

*Gabriel M. Rosenbaum*

## THE ARABIC DIALECT OF JEWS IN MODERN EGYPT

Gabriel M. Rosenbaum was born in Jerusalem and has lived most of his life in Tel Aviv. He received his Ph.D. from Tel Aviv University in 1995 and is a senior lecturer in Arabic Literature at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. His research and academic publications focus on the literature, drama, language and folklore of modern Egypt, based both on written sources and on close contact with Egyptian culture and its makers. He writes fiction prose and poetry in Hebrew and has also published translations of foreign literary works into Hebrew, including two plays by Egyptian playwrights. He has visited Egypt many times and has lectured on several occasions at the Israeli Academic Center in Cairo.

### INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

Jews living in various parts of the Arab world sometimes spoke distinctive Arabic dialects,<sup>2</sup> differing in a number of respects from the Arabic spoken by their Muslim and Christian neighbors. As Haim Blanc has pointed out, however, until recently the Arabic spoken by the Jews of Egypt in the twentieth century has been thought to differ very little from that spoken by non-Jews. In a preliminary study of the Arabic of the Jews of Cairo, Blanc was careful not to label the linguistic variety he was describing as “Jewish Cairene.”<sup>3</sup> Notwithstanding this guarded formulation, he laid the foundations for a description of modern spoken Egyptian Judeo-Arabic. Beyond his pioneering articles,<sup>4</sup> however, the

spoken dialect of the Jews of Egypt has received scant attention, and extremely little has been written on the basis of data collected from Jewish speakers of Egyptian Arabic.<sup>5</sup> The purpose of my study is to continue Blanc’s work and fill a gap in this area.

In Egypt, Muslims and Coptic Christians speak what is essentially the same dialect; local variants are geographically rather than ethnically conditioned. However, the language of the Jews of Cairo and Alexandria, while influenced by the respective local dialects, contains many common elements – in the areas of phonology, morphology, and particularly vocabulary – which are not to be found in the dialects spoken by non-Jews. From the point of view of phonology and morphology, the unique fea-

tures of this Jewish Arabic speech are constant, irrespective of the circumstances of communication. The distinctive lexical features, on the other hand, usually appear only in communications among Jews.

In the twentieth century, about 98% of the Jews of Egypt lived in the two large cities of Cairo and Alexandria.<sup>6</sup> Today almost no Jews remain in Egypt, and the number of those outside Egypt who still use Egyptian Judeo-Arabic is constantly diminishing, so that this language will probably disappear in the not far-distant future. The following survey, based primarily on data elicited from informants and constrained by limitations of space, gives but a sampling of the relevant grammatical phenomena and vocabulary items.<sup>7</sup>

DISTINCTIVE  
CHARACTERISTICS OF  
EGYPTIAN SPOKEN JEWISH  
ARABIC: PHONOLOGY  
AND MORPHOLOGY

*Consonants and Vowels*

The phonetic realization of the Egyptian dialect (henceforth: Egyptian Arabic) by Jews is nearly identical to that of non-Jews. However, some differences do exist, mostly as a consequence of the introduction of non-Arabic elements into the spoken language, mainly from Hebrew but also some from a number of European languages.

Certain consonants have entered Jewish Arabic in borrowings from Hebrew and other languages. These are sometimes pronounced as in the source language and sometimes adapted to the pronunciation of Egyptian Arabic. For example, most speakers of Jewish Arabic pronounce the consonant *p*,

which does not exist in Arabic, as *p* ( $p = p$ ), but some pronounce it as *b* ( $p > b$ ); the former would say *purīm* (Purim, “the Feast of Lots”), the latter *burīm*. On the other hand, the consonant *q* (ق), realized as a uvular stop in Standard Arabic, is universally pronounced as a glottal stop (like *hamza*) in Cairo and the cities of Lower Egypt, and this is true of the Jews as well ( $q > ʔ$ ) – even when uttering words of Hebrew origin, such as *šattaʔ* (“be quiet, don’t talk about this now”), derived from the Hebrew root ŠTQ. Occasionally, this consonant may also be realized as a velar stop ( $q > k$ ), yielding, for example, *kaddīš* (Kaddish, a liturgical prayer also used in commemoration of a death) instead of the more common form *ʔaddīš*. The phoneme /*b*/, which in Hebrew is pronounced either as a stop [*b*] or as a fricative [*v*], is always pronounced *b* by Egyptian Jews in words of Hebrew origin, as in *kabēd* (see below), versus *kavēd* in Hebrew.

Vowels in words of Hebrew origin are usually preserved in Jewish Arabic. *Shewa mobile* at the beginning of a word or syllable is almost always pronounced *e*, as in *tefillā* (prayer). The doubling of consonants in Hebrew words is also retained, as in *kippūr* ([Yom] Kippur, the Day of Atonement). The stress in such words is usually where it would be according to the rules of accentuation in Hebrew, even where these contradict the rules of Egyptian Arabic.

*The Definite Article, the Feminine, and the Plural*

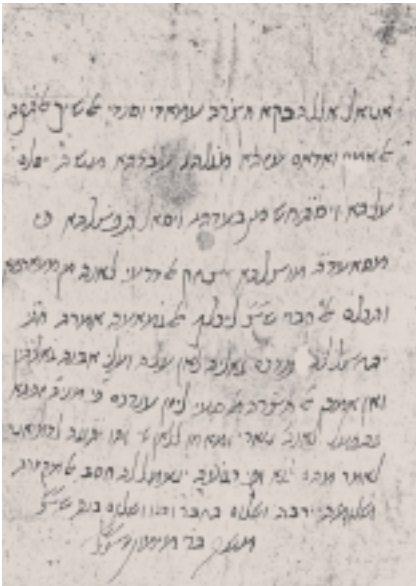
The Arabic definite article *el* is also used before words of non-Arabic origin. Only in collocations of Hebrew origin is the Hebrew definite article *ha* retained, as in the oath *beʔemēt hatorā* (by the Torah!). In rare cases, the prefixed *ha* is perceived as part of the succeeding word, and the Arabic definite article may then be attached as well: *el-harambām* (Maimonides, called in Hebrew by his acronym, *Rambam*, for Rabbenu Moshe ben Maimon).

Feminine forms of words of Hebrew origin are usually consistent with Arabic nominal patterns but retain the stress they would have had in Hebrew. For example, *kabedā* is the feminine form of *kabēd* (pest, nuisance, lit.: heavy), while *kohenā* (daughter/wife of a priest) is the feminine form of *kohēn* (priest).<sup>8</sup>

In the plural, the Hebrew form is usually retained, as in *mamzerīm* (bastards) or *mitsvōt* (religious commandments), but the Arabic plural suffix *īn* is occasionally attested, as in *mamzerīn*.



Purim play staged by Jewish schoolgirls in Cairo.



Judeo-Arabic letter of recommendation by Maimonides, bearing his signature.

### Non-Standard Verbal Patterns

Whereas Cairene Arabic uses the prefixes *a* and *n*, respectively, for the imperfect first person singular and plural, Alexandrians use the prefix *n* for the first person singular and the prefix *n* together with the suffix *u* for the plural.<sup>9</sup> This is the usage of the Jews in both Alexandria and Cairo. For example, a Cairo-born Jewish woman said: *'ana ba'a benḥebb-e 'awi bāba wumāma, ma 'ederteš nefāre'hum* (I love Dad and Mom very much; I couldn't leave them).

Non-standard verbal patterns in the past tense of a verb derived from the root GY' will be discussed below, in the section on "Participles and Typical Words."

### Preference for the Vowel *u* in Verbs and Nouns

A typical feature of Egyptian Jewish Arabic is the preferential use of the vowel *u* in some verbs and

nouns, as against the use of another vowel in the standard dialect.

In Egyptian Arabic, some first-form verbs have two possible patterns, *fe'el* and *fu'ul*, both of which are in use. Today there is a tendency to prefer the *fe'el* pattern, but Jewish speakers more commonly use the *fu'ul* pattern. For example, Jewish speakers will prefer the form *ḥulus* (come to an end, be finished) to *ḥeleş*. The same is true of nouns with two alternative pronunciation patterns. Jewish speakers prefer forms with the vowel *u*, while the preferred forms in the standard dialect are usually those with the vowel *e* (or *i*). Thus, for example, the Jews prefer the form

*šubbāk* ("window") to *šebbāk*, which is the more common form in the standard dialect.

A unique feature of Jewish Arabic is the use of the vowel *u* even in cases where the standard dialect has no such form, but uses *e* (or *i*) exclusively. Examples include *mušṭ* (comb), versus standard *mešṭ*; *ṭušt* (tub or washtub), versus standard *tešt*; and *muḥadda* (pillow), versus standard *meḥadda*. Even some words of Hebrew origin have Jewish Arabic versions substituting *u* for the original vowel: *kutubbā* (marriage contract), as opposed to *ketubbā*; or *kuppūr* ([Yom] Kippur), as opposed to *kippūr*.



A marriage contract from Mit-Ghamr (1903), decorated with motifs from Egyptian folklore.

PARTICLES AND  
TYPICAL WORDS

Jewish Arabic uses the demonstrative pronouns *de* and *dōn* in addition to the standard forms *da* and *dōl*.<sup>10</sup> I also found the form *dōni*, as a variant of *dōn*.

Jewish speakers often use the personal pronoun *humman* (they) instead of the standard *humma*, and, less often, *kamāna* (also, too), instead of standard *kamān*. Furthermore, Jewish Arabic has retained the interrogative particles *'ēš* (what?), *lēš* (why), and *kēf* or *kif* (how?), which have fallen out of use in the Cairene dialect. The Cairene dialect would also have put these particles at the end of the sentence, while Jewish Arabic places them at the beginning: *'ēš 'āyez?* (what do you want?), as opposed to *'āyez 'ēh?* in the standard dialect.

Jews often pronounce the number 400 as *'urbu'meyya*, instead of standard *rub'umeyya*, and a few informants pronounced the number 600 as *settemeyya*, versus standard *suttumeyya*.<sup>11</sup>

On the basis of descriptions of Egyptian Arabic from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Blanc demonstrated that some of the morphological features unique to the Jews of Cairo were once used by non-Jewish speakers as well. They fell into disuse over time, to be retained only by the Jews.<sup>12</sup> For example, the non-standard form *'ega* (he came), which can be conjugated in all persons in the past tense, appears in non-Cairene and non-Egyptian dialects, but in twentieth-century Cairo it was used only by Jews. I found further instances of forms now used only by Jews in other descriptions from the same period,

such as *gu* (they came), versus standard *gum*, and *de* (this),<sup>13</sup> used in addition to the standard form *da*.<sup>14</sup> Another non-standard form used by many Jewish informants is the third person feminine singular form *gātet* (she came), versus *gat* in Egyptian Arabic. It should be pointed out that several forms that are no longer used in Cairo are still used in non-Cairene Egyptian dialects.<sup>15</sup>

THE VOCABULARY OF  
SPOKEN EGYPTIAN  
JEWISH ARABIC

Vocabulary items used exclusively by Jews consist mainly of Hebrew words and expressions, which often undergo changes in meaning and sometimes changes in form as well. Another major component is Arabic words that are used by Jews in a different way than by non-Jews. Other, quantitatively more limited sources are Aramaic and various European languages, mainly French and Italian, as well

as Ladino (Judeo-Spanish). The syntactic patterns into which all the Hebrew and other non-Arabic components of the vocabulary are implanted are those of Egyptian Arabic.

As in the vocabularies of other Jewish languages, many uniquely Jewish words and expressions are connected with religious and communal aspects of Jewish life. Others are used as a secret language for communicating information in the presence of those who are not members of the community.<sup>16</sup> The vocabulary items described below are typical examples, constituting only a small part of the corpus I collected.

*Words Originating in European  
Languages*

The word *el-kumminutē* or *el-komminutā* (the first derived from French *communauté*, the second probably from Italian *comunità*, with the addition of the definite article) is commonly used to designate the central organ of the Jewish



The Chancellor of the Alexandria Jewish community in his office.

community, which was responsible for managing its religious and secular affairs. *Bēt es-sinyōr*, synonymous with *el-kumminūtē*, is also very commonly used among all Jews. *Es-sinyōr* (the lord, the master) was a term used especially among speakers of Italian and Ladino to designate the Chief Rabbi. *Bēt es-sinyōr* thus refers to the Chief Rabbi's house, or the seat of the Rabbinate.

Several more words stemming from Ladino are used by all Egyptian Jews. Two common examples are *robbīsa* (or *rabbīsa* and *ribbīsa*), denoting a rabbi's wife<sup>17</sup> and often used more generally to denote a pious woman, and *kurrātša*, denoting a pouch for carrying one's phylacteries and prayer shawl.

#### Words and Expressions Whose Components Are All Arabic

Some of the words and expressions used by Jews consist exclusively of components of purely Arabic origin. For example, the word *'erāya*, which in Egyptian Arabic means "reading" as well as declaiming verses of the Koran, is used by Jews to denote a memorial service. *Gabal* means "mountain," but Cairene Jews use it, with the prefixed definite article (*el-gabal*), to denote a cemetery, so that *tele' el-gabal* (went up the mountain) means "went to visit the cemetery."

The Jews of Egypt use two words to denote the Sabbath, Hebrew *šabbāt* and Arabic *sabt*. A second-form verb, *sabbet*, derived from the Arabic term, means "spent the Sabbath with," as in *ta'āla sabbet 'andena* (come and spend the Sabbath with us). No verb with this meaning exists in Egyptian Arabic.

Some of these expressions have no meaning outside Jewish Arabic. For example, it was the custom of the Jews of Egypt to eat goose at the festive meal on the holiday of Shavuot (Pentecost), giving rise to the expression *'id el-wezza* ("feast of the goose"), a popular name for the holiday. According to folk belief, a wife who does not serve her husband goose on Pentecost risks divorce.

#### Hebrew Components

#### The creation of new words and expressions based on Hebrew roots

Some words and expressions in Jewish Arabic are neologisms created from Hebrew words or roots. For example, the second-form verb *makket* (hit, beat) is formed from the root MKT, otherwise non-existent in Arabic and derived from the Hebrew word *makkot* (blows, in the plural), whose Hebrew root is NKY. The verb is commonly used in the imperative: *Makketo!* (Hit him! Beat him up!).

The verb *'etdardem* or *'eddardem* (fell asleep) is also commonly used in the imperative by impatient or angry parents to their children at bedtime: "Go to sleep! Fall asleep!"<sup>18</sup> Many speakers consider it a profanity. The verb *dardem* exists in Egyptian Arabic, where, as a secondary form of *radam*, it means "cover, fill [mainly with earth]." *Etdardem* is its passive form,<sup>19</sup> but neither form is widespread. In Jewish Arabic, *'etdardem*, apparently influenced by the Hebrew root RDM and the verb *nirdam* (fell asleep), is used only with the meaning of "fall asleep." The verb, which looks as if it were



A Hebrew grammar book designated for the Arabic-speaking Jewish pupils of Alexandria.

derived from the quadriliteral root DRDM (expanded from the trilateral root RDM), exists only in the seventh form and also appears in the expression *'etdardem durdēmet Hanōh* (fell asleep like Enoch, i.e., fell into a deep sleep). The word *durdēma*, which is used exclusively in this expression and only in the construct form, is reminiscent of the Hebrew word *tardema* and also has the appearance of being derived from the root DRDM. The name of Enoch and the expression's metaphorical meaning appear to be based on Gen. 5:24: "Enoch walked with God, and he was not; for God took him."

The eighth-form verb *'ettabal* or *'ettabal*, meaning "immersed oneself in a ritual bath" (usually said of a woman), does not exist in Arabic and derives from the Hebrew root ṬBL, as does the word *ṭabbāla*,

referring to the (female) supervisor of the ritual bath and formed according to a nominal pattern often used for indicating professions. Egyptian Arabic has an identical word meaning “woman drummer,” derived from the Arabic root *ṬBL* and its second-form verbal derivative, *ṭabbel*, which means “beat a drum” (see also *maṭbal* and *ṭebilā* in the next section).

### Words and expressions whose Hebrew components retain their original form and meaning

Many Hebrew words retain their form and meaning in Jewish Arabic. Examples are *še'er* (lie); *gannāb* (thief); *rā'*, pl. *ra'im* (bad, an evil person/persons); *le'olām va'ēd* (forever); *nēs* (miracle); and *yerē šamāyim* (God-fearing).

#### Words and Expressions Originating in Aspects of Jewish Life

A considerable portion of the unique vocabulary of Egyptian Jewish Arabic refers to aspects of Jewish religious and communal life. Below are some typical examples.

#### The synagogue and prayer

*Tefillā* (prayer); *gelyān*<sup>20</sup> (raising the Torah scroll in the synagogue); *tagleyya* (carrying the Torah scroll around the synagogue); *šammāš* (caretaker, beadle of a synagogue; also, the ninth candle from which the Hanukkah lamp is lit); *ḥazzān* (cantor); *gabbāy* (administrator of a synagogue); *tebbā* (prayer rostrum); *sēfer*, pl. *sefarim* (Torah scroll).



Bar mitzvah ceremony in Cairo (1953).

#### Jewish holidays and the Jewish calendar

*'urubbā*, *'erubbā*, *'arubbā*, and also *yōm el-'urubbā* (the eve of a holiday); *roššanā*, *roš ḥašanā* (Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year); *sukkōt* (Sukkot, the Feast of Tabernacles); *purim* or *burim* (Purim); and *'ēḥa*, the Hebrew title of the Book of Lamentations, used to designate the Ninth of Ab, the fast day on which Lamentations is read in the synagogue (see also below).

#### Religious duties and ceremonies

The word *tefilim* or *tefilin*, i.e., phylacteries, is also used to refer to the Bar Mitzva ceremony celebrating a boy's coming of age at thirteen. Often prefixed by an Arabic definite article, it is also used in mixed expressions having to do with the Bar Mitzva ceremony: *ḥayelbes*

*et-tefilim* (lit.: he will put on phylacteries, that is, he is about to celebrate his Bar-Mitzvah); *labbesūh et-tefilim* (they celebrated his Bar Mitzva). Other examples in this category include: *mezuzā* (a parchment scroll affixed to the doorpost); *habdalā* (the ritual concluding the Sabbath or a holiday); *maṭbal* (ritual bath); *ṭebilā* (immersion in a ritual bath); and *'iddūs* or *'addūs* (*kiddush*, a prayer recited before a festive Sabbath or holiday meal). *Kapparāt 'avonōt*, or *kapparā* alone, refers to the ritual of atonement practiced before Yom Kippur or in times of illness or trouble, in which a rooster (for men) or a hen (for women) is slaughtered and its meat, usually, given to the poor. The expression is also used as an exclamation when something breaks or some other bad thing happens: “let it atone for your sins!”, i.e., “Never mind!”

### Words and Expressions Whose Hebrew Components Have Undergone Change in Form or Meaning

As in other eastern Jewish dialects, the word *ḥaḥām*, which means “wise,” “wise man,” or “scholar” in Hebrew, is the usual designation in Egyptian Jewish Arabic for a rabbi. Arabic suffixes of Turkish origin yield *ḥaḥāmbāša* (Chief Rabbi) and *ḥaḥāmḥāna* (the Rabbinat, the central institution of the Jewish community).

*’Ēḥa*, designating the fast of the Ninth of Ab (see above), is used in a number of expressions with negative connotations, as in *yōm ’ēḥa* (figuratively, a bad, unlucky, or disastrous day); *wešš-e ’ēḥa* (a grieved-looking person); *’āmel zayy-e ’amūd ’ēḥa* (lit.: acts like a pillar of the Ninth of Ab, i.e., stands still).

*’Ēšet-ḥāyil*, or *’ēšet-ḥāyim* (“woman of valor,” Prov. 31:10) is used by Egyptian Jews quite frequently to refer to a righteous, pious woman, loyal to her husband and family; this expression refers more to a woman's moral qualities than to the skills enumerated in Proverbs.

The expression *’adonāy ’emēt wumoše ’emēt* (lit.: God is true and Moses is true), as well as the shortened version *’adonāy ’emēt*, does not exist in modern Hebrew. In Jewish Arabic it is an exclamation, made in response to hearing something incredible: “Really?! That's amazing! You don't say!”

*’Odeš* (lit.: something sacred or consecrated) refers to a Jewish charity fund providing free lodging and economic assistance to indigent Jews.

### Expressions Consisting of Mixed Components

The linguistic creativity of the speakers of Egyptian Jewish Arabic is especially noticeable in their creation of mixed expressions combining Hebrew and non-Hebrew (usually Arabic) components. The structure and syntax of such expressions are those of standard Egyptian Arabic.

*Yā wāy wāy yā barūḥ ’adonāy*: This expression, used in response to extreme fluctuations, for good or ill, in a person's or the world's situation (such as a drought followed by floods, or a very poor person suddenly coming into a lot of money), is based on the common Egyptian Arabic pattern *yā ... yā ...* (either ... or ...), into which two contradictory possibilities are inserted. In this case, the initial insertion consists of the onomatopoeic words *wāy wāy*, which denote sorrow, while the second is a Hebrew expression meaning “blessed is God,” yielding the meaning “either things are terrible

or they are wonderful; feast or famine.”

*Hazzān bistanna ’addiš*, “(like) a cantor waiting for a Kaddish,” is an expression used of someone looking for an opportunity to earn something for his livelihood, even at the expense of others. The two nouns are of Hebrew origin, while the verb is Arabic.

*Rama el-’avonōt*, “cast his sins away” (in the *Tashlikh* ceremony on the Jewish New Year). The verb and definite article are Arabic; the noun is Hebrew.

### ELEMENTS OF JEWISH SECRET LANGUAGES AND THEIR REFLECTION OF RELATIONS WITH NON-JEWS

In many Jewish communities, in the East as well as in the West, elements of the unique Jewish vocabulary served as a secret language, making it possible to communicate in the presence of non-Jews without the latter understanding what



Entrance to the Jewish Quarter of Cairo. The old Jewish Quarter is part of the Mousky quarter, a commercial neighborhood that was populated mostly by Jews.

was being said. Artisans and merchants often developed secret languages for their own particular professions, enabling them to speak about commercial as well as private matters in the presence of customers – including Jews who were not of the profession.

The word *gōy* (see below) is used by Jews in both the East and the West to denote a non-Jew. In Egypt and other areas in the east, the Jews make a terminological distinction between Christians, Muslims, and Jews in order to be able to report on a person's affiliation during the process of communication.<sup>21</sup> The Jews of Egypt refer to a Jew as *ben 'ammenu*, pl. *benē 'ammenu* (lit.: a member of our people); to a Muslim as *gōy*, f. *goyā*, pl. *goyīm*; and to a Christian as *'arēr*, f. *'arērā*, pl. *'arerīm*. The latter term, *'arēr*, is derived from the Hebrew word *'arēl* (uncircumcised),<sup>22</sup> which is used in various Jewish dialects in the east and even appears in written texts. Another common word used as a secret language element is *šatta'* (from the Hebrew root ŠTQ), "be quiet," i.e., don't speak about this now, so that the non-Jew won't hear.<sup>23</sup>

The most developed secret language is that of the goldsmiths, which was used for centuries by the Jewish (mostly Karaite) goldsmiths in Egypt and was later adopted by their Muslim and Christian colleagues, who use it to this day. There are some local variations of this language in different areas of Egypt. For example, "one" in all versions of

the goldsmiths' language is *'ahād*, derived from Hebrew *'ehād* (or the construct form *'ahād*); "two," on the other hand, is *šanāyen* (derived from Hebrew *šenāyim*) in the Cairene version, while in Alexandria it is *'ahādēn*, a dual form of Hebrew *'ehād* (one), though this word has no such form in Hebrew. In all versions, *yāfet* refers to high quality goods or a good customer; phonetically, this word is similar to Hebrew *yafē* (beautiful, nice). It is also the colloquial Arabic form of *yāfit*, Standard Arabic for the biblical name Japheth (*yefet* or *yafet* in Hebrew), which, according to rabbinic interpretations, means "beautiful."<sup>24</sup> Most of the numbers, such as *šelūša* (three), *hemešša* (five), *šamūnya* (eight), and *šlušin* (thirty),

are of Hebrew origin, but some are not: *'ennetra* (ten), *mešit* (twenty, in Cairo), *'ennetretēn* (twenty, in Alexandria), *kwatrīn* (forty, derived from the word denoting "four" in the Romance languages, with the Arabic plural suffix *-in*). The goldsmiths' language has dozens more words for communicating information about customers and goods or giving instructions about how to treat customers. Most of them are derived either from Hebrew or from the names of goldsmiths' tools, some of which are archaic terms whose original meaning is no longer known to the speakers of the language. For example, a piece of jewelry that was returned by a customer and is now again on display is called *'admōn* or *'admūn*, from Hebrew *qadmon*, (ancient). *Hāt el-gaft* (lit.: "hand me the tweezers") means "be quiet, don't talk about this now," similarly to the word *šatta'* (see above).<sup>25</sup>

#### OATHS

Many informants insisted that swearing was a reprehensible habit and that they themselves refrained from pronouncing oaths. However, oaths are very common in the language of the Jews. Most consist of Hebrew components combined with Arabic oath formulas. The most commonly used oath formula is *we* (also *wu*, *wa*: by ..., by the life of ..., I swear by ...). Other formulas include *wehyāt* ... (by the life of ..., I swear by the life of ...), and *be*, similar to *we*.



Torah scrolls in the Ark of the Eliahu Hanabi Synagogue in Alexandria. The silver-plated scroll at the back was used only in the Kol Nidre service on Yom Kippur.



The most common and forceful oaths contain words denoting the Torah. A very frequent one is *be'emet hatorā* (by the truth of the Torah). The word *sēfer*, which denotes a Torah scroll, appears in a number of oaths, in both the singular form, *wes-sēfer* (I swear by the Torah scroll) and the plural, *wes-sefarim* (I swear by [all] the Torah scrolls). The strongest and most binding oath is *wes-sēfer kannidrē* (I swear by the Torah scroll of *kannidrē*). *Kannidrē* refers to the Kol Nidrei prayer, recited on the evening of Yom Kippur. Most of my informants, though not all, knew that the reference was to the Torah scrolls that are taken out of the Holy Ark for that prayer. All of them agreed that this was a very strong oath, which bound its user to telling the truth. Another common oath is *wehyāt el-harambām* (by the life of Maimonides).<sup>26</sup>

A number of oaths mention cult articles or objects in the vicinity of the person making the oath. Examples include *wet-tefilim* (I swear by the phylacteries); *wel-mušḥāf* (I swear by the [printed holy] book); and *wehyāt eš-šhakōl* (I swear by the drink). This last oath has its origin in the Hebrew blessing *šhakōl nihya bidvaro*, "(Blessed art Thou, Lord, king of the universe) by whose word everything was created," recited before imbibing a drink.

### CUSTOMS AND LANGUAGE

As with any distinct social group, the language of the Jews of Egypt contains expressions and idioms related to the group's way of life. Some of these are connected with events in the life of the community

and are said only in the context of these events.<sup>27</sup>

At the Passover seder, which in Jewish Arabic is called *lēlt el-haggadā* (lit.: "The night of the Haggadah"), it is customary to give each small child in turn a folded napkin with a piece of *matza* inside, which he then carries on his shoulder in commemoration of the parcels which the Children of Israel carried as they left Egypt. The leader of the ceremony conducts the following dialogue with each child in turn:

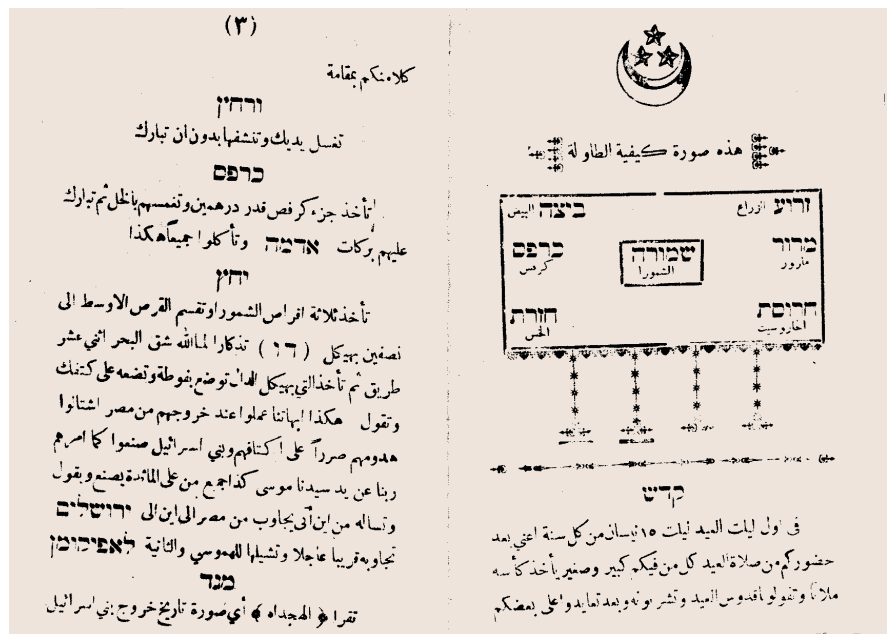
- *gayy-e mnēn?* (Where are you coming from?)
- *min mišrāyim.* (From Egypt.)
- *werāyeh fēn?* (And where are you going?)
- *'ala yerušalāyim.* (To Jerusalem.)<sup>28</sup>

Several informants reported that in families with many children, when the ceremony became repetitive, the more mischievous children would answer the first

question by saying things like *me-l-madrasa* (from school) or *min mašr el-gedīda* (from Heliopolis).

When Jewish parents want to quiet their tots and children or put them down to sleep, they sing: *ḥud el-bezza weskut / ḥud el-bezza wenām / ummak er-robbīsa / wa-būk el-ḥaḥām*, "Take the nipple and be quiet / take the nipple and sleep / your mother is a Rabbi's wife / and your father is the Rabbi." This is a Jewish version of a song that non-Jews sing to their small children. It has a number of versions; for example: *ḥud el-bezza weskut / ḥud el-bezza wenām / ummak es-sayyeda / wa-būk el-'imām*, "Take the nipple and be quiet / take the nipple and sleep / your mother is a lady / and your father is the Imam (prayer leader)."<sup>29</sup>

At the end of the Sabbath, Jews greet each other by saying *gum'etak ḥadra* (or *gum'etkum ḥadra* in the plural), "Have a good (lit.: green) week," a greeting used exclusively by Jews. The usual responses are



A Haggadah in Arabic, with Hebrew headings.

*wugum'etak hadra* (or just *wugum'etak*), "May you also have a green week," or *wugum'etak zayy es-sal'*, "May your week be as green as beet leaves." Other such greetings draw upon similes used by Egyptians generally to greet each other in the morning, such as *full* (jasmine) or *'ešta* (cream made from the foam accumulating at the top of the milk); for example, *wugum'etak zayy el-full*, "May you have a week (white and clean) like jasmine."

Jews who go to the synagogue at the end of the Sabbath receive myrtle branches. They rub the leaves in their hands and recite the blessing *borē 'ašēy besamīm* (lit.: [Blessed art Thou Lord, king of the universe], who created sweet-smelling trees). Myrtle in Arabic is *marsīn*, which some Jews pronounce *marsīm*, but



The Judeo-Arabic newspaper *Misraim*.



Conclusion of the Sabbath (*Habdālā*) ceremony in the Eliahu Hanabi Synagogue in Alexandria (1980).

many pronounce it *barsīm*, which in Egyptian Arabic denotes a species of clover used as animal feed. Some of my informants told me that they wondered how the same word could refer both to animal feed and to a plant rubbed for its sweet smell at the end of the Sabbath.

CONCLUDING NOTE

On the basis of the linguistic usages and vocabulary items described here, which represent only a small part of the repertoire of the Jewish Arabic spoken by the Jews of Egypt, it may be said that they had a dialect of their own. The Jews of Cairo and Alexandria, where nearly all the Jews lived, shared a common dialect which was distinct in quite a number of features from the dialects spoken

by non-Jews – a difference that was greater when the Jews were communicating with each other than when they communicated with non-Jews. Hundreds of words and expressions were unique to the Jews; many of these were of Hebrew origin, while others comprised a mixture of Hebrew, Arabic, and occasionally other languages as well. This vocabulary attests to ties with other Jewish dialects in the region, but it also has some distinctive features of its own, amounting, together with the phonological and morphological features described at the beginning of this article, to a dialect that we may call “Spoken Egyptian Jewish Arabic.” This dialect occasionally came to written expression as well. Certain words and expressions, particularly some of those having to do with religious and community life, may be found in the Arabic-language Jewish newspapers published in Egypt during the first half of the twentieth century. A few words even appear in earlier written texts, such as those found in the Cairo Geniza.

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1. This paper is based on parts of a forthcoming study of the Arabic dialect of the Jews of Egypt. I have described some of its results in two Hebrew articles: “Spoken Jewish Arabic in Modern Egypt: Hebrew and Non-standard Components,” *Massorot*, 12 (2002), pp. 117–148; and “Hebrew Words and Karaite Goldsmiths’ Secret Language Used by Jews and Non-Jews in Modern Egypt,” *Pe’amim*, 90 (2002), pp. 115–153.
2. Such as the dialect of the Jews of Baghdad, which differs from that of both Muslim and Christian inhabitants of that city; see Haim Rabin et al., “Jewish Languages: Common, Unique and Problematic Features” (A Scholars’ Forum), *Pe’amim*, 1 (Spring 1979), pp. 40–57 (Hebrew).
3. Haim Blanc, “The Nekteb-Nektebu Imperfect in a Variety of Cairene Arabic,” *Israel Oriental Studies*, 14 (1974), p. 207.
4. Idem, “Egyptian Judeo-Arabic: More on the Subject of R. Mordechai b. Yehuda Ha-Levi’s *Sefer darxe no’am*,” *Sefunot*, 18/NS 3 (1985), pp. 299–314 (Hebrew); idem, “Egyptian Arabic in the Seventeenth Century: Notes on the Judeo-Arabic Passages of *Darxe No’am* (Venice, 1697),” in Shelomo Morag et al. (eds.), *Studies in Judaism and Islam Presented to Shelomo Dov Goitein*, Jerusalem 1981, pp. 185–202. Both articles describe colloquial Arabic texts written down by Jews in the seventeenth century.
5. For details, see Rosenbaum, “Spoken Jewish Arabic” (above, note 1), in the Introduction.
6. See Gudron Krämer, “The Rise and Decline of the Jewish Community of Cairo,” *Pe’amim* 7 (1981), p. 5 (Hebrew).
7. For additional details, see my articles cited in note 1 above.
8. In Egyptian Arabic, words with long vowels have their stress on the syllable with the last long vowel; therefore, one would have expected the feminine forms of *kabēd* and *kohēn* to be *kabēda* and *kohēna*.
9. On this issue see Blanc, “The Nekteb-Nektebu Imperfect” (above, note 3), p. 206; and idem, “Egyptian Judeo-Arabic” (above, note 4), p. 303.
10. See Blanc, “The Nekteb-Nektebu Imperfect” (above, note 3), p. 216.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 217
12. *Ibid.*, p. 207.
13. Cf. *An Egyptian Alphabet for the Egyptian People*, n.a., Florence, 1904<sup>2</sup>, p. 84, where *gu* is the only form.
14. Cf. Gabriel Sacroug. *The Egyptian Travelling Interpreter, or Arabic Without a Teacher for English Travellers Visiting Egypt*, Cairo 1874, p. 239.
15. For such forms see Peter Behnstedt and Manfred Woidich, *Die ägyptisch-arabischen Dialekte*, (IV: *Glossar Arabisch-Deutsch*), Wiesbaden 1994; on this matter see also Blanc, “The Nekteb-Nektebu Imperfect” (above, note 3), p. 216.
16. See, e.g., Abraham Ben-Yaacob, *Tovrit ve’aramit bilshon yehudey bavel* (Hebrew and Aramaic in the Language of the Jews of Iraq), Jerusalem 1985, pp. 10–12; Moshé Bar-Asher, “Eléments hébreux dans le judéo-arabes Marocain,” in idem, *Massorot uleshonot shel yehudey tzefon afriqa (Traditions linguistiques des Juifs d’Afrique du Nord)* Jerusalem-Ashkelon 1999, p. 158.

17. The forms *rabí*, *rebí*, *ribí* and *rubí* exist in Ladino as versions of the Hebrew *rav* or *rabbi*; see David M. Bunis, *A Lexicon of the Hebrew and Aramaic Elements in Modern Judezmo*. Jerusalem 1993, p. 406. The feminine Egyptian Judeo-Arabic forms are derived from these.
18. See also Geoffrey Khan, "A Note on the Trade Argot of the Karaite Goldsmiths of Cairo," *Mediterranean Language Review*, 9 (1995–1997), p. 75.
19. See El-Said Badawi and Martin Hinds, *A Dictionary of Egyptian Arabic*, Beirut 1986, p. 284.
20. A homonym in the standard dialect, used by Jews as well, means "dishwashing" or "dishes to wash."
21. See for example Moshé Bar-Asher, "Evolution des termes hébreux dans le judéo-arabe," in idem, *Massorot uleshonot* (above, note 14), p. 255 (Hebrew); idem, "Aspects linguistiques de la composante hébraïque du judéo-arabe moderne," *Massorot uleshonot*, p. 211 (Hebrew). For words signifying Christians and Muslims see, e.g., Guershon Ben-Oren and Wolf Moshkowitz, "L'argot des commerçants juifs de Géorgie comparé à celui d'autres pays d'Orient," *Massorot*, 2 (1986), p. 54 (Hebrew). See also the next note.
22. Cf. the form *narelím*, used by the Jews of Piedmont in Italy: Primo Levi, *Hatavla hamahazorit* (Hebrew translation of *Il Sistema Periodico*), Tel Aviv 1987, p. 10.
23. See also Blanc, "The Nekteb-Nektebu Imperfect" (above, note 3), p. 217.
24. BT *Megilla* 9b, commenting on Gen. 9:27.
25. For a detailed description of the goldsmiths' secret language see Rosenbaum, "Hebrew Words" (above, note 1).
26. On the definite article in this word see above, in the section on "The Definite Article, the Feminine, and the Plural."
27. On the customs of Egyptian Jews according to written records see, e.g., Raphael Ben-Shimon, *Sefer Nehar Mitzrayim* (The Book of the River of Egypt), Jerusalem 1998 (Hebrew); Yom-Tov Israel, *Sefer minhagey mitzrayim lefi seder hashulhan 'arukh* (The Book of the Customs of Egypt: Arranged in the Order of the Shulhan Arukh), ed. Avraham Yosef, Jerusalem–Holon 1990; and Yehuda Nini, *Mimizrah wumiyam: Yehudei Mitsrayim – Hayyey yom yom vehishtakfutam besifrut hashut 5642–5674* (From East and West: The Jews of Egypt – Their Everyday Lives and Their Reflection in the Responsa Literature 1882–1914), Tel-Aviv 2000. On everyday life in modern times see, e.g., Jacques Hassoun, "Chroniques de la vie quotidienne," in idem (ed.), *Juifs du Nil*, Paris 1981.
28. For a description of this ceremony and a French version of the dialogue see Hassoun, *Chroniques* (above note 27), pp. 174–175.
29. Cf. E. E. Elder, *Egyptian Colloquial Arabic Reader*. London 1927, p. 113.