

In his letter to the King of the Khazars, R. Chasdai recounts how he was in charge of all customs and charges for importers and exporters, basically all trade tax collection (these revenues amounted to 100,000 gold pieces annually). R. Chasdai's curiosity about the kingdom of the Khazars had been sparked by reports he had heard of a Jewish kingdom in what is the Ukraine today and he was curious to find out whether this was true. He first financed a trip with two Jewish traders going through Constantinople, but they returned after six months without venturing further due to the dangers involved in the journey. He then succeeded in sending his epistle through two trusted merchants, Master Saul and Master Joseph, who seem to have succeeded in having the letter delivered. R. Chasdai was also instrumental in bringing scholars from the diaspora to Spain to educate the Jewish population and enable them some independence from the overarching control of the Babylonian institutions¹ and of scholars. It is no doubt that due to his kindling of the spirit of Jewish learning, Cordova became one of the most important centers of *Torah* study in the Western world. The greatest of all medieval Jewish scholars, Maimonides,² was born and educated there.

Below is my translation of King Joseph's reply, as it appears in the manuscript:

“The letter of Joseph ben Aaron, the King the Togarmi to Rav Chasdai, Head of the Diaspora, the son of Isaac, son of Ezra the Spaniard, who is both dear and esteemed by us. I would like to acknowledge receipt of his esteemed letter by the hand of R. Yaakov ben Eleazar from the land of Nimets³, which pleased us. We were duly impressed by your understanding and wisdom. I found in your letter the location and dimensions of your country and the lineage of Abd al Rahman, the reigning king and his great magnificence and majesty, and the Divine assistance in his conquest of the oriental domains so that his great sovereignty is renowned in all the land and his fear instilled in all other rulers. About the carelessness of the messengers from Constantinople, who falsely made you doubt the veracity of my kingdom in which you did not believe possible. Then you asked for verification about our rule our lineage and how our fathers adopted Jewish law, that the Lord opened our eyes and suppressed our enemies. Further you asked for the measurement of our land, its length and breadth and the islands surrounding us, those people that are our allies and those with whom we are at war. If our messenger succeeds in reaching you to appear before your magnificent and just king who through his good deeds draws the hearts of his subjects to love him. And because the people say that there is no longer a remnant of Israel and no longer a kingdom and that there will be an uplifting of heart and an answer and praise and glory in the eyes of those who had said there was no future and no kingdom of the Jews. I will now answer you on each of the items you asked in your letter in joyfulness to you and in appreciation of your wisdom. Where you mention your land and the kings' ancestry we have already touched upon this and

¹ The yeshivas of Sura and Pumpedisa headed by the Gaonim.

² Moses b Maimon (1138-1204), renowned Jewish scholar of the middle-ages. Author of a commentary on the *Mishna*, the *Guide to the Perplexed*, on philosophy, and the *Yad Hachazoko*, on the code of Jewish law.

³ Germany.

there were already letters of friendship between our fathers in times gone by and this was recorded and known to our elders and let us renew this link between our fathers and pass it on as an inheritance to our children.

You asked in your letter from which nation we come from and from which family and tribe. Know that we are of the children of Japhet⁴, the children of Togarma⁵ his son. We have found in the books of ancestry of our forebears that Togarma had ten sons and these are their names. The first was Agiar, Tirus, Avar, Ogin, Bizel, Tarna, Khazar, Janor, Bilgad, and Sovir. I am of the children of Khazar, who was the seventh. It is written that in those days because my fathers were few in number the Lord gave them strength and might and they waged war with many mightier nations and with the Lords' help we dispossessed them and inherited their lands and pursued them until they had crossed the great river Duna and right to this time they live on the Duna⁶ river near Constantinople and the Khazars inhabited their land. After many generations, a king by the name of Bulan⁷ who was both wise and God fearing and believed with all his heart and removed the soothsayers and idol-worshippers from the land and rested under divine wings. There then appeared to him an angel in a dream and said to him, 'Oh Bulan the Lord has sent me to you and said⁸ I have heard your prayers and supplications behold I will bless you and make you fruitful and establish your kingdom to the end of the generations and hand all you enemies into your hands, so now pray before the Lord in the morning when you awake.' He did so. Then the angel appeared to him a second time and said, 'I have seen your ways and I am pleased with your actions and know that you go about all you do with all your heart and I would like to give you commandments, decrees and justice, and if you keep my commandments, decrees and justice, I will bless you and increase your numbers.' He answered the angel speaking to him and said, 'you know master my innermost thoughts that I have put my trust solely in you, but the nations over whom I rule are atheists and I do not know if they will listen to me. If I have found favour in your eyes and if your mercy will trickle down on me, please appear to their great prince⁹ and he can assist me in this matter.' The Lord did as he requested and appeared to that prince in a dream and when he awoke in the morning he came and told the king. The king then gathered all his ministers, servants and all his subjects and related to them all these things and they were pleased to accept the laws and entered into the faith under the divine wings. Then the angel appeared to him again and said, 'behold the heavens and the upper heavens cannot contain me and now build a house for my namesake.' He answered 'I am very embarrassed before you but I have not got the silver and gold to carry out your orders as I would wish.' The angel answered him: 'Take courage and be strong, gather your people and your army and go to the land of Rodlan and the land of Ardill for I have put fear and dread of you in their hearts and I will deliver them into your hands. For behold, I have prepared for you there two treasures, one of silver and the other of gold, and I will be with you and guard you wherever you go. Take the treasure and come home in peace and build a house in my name'. He believed in him and did all that he was bid. He waged war and laid waste the lands and returned in peace. The money he sanctified and built with it the tent, ark, candelabra, table and alters and all the holy vessels and to this very day they are still kept by me.

⁴ Third son of Noah.

⁵ Son of Gomer son of Japhet.

⁶ Danube.

⁷ The Wise in Turkish.

⁸ Deut. 7, v. 13.

⁹ The Beg who was the military leader and co-ruler.

After all this his fame spread in the world and the King of Edam [Romans] and the King of the Ishmaelites heard of him and sent their messengers with great wealth and gifts together with their wise men to persuade him to follow their laws. But he was clever and asked for a wise man of Israel and they all preached and examined and argued amongst themselves about their respective laws and they each disagreed with the other and they could agree about nothing. When the king saw this he said to the Roman priest and to the Ishmaelite: "Return to your tents and on the third day hence I will call for you". The next day the king sent for the priest and said to him, "I know that your King of the Romans is greater than other kings and his laws are well honoured and I would like your laws, but I would like to ask your honest opinion, which is better the laws of Israel or the laws of Ishmael?" Then the priest answered thus: "Oh long live the king my master know truly there is no law in the whole world like the law of Israel for the Holy One Blessed be He chose Israel from all the nations and called them his first born son and performed for them great wonders and miracles, delivered them from Pharaohs' slavery and made them to pass on dry land through the sea and drowned their pursuers. Brought them down the Manna, brought forth water from a rock, gave them the Torah from the midst of the fire, gave them the inheritance of the land of Canaan and built them the Temple so he could dwell amongst them. Only after this he was angry with them and cast them out from before him and dispersed them in all directions. If it were not for this there would not be laws to match theirs in the world. The Ishmaelites have no Sabbath and no festivals, no laws and interdicts, they eat all unclean things and all creepy crawlies". The king answered him: "You have spoken justly and know that I will honour you". The next day the king sent for the Muslim Immam and asked him to tell him truly what is the difference between the law of Israel and that of Rome, which do you consider the better. The Immam answered him and said the laws of Israel are superior and all true and with them the laws of God and statutes and righteous judgements and only because they sinned and transgressed against him was he angry with them and delivered them into the hands of their enemies. Whereas the Roman law they eat all unclean things and prostrate themselves to images they made with their own hands. The king replied that he had indeed told him the truth and he would likewise honour him.

On the next day he called all of them together and said to them in front of all his ministers and servants and subjects, I would like you to choose for me which of the laws are the good and just. They began to discuss and none could establish their base case. At this point the king said to the priest, which is the better law that of the Israelites or the Ishmaelites and the priest answered, the law of the Israelites is superior. Then the king addressed the Immam and asked, which is better, the law of the Israelites and the law of the Roman Church, and he answered the law of Israel is superior. So the king answered: "You have already admitted with your mouths that the law of Israel is best and I have already chosen the law of Israel, which is the law of Abraham and the Lord God shall be my helper. The silver and gold that you said you would give me you can now do painlessly and return in peace to your respective lands".

From that day forth the Lord God helped and strengthened him. He and all his people were circumcised. They sent for and brought wise men of Israel and they explained the Torah and arranged for them all the commandments and until this very day we

keep the true and honoured laws of the Holy One Blessed Be He. From that day forward since our fathers entered into the protection of the Divine wings we have subdued all our enemies and cast down all the nations and creeds that surround us and no one has been able to stand up against us and all pay us tribute even from the kings of Rome and Ishmael.

After these events arose a king from his grandchildren named Obadiah, who was both righteous and upright. He renewed the kingdom and established the law as it should be and he built synagogues and houses of learning and gathered many wise men of Israel and he funded them richly and they explained the twenty four books of the *Bible* and the *Mishnah* and *Talmud* and all the fixing of the prayers and the readers and he was a pious man and an obedient follower of the laws and commandments. After him came Hezekiah, his son and after him Menasseh his son followed by Chaninah the brother of Obadiah, then Isaac his son, and Zebulun his son, Menasseh his son, Nisi his son, Menachem his son, Benjamin his son, Aaron his son and I, Joseph, son of the aforementioned Aaron. All of them kings, the sons of kings and no stranger can sit on our fathers' throne. May it be the will before he who appoints kings that we continue our kingdom in his laws and commandments.

You then asked about the area of our land, its breadth and width. For it is by the river¹⁰ close to the Gorgon Sea¹¹ on the East, four months' walk distance. On the banks of the river countless nations dwell in villages, towns and fortified encampments. There are in all nine nations¹² containing countless inhabitants and they all pay me tribute. From there the border turns round the Gorgon Sea. All seashore dwellers, a month's walk in distance, pay me tribute. Then on the South there are fifteen nations, many and mighty, who are countless in their multitude up to the border of Baab el Abuab. They live in the mountainous region. Also all the inhabitants of Casa and Tanas up to the sea of Constantinople, a walk of two months distance, all pay me tribute. On the West there are thirteen nations, many and mighty, who live on the coast of the Constantine Sea from whence the border turns northwards to the great Yugaz¹³ river. They live in open cities, which are unwalled, and occupy all the wilderness up to the Hungarian border. They are as many as the sands of the sea and all pay me tribute. Their territory is four months' walk from end to end.

I myself live on the river mouth and I do not take my eye off the Russians and those who come by boat to visit them and I also don't allow their enemies who come by land to cross into their land. And I will wage a mighty war against them for if I let up they would conquer all the land of the Ismaelites up to Baghdad. Further, let me also tell you that I live on this Khazar river with the Lord's help, and I have in my kingdom three provinces.¹⁴ In the first the Queen lives with her maidens and administrators, which is fifty by fifty Parsas¹⁵ in area. This province has many villages and pastures. Its inhabitants are Jews, Muslims, Christians and other nationals of diverse tongues. The second region is eight by eight Parsas in total. I reside in the third region, together with my nobles and servants and all my retinue.. This province

¹⁰ Volga.

¹¹ Caspian Sea.

¹² The St Petersburg manuscript specifies them.

¹³ Maybe the Dnieper.

¹⁴ The capitals were Semender, Sarkal and Itil.

¹⁵ Translated by some as parasangs 2-3 miles but a Parsa is 1.6 miles.

is small, three by three Parsas, and between the walls the river meanders. We live in the region all winter and in the month of Nissan we leave the region and each man goes to his respective fields and gardens and to his farming. For each family has its family inherited estate and they travel and reside there with much joy and singing. There is no sound of oppression, no calumny, nor evil in the land. Both my servants and I travel some twenty Parsas until we get to the great river Varsan¹⁶ by name and there we journey to the border of the region. This is the area of our land and our place of rest. The land does not get much rainfall but there are many rivers in which many fish thrive. We also have many springs and wells and the land is good and fat. We have pasture and fields, vineyards, gardens and orchards all fed by the rivers and we had a multitude of fruit tree varieties.

I will also explain to you the borders of my own land. To the east, a distance of twenty Parsas to the Gorgon Sea. To the south, a distance of thirty parsas. To the west, a distance of forty parsas. I live in the middle of my fields, my vineyards my gardens and my orchards. Then to the north, a distance of thirty parsas where many rivers and springs flow. With the Almighty's help, I live in security.

You further asked about the wondrous matters. Know that our eyes are directed at the Lord our God and to the wise men of Israel and to the Yeshiva in Jerusalem and the yeshiva in Babylon. We are far from Zion but we have heard that for all our sins, the calculations have been mistaken and we know nothing more than that which will be right in the Lord's eyes and he will do for his great name. May the destruction of his house not be a small matter, nor the cessation of the sacrifices and all the wonders that befell us, oh God of Israel. We have only to hand the prophecy of Daniel, and the Lord God of Israel will speed the redemption and gather our exiles and diaspora in our lifetime and in yours and in the lives of the whole House of Israel lovers of His name.

You also mention in your letter that you would like to see my face. I would also prize and long to see your gracious countenance, your exalted wisdom and grandeur. Were that your words could be true and if I were to merit your friendship and gaze upon your honoured and noble features, you would be to me as a father and I would be your son and by your word my people would be blessed, on your instruction would I come and go and with you wise counsel and now wish you great peace.

¹⁶ An Armenian river tributary of the Euphrates.