the most part, on the titles bestowed on different figures by various officials; however, I also describe the practical authority held by these notables, which, I believe, befitted their position, what I call “Head of the Jews.”

### **Head of the Jews: The Characteristics of the Position in Egypt**

Based on an analysis of the characteristics of all the dignitaries who appear to have served in the office of *ra'is al-yahud* in Egypt – as I put forward in some of my articles<sup>4</sup> – and all the clues I have gathered from Geniza documents, I suggest that some of the following points, more or less common to all of them, may be demonstrated as related to the practical authority wielded by the Head of the Jews:

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<sup>2</sup> E. Bareket, “The Head of the Jews (*Rais Al-Yahud*) in Egypt under the Fatimids: A Reconsideration” (Hebrew), *Zmanim* 64 (1998), pp. 34-44, see p. 42; E. Bareket, “The Head of the Jews (*ra'is al-yahud*) in Fatimid Egypt: A Re-evaluation,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 67 (2004), pp. 185-197.

<sup>3</sup> M. Rustow, *Rabbanite-Karaite Relations in Fatimid Egypt and Syria: A Study Based on Documents from the Cairo Geniza*, Ph.D. diss. (Columbia University, 2004), pp. 203, 212, note 56; M. R. Cohen, *Jewish Self-Government in Medieval Egypt* (Princeton, 1980), p. 291.

<sup>4</sup> E. Bareket, “Eli ben Amram – A Controversial Leader, Fustat, the Second Half of the Eleventh Century,” *AJS Review* 23/2, (1998), pp. 1-27; E. Bareket, “Avraham ha-kohen b. Isaac ibn Furat,” (Hebrew) (*Hebrew Union College Annual*), 70-71 (1999-2000), pp. 1-19.

The person who filled the position would be asked to intercede at the *imam's* court regarding any problem, be it financial, social, or economic, faced by the Jews of the Fatimid regions as a whole.

One example is Avraham ha-Cohen b. Yizhak b. Furat, who I suggest was Head of the Jews during the fifth decade of the eleventh century. Even before that, during the third decade of that century, Avraham had been called upon to intervene with the Fatimid authorities in Ramleh and Egypt on behalf of the yeshiva and private individuals regarding various matters. He would also send money to help the yeshiva and the needy in Palestine. One such request is found in the letter Avraham Ha-Cohen received in 1035 from Avraham b. Shmuel "The Third" (in hierarchy) of the yeshiva, asking him to intervene in the matter of trespassing by a some Muslim on the property of the synagogue in Ramleh.<sup>5</sup> At the end of 1052, when Daniel b. A'zarya wanted to receive the *sijil* (an official document) from the caliph testifying to his being the Gaon of Palestine, he turned to Avraham Hacoen, who was apparently the Head of the Jews, a fact which indicates his position in the court and his connections with the vizier.<sup>6</sup>

The Head of the Jews maintained a kind of "court" (*majlis*) in his home, a hall where all the community notables met to hear his decisions on various matters.

Like Hesed ha-Tustari and David ha-Levi b. Yizhak, his predecessors in this position, Avraham ha-Cohen also held conferences and meetings on issues related to the community in his *majlis*, a conference room, a type of throne room. This can be seen in a letter written by Gaon Daniel b. A'zarya, which hints at Avraham's position at court, and perhaps to his being a Karaite as well (*majlis* is usually a designation for a Karaite synagogue).<sup>7</sup>

Relations between him and the gaon, the yeshiva, and the Jewish community were conducted through middlemen, leaders of the Jewish community in Fustat. This indicates that he was an officer of the Fatimid administration, because this was also the standard procedure for making and maintaining contact with Fatimid officials.

The gaon of Palestine did not have access to the court; therefore, his business with the court had to be conducted through accepted channels, standard practices according to the Muslim custom: he addressed his request to the court by means

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<sup>5</sup> T-S 13J20.1, M. Gil, *Palestine during the First Muslim Period (634-1099)*, (Hebrew), vol. 2 (Tel Aviv 1983), pp. 417-419; and many others such as: Bodl. MS Heb. C 28, f. 67, a letter by Shlomo b. Yehuda to Avraham ha-Cohen, 1030, asking him to intervene on his behalf with the emir, *ibid.*, pp. 188-190; Bodl. MS Heb. B 11, f. 1, a letter by Avraham b. ha-gaon on behalf of his father to Avraham ha-Cohen, 1030, complaining about a conspiracy against the gaon, *ibid.*, pp. 255-277. Avraham's extensive mediation and petition, and financial activities are very reminiscent of those of Hesed ha-Tustari and David ha-Levi b. Yizhak, his predecessors. See S. Sela, "The Headship of the Jews in the Fatimid Empire in Karaite Hands," *Mas'at Moshe; Studies in Jewish and Islamic Culture Presented to Moshe Gil* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 1998), pp. 256-281, see pp. 256-266.

<sup>6</sup> Mosseri VA8, Letter from Daniel b. A'zarya to Avraham ha-Cohen, in M. Gil, 'Palestine during the First Muslim Period (634-1099); Notes', *Te'udah : the Chaim Rosenberg School of Jewish Studies Research Series, Vol. 7: Studies in Judaica: Interdisciplinary volume*, p. 329, lines 19-20.

<sup>7</sup> The *majlis* of Hesed ha-Tustari and David ha-Levi b. Yizhak, Gil, *Palestine*, vol. 2, p. 304, lines 21-23. The *majlis* of Avraham ha-Cohen: T-S 24.56, p. 2, line 1, *ibid.*, p. 652; see also, Sela "The Headship of the Jews", pp. 262-264. The *majlis* is the Karaite synagogue; see Gil, *Palestine*, vol. 3, p. 695, according to the index.

of the community leaders in Fustat. These leaders also had no access to the court, so that every time they needed to have contact with the authorities, they did so by means of its Jewish members. For example, the gaon of Palestine, Shlomo b. Yehuda, asked Ephraim b. Shmariya, the head of the *kahal* in Fustat, “to go to the distinguished ministers and tell them, and to come, he and them, to any *nagid* who is a servant of our master the king.” “The ministers” are the Jewish members of the court; “*nagid* who is a servant our master the king” refers to a high Muslim official in the Fatimid administration, such as the vizier.<sup>8</sup>

We have some proof available to us, at least in regard to some of the people I mention, that they were responsible, directly or indirectly, for various appointments in the community, particularly the most important post, which is of course, the head of the community, the head of the *bet din*. The *ra'is al-yahud* intervened in the appointment of community office holders, and appointed and dismissed even senior officials. At the very least, the *ra'is al-yahud* operated behind the scenes putting pressure on the gaon, who was outwardly responsible for filling these positions. Avraham ha-Cohen b. Yizhak b. Furat, for example, exerted a great deal of influence in both the court and the Jewish community. He appointed and dismissed community officials in close cooperation with Gaon Daniel b. A'zarya, and wielded authority over community leaders, who made a point of maintaining warm relations with him.<sup>9</sup>

The office holder received a threefold official appointment over all the Jews, that is, the Rabbanites, Karaites, and Samaritans, in the name of the *imam*.

According to the writ of appointment for the *ra'is al-yahud* issued by the Fatimid caliphate, the title of Head of the Jews encompassed leadership over the three officially recognized groups of Jews: the Head of all the Jews – the Rabbanites, the Karaites, and the Samaritans.<sup>10</sup> We still have not found this all-encompassing title, precisely in these words, used in reference to the Head of the Jews mentioned here, such as Hesed ha-Tustari, David ha-Levi b. Yitzhak, and Avraham ha-Cohen; however, allusions to the title can be found. The Karaite *nasi*, Zakai Bar Yedidياهو, wrote a letter to Avraham ha-Cohen with a flowery rhymed preamble. Among the superlatives he used to address ha-Cohen was the phrase “the magnificence of the three parts,” a title that might allude to his control over the three parts of the nation, from the Islamic point of view.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> E. Bareket, *The Jewish Leadership in Fustat in the First Half of the Eleventh Century*, Tel Aviv University, 1995, p. 30; CUL Or 1080 J 107, Gil, *Palestine*, vol. 2, p. 216.

<sup>9</sup> ENA NS 47.2, a letter from Daniel b. A'zarya to “The Leader of the Nation, the Glory of the Elders.” Avraham is asked to act against a rebellious cantor, Gil, *Palestine*, vol. 2, no. 358, pp. 669-671. See also Bareket, *The Jewish Leadership*, pp. 131-132, T-S 8J22.14, a note from Sahlan b. Avraham, the head of the Babylonian Congregation in Fustat, to Avraham ha-Cohen asking him to take care of a certain poor individual, S.D. Gotein, “The Public Activities of Rabbeinu Elhanan b. Shemariya Rosh ha-Seder of All Israel”, in the *Joshua Finkel Festschrift* (New York, 1974), Hebrew section, pp. 126-127. See also, Bareket, *The Jewish Leadership*, pp. 183-184.

<sup>10</sup> S. Sela, “The Head of the Rabbanite, Karaite and Samaritan Jews: On the History of a Title,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 57 (1994), pp. 255-267, see p. 257.

<sup>11</sup> T-S 13J15.14, line 9, J. Mann, *The Jews in Egypt and in Palestine under the Fatimid Caliphs*, vol. 2 (New York, 1970), pp. 83-84. The identity of the Karaite *nasi* Zakai b. Yedidya is unknown. See *ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 85; see also Gil, *Palestine*, vol. 1, note 779. A similar literary analysis was

Aside from references to his practical powers, we have available to us several substantiations associated with various titles. By themselves, these proofs may not be irrefutable; however, taken together with the other evidence regarding his practical authority, they provide us with a fairly complete picture:<sup>12</sup>

A Jewish courtier, in the field of medicine (such as Musa b. Elazar, or Mevorakh b. Sa'adia), or from the field of finance and commerce (such as Menashe Ibn al-Kazzaz or Hesed ha-Tustari); A scion of financiers or physicians of at least three generations standing, with status at court (Musa b. Elazar and his family, Hesed ha-Tustari and his family); A man possessing strong ties with governors at different levels of the Fatimid administration, with the vizier, with the imam's mother, and with the imam himself.

For instance, the cantor of the Fustat community and the right hand of community leader Ephraim b. Shmariya wrote to the *ra'is al-yahud*, David ha-Levi, addressing him as follows: "Our honored and revered master and teacher, David b. Yizhak, the renowned minister who stands in the breach and serves as an advocate for the people of Israel before the king and his ministers, and the lady, and the chamberlains ... as Joseph before Pharaoh and as Mordecai before Ahasuerus." This description corresponds precisely to that of a person officially appointed by the caliphate to be *ra'is al-yahud*, someone who is privileged to go before the caliph, his mother, and all the members of his court, someone who works for the benefit of the people of Israel at the court, as did Joseph and Mordecai in their day.<sup>13</sup> Another letter, written to "our master, the most magnificent of all the sons of Levi" – most likely David ha-Levi b. Yizhak – uses similar language: "To our master the great, illustrious, exalted minister of four crowns: the crown of Torah, the crown of the Levites, the crown of awe, and the crown of the kingdom of the Holy One Blessed Be He... let he be blessed with grace and kindness ... and in the eyes of the king, and his second (the vizier), and the Ladies (the king's mother and wife), and the eunuchs (chamberlains), and the royal ministers, and in the eyes of all the kingdom... ."<sup>14</sup> Eminent members of the Jerusalem community used the exact same phraseology when writing to Avraham ha-Cohen the physician in Cairo: ... "He should find favor in the sight

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made by S. Sela regarding Paltiel and his son, who may have been the first "Heads of the Jews" under the Fatimid regime; see Sela, "History of a Title," p. 263.

<sup>12</sup> Bareket, "Avraham ha-kohen," p. 17; Bareket, "The Head of the Jews," pp. 194-195.

<sup>13</sup> Dropsie 401, a rhymed letter by David b. Shekheniya to David ha-Levi b. Yizhak, in Bareket, *The Jewish Leadership*, p. 250, n. 11; *ibid.*, in detailed bibliography; see also, p. 123. See also Sela, "The Headship of the Jews," p. 258, n. 9. On David b. Shekhaeniya, see Bareket, *The Jewish Leadership*, pp. 122-124.

<sup>14</sup> Bodl. MS Heb. c28, f. 26, (Bodl.2876.260), Mann, *The Jews in Egypt and in Palestine under the Fatimid Caliphs*, vol. 2 (New York, 1970), p. 340. See S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, vol. 2 (Berkeley, 1967-1993), p. 352, n. 32; p. 604. Goitein's statements (*ibid.*, pp. 353-352) serve as reinforcement for my assumption about the *ra'is al-yahud*. It is interesting to note the reference to the four crowns with which the author uses to aggrandize the intended recipient of his letter. The title that is of special interest is: the crown of the kingdom of the Holy One Blessed Be He. Could this be a reference to a royal status of some kind, the title *ra'is al-yahud*? **Ladies** refers to the king's mother and wife, the women who have control over the comings and goings of the *ra'is al-yahud*. Eunuchs (Chamberlains) are senior ministers in the Fatimid government. See Bareket, *The Jewish Leadership*, pp. 30-31.

of our master the king, long may he live, and before the lady and before the noblemen and all who meet him... who stands before the people of God with all his power and all his might and puts his life into his hands on behalf of his people, Israel...".<sup>15</sup> This wording, too, allows us to conclude that Avraham ha-Cohen, like David b. Yizhak who preceded him, held the high office that allowed him to have access to the court and work on behalf of his people.

The letters addressed to him were composed in a style – metaphors, forms of address, emphasis on titles – similar to the one used in the Fatimid administration. The petitioner would emphasize the addressee's attributes and status vis-à-vis his own inferior status, and use vocabulary borrowed from the Fatimid diplomatic lexicon.

In the middle of the fifth decade of the eleventh century, Avraham b. Furat, felt that conditions were ripe for him to move to Cairo, closer to the court of the caliph, in order to attempt to obtain the coveted appointment as *ra'is al-yahud*.<sup>16</sup> It may be that, around the year 1055, something happened to the Karaite financier David ha-Levi b. Yizhak, who was ostensibly the last *ra'is al-yahud*. Perhaps he fell ill and this is what prompted Avraham ha-Cohen to move to Cairo. When he moved there, the court offered him an appointment to a high position, as it written: "*galalah manzalatihi*" (his noble rank). It is reasonable to assume that the position of *ra'is al-yahud* is being referred to here.<sup>17</sup> This reference is found in a letter written by Gaon Daniel b. A'zarya to Avraham ha-Cohen, which contains expressions taken from the Fatimid diplomatic lexicon. The gaon mentions *husul A'wd al-sijil*, that is, obtaining a copy of the caliph's royal decree. *Sijil* is a Fatimid diplomatic term for an official, royal decree of appointment.<sup>18</sup>

The title of *ra'is al-yahud* and its holder's status at the Fatimid court was not linked in any way to scholarly qualifications. Thus, his power was not based on learning, in contradistinction to the heads of the communities and those who presided over the community courts, all of whom were required to possess great scholarly and halakhic knowledge.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> ENA NS 18.38, lines 16-21, Gil, *Palestine*, vol. 3, pp. 44-45.

<sup>16</sup> 15. Bodl. MS Heb. a 3, f. 17, *ibid.*, pp. 669-662, a letter from Daniel b. A'zarya to Avraham ha-Cohen. On page 1, line 12, Daniel says that he is sad that Avraham returned to Egypt from Palestine. In the address, he writes: "To my master and the distinguished teacher Abu Is-hak al-Kahira. (who lives in Cairo)."

<sup>17</sup> T-S 24.56, *ibid.*, pp. 655-648, a letter written in c. 1055 by Daniel b. A'zaryah to Avraham ha-Cohen. The date was approximated by Gil. On page 2, lines 26-34 Daniel b. A'zarya mentions Avraham's moving to Egypt and the high office that was offered to him; see the term mentioned in line 29. The Gaon again refers to the vizier's support of him thanks to the interventions of Avraham ha-Cohen, page 1, lines 4-10. Abu Nasr is mentioned in the right margin, line 2. This is apparently David ha-Levi b. Yizhak, and this is the last Geniza letter in which he is mentioned. On the death of David ha-Levi b. Yizhak, see Sela, "The Headship," p. 272.

<sup>18</sup> *husul awd al-sigil*, an official royal decree, see *ibid.*, page 1, right margin, line 16. Gil, *Palestine*, vol. 3, p. 710, according to the index; Sela, "History of a Title," pp.258-260; see additional bibliographical notes, *ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Gil, *Palestine*, vol. 2, pp. 487-490. Although Gil (*ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 489) maintains that these figures did not view themselves as Jewish leaders, and the Fatimid regime did not consider them as *ra'is al-yahud* either, it seems to me that today we have available to us evidence that indicates otherwise. I already noted my suggestion about the status of Avraham ha-Cohen as *ra'is al-yahud*

The Jewish communities the length and breadth of the Fatimid kingdom were greatly dependent on him, as were the *geonim* who were also subservient to him; they tried to maintain close relations with him, earn his favor, and grant him titles.

The titles, which the *geonim* bestowed upon all the Heads of the Jews, were built on a similar basis: a dual title consisting of ‘*sar* – minister (which at that time meant “courtier”) – with additions such as “the great minister” or the “adornment of ministers”; and *zaqen* – elder (which in those times meant “a notable”), with the addition of “elder of the generation,” “glory of the elders,” or “elder of the House of Israel,” i.e., the Jews.

In about 1055, Gaon Daniel b. A’zarya decided to grant Avraham ha-Cohen an additional title, *hod ha-zeqenim* (the glory of the elders), over and above the ones he already held. The gaon explained: “This will be the order of the titles: Our glorious, princely, noble, distinguished, great, holy, master and teacher Avraham ha-Cohen, leader of the people, *hod hazeqenim* (the glory of the elders), the most magnificent of the *kohanim*.” The gaon also ordered prayers to be said in honor of Avraham in all the synagogues in all the Jewish communities, and declared that the congregations of Fustat would be under the exclusive authority of Avraham and subject to his decisions.<sup>20</sup> The Gaon would often pay tribute to Avraham’s high rank at court, his close ties with the vizier, and his ability to take action and obtain favors from the vizier, on behalf of the public and on Daniel’s behalf, on a personal level. Daniel referred to Avraham as: “the minister, master, the minister of the people, the glory of the elders, the most magnificent of the *kohanim*, the most senior figure of the people of the Lord.”<sup>21</sup>

According to Sela’s analysis, which is based on Mann, *nagid* is a Jewish title parallel to the Fatimid *ra’is al-yahud* dating from the times of the mysterious Paltiel, that is, from the early days of Fatimid rule.<sup>22</sup> The Fatimids appointed the *ra’is al-yahud* in order to meet the needs of their court with respect to the necessary arrangements for the external organization and court representation of the Jewish *dhimmi*; the office is not connected in any way with the titles, which *yeshivot* awarded to certain dignitaries for their own purposes. The opposite is the case. In light of the notable’s rise in rank at court, the *yeshiva* also granted him titles, in order to tie him to their institution and ensure his good services on their behalf. I did not find the title *nagid* linked to any notable who I believe filled the office of Head of the Jews; however, knowing the randomness of the Geniza documents, it seems to me that the absence of any mention of the title *nagid* does

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in my book; see, Bareket, *The Jewish Leadership*, p. 30, n. 12. I also mentioned the suggestion in my article; see, Bareket, “The Head of the Jews,” p. 42. In in both these studies, however, I only noted the possibility and did not discuss it in depth.

<sup>20</sup> BM Or 5544.8, Gil, *Palestine*, vol. 2, pp. 646-647; for the order of the titles, see lines 2-4; Mosseri V 328, *ibid.*, pp. 671-672, the opening of a letter from Daniel b. A’zarya to Avraham ha-Cohen.

<sup>21</sup> Bodl. MS Heb. a 3, f. 17, v. lines 1-2, *ibid.*, pp. 662-669; the words of praise are scattered throughout the letter. Goitein (*A Mediterranean Society*, vol. 5, p. 579, n. 47) believes that the title “the most senior notable of the people of the Lord” is an additional title granted by Daniel b. A’zarya to Avraham ha-Cohen. Goitein considers this to be a non-religious title.

<sup>22</sup> Sela, “History of a Title,” pp. 263-264.

not negate the overall picture I have described. Not to mention that, apparently, the gaon did not grant every *ra'is al-yahud* the title of *nagid*.<sup>23</sup>

My challengers would probably contend that there is nothing unusual in my description, if I am trying to compare the status of the alleged Head of the Jews in Egypt, with that of the court Jews in the Abbasid caliphate, and they would be correct. But we must remember one important point: In Babylonia, the title “Head of the Jews” belonged officially to the exilarch, who was not a court Jew, and this office involved more tradition and history than actual authority. From this standpoint, there was a vacuum in Egypt, where no apparent historical authority existed that could interfere when an official title was granted to a court Jew, who had proven himself by being extremely useful to the Fatimid regime. As far as the status of head of the yeshiva was concerned, it was no different than that of the Karaite *nasi* or the Samaritan High Priest, who served purely as the heads of their communities; they did not function as *ra'is al-yahud*, as is clearly stated in the important document about the authority of the gaon, which was read first by Goitein and then by Gil.<sup>24</sup>

There is no doubt regarding the tight connection which took place between the Jewish congregations of Egypt and of Spain. We have dozens of Geniza documents to prove it.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, the Muslim authorities maintained a consistent and uniform practice towards the protected people, in Abbasid Caliphate, in Fatimid Egypt and in Muslim Spain, based on the traditional view of Islam, including their right to self-rule.

Jewish courtiers accompanied Muslim rulers in all parts of the Muslim Empire during the 9<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> centuries. But compared to Egypt Jewry, which well documented in the Geniza, no other example of the courtiers' cultural activity is similar to the Spanish one; at least not in the sense that it is preserved in such detailed descriptions.<sup>26</sup>

### **The Head of the Jews in Spain**

Up to this point, I have discussed the difficulties entailed in dealing with the institution of the Head of the Jews in Egypt. Yet, in regard to Spain, I am confronted with even more problems. There is absolutely no certainty that such an institution existed and we have no sources available to us that can be of help. Practically the only Jewish source is the *Sefer ha-Qabbalah* (*The Book of*

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<sup>23</sup> Bareket, “The Head of the Jews,” p. 193.

<sup>24</sup> S. D. Goitein, *Palestine Jewry in Early Islamic and Crusader Times in the Light of Geniza Documents* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 1980), pp. 56-60; Gil, *Palestine*, vol. 1, pp. 419-421; vol. 2, pp. 567-569.

<sup>25</sup> For instance, the reach correspondence included in M. Gil, and E. Fleischer's *Yehuda Ha-Levi and his Circle*, (Hebrew), (Jerusalem, 2001).

<sup>26</sup> M. Ben-Sasson, "Al-Andalus: The So-Called 'Golden Age' of Spanish Jewry-a Critical View", *The Jews of Europe in the Middle Ages (Tenth to Fifteenth Centuries)*, Proceedings of the International Symposium held at Speyer, 20-25 October 2002  
Edited by C. Cluse, pp. 123-137, see p. 130.

*Tradition*), which was written in 1161 by Avraham b. David (*Rabad*).<sup>27</sup> But, as we know, his book is full of historical inaccuracies and anecdotes, and we cannot rely on it totally. Nevertheless, all the scholars who write about well-known personalities from tenth- and eleventh-century Spain quote him as if his was speaking *Torah mi-Sinai*. According to *Rabad's* description, we can find four notables who may have held an identical type of office as that of the Head of the Jews in Egypt: **Hasday b. Shaprut** (910-975), **Ya'aqov b. Jo** (end of the tenth century-beginning of the eleventh century), **Shmuel Halevi ha-nagid** (993-1056), and his son **Yehoseph Halevi ha-nagid** (1035-1066). If we examine them one by one, we will again see that their titles cannot possibly be relied upon as our only criterion.

### **Hasday b. Shaprut**

Hasday b. Shaprut was called *nasi* by the Jews.<sup>28</sup> What does this title tell us? The general practice was that the title *nasi* was conferred solely on public figures descended from the exilarch of Babylonia, ostensibly from the House of David.<sup>29</sup> What is the significance of labeling Hasday b. Shaprut with this appellation, given that he was most certainly not of Davidic descent? There is no doubt that starting in the ninth century, the status of the exilarch declined in the Abbasid caliphate, and with this development, respect for the title *nasi* began to erode as well, as *Rabad* explains: “However, ever since the beginning of Muslim rule, the exilarchs did not exercise their authority fittingly. In fact, they used to buy their position with large sums of money, like publicans, and were worthless shepherds.”<sup>30</sup> From here on we see various personalities, who were definitely not of Davidic lineage, bearing this title, which was also bestowed upon them in a variety of panegyric poems. Did the caliph Abd al-Rahman III officially appoint Hasday b. Shaprut to be Head of the Jews? According to Ashtor: “The caliph placed Hasday b. Shaprut at the head of the Jewish collective in his realm and gave him the authority to make decisions regarding the communities as he saw fit.”<sup>31</sup> But what is Ashtor’s source? We have no proof beside *Rabad* that b. Shaprut was the Head of the Jews, as we are attempting to claim, with authority to appoint *dayanim* and community leaders, and control all community matters. Hasday b. Shaprut was extremely active in the political affairs of the caliphate and in the cultural life of the Jews, but what real authority did he have with respect to the Jews?

Only in one case do we learn from *Rabad* that “after the death of the great *nasi*, Hasday son of Is'haq, the community was divided by a bitter dispute. In the

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<sup>27</sup> Avraham b. David ha-Levi, *Sefer ha-Qabbalah* (The book of tradition), ed., A. Neubauer, *Mediaeval Jewish Chronicles*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., vol. 1 (Jerusalem, 1967), pp. 67-73. Quotes translated from *Sefer ha-Qabbalah* are from Gerson D. Cohen’s edition, (Philadelphia, 1967).

<sup>28</sup> *Sefer ha-Qabbalah*, p. 69.

<sup>29</sup> Gil, *Palestine*, vol. 1, p. 637.

<sup>30</sup> *Sefer ha-Qabbalah*, p. 67; M. Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael* (Hebrew), vol. 1 (Jerusalem, 1997), p. 102.

<sup>31</sup> E. Ashtor (Strauss), *History of the Jews in Muslim Spain*, (Hebrew), vol. 1 (Jerusalem, 1966), p. 113.

days of Hasday, there was not a man in the world who could have disputed the authority of Hanokh.”<sup>32</sup> Does this constitute proof? On the face of it, this does not constitute proof; however, if we put together all the information we have on the figures in Spain, this can shed light on Hasday b. Shaprut, as we shall see below.

### **Ya'aqov b. Jo**

Let us look at the second figure, Ya'aqov b. Jo. What little information we have about him at all comes from *Rabad*:

'...the result that King al-Mansur became fond of Jacob b. Jo. Accordingly, the former issued him a document placing him in charge of all the Jewish communities from Sijilmasa to the river Duero, which was the border of his realm. [The decree stated] that he was to adjudicate all their ligations, and that he was empowered to appoint over them whomsoever he wished and to exact from them any tax or payment to which they might be subject. Furthermore, he placed at his disposal eighteen of his eunuchs clad in uniform, who conducted him in the carriage of a vicegerent. Then all the members of the community of Cordova assembled and signed an agreement [certifying] his position as *nasi*, which stated 'Rule thou over us, both thou and thy son and thy son's son also.'<sup>33</sup>

The synthesis in *Rabad* is perfectly clear: something from the description of Nathan the Babylonian's *Akhbar Baghdad* about the exilarch in Babylonia,<sup>34</sup> and another bit from the biblical story of Gideon (Judg.8:23). Yet, it contains some elements that characterize the appointment of the exilarch or the Head of the Jews, which are familiar to us from Babylonia and Egypt: an official letter of appointment, the authority of a supreme judge, responsibility for making appointments, royal garments, symbols and ceremonies that connote royalty. In addition, the Jewish community accepts the appointment after the fact and gives it their support.

### **Shmuel *ha-nagid***

The next two figures I want to deal with are Shmuel *ha-nagid* and his son Yehoseph. Up to this point, we have been dealing with titles, but now we are now going to take a look at a designation, which, though known in other places such as the Maghreb and Egypt, had not been used before in Spain. We encounter the title *nagid* in rhetoric and poetry, although infrequently, when the meaning is apparently nonspecific: a high-ranking leader. Researchers have conducted numerous, lengthy discussions on the significance of this title, who granted it to

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<sup>32</sup> *Sefer ha-Qabbalah*, p. 69.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* p. 70. See Ashtor, *History of the Jews*, vol. 1, p. 245, n. 22.

<sup>34</sup> Neubauer, *Mediaeval Jewish Chronicles*, vol. 2, pp. 84-85.

whom, and the actual authority it carried.<sup>35</sup> In any event, this was the first time the appellation was mentioned in connection with a Jewish notable in Spain and we must examine what it encompassed. For this purpose, we shall analyze the relationship Shmuel and his son had with the traditional centers of leadership, Babylonia and Palestine, since this Hebrew title could only have been granted by a Jewish institution, not a Muslim caliph.

A complex and interesting relationship existed between the house of the *negidim* – Shmuel and his son Yehoseph – and the exilarch Yehizqiyahu II b. David and his son, David II b. Yehizqiyahu. In 1055, Shmuel *ha-nagid* dedicated a poem to Yehizqiyahu II the exilarch.<sup>36</sup> Shmuel *ha-nagid* also mentioned Yehizqiyahu II the exilarch in the Arabic conjunctions of his *diwan*, in statements relating to the same year, 1055, that follow the description of the military victory in which the *nagid* played a part. These lines of poetry reveal his opinion that the advantage of perpetuity is set aside for the rule of the exilarchs of Davidic lineage,<sup>37</sup> a point of view which may help us understand why Shmuel was invested with the title *nagid*, and not *nasi*, as were his predecessors. It may also have been due to the fact that the title *nagid* had become a permanent fixture after having been conferred upon *negidim* from the Maghreb, such as Avraham b. Nathan at the beginning of the eleventh century and Ya'aqov b. Amram in the third decade of the twelfth century. Some researchers who have dealt with this issue in recent years believe that this was an honorary title with a purpose – to establish a connection between a major Jewish figure from the Qairawan community and the Babylonian yeshiva – and not an official title awarded by the authorities.<sup>38</sup>

The strong ties that existed in 1004-1038 between Hai gaon of Pumbedita and Shmuel *ha-nagid* were a matter of considerable importance. As Mann suggested, it is reasonable to assume that, after the decline of the caliphate of Cordoba, relations between the Jews of Spain and Pumbedita were renewed and strengthened. Shmuel *ha-nagid*'s admiration for Hai gaon is especially obvious in the lamentation he wrote after the gaon's death, where he lavishes unbridled praise upon him. It may also be assumed that Hai gaon was the one who conferred the title of *nagid* on Shmuel.<sup>39</sup>

If we are to judge by a poem that Shmuel *ha-nagid* sent to Daniel b. A'zarya, the inhabitants of Palestine took great pride in Daniel's genius during the sixth decade of the eleventh century. It appears that strong ties existed between Daniel b. A'zarya and the Spanish *negidim*, Shmuel and his son Yehoseph. Daniel even awarded them with titles (it is not clear which ones) on behalf of the yeshiva; he

<sup>35</sup> Such as Ashtor, *History of the Jews*, vol. 2, p. 80; S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, vol. II (California, 1971), pp. 23-40; Jefim (Hayyim) Schirmann, *A History of Jewish Poetry In Muslim Spain*, (Hebrew), updated and completed: Ezra Fleischer (Jerusalem, 1996), chapter 3.

<sup>36</sup> Gil, *Palestine*, vol. 1, p. 445 (Sasson edition, poem no.143, pp. 101-103); T. Beeri, "Poem of Rebuke by David ha-nasi," *Revue Européenne des Etudes Hébraïques* 8-9 (1995), pp. 89-102, see p. 90.

<sup>37</sup> Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael*, vol. 1, p. 112, n. 84.

<sup>38</sup> M. Ben-Sasson, *The Emergence of the Local Jewish Community in the Muslim World, Qayrawan, 800-1057* (Jerusalem, 1996), (Hebrew) pp. 347-348.

<sup>39</sup> Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael*, vol. 1, p. 197.

may also have been the one who conferred the title of *nagid* on Yehoseph the son of Shmuel, an appellation which his father also bore.<sup>40</sup>

In regard to the relations of the Spanish *negidim* with Egypt, the texts that document the ties of 'Eli *ha-haver* b. 'Amram, the leader of the Fustat community in Egypt during the second half of the eleventh century, with the House of Shmuel *ha-nagid* are important and fascinating. These texts supplement the scant basic evidence, Jewish and Arab, which portrays the tragic figure of Yehoseph the son of the *nagid*, and after putting them all together, it is possible to correctly evaluate the position he held in the contemporary Jewish world. 'Eli *ha-haver* b. 'Amram was already in contact with the House of the *negidim* during the lifetime of Shmuel.<sup>41</sup>

'Eli b. 'Amram wrote a long letter to Shmuel *ha-nagid* sometime before 1056, the year of the *nagid*'s death, in which he included words of poetry. He notes that this is the first time he is corresponding with the *nagid*, evidently to thank him for his donation. We do not know the circumstances that preceded the letter, or what prompted the *nagid* to send a donation to 'Eli b. 'Amram. Eli's letter also mentions his congregation, "where on every Sabbath, on every holiday, when the Torah is removed from the ark, we pray for our master Daniel the *nasi* and gaon, may he live a long life, and for you, again and again, *nagid* of the Exile, and for your wise sons..." The meaning of this sentence is highly significant. Immediately after his appointment as head of the community, 'Eli b. 'Amram chose to institute a special prayer in honor of the Spanish *nagid* and his sons, Yehoseph and Elyasaph, even though, according to tradition, he should only have mentioned the *gaon* of Palestine at the beginning of the prayer.<sup>42</sup>

The titles 'Eli b. 'Amram uses when referring to Shmuel *ha-nagid* are not merely rhetorical; rather they mask political and social meanings. He calls him *negid ha-gola* (prince of the exile) at a time when the title *nagid* was an honorific awarded by the yeshivot, both in Babylonia and in Palestine, to important people with very close ties to the Muslim regime, usually the court physician. The word *nagid* is the precise Hebrew equivalent for the Arabic *amir*. The title of *nagid* was apparently conferred on Shmuel Ha-Levi by Hai gaon of Pumbedita in the eleventh century. During the Middle Ages, the word *gola* (exile) was uniquely associated with Babylonia, and it is somewhat strange to see it used here in reference to a Spanish notable. But it is simply an expression of 'Eli b. 'Amram's desire to highlight the fact that the title was rightfully bestowed upon Shmuel Ha-Levi by none other than *rosh yeshivat gola* (head of the yeshiva of the exile), that is, the yeshiva of Pumbedita.<sup>43</sup>

Elsewhere, 'Eli b. 'Amram refers to Shmuel *ha-nagid* as "*nesi am segula (nasi of the Chosen People)*," a title whose meaning we have already discussed. "*rosh ha-seder ha-gadol (Great Head of the Seder)*" is also among the titles that 'Eli b.

<sup>40</sup> Gil, *Palestine*, vol. 1, p. 593, n. 892.

<sup>41</sup> T. Beeri, "Eli *ha-haver* b. Amram, Hebrew Poet in Egypt, 11<sup>th</sup> century" (Hebrew), *Sefunot* 23 (2003), pp. 279-344, see: pp. 282-283.

<sup>42</sup> J. Mann, *Texts and Studies in Jewish History and Literature* (New York, 1972); Gil, *Palestine*, vol. 1, pp. 420-421.; pp. 386-387, n. 2.

<sup>43</sup> Gil, *Palestine*, vol. 1, pp. 488-489; Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael*, vol. 1, p 188.

'Amram used when addressing Shmuel Halevi.<sup>44</sup> During the period in question, this honorific was conferred upon distinguished personalities in the community. It may have been a title for a real position under the exilarch in Babylonia; moreover, the exilarch was apparently the one who conferred this title on those he favored. By calling Shmuel Halevi “*Rosh ha-seder ha-gadol*,” 'Eli b. 'Amram extended himself. We found that no one else referred to Shmuel *ha-nagid* with the honorifics “*nasi*” or “*rosh ha-seder*,” as was the practice with respect to other prominent people of that period, whose names were routinely embellished with these titles.<sup>45</sup> It may therefore be concluded that 'Eli b. 'Amram put a great deal of effort into making Shmuel *ha-nagid* a supporter of his faction.

### **Yehoseph *ha-nagid***

After the death of Shmuel *ha-nagid* in 1056, 'Eli b. 'Amram formed an association with his son, Yehoseph. Immediately after the death of the father, 'Eli b. 'Amram wrote a long letter to Yehoseph – who inherited his father’s position and was also given the title *nagid* – in which he described the mourning customs he introduced in the Fustat community after the bitter tidings about the death of Shmuel *ha-nagid* were received. He also took pains to stress that from then on, he and the Fustat community would look upon Yehoseph as his father’s successor, in name and in position; he showered Yehoseph with a flood of congratulations on being given the title of *nagid*, noting that it would be his practice and that of the Fustat community to pray for the well-being of Yehoseph *ha-nagid*, as they had done for his father. The letter began with a long series of flowery expressions, among them actual titles used in the literature of the times, such as *sar ha-sarim* (chief of all ministers), *negid ha-negidim* (most exalted of *negidim*), *mehulal be-fi ha-meshorerim* (hailed by bards). These appellations referred to his status as a member of the court and as vizier, on the one hand, and head of Spanish Jewry, on the other. He goes on to address Yehoseph as the most exalted *nagid*, the *nagid* of the Exile, the crown of scholarship, the head of the Sanhedrin elders.<sup>46</sup> He bestows upon Yehoseph the titles he used when addressing his father, although he adds *rosh le-ziqney 'Agula* (the head of the Sanhedrin elders). Since 'Agula is another name for the Great Sanhedrin, that is, the Palestinian yeshiva, this label proves that the title of *nagid* was conferred on Yehoseph son of Shmuel by none other than the head of the Palestinian yeshiva, Daniel b. A'zarya, as the letter itself states explicitly: “Also the correct new name and the names used to designate him, our master the great Daniel *ha-nasi*, the head of the yeshiva, *Geon Yaakov*, may he live forever.”<sup>47</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 131.

<sup>45</sup> Gil, *Palestine*, vol. 1, pp. 638-639, as with the Karaite *nesi'im*, who always had the title *nasi* next to their names, based on their origins in the House of the Exilarch (House of King David), or, for example Assaf *rosh ha-seder*, see Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael*, vol. 1, p. 131.

<sup>46</sup> ENA 3765.8,9, Mann, *The Jews in Egypt and Palestine*, vol. 2, pp. 460-461. The first publication of the entire letter and the fragment at the end of the poem will appear in my book on 'Eli b. Amram, forthcoming.

<sup>47</sup> Gil, *Palestine*, vol. 1, pp. 410, 419, 593; Mann, *The Jews in Egypt and Palestine*, vol. 2, p.461.

Because of his desperate need to obtain support from any possible quarter, 'Eli made every effort to get Yehoseph *ha-nagid* to join his camp. In exchange, he offered to be a kind of agent between the house of the *nagid* of Spain and the Palestinian yeshiva. In a letter and poem he sent to Yehoseph, he announced that new honorary titles had been conferred upon him on behalf of the yeshiva, a message that contains more than a hint about Eli's part in this action.<sup>48</sup>

Up to this point, we have been discussing the titles attached to Shmuel *ha-nagid* and his son. But we have already agreed that titles are not enough and that the determining factor is the actual authority they held with respect to the Jewish community. On the basis of all the available information, there is no doubt that Shmuel was a vizier in the court of the Berber kings of Granada, as was his son Yehoseph. The major question is: Were they granted some sort of appointment by the king to serve as Head of the Jews, and did they have certain powers, such as the authority to make appointments and exercise control over the community? Avraham b. David (*Rabad*) recounts that Shmuel was well known for his generosity, especially in the sphere of scholarship and support for Torah scholars. He does not supply much information about Yehoseph aside from the fact that he grew haughty, which led to his destruction – he was killed by the Berber princes.<sup>49</sup> Ashtor notes:

Indeed, he was not only the vizier for King Badis, and the protector of his people, but also the head of the Jewish community in the Kingdom of Granada, a role he fulfilled with utmost responsibility. He did not tolerate disputes and quarrels in the communities and those who fomented them were forcefully put in their place. At first he had exclusive responsibility before the authorities for the taxes levied on the Jews, but after they learned of his knowledge of Gemara and the other writings of the Talmudic sages, he became the chief rabbi of Granada. Every important judgment was brought before him, and in addition, he received written responsa queries, to which he responded on the basis of his thorough knowledge.<sup>50</sup>

When Ashtor says that “he did not tolerate disputes and quarrels in the communities,” he bases himself on a poem found in the Geniza; it was written by an anonymous poet, who may be referring to Shmuel Halevi when he says: “hand over anyone who disputes against the House of God to the community council.”<sup>51</sup> Again, we have to put together fragments of information to build an overall picture.

## Conclusions

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<sup>48</sup> ENA 3765.8,9, Gil, *Palestine*, vol. 1, p. 593. The titles themselves are not listed in detail. In Goitein's opinion, Hay Gaon granted the title *nagid* to Shmuel ha-Levi, while Daniel b. A'zarya bestowed the title upon his son, Yehoseph, Goitein, *Palestine Jewry*, pp. 163-164.

<sup>49</sup> *Sefer ha-Qabbalah*, pp. 72-73.

<sup>50</sup> Ashtor, *History of the Jews*, vol. 2, p. 80.

<sup>51</sup> S. Stern, “Shemuel *ha-nagid*,” *Zion* 15 (1950), pp. 141-142, p. 142, lines 25-27.

By all appearances, the findings presented here supposedly indicate that in Spain, under both the Umayyads and the small emirates, there was no official institution which could be called “Head of the Jews.” Every ruler functioned according to his own needs, as dictated by changing political circumstances. All the information available to us about the notables discussed here pertains to the status of Jews associated with the court and their activities in that sphere; in this they are similar to the court Jews in the Abbasid caliphate. Nevertheless, we must bear in mind that the institution of exilarch did not exist in Spain; therefore, some sort of rank of “Head of the Jews” may nonetheless have been conferred on the court Jews there, although we have no real proof of this, aside from what *Rabad* says about Ya'aqov b. Jo.

Another piece of circumstantial evidence may be added here: the regime in which the *negidim* Shmuel and Yehoseph functioned was an unusual one in the annals of Islam. It may be asserted that this specific regime, the *amirs* of the small kingdoms, did not operate precisely according to the laws of Islam; rather, their operations were based only on their political and social needs. In the eleventh century, the small kingdoms (*muluk al-tawa'if*) did not run according to the pact of Umar or the orthodox Muslim model. The *amirs* were embroiled in a battle of survival for their personal rule and their realms, and were struggling under the constant threat of being reconquered by the Christians, who were advancing and becoming more and more threatening. Thus, they appointed officials on the basis of immediate needs, people with abilities that could be of immediate benefit, without considering their religion or traditions.<sup>52</sup>

Similarly, the Fatimid regime in which the court Jews of Egypt functioned – those who were supposedly appointed to the position of Head of the Jews – was also not a genuine Muslim administration, but rather atypical in the history of Islam. At least up to the last third of the eleventh century, the Fatimid regime was Isma'ili in nature, and very different from the previous and subsequent governments, which ruled according to the Sunna. A government run by a minority group, it was hated by the Sunni population. When points of conflict arose between the customary Sunni approach and Fatimid-Isma'ili law, the Fatimid imams gave preference to the Isma'ili laws.<sup>53</sup> It is reasonable to assume that just as the Fatimids acted according to the Isma'ili views in other regards, they also granted the position of *ra'is al-yahud* to a Jewish figure who could be of practical use to them in their court. This precedent inspired a longstanding tradition that was maintained down through the eras of the Ayyubids, the Mamlukes, and the Ottomans. This is an interesting point of comparison which still needs to be examined and discussed.

We do not have indisputable facts about the Head of the Jews in Egypt or in Spain, only bits and pieces of hints and weak assumptions. The entire structure that I am creating is based solely on circumstantial evidence and lacks a real basis of support. I, therefore, understand full well the position of my learned colleagues,

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<sup>52</sup> Ashtor, *History of the Jews*, vol. 2, p. 15.

<sup>53</sup> Y. Lev, *State and Society in Fatimid Egypt* (Leiden, 1991), p. 197.

who reject this point of view outright and argue that I must bring genuine proof. Nevertheless, taking together all the points I have raised in my previous articles and in this paper, I believe that there is a real historic possibility that in both Egypt and Spain, the ruling authorities did appoint a “Head of the Jews.” And I would like to again stress that the title “Head of the Jews” conferred by the authorities and the title *nagid*, which was bestowed by the heads of the yeshivot, do not necessarily coincide.

If, by any chance, there be some genuine proof, that both in 11<sup>th</sup> century's Spain and Egypt, there existed such a legal appointed position, it would strengthen our knowledge of political and social conducting of both Jewish community and Muslim regime. If the *ra'is al-yahud* did in fact exist in Spain and Egypt, what does that mean for those communities? For further research into them? In what direction should further research into the question of the existence or non-existence of *ra'is al-yahud* go? These are the types of questions whose answers would make a difference in a future research. We are obligated to search for any possible hint in Jewish and Arabic sources, and hopefully we get a satisfactory answer.

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