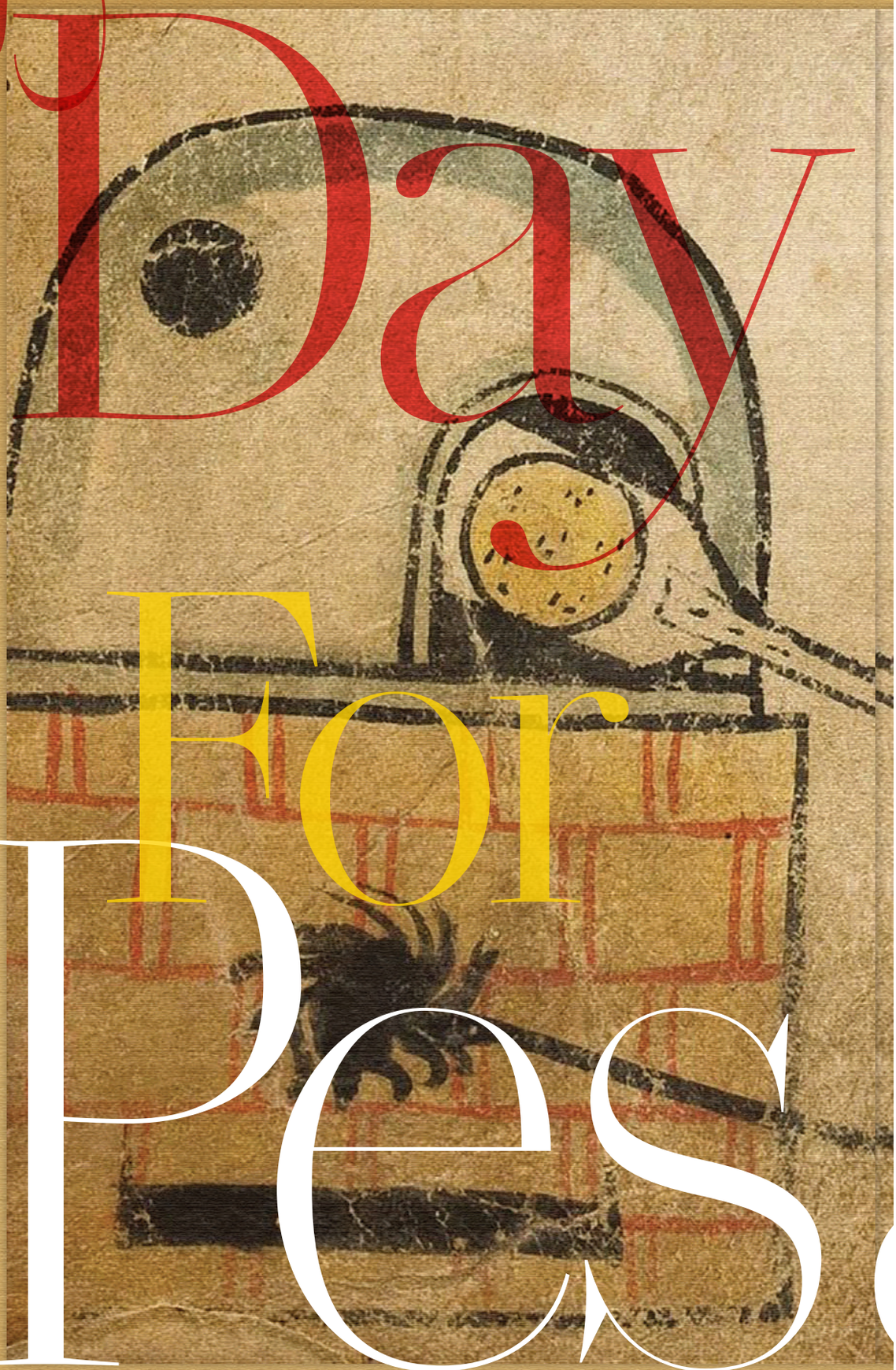
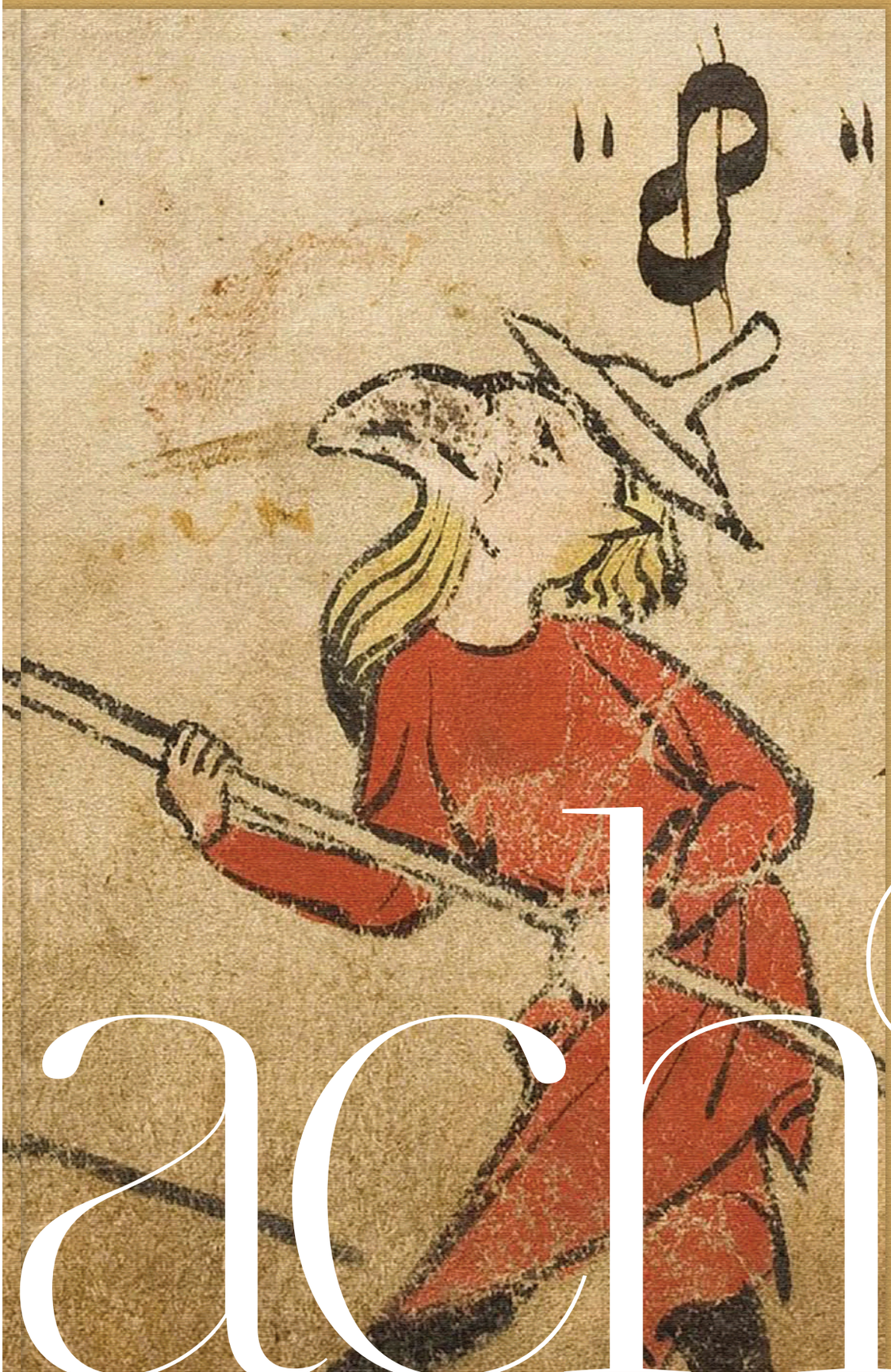
KUNTERES

Wrong Day For Peas

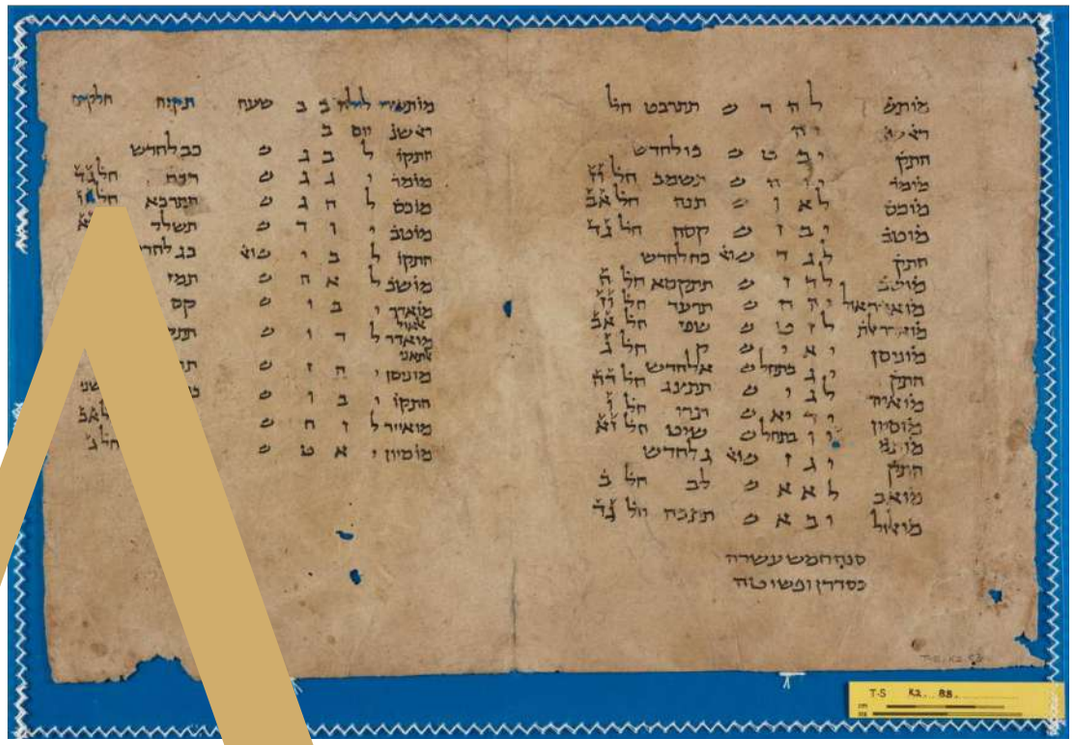




A CALENDAR CONTROVERSY IN THE TENTH CENTURY, WHICH WAS FORGOTTEN UNTIL IT SURFACED IN THE CAIRO GENIZAH, MEANT THAT JEWS IN DIFFERENT COMMUNITIES CELEBRATED YOM TOV ON DIFFERENT DAYS.

aCh?

By Lawrence H. Schiffman



Judeo-Arabic Calendar for 952/3-1022/3 on paper (TS K2.83)
Courtesy of Taylor Schechter Genizah Unit, Cambridge University

As Pesach approaches, Jewish communities everywhere race to prepare. But imagine if the Jews across town were still preparing for Pesach while you were sitting down to the Seder—because the two communities couldn't agree on which day Pesach started.

The Jewish calendar has served as a unifier of the Jewish people for about a thousand years. But it was not always that way. In fact, in the year 922 CE, not all Jews observed Pesach on the same date. *How could this be*? you will ask; after all, sometime in the fourth century CE, the Jewish people stopped determining the calendar by lunar observation and instituted a calculated calendar. How could it be that Jews who followed the Babylonian Sages would observe Pesach and even Rosh Hashanah two days before their brethren in Eretz Yisrael?

This is a long and complicated story. But happily, as a result of new discoveries in the Cairo Genizah, the storehouse of discarded manuscripts in the old *shul* of Fustat in Egypt, it can be told now with much greater accuracy than ever before. In fact, readers who have heard the story before will find it told here with some significant differences resulting from new research and the publication of new editions of the previously published material.

Calculation conundrum

From the time of *Chazal*, it was established that authority in calendrical matters should belong to the Sages of Eretz Yisrael (Rambam, *Kiddush Hachodesh* 5:1). But with the institution of the calculated calendar, the communities of Bavel (in present-day Iraq) had begun to make their own calendar calculations, and recent research shows that they, like their counterparts in Eretz Yisrael, would make a public announcement before the start of each year as to when the festivals would occur. While almost all the elements of the system of calculation were already uniform, there were still certain differences of opinion, and full consensus would take another two centuries or so to be attained.

In Elul preceding Rosh Hashanah of 921, at the public session of the *kallah* (study assemblage), the *reish galusa* (exilarch) and heads of the Babylonian *yeshivos* announced that the months

of Marcheshvan and Kislev would each be of 30 days and Rosh Chodesh Nisan would be on a Tuesday, as would the first day of Pesach. Yet in Eretz Yisrael, Rav Aharon ben Meir, the head of the Academy in Teveriah, had sent his son to Har Hazeisim in Yerushalayim during Sukkos to announce that according to his calculation both of these months were to be of 29 days and, therefore, Rosh Chodesh Nisan and Pesach would be on Sunday. Through these two announcements, the stage was set for one of the greatest calendar controversies that the Jewish people faced throughout history. Most probably, these events helped to bring about the completely unified system of determining the calendar that is followed by the Jewish people today.

This controversy was mostly unknown in modern times until it was uncovered beginning in the 1860s in fragmentary manuscripts discovered in the Cairo Genizah. The Genizah manuscripts, recovered from the old *shul* or from various burial locations in Cairo, would radically change our understanding of medieval Jewish history and shed enormous light on all genres of Jewish literature. Significantly for our discussion, it substantially increased our knowledge of the period of the *Geonim*—the rabbis and scholars who led the Jews of Bavel and Eretz Yisrael from the Islamic conquest of 638-640 CE into the medieval period. However, because of the lack of full and direct access to the manuscript evidence as well as because of some scholarly biases, the picture of this calendar controversy was not fully clear. Now, with the full publication of the documentation in scholarly editions, a much more accurate picture can be drawn.

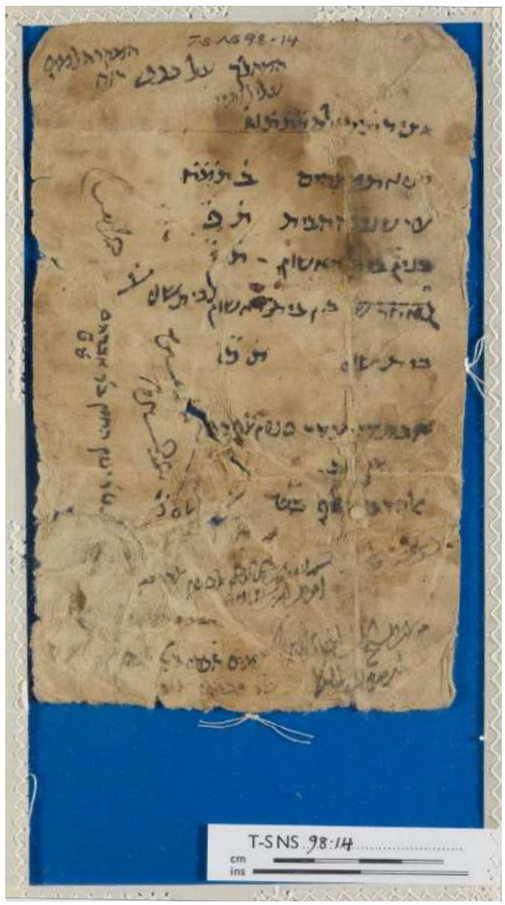
Causes of a controversy

What actually was the cause of this disagreement? From a technical point of view, it stemmed from something that would later be called *molad zaken*. This term refers specifically to a rule derived from the Gemara (*Rosh Hashanah* 20b). This rule specifies that if, according to astronomical calculations, the *molad* of the month of Tishrei (the point of conjunction when the moon is invisible because it is between the sun and the earth) takes place after noon, then Rosh Hashanah must be postponed. Since there is another rule, *lo adu rosh*, that Rosh Hashanah cannot begin on Sunday, Wednesday or Friday, if the next day were one of those days, Rosh Hashanah would effectively be postponed by two days. This was the opinion of the authorities in Bavel.

Rav Aharon ben Meir and his supporters maintained that noon was not the deadline. In their view, postponement (whether of one day or two) would not take place unless the *molad* was at least 642 *chalakim* (parts, each of which is 1/1,080 of an hour, meaning three seconds) after noon (approximately 12:32 PM). (No convincing explanation of the origin of this view has been suggested.)

For the Babylonian authorities, 921/2 CE would be a year in which postponement should take place. For those of Eretz Yisrael, the *molad* came in before their later deadline and, therefore, Rosh Hashanah should not be postponed. In this particular year, the *molad* was on Shabbos, so the Babylonian postponement had to be two days long because otherwise Rosh Hashanah would begin on Sunday, violating *lo adu rosh*. This, in turn, led to the two-day discrepancy in the observance of Pesach.

From the earliest discovery of this controversy, it was assumed that the main protagonist on the Babylonian side was Rabbeinu Saadyah Gaon (882-942). Born in Egypt, he eventually made his way via Eretz Yisrael and Syria to Bavel. Later, he was appointed



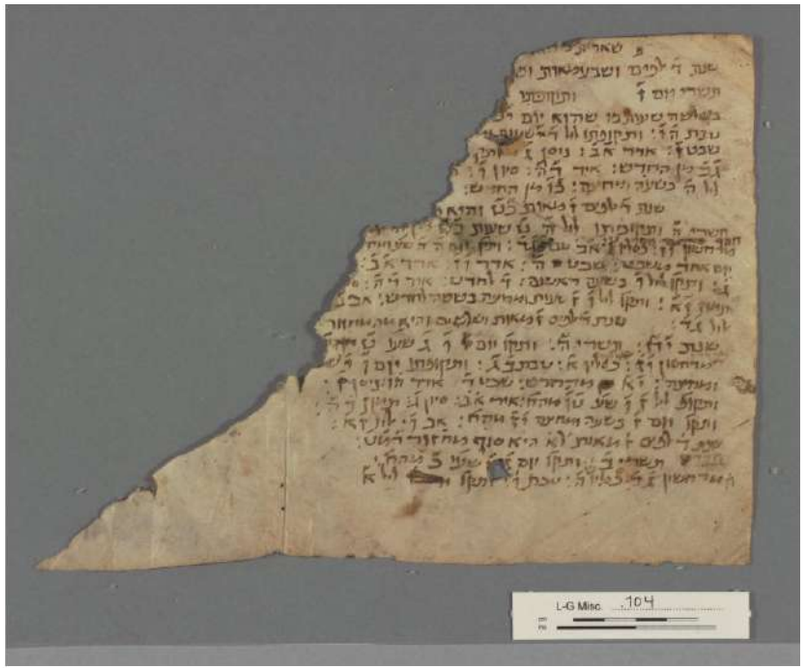
Calendar jottings with Tehillim, 104:3, on verso, calendar for 1103-4, paper (T-S NS 98.14). Courtesy of Taylor Schechter Genizah Unit, Cambridge University

Gaon of Sura, which was by then located in the recently established city of Baghdad. However, this assumption, while supported by *genizah* manuscripts of some letters actually authored by Rabbeinu Saadyah, was greatly exaggerated as a result of the mistaken attribution to him of an entire treatise covering the Babylonian view of this controversy. In fact, we now know that while Rabbeinu Saadyah did indeed play a role in defending the Babylonian position, the lead on the Babylonian side was taken by the Exilarch Dovid ben Zakkai (d. 940) and by the heads of the academies.

Both sides wrote a series of strong letters back and forth arguing their positions, but those seem to have resolved nothing. Rav Aharon ben Meir attacked Rabbeinu Saadyah in his letters, as Rabbeinu Saadyah had written to his disciples instructing them to follow the Babylonian ruling.

In order to advance their position, on Monday, 18 Elul (16 September) 922, the Babylonian rabbis held public readings and denunciations of Rav Aharon's writings, to expose their errors. On Tuesday, 27 Tishrei (22 October), of that same year, a "Book of the Calendar Controversy," signed by the Exilarch, was disseminated wherever Rav Aharon's views may have reached. This document is preserved almost in its entirely in the Cairo Genizah and has been reconstructed by Sasha Stern of University College, London, and his colleagues.

The narrative in our books of Jewish history claimed a decisive victory for the Babylonians over Rav Aharon and his followers in Eretz Yisrael. But such a decisive defeat did not happen at the time, at least according to the Genizah documents. Actually, the victory of the approach of the Sages of Bavel took about two centuries to be complete. Indeed, in the aftermath of their contradictory announcements of the date of Pesach, Jews throughout the Middle East, depending on which customs they followed, celebrated Pesach in 922 on different days, and in some places, like Cairo, we know that both dates were celebrated by their respective communities.



Hebrew calendar for 952/3-970/1, on parchment (L-G Misc. 104)
Courtesy of Taylor Schechter Genizah Unit, Cambridge University

Of course, the possibility of such a conflict depends on the *molad* taking place around midday. This happened again in 927. But it appears that by this time both sides had tired of this controversy and so we do not hear of a continuation of the conflict. But we also do not know which point of view was followed by most of the Jewish people at the time. What we do know is that by the year 1108, the next time that this could conceivably occur, the view of the Eretz Yisrael scholars had fallen into disuse and that of the Babylonian *Geonim* was enshrined in numerous works of *halachah*.

A question of authority

The controversy surrounding the fixing of the festivals of 921/2 turned quickly into a wider question of leadership between the *chachamim* of Bavel and Eretz Yisrael. In fact, the arguments presented in the various treatises and missives surrounding this controversy did not make any scientific or astronomical arguments in favor of one or the other opinion. Rather, each side argued for its right to declare the correct determination of the calendar. Local communities each followed their respective leadership.

It is especially important to grasp the seriousness of the controversy. The Sages of Eretz Yisrael saw the calendar as the last bastion of "*Ki miTziyon teitzei Torah*—For Torah will go forth from Zion"—following their eclipse by their Babylonian counterparts. We need to remember that by this time, the academies of Eretz Yisrael were a shadow of what they had been in the earlier Talmudic period before they were closed by the Christian Byzantine rulers (ca. 424 CE).

The Babylonians, on the other hand, maintained that their *rabbanim* had the ultimate authority over the Jewish people due to the continuity of their tradition of Torah

Judeo Arabic calendar for 998/9-1008/9, on paper (TS NS 98.17)
Courtesy of Taylor Schechter Genizah Unit, Cambridge University

In order to advance their position, on Monday, 18 Elul (16 September) 922, the Babylonian rabbis held public readings and denunciations of Rav Aharon's writings, to expose their errors.

study, essentially uninterrupted by the Islamic conquest. This was not a struggle over political power. It was an argument over whether the halachic traditions of Eretz Yisrael or Bavel would be determinative for Jewish communities around the world.

Interestingly, this controversy was not all that different from an earlier calendar controversy that we know about from *Bayis Sheini*-period texts, especially the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Scrolls and various other texts from this era called for replacement of the lunar calendar with a solar, 364-day year calendar. It would be based on a sequence of months equaling 30, 30, 30 and 31 days in each quarter. This calendar was put forward by groups connected to the *Tzedukim* (Sadducees). Among other things, it was designed to make sure that Shavuos must occur on a Sunday. If this sectarian calendar were ever put into practice, it would have constituted an even greater break in the unity of the Jewish people than that which took place as a result of the controversy in the Geonic period.

The calendar controversy of 921/2 CE was a struggle that might have had much greater consequences, but, in fact, it essentially evaporated with a few remaining whimpers. Until it was rediscovered in the Cairo Genizah, it left virtually no historical memory except in a few very vague references in non-Jewish and Karaite sources.

But take a moment to imagine the possibility of Pesach being observed on different days in different communities and even in the same community. This experience must have been one from which both sides recoiled. The resolution of this conflict did not lie, as scholars used to think, in a decisive victory for Bavel, led by Rabbeinu Saadyah Gaon. Rather, it appears that both sides tired of the terrible rancor and divisiveness that this controversy had brought on. Whether the Eretz Yisrael side gave up as early as scholars used to think, or whether the conflict continued for many years—as now seems to be the case—Jewish unity eventually overcame this calendar controversy. Let us hope that the same will be the case with any controversies in our days. ●

Bibliographic note: the new research reported in this article as well as full publication of the relevant Genizah texts may be found in S. Stern, The Jewish Calendar Controversy of 921/2 CE *(Leiden, Brill, 2019).*

Lawrence H. Schiffman is Judge Abraham Lieberman Professor of Hebrew and Judaic Studies and Director of the Global Network for Advanced Research in Jewish Studies at New York University.