

The Evolution of Biblical Terms through the Ages

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Down through the ages, Jewish society has routinely adopted Biblical terms and put them to use for a variety of purposes. Over the course of time, these words have undergone all sorts of transformations that have changed their essence and meaning, serving totally different objectives at every stage of history, while always retaining their Biblical origins. Tracing a word's evolution from the Book of Books lent authority and power, but mainly a sense of identity and belonging, since the Biblical code was a basic system that could be identified by Jewish society in any era or any place. In this article, I try to follow after three Biblical terms, and find out in what way people used them through ages.

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1. Titles of Jerusalemite Yeshiva

Throughout the generations, the Jewish society used to adopt Biblical terms and use them for different needs. As time passed, these terms underwent all sorts of changes and were used for completely different goals in each historical period, but in their core they always stayed Biblical terms. "Drinking" from the Book of Books was a source of authority, of power, but mainly of identity and belonging. The Biblical code was a basic and identifying one in the Jewish society always and everywhere.

With the Return to Zion in the sixth century BCE, laying the foundations of public Torah reading and the development of the Oral Law, Jewish society gradually became literate and study became a cornerstone of its world outlook. Already in the book of *Deuteronomy* (which is thought to have been written in the seventh century BCE), the people enjoined to memorize and study: "And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be upon thy heart; and thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thy house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up" (Deut. 6:6-7). In his book *The Antiquities of the Jews*, Josephus Flavius explains that "The Torah did not command that a feast should be held when a son is born, or that the occasion become an excuse for imbibing strong drink, it only instructed... to teach one's sons the Bible, so that they would know the laws and the deeds of our ancestors..." After the destruction of the Second Temple, the concept of study was gained strength and turned into the central pillar of Jewish society.¹ Alongside the Written Law (the Torah), the Oral Law developed, the result of innumerable discussions and debates that led to myriad laws (*halakhot*), set down by the *Tannaim* (between the first and third centuries) and the *Amoraim* (between the third and fifth centuries), each group in its own era. In the first century CE, it was ordained that "teachers of young children should be

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appointed in each district and each town, and that children should enter school at the age of six or seven” (b*Baba Batra* 21a; y*Ketuboth* 5:11). By the fourth century, study was considered routine for large sectors of the population, as noted by Rabbi Pinchas in the name of Rabbi Hoshea: 480 synagogues were there in Jerusalem and each of them had... a house of study for the Torah [the Bible], and a house of study for the Oral Torah, the Mishnah and the Talmud (y*Moed, Megillah* 3, 23a) [73d]. The Written Law was always considered the basis for holiness, uniqueness, and exclusivity, and down the ages all the rules that came into being relied, to one extent or another, on the Torah. For this reason, when I attempt to analyze terminology used by the Jewish community in the Middle Ages, I must first examine its Biblical origins.

1.1. *Haver*—The Jerusalemite Title

Our examination of Genizah documents revealed that *Haver* was the most distinguished honorific title granted by the Palestinian yeshivah to its supporters and representatives in communities under its authority. We were interested in discovering not only the identity of those who were given this august title, but also why the yeshivah utilized this particular one. Furthermore, we wanted to learn about its origins and how its use became so widespread among the Jews in Islamic lands in the early Middle Ages, as reflected in Genizah documents.

1.2. The Meaning of *Haver* in the Bible

The term *haver* is mentioned in the Bible thirteen times. According to the various contexts in which it is used and the commentaries of medieval exegetes, it has one meaning, but three different nuances. In the Bible, the basic sense of the word *haver* is a member of a group of people who have something in common, who share the same views. As Rashi (France 1040-1105) notes: *haverim* (pl.) are equals who share similar opinions/attitudes. *Metsudat David* (the end of the seventeenth century, David Altschuler and his son Yehiel) asserts that *haverim* are as one person, in other words, *haverim* agreed with one another, were of the same mind. This camaraderie or friendship is mentioned in a positive sense, as in:

Judges 20:11: “So all the men of Israel were gathered against the city, knit together as (*haverim*) one man;” and Psalms 119:63: “I am a (*haver*) companion of all them that fear Thee, and of them that observe Thy precepts.”

On the other hand, the term also serves to define a group of people that have something negative in common, as in:

Isaiah 1:23: “Thy princes are rebellious, and (*haverim*) companions of thieves...” and Proverbs 28:24: “Whoso robbeth his father or his mother, and saith: ‘It is no transgression,’ the same is the (*haver*) companion of a destroyer.”

The third nuance is that of a covenant made between two or more persons for a common purpose, as in:

Ecclesiastes 4:10: “For if they fall, the one will lift up his (*haver*) fellow; but woe to him that is alone when he falleth, and hath not another to lift him up;” and Malachi 2:14: “Yet ye say: ‘Wherefore?’ Because the Lord hath been witness between thee and the wife of thy youth, against whom thou hast dealt treacherously, though she is thy (*havera*) companion, and the wife of thy covenant.”

The exegete of *Metsudat David* explained “I will answer you that this is because the Lord is eternal between you and your wife who you married in the days of your youth, who you yourself betrayed, but she is a (*havera*) companion to you and the wife with whom you have made a covenant, because she upholds the covenant that you made with her to be your wife, because she does not look to the others, you are in the wrong.”

To summarize: In the Bible the term *haver* has the meaning of connecting, coming together with others for a shared purpose.

1.3. *Am Ha'aretz—A Term the Genizah Does Not Employ*

The expression *am ha'aretz*, which appears frequently in the Bible, is not mentioned in the Genizah literature; however, it is widely utilized in Talmudic literature. Here I would like to examine its meaning in the Bible, how its usage evolved in Talmudic literature, and why it disappeared in the Middle Ages.

1.4. *The Meaning of Am Ha'aretz in the Bible*

This term went through several transformations during the various periods documented in the books of the Bible. *Am ha'aretz* was mentioned there in various contexts, in keeping with the time period and world views involved. Out of all the circumstances in which it is mentioned in the Bible, 37 relate to events in the kingdom of Judah and Jerusalem. Thus, it may be concluded that the phrase *am ha'aretz* is in most cases a label for a group or social stratum in Judah.²

*In Biblical narratives such as the book of Genesis,³ which preserve earlier traditions, the expression is mentioned in a sense that most closely approximates its plain meaning: the people that dwells in the land:

Genesis 23:13: "And he spoke unto Ephron in the hearing of the (*am ha'aretz*) people of the land saying ..."

Exodus 5:5: "And Pharaoh said: 'Behold, (*am ha'aretz*) the people of the land are now many, and will ye make them rest from their burdens?'"

*In the period of the Kingdom of Judah,⁴ *am ha'aretz* denoted a body that had the authority to make and carry out policy, the nobility and the authoritative leadership that advised the king:

2 Kings 21:24: "But (*am ha'aretz*) the people of the land slew all them that had conspired against king Amon; and the people of the land made Josiah his son king in his stead."

2 Kings 23:30: "And (*am ha'aretz*) the people of the land took Jehoahaz the son of Josiah, and anointed him, and made him king in his father's stead."

*With the Return to Zion, at the beginning of the Second Temple period, the years when the prophets Haggai and Zechariah were active,⁵ the term *am ha'aretz* was used to define the entire group that returned to Zion, from the exile in Babylonia to Judah:

Haggai 2:4: "Yet now be strong, O Zerubbabel, saith the Lord; and be strong, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest; and be strong, all ye (*am ha'aretz*) people of the land..."

Zechariah 7:5: "Speak unto all (*am ha'aretz*) the people of the land, and to the priests, saying..."

The turning point in the evolution of the meaning of *am ha'aretz* occurs at the beginning of the Return to Zion. The trend toward separation spearheaded by the elite among the returnees gained momentum during the period of Ezra and Nehemiah.⁶ The meaning of the phrase was transformed. It took on a negative sense, signifying the other, the stranger, those who are not accepted among the returnees to Zion—the holy seed:

Ezra 9:2: "For they have taken of their daughters for themselves and for their sons; so that the holy seed have mingled themselves with (*am ha'aretz*) the peoples of the lands..."

Nehemiah 10:32: "And if (*am ha'aretz*) the peoples of the land bring ware or any victuals on the Sabbath day to sell, that we would not buy of them on the Sabbath, or on a holy day..."

From here on in the expression *am ha'aretz* was understood mainly in a negative sense. Even though it took on and shed different meanings, it never returned to its plain meaning or its positive sense.⁷

1.5. Haver and Am Ha'Aretz in the Second Temple Period, the Era of the Mishnah and Talmud—Positive and Negative Denotations

During the first few centuries of the Common Era and up to the fifth century CE, these two terms, which had already become, more or less opposites, were saddled with social and cultural meanings that intensified over time. Being defined as a *haver* gave a person an element of respect, admiration, whereas labeling someone as an *am ha'aretz* signified denigration.

*During the Second Temple period, the strict observance of the laws of *terumot* (donations) and *ma'aserot* (tithes), and ritual purity (*toharah*) was a major cornerstone of the nation's values. At that time, those who stringently adhered to these *halakhot* (laws) were designated as *haverim*, whereas people who flouted or were not careful about their practice were labeled *amei ha'aratzot* (pl.) A *haver* was part of a group that had organized itself in a type of fraternal order, a framework for maintaining the laws of tithes and strictly adhering to the *halakhot* of ritual purity. The *haverim* were enjoined to avoid contact with *amei ha'aretz*, who might cause them harm by means of *tevel* (produce for which the *terumah* and *ma'aser* tithes had not been given) or ritually impurity (*tum'ah*).⁸

Tosefta, Seder Zera'im, Tractate Damai 2b: A person who upholds four things [tithes and ritual purity] is accepted as a *haver*, should refrain from giving *terumot* and *ma'aserot* tithes to an *am ha'aretz* and from purifying himself in the premises of *am ha'aretz* and to eat non-holy foods when in a state of ritual purity.

2d: If an *am ha'aretz* undertakes all the requirements of being a *haver* (*haverut*) and suspicion is aroused about one issue, then he is suspected of violating all of them according to Rabbi Meir; and sages say, he is not suspect, except for that one commandment alone.

*After the destruction of the Temple (70 CE), during the period of the Mishnah and Talmud, the phrase *am ha'aretz* was recognized as having two meanings, both of them negative. The terms *haver* and *am ha'aretz*, as they related to the commandments of tithes (*terumot* and *ma'aserot*) and ritual purity, continued to appear in the legal discussions and *halakhot* of the *Tannaim* active in the years following the destruction, but their purpose was mainly to preserve the laws that existed during the Second Temple era, which were practiced by the *havurot* (societies of *haverim*) of the Pharisee elite.⁹ At the same time, the expression took on another meaning. When the study of Torah replaced, for the most part, tithes and ritual purity in the life of the society, the meaning of *haver* and *am ha'aretz* changed, signifying, from then on, the learned person (*haham*) as opposed to the uneducated one (*ignoramus*). From that time forward, both terms were used with respect to two areas: A. "*am ha'aretz le'Torah*"—that is, an *am ha'aretz* as far as knowledge of Torah is concerned, an ignorant person who never studied Torah, in contrast to a *talmid haham*, a learned person; and B. "*am ha'aretz le'mitzvah*"—that is, someone who is lax about the observance of *mitzvot* (commandments), mainly those related to *trumah* and *toharah* (ritual purity), as opposed to a *haver*. Yet it is reasonable to assume that *havurot* were formed by *haverim*, who came from the Pharisee elite, which was also supplied the ranks of *hahamim* (pl.) (sages) following the destruction of the Temple, while the social stratum that spawned those who were lax in their observance of the commandments of tithes and ritual purity also constituted the layers of the unschooled in Torah learning.

The Mishnah, Seder Nizikin, Masekhet Avot 2:6 states: "... an empty-headed person (*boor*) cannot be sin-fearing, nor can an ignorant person (*am ha'aretz*) be pious." The Babylonian Talmud, which is geographically and chronologically removed from the events in Eretz Yisrael, makes a more extreme declaration:

It was taught in a *beraita* that Rabbi Akiva said: "When I was an ignoramus I said: Who will give me a (*haver*) Torah scholar so that I will bite him like a donkey?" His disciples said to him: "Master, say that you would bite him like a dog!" He said to them: "I specifically used that wording, as this one, a donkey, bites and breaks bones, and that one, a dog, bites but does not break bones." (Pesachim 49b)

The statement is attributed to Rabbi Akiva, who was extreme in his views and strict in his conduct. It may be assumed that his declaration expresses the attitude of many in the elite group he joined as due to his high level of scholarship. He had been in the place of the "other" and was very well aware of what he was saying. These statements reflect a harsh outlook on the world and represent a very harsh social gap. The *am ha'aretz* is presented as the enemy of the (*haverim*) Torah scholars. *Amei ha'aretz* hate sages because they are the custodians of the Written Law, responsible for its development and teaching, and for demanding absolute loyalty to the Torah and more, since they produced the Oral Law. The sages created a spiritual-national process, which made the Torah the instrument that empowered the nation, the framework for its ongoing existence, while making sure that the Written Law and its absolute authority infused the thoughts and conduct of the intimate and public life of the people and every individual in Israel. Most of the sages came from humble backgrounds but some were descended from wealthy families of distinguished lineage, including the priests (*kohanim*). They formed a sort of class of their own, and a type of barrier grew up between them and the masses. Added to this were the normal antagonisms between the intellectuals and the masses found in every society; nonetheless, we can say that for the most part, the masses followed the sages. It is only natural that the documents available to us are testimonies about the academic activities of the sages: Torah study.⁹

The pinnacle of the *haver's* obligations in the group (*havurah*) was the eating of ordinary food in a state of ritual purity. As long as he was a member of the group, a *haver* had to maintain his loyalty to its principles and abide by them. His membership in the *havurah* could be terminated if he did not meet the commitments he had undertaken to fulfill. The principles of the *havurah* did not hinge exclusively on the strict observance of the laws of ritual purity, but included general moral doctrines. A *haver* who behaved inappropriately could not remain in the group. For example, a member who became a *gabai*, that is, someone who collects taxes and customs duties on behalf of the Roman government, could not continue to be part of the *havurah* because the government in question was the Roman regime, the embodiment of a kingdom of evil. Thus, the severity with which such conduct was considered went far beyond that of normal morality.

Nevertheless, sources originating in Eretz Yisrael paint a complex picture of openness in the relations between *haverim* and *amei aratzot*, which was characteristic of the Pharisees during the Second Temple period: A. Members of the *havurah* could come in contact with those who observed the tithes to the extent that the person undertook before the *havurah* to be strict about giving tithes; B. Marital and familial relations were created between *haverim* and *amei aratzot* and such connections existed within families as well; C. The living quarters of the *haverim* were not necessarily separate from those of the *amei aratzot*, and there was no visible barrier between them in day-to-day life. The purpose of the numerous *halakhot* dealing with contact between *haverim* and the *amei aratzot* was to prevent *haverim* from accidentally consuming *tevel* or violating the

prohibitions of ritual purity. Yet these laws stress openness in contact. Thus we found that *haverim* were guests in the homes of *amei aratzot* and sometimes even dined with them. *Amei aratzot* frequented the shops of *haverim*, leased fields from them, and even gave them tithed produce. *Haverim* took slaves and servants that were *amei ha'aretz*. The wives of *haverim* ground wheat in the homes of the wives of *amei ha'aretz* and had neighborly relations with them.¹⁰

In summary, up to the fifth, sixth and seventh centuries, mainly in Eretz Yisrael and the lands under its authority, under Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine rule, the terms *haver* and *amei ha'aretz* were used as defined above, and served as a social tool for distinguishing between two strata of society, the elite and the popular, which were divided by different social-ideological outlooks. Yet despite the alienation and disconnection this caused, the separation was apparently far from absolute.

1.6. In the Early Arab Period and in Genizah Documents from Eretz Yisrael

The seventh to tenth centuries constitute a lacuna due to lack of sources. The Genizah documents begin to shed a modicum of light from the beginning of the tenth century, but they only bring us an abundance of information starting in the eleventh century. Regrettably, a lacuna of three hundred years is a very serious gap, but we must make use of what is available to us.

Moshe Gil, the great Genizah scholar wrote:

Torah scholars who were recognized for their scholarship and ordained by the yeshivah to serve as *dayanim* (judges) in their communities and towns were called *haverim*, a term found, as we know, in Talmudic literature, where it is a synonym for a Torah scholar and the opposite of an *am ha'aretz*. This title (and not “*rav*”) is the one usually used to refer to a *dayan* who heads a community (*kehilah*), as indicated even by the fact that this expression was adopted by pre-Islamic Arabic, in the sense of Jewish Torah scholar, or Jewish leader.¹¹ (1982, 417)

Indeed, Arab-Muslim traditions attach a great deal of importance to the supposed visit of the caliph Umar ibn Al-Khattāb on the Temple Mount following the conquest of Jerusalem in 638. Most of these traditions recount that a Jew from the Arabian Peninsula accompanied the caliph on this tour, a Jew who converted to Islam and became a type of expert consultant to Umar on Jewish matters. According to tradition, he was called Ka'b al-Akhbar, a unique phrase consisting of two words, one in classical Arabic—Ka'b, which means miter or head covering—and Akhbar, the Arabic equivalent of the Hebrew *haver*, which took on the broken Arabic plural rather than the Hebrew plural, *haverim*. In other words, this name means “the most magnificent of *haverim*.” Clearly this term is a legacy from previous eras when the word *haver* indicted an elitist stratum. It was passed on to the Jews of the Arabian Peninsula, who came there during the first century in the wake of the Romans' destruction of Jerusalem, and was handed down from them to Arab society, all the while retaining the same sense of elitism.

Following this path brings and leads us directly to the development of this word in the sense that it was used during the early Arab period, a meaning derived from two sources, an internal Jewish one, indicating a high social standing, and an external, Arab-Muslim source, which derived the term from the Jewish world and recycled it back again to the Jewish realm of Eretz Yisrael and the communities under its authority.

Genizah documents reveal that the institution, which had the authority to grant titles and make appointments in Eretz Yisrael under the Fatimid regime (tenth-twelfth centuries) was the Palestinian yeshivah, or as it called itself the Great Sanhedrin or, alternatively, *Havurat Hakodesh*—a term that touches on the issues under discussion here. There were seven *haverim* in the yeshivah. The first was the head of the yeshivah, or

according to his full title, the head of the Geon Yaakov Yeshivah. The second was the *av bet din* (head of the court), while numbers three to seven were designated as *haverim* of the yeshivah, *haver* number three, *haver* number four, and so on. In addition, the yeshivah, or the head of the yeshivah appointed deputies to head the communities under its authority. The Palestinian yeshivah's authority encompassed Egypt, Eretz Yisrael, Syria, southern Italy and Sicily. The head of the yeshivah would appoint prominent people to lead the various communities on his behalf and preside over their community's courts (*batei din*). The yeshivah conferred the title *haver* on these appointees, their full designation being *haver* of the Great Sanhedrin. Some of them even received a more lofty title: the *brilliant haver*.¹²

The term *am ha'aretz* disappeared entirely and was never used in the Middle Ages, except in the new and modern sense of an uneducated person, an ignoramus.

2. Titles of Babylonian Yeshivot

2.1. *Aluf*—The Babylonian Title

Between the seventh and twelfth centuries, Eretz Yisrael and Babylonia were the two centers of authority for all the Jews and they competed with each other for the hegemony over the Jewish people. Not only did their customs and practices differ, but also the world views expressed in their Talmuds, and so, too, their use of certain terminology. One of the honorific titles used by the Babylonians was *aluf*. Like *haver*, the title *aluf* originated in the Bible and evolved over time.

2.2. *Aluf* in the Bible

The original *aluf*, in the Bible, had two meanings:

(1) *Aluf* is a chief, a leader, from Edom to Judah. In the Bible, *aluf* is not a military leader (as it is today) but rather the head of a group or tribe, since in Biblical parlance, the word *elef* (derived from the same root) means tribe or large family. This usage evolved into the number *elef* (one thousand), which is the most common way it is used till today. *Aluf* is, therefore, the one who heads an *elef*, the leader of a tribe or family.

Genesis 36:15: "These are the (*alufim*) chiefs of the sons of Esau: the sons of Eliphaz the first-born of Esau: the (*aluf*) chief of Teman, the (*aluf*) chief of Omar, the (*aluf*) chief of Zepho, the (*aluf*) chief of Kenaz..."

Jeremiah 3:4: "Didst thou not just now cry unto Me: 'My father, Thou art the (*aluf*) beloved one of my youth.'"

Radak (David Kimchi, 12th century) interpreted: *alufei* and *g'dolei*: my friends and esteemed mentors/Metsudat David interpreted: You are the master.

(2) The second meaning of *aluf* in ancient Hebrew is cattle or sheep, that is, beasts raised in herds. In this sense it appears twice in the Bible, however, it gained immortality by becoming the name of the first letter of the alphabet, *alef*. The names of the letters that comprise the Canaanite-Phoenician alphabet were assigned according to their similarity to the shape of the letter, and the letter *alef* was the picture of the head of an ox with horns, that is, an *aluf*. The letter *alef* is also the first letter in the Paleo-Hebrew alphabet, which developed from the Assyrian and Aramaic alphabets. This also led to the naming of the Aramaic word for *alef*, alpha, which crossed continents and time periods.

Jeremiah 11:19: "But I was like a (*keves aluf*) docile lamb that is led to the slaughter." Rashi's commentary on this passage is: *keves aluf* is a large sheep, and according to the Targum Jonathan, a select, top quality sheep. (It is interesting to note that the prophet Jeremiah uses both meanings of *aluf* in his prophecies.)

Exodus 15:15: “Then were (*alufei*) the chiefs of Edom affrighted; the mighty men of Moab, trembling taketh hold upon them...” In the Hebrew, both meanings of *aluf* could be correct here, in keeping with the parallels to the *eilim* (mighty men) of Moab: the reference is to heads of cattle.

The connection between *aluf* in the sense of leader or head of a group, and *aluf* in the sense of ox or sheep is apparently the verb *le’alef* (to train or tame) meaning to teach a group, to instruct or lead it—given that *elef* is a group or a tribe—and to train an ox for agricultural work.¹³ The Oral Law contains no mention whatsoever of this term and it has no additional meaning.

2.3. In the Early Arab Period and in Genizah Documents from Babylonia

The Babylonian yeshivot chose their own terminology, which was distinct from that of the Palestinian yeshivah, even though, as in Eretz Yisrael, the Bible was the source of all their terms. They also used the title *haver*, albeit infrequently and in a different context. In the Babylonian yeshivah, *haver* did not have the weight and special significance it had in the Palestinian yeshivah. In his well-known work, *Akhbar Baghdad* (*Baghdad news*), the tenth-century author Nathan the Babylonian employed this expression in the Arabic original to define the yeshivah members who did not have the rank of *aluf*, but sat in one of the yeshivah’s seven rows, their seats being hereditary, handed down from father to son. Here Nathan may have been using the ordinary Arabic meaning of *haver*, i.e., Torah scholar. We may conclude that the Babylonians did not utilize the term *haver* in its Mishnaic-Talmudic sense, as was the case in Eretz Yisrael, rather they took it directly from Muslim terminology, which had, in turn been influenced by the Hebrew.

In contrast, the most prized honorific in the Babylonian yeshivah was *aluf* and its parallel, *rosh khala* (in Arabic, *ras al-kull*). In *Akhbar Baghdad*, Nathan haKohen the Babylonian explains the organization of the yeshivah:

And this is the order of the seating in the yeshivah. The head of the yeshivah (*rosh hayeshivah*) stands at the head with ten people arrayed before him, and this is called *dara kama* (the first row). They face the head of the yeshivah. Of the ten who sit facing him, seven are *rashei kallot* and three are *haverim*. And why are they called *rashei kallot*? Because each of them is appointed by ten of the Sanhedrin and they are called *alufim*.¹⁴ (1966, 87)

Nathan the Babylonian’s description is confirmed by many letters found in the Genizah, correspondence sent by geonim and members of the Babylonian yeshivah to Egypt and Qayrawan (Tunisia). For example, Sherira Gaon of Pumbedita wrote to Ya’akov ben Nisim of Qayrawan: “Because at the time that the members arranged themselves before us according to the customary arrangement, the name of the *aluf* was called to the head of his row...” This fragment verifies that the *rosh kalla* stood at the head of the row and was known as an *aluf*.¹⁵

In his work Nathan the Babylonian also recounts that the places in the first row were permanent and handed down from father to son: “and the custom was that, if one of the *rashei kallot* (heads of rows) died and he had a son to replace him, he would inherit his father’s place and occupy it, even if he was young in years... and none of them would pass over the threshold of his colleague...”¹⁶ This account is verified in a letter written by Zemach Zedek ben Yitzhak, the gaon of Sura, to Elhanan ben Shemariya in Fustat, in about 990: “... when his letter arrived, our disciple, Sahl *aluf* the son of an *aluf*, our agent took him under his wing...”¹⁷ A letter written by someone in the Pumbedita yeshivah to two members of the Qayrawan community provides further confirmation of Nathan the Babylonian’s portrayal: “... it is evident and clear to everyone that the Pumbedita yeshivah has an abundance of *alufim*... the yeshivah of Pumbedita has seven *alufim* Mar Rav Ahi *Aluf* ben Mar Rav Mar and Mar Rav Menahem *Aluf* ben Mar Rav Yoseph Gaon ben Mar Rav Hai...”¹⁸

3. In Summary

The two sister authorities and rivals, Eretz Yisrael and Babylonia, used different terms, yet, even though all of them originated in the Bible, each center chose different ones and used them in different ways. Their choice of terminology was affected not only by internal-Jewish influences, but also by external ones, from Islamic society. It may be assumed that the adoption of a phrase, although by nature a gradual process, was not accidental. The yeshivah in Eretz Yisrael selected an elitist term—which was given harsh expression in the Oral Law that originated in Palestine—out of the perspective that Eretz Yisrael is the Holy Land, Eretz ha-Zvi. (In fact, the yeshivah also called itself Yeshivat ha-Zvi.) The utilization of a particular nomenclature was an attempt to hold on to the foundations of the holiness of Eretz Yisrael in face of the relentless battle being waged between the Palestinian yeshivah and the Babylonian yeshivot, which gained the lead and then the hegemony over the Jewish nation during the fifth century and thereafter by means of the Babylonian Talmud and the judicial decisions of the geonim. Unlike the Palestinian institution, the yeshivot of Babylonia picked a term that had even in the Bible denoted groups outside the land of Israel, as well as a senior rank and leadership position, enabling it to express the superiority of its holder.

Interestingly enough, this struggle between the two centers was also reflected in the personalities of two community leaders in Fustat, Egypt in the first half of the 11th century. They were Avraham ben Sahlan and his son, Sahlan ben Avraham, two men who succeeded one another as head of Fustat's Babylonian community. Seeking the support of these leaders, both of the centers showered them with honorifics. Thus, in contrast to the leaders of the Jerusalem *kahal*, whose titles were conferred solely by the Palestinian yeshivah, the two heads of the Babylonian community received the Jerusalem honorific of *haver*, as well as the Babylonian titles of *aluf* and *rosh kalla*. This was an uncompromising political struggle, with each center attempting to attract supporters to its side from as many communities as possible, support that was expressed not only in the acceptance of authority and status, but also financial contributions.¹⁹

Notes

1. Zvi Ekstein and Maristella Botichini, *The Chosen Minority: How Education Shaped Jewish Economic History, 70-1492*, Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 2013, 106-97. Hebrew version of Maristella Botticini and Zvi Eckstein, *The Chosen Few: How Education Shaped Jewish History, 70-1492*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012.

2. Biblical scholarship generally attributes the book of Genesis to the redaction of several ancient sources, an endeavor completed during the first Temple era.

3. Michael Kochman, *The encyclopedia Olam Hatanach: A Critical Commentary of the Bible for the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, Revivim, 1985, 41-42 (Hebrew).

4. The Kingdom of Judah existed from the last third of the tenth century BCE to the destruction of the First Temple by the Babylonian Empire in 586 BCE.

5. According to historical research, the Second Temple was erected in 516 BCE, about seventy years after the destruction of the First Temple.

6. Ezra apparently returned about sixty years after the construction of the Second Temple, about 150 years after the Return to Zion in 538.

7. Lexicon of Jewish Culture, <http://lexicon.cet.ac.il/wf/wfTerm.aspx?id=1410> (Hebrew).

8. Aharon Oppenheimer and Moshe David Herr, *The History of Eretz Yisrael*, Vol. 5, The Period of the Mishnah and Talmud and Byzantine Rule, Jerusalem, Keter, 1990, 112-22 (Hebrew).

9. Gedaliyahu Alon, *The History of the Jews in Eretz Yisrael during the Mishnah and Talmu Eras*, Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1975, Vol. 2, 80-83 (Hebrew).

10. Menahem ben Shalom, *Hasidism and Hasidim during the Two Mishnaic Periods*, Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 2008, 197-201 (Hebrew).

11. Moshe Gil, *Palestine during the First Muslim Period (634-1099)* 3 Vols., Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University and the Ministry of Defense, 1982, 417 (Hebrew).
12. Elinor Bareket, *Shafir Mitzrayim: The Jewish Leadership in Fustat during the First Half of the Eleventh Century*, Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1994, 35-37 (Hebrew).
13. Rubic Rosenthal, "The Language Scene: The Evolution of *aluf*" <http://www.nrg.co.il/online/47/ART2/149/720.html> (Hebrew).
14. Adolph Neubauer (ed.), *Akhbar Baghdad (Seder Olam Zuta) Seder Hehahamim Vekorot Hayamim*, Jerusalem, 1966, 87 (Hebrew).
15. Moshe Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael during the Geonic Period*, 3 Vols., Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University and Mosad Bialik, 1997, Vol. 2, 106, lines 6-7 (Hebrew).
16. Neubauer, *Akhbar Baghdad*, 87.
17. Gil, *In the Kingdom of Ishmael*, Vol. 2, 134, row 14.
18. *Ibid.*, 15, lines 3-6.
19. Bareket, *Shafir Mitzrayim*, 165-87.