Several comments on a Genizah fragment of Bavli, Eruvin 57B–59A

This article refers to a Cairo Genizah fragment related to Bavli, Eruvin tractate 57b–59a, identified as Cambridge, UL T-S F1 (1) 85. FGP No. C 96541. The article begins with a description of the Genizah fragment and presents a reproduction of the fragment itself at the end of the article. Reference is made to the content and several comments are made in an effort to characterise the fragment.

Keywords: Genizah; Eruvin; Sugya; Aramaic words; Geographical sites.

Description of the Genizah Fragment

The Genizah fragment is identified as Cambridge, UL T-S F1 (1) 85, and here I shall discuss one folio (No. C 96541 at the Friedberg Jewish Manuscript Society) selected at random.

The fragment includes approximately 36 lines. The measurements of the folio are 26.5 cm × 32.3 cm. The measurements of the written area are 20.5 cm × 24.5 cm. The page is torn at the edges and a considerable part of it is faded and illegible. The legible part of the fragment, which parallels that of the printed version (Vilna), begins with the words ‘…ve-ha at hu de-amrat’ (57b) and ends with the words ‘ein, le-makom’ (59a).

The scribe added occasional signs above or below some words in the fragment as necessary in his opinion. The purpose of the upper signs is to note deletion of letters or decoration of the word mishna, and of the lower signs to note how the words should be read. Between the lines, there are emendations in a different hand. The writing style is Square Eastern (Goldberg 1986:55).

Paleographically, the formative features of the letters have a greater similarity to letter specimens written in 995 AD (unknown place) and to letter specimens written in Cairo, Egypt, in 1003/4 (Beit-Arié 1987:15, 17).

Geographical sites

The fragment mentions several matters also mentioned in the various versions stated above (sometimes with minor linguistic changes), such as geographical places and special words. The names of the geographic places mentioned in the fragment are ‘Ardashir’ (Neaman 1972:145–146; Obermeyer 1929:263–265; Oppenheimer 1983:223–234) (5) and ‘Tigris’ (Epstein 1935:404; Obermeyer 1929:90) (57b). Ardashir was a large settlement on the west bank of the Tigris river, which in the time of the amora Raba was connected to a town named Ktesifon by means of an eruv techumin (Eshel 1979:36–37; Neaman 1972:136–138). In Hebrew, the Tigris is called hiddekel (חידקאל) and in the Talmud it is mentioned in its Aramaic name: Diglat(דיגלת) (Eshel 1979:91). All these places belong to the Mehoza area (Oppenheimer 1983:223–234).

Unique words that appear only in this text

Special words in this fragment are the words, ‘flanks of a wall’ (אַטְמַהַאתַא דשורא) (6), which appear with vowelisation marks to note how the words should be read and mean ‘flanks (i.e., sides or projecting parts) of a wall’ (Aruch HaShalem 1955:62). Another possible interpretation is:

[...]flanks (i.e., sides of a building or projecting parts of a building) like caves, and they stand in the water (as though connected to the flanks of a wall) [in seventy cubits and some].

3. Tosafot, Eruvin 57a s.v. R. Huna.

Note: The collection entitled ‘Eben Scheffler Festschrift’, sub-edited by Jurie H. le Roux (University of Pretoria) and Christo Lombaard (University of South Africa).
Yet another interpretation is ‘parts of the wall that are like its wings’ (Krauss 1921:64) or probably ‘certain foundation walls which are incorporated into the Hiddekel’.4

Such also is the word apeskima (אפשימה) (13), meaning ‘a rope made of the bark of a nut tree’,5 ‘ropes made of the fibres of the Indian nut’, ‘anything weaved from palm leaves’ or ‘rope made of dates’.6

The word apeskima (אפשימה), according to the first expression in the text of the sugya, is a fibre that grows around the palm tree,7 from whence the measuring rope is manufactured. And there is a dispute between R. Abba and R. Jacob about the meaning of the word nargila (נגרילה) (13) and of the word navra (נברא) (14). According to R. Abba, the meaning of the nargila is ‘dates’. R. Abba defines the word nargila by its name. However, R. Jacob defines the word nargila by its description, ‘A palm-tree which has only one bast’ (14), and the meaning of the word ‘navra’ is ‘woven rope’ and the meaning of ‘A palm-tree which has only one bast’ is, according to R. Jacob, ‘dates that need (enough to) weave them (into) one rope’.8 Another interpretation of ‘A palm-tree which has only one bast’ is ‘a palm tree that has only one branch’,9 and there are other interpretations of the word nargila.10

According to the second expression in the text of the sugya (others read), the dispute between R. Abba and R. Jacob concerns identification of the species called apeskima from which the measuring rope is made.

According to R. Abba, the species is called nargila (נגרילה) with no added explanation of this word, and according to R. Jacob this species is called ‘A palm-tree which has only one bast’, which means ‘a fibre that twists and climbs around the palm tree’,11 and there are other interpretations of the word navra (נברא).12 In fact, the differences between these two expressions derive from alternate versions embraced by different scholars (Aminoah 2016:1006).

In ancient times, ropes were woven from palm leaves and also used for measuring purposes because this type of rope would not shrink in the sunny season nor expand in the rainy season. These measurement techniques were regularly used by surveyors and they were also appropriate for measuring distances in the context of the Sabbath limits (Safrai & Safrai 2009:161).

Another word that bears interpretation is megeg (מגי) (16), ‘megeg rope’ (מגי כבל). (17). megeg is a type of reed (a species of water plant from the Cyperaceae family that grows in swamps and on the banks of streams – Cyperus, papyrus),13 and ‘megge rope’ is a type of reed used to make rope14 that resembles rubber or a type/species of rubber.15 A similar interpretation is a grass called megeg used to make a rope that resembles rubber (Epstein 1982:104). Yet another option is ‘megeg- oil in the Arabic language – Araqiya’ (Lewin 1934:172).

The verb mekaded (מקאדה) (= pierce) (2 x 21) has several interpretations with an almost identical meaning. The word means: cut17 or pierce (the mountain).18 Some think that there is no real difference between these versions;19 however, the source of the word is unclear (Safrai & Safrai 2009:162). In Aramaic dictionaries, the meaning of the verb kadad (קדה) is to measure distances in a mountainous region20 and the meaning of the verb kadar (קטד) is to measure,21 and some of the researchers interpreted the Mishna accordingly (Safrai & Safrai 2009:162).

There are differences between the fragment and the other versions contained in the manuscripts and in the Vilna edition mentioned above, evident mainly in linguistic aspects such as the adding or removing of a linguistic form, linguistic exchanges and changes in the linguistic order, as well as multiple use of vowel letters. The differences in each of the words mentioned above derive from variant versions of the different scribes, or as varying linguistic forms, for instance, with regard to the word mekaded (מקאדה).

The fragment’s version does not contribute to understanding problematic issues in the sugya, such as the discrepancy between the second expression, ‘some there are who read’ (25), and the first, ‘What may be the depth of a glen?’ – R. Joseph replied: Two cubits. Abaye raised an objection against him … He holds the view of “Others” [=R. Meir] (26). The problem that arises when comparing these two expressions is that according to the second form, the difficulty brought on behalf of Abaye and the resolution (not voiced by Abaye (Halivni

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There is another suggestion, to read (in the version of the Mishna – ha-mumche (מומחה) (= ‘only along the beaten track’ [an expert, skilled surveyor]) (34). This word joins the other versions of manuscripts (such as, MSS Munich 95, Vatican 109, Oxford 366) where the same word ha-mumche (only along the beaten track) was also mentioned. This version in the fragment does not support Rashi’s version, who has the form ella mumche (₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪₪称之 (במשיחה), that is, with a measuring rope (of flax [Goldberg 1986:143; Lieberman 1962:383]), instead of ella min ha-mumche (מומחה) (only along the beaten track). This in light of the correspondence between the language of the Tosefta, which brings the short form en modedin ella min ha-mumche (אלא מן המומחה) (only along the beaten track), and the language of the Tosafot,28 which has en modedin ella bemeshicha (אלמה במשיחה) (only along the beaten track). According to this suggestion, the version in the Mishna was disrupted to form ella min ha-mumche (אלא מן המומחה) (Dinner 1895:52) (only along the beaten track) instead of bemeshicha (במשיחה) (only with a measuring rope (of flax)) as in the Tosafot. All these interpretative suggestions raise exegetical, linguistic and syntactic difficulties.29 For example, with regard to the Mishna’s version of the words min ha-mumche (מקומך). If the Mishna’s version is min ha-mumche and the word mumche (מקומך) means a person proficient in measuring (as interpreted by Rashi and later by R. Ovadia of Bartenura), then the word min (_subplot) is redundant. And indeed, some versions, for instance Rashi’s version, do not have the word min but rather en modedin ella mumche (אלא מומחה) (or en moded ella mumchim) (研讨). However, some scholars are of the opinion that even this version is incorrect, rather it should be en modedin ella mumchim (研讨).20

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