

# The Medieval Jewish Kingdom of the Chazars

## 740-1259 ce

ABOUT the year 740, many of the Chazars a powerful Turkish tribe occupying the steppes of southern Russia, became converts to Judaism. More than two centuries later, the report of the existence of this Jewish kingdom aroused the curiosity of Hasdai ibn Shaprut (about 915-970). Ibn Shaprut was not only the personal physician of the Spanish Caliphs Abd-al-Rahman III (912-961) and his son Hakam II (961-976) but was also inspector-general of customs and an adviser in foreign affairs. To satisfy his curiosity lie wrote to the ruler of the Chazars about 960 and some time later received an answer from Joseph, the reigning king. The letters of Hasdai and Joseph, both originally written in Hebrew, are given below in extract.

Fragments of the Chazar kingdom persisted into the thirteenth century.

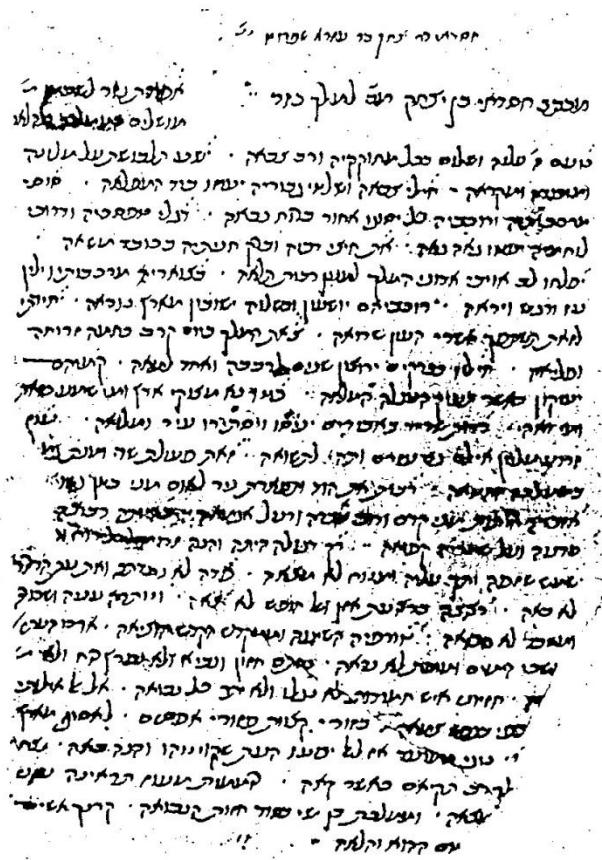


Figure 1. First of the letters from Hisdai ibn Shaprut to the king of the Khazars, 10th century. Oxford, Christ Church Library, Ms. 193, p. 12.

## The Letter Of Rabbi Chisdai ben Yitzchok ibn Shaprut To The King Of The Chazars (About 960 ce)

I, Chisdai ben Yitzchok ben Ezra, belonging to the exiled Jews of Jerusalem in Spain, a servant of my lord the King, bow to the earth before him and prostrate myself towards the abode of your Majesty from a distant land. I rejoice in your tranquillity and magnificence and stretch forth my hands to God in heaven that He may prolong your reign in Israel. . . .

Praise be to the beneficent God for His mercy towards me! Kings of the earth, to whom his magnificence and power are known, bring gifts to him conciliating his favor by costly presents, such as the King of the Franks, the King of the Gebalim who are Germans, the King of Constantinople, and others. All their gifts pass through my hands, and I am charged with making gifts in return. Let my lips express praise to the God of heaven who so far extends His lovingkindness towards me, without any merit of my own, but in the fullness of His mercies!

I always ask the ambassadors of these monarchs who bring gifts, about our brethren the Israelites, the remnant of the captivity whether they have heard anything concerning the deliverance of those who have languished in bondage and have found no rest.

At length mercantile emissaries of Khorasan told me that there is a kingdom of Jews which is called Al-Chazar. But I did not believe these words for I thought that they told me such things to procure my goodwill and favor. I was therefore wondering till the ambassadors of Constantinople came with presents and a letter from their king to our king, and I interrogated them concerning this matter.

They answered me: "It is quite true, and the name of that kingdom is Al-Chazar. It is a fifteen days' journey by sea from Constantinople, but by land many nations intervene between us; the name of the king now reigning is Joseph; ships sometimes come from their country to ours bringing fish, skins, and mares of every kind. The men are our confederates and are honored by us; there is communication between us by embassies and mutual gifts; they are very powerful; they maintain numerous armies with which they occasionally engage in expeditions." When I heard this report I was encouraged, my hands were strengthened, and my hope was confirmed. Thereupon I bowed down and adored the God of heaven.

I pray for the health of my lord the King, of his family, and of his house, and that his throne may be established for ever. Let his days and his sons' days be prolonged in the midst of Israel!

*The Letter of Yosef haMelech ben Aaron haMelech, the Turk to  
May His Creator Preserve Him  
Chisdai ben Yitzchok ben Ezra  
(About 960 ce)*

*I wish to inform you that your beautifully phrased letter was given us by Isaac, son of Eliezer, a Jew of the land of Germany. You made us happy and we are delighted with your understanding and wisdom..... Let us, therefore, renew the diplomatic relations that once obtained between our fathers, and let us transmit this heritage to our children.*

*You ask us also in your epistle: "Of what people, of what family, and of what tribe are you? " Know that we are descended from Japhet, through his son Togarmah. I have found in the genealogical books of my ancestors that Togarmah had ten sons. These are their names: the eldest was Ujur, the second Tauris, the third Avar, the fourth Uguz, the fifth Bizal, the sixth Tarna, the seventh Chazar, the eighth Janur, the ninth Bulgar, the tenth Sawir. I am a descendant of Chazar, the seventh son.*

*I have a record that although our fathers were few in number, the Holy One blessed be He, gave them strength, power, and might so that they were able to carry on war after war with many nations who were more powerful and numerous than they. By the help of God they drove them out and took possession of their country. Upon some of them they have imposed forced labor even to this very day. The land in which I now live was formerly occupied by the Bulgarians. Our ancestors, the Chazars, came and fought with them, and, although these Bulgarians were as numerous as the sand on the shores of the sea, they could not withstand the Chazars. So they left their country and fled while the Chazars pursued them as far as the Danube River. Up to this very day the Bulgars camp along the Danube and are close to Constantinople. The Chazars have occupied their land up till now.*

*After this, several generations passed until a certain King arose whose name was Bulan. He was a wise and God-fearing man, trusting in his Creator with all his heart. He expelled the wizards and idolaters from the land and took refuge in the shadow of His wings. . . . After this his fame was spread broadcast. The kings of the Byzantines and the Arabs who had heard of him sent their envoys and ambassadors with great riches and many great presents to the King as well as some of their wise men with the object of converting him to their own religion. But the King--may his soul be bound up in the bundle of life with the Lord his God-being wise, sent for a learned Israelite. The King*

searched, inquired, and investigated carefully and brought the sages together that they might argue about their respective religions. Each of them refuted, however, the arguments of his opponent so that they could not agree. When the King saw this he said to them: "Go home, but return to me on the third day.....

On the third day he called all the sages together and said to them: "Speak and argue with one another and make clear to me which is the best religion." They began to dispute with one another without arriving at any results until the King said to the Christian priest: "What do you think? Of the religion of the Jews and the Moslems which is to be preferred?" The priest answered: "The religion of the Israelites is better than that of the Moslems."

The King then asked the kadi: "What do you say? Is the religion of the Israelites, or that of the Christians preferable?" The kadi answered: "The religion of the Israelites is preferable."

Upon this the King said: "If this is so, you both have admitted with your own mouths that the religion of the Israelites is better. Wherefore, trusting in the mercies of God and the power of the Almighty, I choose the religion of Israel, that is, the religion of Abraham. If that God in whom I trust, and in the shadow of whose wings I find refuge, will aid me, He can give me without labor the money, the gold, and the silver which you have promised me. As for you all, go now in peace to your land."

From that time on the Almighty helped Bulan, fortified him, and strengthened him. He circumcised himself, his servants, attendants, and all his people. Then Bulan sent for and brought from all places wise men of Israel who interpreted the Torah for him and arranged the precepts in order, and up to this very day we have been subject to this religion. May God's name be blessed and may His remembrance be exalted for ever!

Since that day when my fathers entered into this religion, the God of Israel has humbled all of their enemies, subjecting every folk and tongue roundabout them, whether Christian, Moslem, or pagan.. No one has been able to stand before them to this day . All of them are tributary.

After the days of Bulan there arose one of his descendants, a king, Ovadiah by name, who reorganized the kingdom and established the Jewish religion properly and correctly. He built synagogues and schools, brought in Jewish scholars, and rewarded them with gold and silver. They explained to him the Bible, Mishnah, Talmud, and the order of divine services. The King was a man who revered and loved the Torah. He was one of the true servants of God. May the Divine Spirit give him rest!

*He was succeeded by Hezekiah, his son; next to him was Manasseh, his son; next to him was Chanukkah, the brother of Ovadiah; next Yitzchok, his son; afterwards, his son Zevulun; then his son Moshe-, then his son Nissi; then his son Aaron; then his son Menachem; then his son Benyamin; then his son Aaron II; and I, Yosef, the son of Aaron the King, am King, the son of a King, and the descendant of kings. No stranger can occupy the throne of my ancestors: the son succeeds the father. This has been our custom and the custom of our forefathers since they have come into existence. May it be the gracious will of Him who appoints all kings that the throne of my kingdom shall endure to all eternity.*

*You have also asked me about the affairs of my country and the extent of my empire. I wish to inform you that I dwell by the banks of the river known as the Itil. At the mouth of the river lies the Caspian Sea. The headwaters of the river turn eastward, a journey of four months distance.*

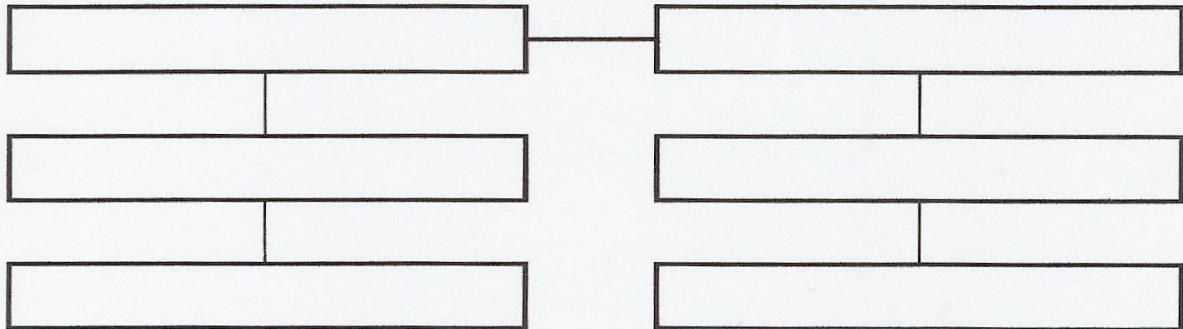
*Alongside the river dwell many tribes in cities and towns, in open as well as fortified places. Bear in mind that I dwell at the delta of the Itil, and, by God's help, I guard the mouth of the river and do not permit the Russians who come in ships to enter into the Caspian so as to get at the Moslems. Nor do I allow any of their enemies who come by land to penetrate as far as Derbend. I have to wage war with them, for if I would give them any chance at all they would lay waste the whole land of the Moslems as far as Baghdad. . . .*

*You have also asked me about the place where I live. I wish to inform you that, by the grace of God, I dwell alongside this river on which there are situated three capital cities. The queen dwells in one of them; it is my birthplace. It is quite large, built round like a circle, the diameter of which is fifty parasangs.*

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

## Kings of the Khazars

Bulan ben Avraham,  
Melech ha Kuzari



Carefully read The Letter of Yosef haMelech ben Aaron haMelech, written about 960 c.e. and then complete the chart of the Kings of the Khazars

