

LOT 206

HEBREW LETTER TO THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF KAI-FUNG-FOO (KAIFENG), ENDORSED IN CHINESE, ISAAC FARAJ BEN REUBEN BEN JACOB, MANUSCRIPT ON PAPER, SHANGHAI: 31 OCTOBER 1850

10,000—15,000 USD

DESCRIPTION

2 leaves (10 5/16 x 8 1/16 in.; 262 x 204 mm). including address panel, 18 lines, written in a square hand, endorsed in Chinese 'if you have a letter [in reply to this] send it to Shanghai town care of Sassoon Company', lined with paper, bound in white cloth.

PROVENANCE

David Solomon Sassoon (1880 - 1942), his MS.54. (Given to him in 1908 by S. M. Moses, who received it from his father, a business associate of the author, Isaac Faraj ben Reuben Jacob

LITERATURE AND REFERENCES

David Solomon Sassoon, *Ohel Dawid, Descriptive Catalogue of the Hebrew and Samaritan Manuscripts in the Sassoon Library, London, 1932, I, p. 404.*; David S. D. Sassoon, "Inscriptions in the Synagogue in Kai-Fung-Foo," *The Jewish Quarterly Review, New Series*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Oct., 1920), pp. 127-144; David S. Katz, "The Chinese Jews and the Problem of Biblical Authority in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century England," *The English Historical Review*, Vol. 105, No. 417 (Oct., 1990), pp. 893-919

CATALOGUE NOTE

The first Chinese Jews may have been descendants of Jewish silk traders who arrived in China in the first quarter of the third century CE, the period of the Han dynasty. Throughout the middle ages Jews had been intrigued by the idea that a Jewish community existed in China and references to the Jews of China are found in the Hebrew writings of Eldad Ha-Dani (9th century) and Benjamin of Tudela (12th century). The Jews of Europe were convinced that their Chinese coreligionists could be descended from the "Ten Lost Tribes of Israel," exiled by the Assyrians in 722 BCE.

European Christians learned of this community only after the encounter reported by Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), the Jesuit missionary, who in 1605 was visited at the mission in Peking by a Jew from Kaifeng. For Christians, the possibility that these Jews may have had older, and thus, more accurate copies of Hebrew biblical texts untainted by what they suspected were rabbinic and Talmudic interpolations and embellishments, inspired them to begin a several hundred year attempt to make contact with the Chinese Jews. This letter to the Jews of Kaifeng was written in Hebrew by Isaac Faraj, a Jewish merchant from Baghdad who was living and trading in Shanghai, some 700 miles away. Ironically, it was delivered by two Chinese Christians at the request of the London Society for Promoting Christianity among the Jews. This letter resulted in the first contact between the Kaifeng Jewish community, then already in decline, and the West; the two couriers returned to Shanghai with Hebrew books and the following year purchased six of the community's 12 Torah scrolls and some 40 additional Hebrew manuscripts from the Kaifeng Jews.

Text of the letter:

In the name of God shall we do and prosper. This the 25th day of the month of Heshvan, in the year [5]611 since the creation of the world (=31 October 1850). Great peace be unto the city wherein there is the holy congregation of Israel, Kai-Fung-Foo:

After due inquiry about your good health and well-being; this is to inform you that our health is good and pleasant, and I have come to inform you that I am Isaac Faraj the son of Reuben Jacob, may his Creator preserve him and keep him alive, from Babylon (Baghdad), and I came to the city of Shanghai in the year [5]606 (= 1845-6), and I settled there for trading purposes. And I have heard that there are Israelites in your city, and I am very pleased to be cognizant of your welfare, and to send you a letter so as to hear news of joy and happiness from your city, and I beg you to send me a reply to what I ask you. Let me know: is there a scroll of the Law in your city? And do you read the

Haftarot from the Prophets? And do you possess the four and twenty books of the Bible? The Mishna and the Zohar? And in what books do the children learn? And from which tribe are you? I beg you to excuse the trouble I am putting you to, and I request you to answer me, and further to tell me all about your city, and to let me know if there is another city wherein Israelites are to be found. And if you wish to have anything from me, such as Pentateuchs, Prophets, and Hagiographa, and any other books, I have faith in His Name, may He be blessed, that He will fulfill your wishes, and I shall send you an answer, and whatever else you wish for. It would give me great pleasure to come and visit the children of Israel of your city and to learn of your welfare, were I not afraid of the fatigue of the journey, and certain other matters, and traveling difficulties. And [as] we are still in exile; may He shortly send us our Messiah, speedily in our time, Amen. Isaac Faraj ben Reuben Jacob, may his end be good.