

*TE'UDA*

I

CAIRO GENIZA STUDIES

TEL-AVIV UNIVERSITY  
FACULTY OF THE HUMANITIES  
THE CHAIM ROSENBERG SCHOOL OF JEWISH STUDIES  
'MORESHET' PROJECT FOR THE STUDY OF EASTERN JEWRY

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THE CHAIM ROSENBERG SCHOOL OF JEWISH STUDIES RESEARCH SERIES

I

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*Edited by*

MORDECHAI A. FRIEDMAN



TEL-AVIV UNIVERSITY

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# THE LIFE OF OUR FOREFATHERS AS REFLECTED IN THE DOCUMENTS OF THE CAIRO GENIZA

S.D. Goitein

Three features distinguished the Cairo Geniza from other Genizas: its size, its contents, and the age of the fragments found there, from the tenth through nineteenth centuries. This extensive period is largely due to the fact that the Geniza chamber was in constant use since the beginning of the eleventh century. As to its contents, the Geniza is unique in that it preserved not only writings of a 'religious' nature but also purely 'secular' papers such as legal documents, accounts, business and family letters. Perhaps the preservation of such writings was a peculiar Palestinian custom and was thus retained in the Palestinian synagogue of Fustat. Alternatively, this may have been a universal Jewish practice in antiquity which was discontinued in later times. If so, there may have been other Genizas that might yet be discovered in excavations in such localities as Sijilmasa, in North Africa, Wargela, in the Sahara or in the Yemen. But the most likely place for such a discovery is Egypt itself. An addition to the catalogue of the Hebrew manuscripts in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, notes that several sacksfull of fragments came from excavations in the vicinity of the synagogue. This undoubtedly refers to the al-Basāṭīn cemetery where the fragments in the Mosseri collection originated. The author recently received a photograph of a complete Geniza family letter that had been purchased in the Cairo bazaar during the summer of 1972.

To return to the first point, the size of the Geniza chamber: it contained hundreds of thousands of fragments. The Geniza was constructed when the Palestinian synagogue was rebuilt, in the second decade of the eleventh century, following the destruction that resulted from the decrees of the mad caliph, al-Hākim. The decision to erect the large Geniza room may have followed an unfortunate event at the end of the year 1011, immortalized in the 'Egyptian Scroll'. On the last day of that year the funeral procession of the congregation's cantor was attacked by the Muslim masses, and the lives of leaders of the community were saved only by the intervention of the caliph.

The former custom was probably to remove Geniza materials for burial in such funeral processions. It is suggested that the community decided to include a large Geniza chamber in the reconstructed synagogue to preserve their sacred writings from future attacks.

Concerning the intellectual and literary activity of our forefathers during the classical Geniza period (tenth-thirteenth centuries), this was a time of crystallization and formulation. In education, great emphasis was placed on Bible study, understanding its meaning, learning its correct pronunciation, and committing it to memory. Talmudic studies concentrated on areas of practical law: Sabbath and the festivals, *kashrut*, marriage and divorce, inheritance, and monetary matters.

The most remarkable literary phenomenon of this period is the abundance of *piyyuṭim*, and religious poetry in general, which have been discovered in the Geniza. The basic concept which underlies *piyyuṭ* is that one is required to innovate in prayer, that it not become rote. A cantor was expected not only to sing known *piyyuṭim* but to make original compositions and spontaneous additions to the *piyyuṭ*. The people's attraction to the often obscure *piyyuṭim* is to be explained not only by the popular tunes to which they were sung and the intellectual challenge to comprehend their meaning but by the spiritual experience conveyed by the rhythm of the poem. As to philosophy, the works of Saadiah Gaon were of uncontested popularity for a most extended period.

The documentary Geniza materials describe every day life. By 'family' one understood primarily the extended family of blood relations. The mother and sister played a special role. The relationship of a sister's son was also particularly close. Marriage with the sister's daughter, opposed by the Karaites, was uncommon among the Rabbanites as well. Marriages between first cousins, on the other hand, were rather frequent and were seen as a way to strengthen the family ties. The wife usually went to live with her husband's family. Needless to say, this was frequently the cause of tension.

Another source of tension was the age difference between husband and wife; girls married at about the age of 15 or 16. The dowry brought by the bride contributed to the family's financial stability, but the use of these valuables was often the subject of family disputes. Frequent extended business trips disrupted many marriages. A large proportion of women remarried after being divorced or widowed. The Geniza reveals relationships



of love between husband and wife, both in first and second marriages.

There was a great deal of movement of the Jewish population from city to city. But the expanse of territory from Palestine and to the East and West, from Iran to North Africa, had continuous Jewish settlements since antiquity. Jewish life in these countries during the High Middle Ages reflected a much higher degree of normalcy and stability than in Christian Europe. This is reflected, for example, in the broad economic foundations of the Geniza Jewish communities.

We find a broad spectrum of interesting data on the organization of the community and its institutions, which illuminate not only the Geniza period but the Talmudic period as well.

Finally, attention is called to the Geniza documents as invaluable source materials for the study of midrashic Hebrew.

## TALMUD FRAGMENTS IN THE CAIRO GENIZA

Y. Sussmann

Thousands of fragments, large and small, of the Mishnah and Talmud were found in the treasure of Hebrew manuscripts which was discovered some hundred years ago in the Cairo Geniza. While the Geniza fragments of rabbinic literature in general were dealt with and researched, these fragments, which contained no spectacular discovery, were, by and large, ignored by scholars. These texts, which include ancient fragments about one thousand years old and which at times preserve original variants that did not reach us through the European channels (Spain, Ashkenaz, etc.), have not yet been dealt with systematically.

The systematic treatment of these fragments has been undertaken by the Mishnah Project, sponsored by the National Israeli Academy of Science. In this framework (photographs of) all the fragments that are scattered throughout the world have been collected, identified and listed with precision. In the past years, much use has been made of these fragments, and their readings have been quoted frequently. But this has been done without

any attempt to evaluate and ascertain the nature of the individual fragments. Frequently the variants of 'Geniza' texts are used as unquestionably authoritative sources, even though this is not always the case. Only after all the fragments have been listed, indentified, and joined together, will it be possible to ascertain the value and authority of the various copies from which they were derived.

The author presented examples of the significance of this work and gave notice concerning the preparation of a complete catalogue which is to be published (of materials from the Geniza and from other sources), of all the manuscripts of the Mishnah, Tosefta, Palestinian and Babylonian Talmud, and Alfasi. The catalogue of the Palestinian Talmud has already been completed. All fragments have been indentified and fragments of individual manuscripts have been matched. (This was not done by L. Ginzberg in his edition, and this misled many scholars.) Thus an attempt has been made to reconstruct the original copies from which the Geniza fragments came. Presently, these fragments (some 30% more than the previous edition) are being prepared for publication.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF THE GENIZA FRAGMENTS FOR THE STUDY OF THE TALMUD AND MIDRASH

Z.M. Rabinowitz

In his visits to the libraries of Cambridge, Oxford, and London, the author found several old Geniza fragments of halakhic and aggadic midrashim, of the Palestinian Talmud and other works. From these it has been possible to study the ancient forms of Talmudic texts. These fragments are written according to the ancient Palestinian orthography, known from old manuscripts that are considered reliable texts of Mishnaic Hebrew and Galilean Aramaic, such as the Vatican MS of Genesis Rabbah or the Rome MS of the Sifra, etc. Most of the fragments are from the eleventh century or earlier. Recently a legal inscription has been discovered at Beth Shean, from the end of the Amoraic

