

The Second Revolution in Documentary Geniza Research

I made Moshe Gil's acquaintance in 1968, when he came to study with Prof. S. D. Goitein at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. Having already studied with Goitein for several years, I was completing my dissertation. When I asked Moshe about his plans, he said forthright: "I'll complete my studies and submit my Ph.D. dissertation within two years and then go back to teach at Tel-Aviv University." Gil was twenty years my senior and, at that time, almost as old as Goitein had been when he began his Geniza career. He had a wonderful sense of humor. In his late eighties, when asked how he was, he still answered that he was training to swim *la Manche* (the English Channel). When in 1968 I heard of his career plans, I chuckled at the naivety of this new-old-fellow-graduate student. But there was no humor in his plans, and it was I who was naive. In two years he completed his dissertation, "Documents of the Jewish Pious Foundations from the Cairo Geniza," earned his degree and returned to Tel-Aviv University to commence his meteoric academic career.

The revolution in research of the Geniza documents, masterminded and executed by Goitein has long been acclaimed and is well known to readers of *Genizah Fragments*. He characterized his magnum opus *A Mediterranean Society* as "spadework." The significance of this ostensibly modest description was explained in the preface to volume two: "I regard this book and similar publications of mine solely as preparatory stages leading to the main task of Geniza research, the systematic edition of the original texts with full translations, commentaries, and facsimiles." Goitein envisioned setting up a team of young

T-S 13J16.14, one of the many letters in the Cairo Geniza written by the Ga'on Solomon b. Judah. The life of the colourful Ga'on and the lost history of the Palestinian Yeshiva were illuminated by Moshe Gil in his *History of Palestine*. This image, and 15,000 others, are now available on Cambridge University Digital Library (cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk).

scholars for this task. When he wrote those remarks in April 1970, he could not have imagined that much of the work would be accomplished singlehandedly by his graduate student Moshe Gil, who was then putting the final touches on his dissertation.

Only those who have experienced the daunting challenge of identifying, deciphering, translating, annotating and analyzing a Judeo-Arabic Geniza fragment can begin to fathom the heroic dimensions of Gil's achievement. The numbers alone are overwhelming. A simple calculation of the fragments edited in Gil's two multi-voluminous, comprehensive, historical

masterpieces, *Palestine during the First Muslim Period (634–1099)* (Parts 2–3: *Cairo Geniza Documents*) and *In the Kingdom of Ishmael* (Vols. 2–4: *Texts from the Cairo Geniza*) and in his *Yehuda Ha-Levi and his Circle: 55 Geniza Documents*, together with *Documents of the Jewish Pious Foundations*, shows that they number 1667. When one takes into account Gil's many other studies, the number approaches two thousand. This momentous accomplishment is not only without parallel in the annals of Geniza research, it is of historical proportions in the humanities in general.

Present and future generations of scholars will re-examine, refine and supplement Gil's editions of Geniza texts. Some editions

and their creative analyses will be challenged. None of this can detract an iota from his remarkable contribution. Innumerable dissertations and researches have already been based on his corpuses. Geniza scholarship will never be the same after Gil's work.

Goitein's seminal "spadework" generated the first revolution of the documentary Geniza. Gil's superb historical studies that were firmly grounded on colossal editions of texts provided the second revolution

Moshe Gil was not only a scholars' scholar, he was a frier. He will be sorely missed.

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