



Solomon Schechter studying documents from the Cairo Geniza, 1895

The Geniza

A Jewish treasure

A Geniza is the store-room in a synagogue, usually specifically for worn-out Hebrew-language books and papers on religious topics that were stored there before they could receive a proper cemetery burial, it being forbidden to throw away writings containing the name of God. The best-known geniza is the Cairo Geniza, studied mainly by Solomon Schechter.

A hiding place or a repository

In Hebrew, the word *geniza* means « hiding place ». It is a depository for sacred Hebrew books that are no longer usable. Later, it became a noun for a place where one put things, and is perhaps best translated as « archive » or « repository ».

Since they cannot be thrown out because they contain God's name, the documents, often called *shemot* or « names » are put in a *geniza*. *Genizot* are usually found in the attic or basement of a synagogue, but can also be in walls or buried underground. In practice, *genizot* also contained writings of a secular nature, and also contained writings in languages that use the Hebrew alphabet (Judeo-Arabic, Yiddish, Judeo-Persian, etc).

The custom also included the periodic solemn gathering of the contents of the *geniza*, which were then buried in the cemetery or *bet ḥayyim*. Synagogues in Jerusalem buried the contents of their *genizot* every seventh year, as well as during a year of drought, believing that this would bring rain. This custom is associated with the far older practice of burying a great or good man with a *sefer* which has become *pasul* (unfit for use through illegibility or old age). In Morocco, in Algiers, in Turkey, and even in Egypt, such paper-interments had been practiced.

The Cairo geniza: a major discovery

The 1896 discovery of the Cairo *Geniza* was one of the greatest Jewish treasures ever found. It has provided the world with the some of the most important documents of the medieval Middle East. It is located in the Ezra Synagogue in Fostat (Old Cairo, Egypt), built in 882.

The importance of the Cairo *Geniza* became apparant in 1896, when two Christians brought some leaves to Solomon Schechter, who at the time was a professor of Talmudic and rabbinical literature at England's Cambridge University. Schechter recognized them as the Hebrew original "Book of Wisdom," ascribed to Ben Sira. The Book of Wisdom became part of the Christian biblical cannon (Ecclesiastics) when translated into Greek. Before its discovery in the Cairo *Geniza*, no known Hebrew version existed, some scholars even doubted its existence. Schechter led an expedition to Cairo where, over several painstaking months, he extracted thousands of pages from the *geniza* and took them back to Cambridge. The sealed, dark room in the dry Egyptian climate allowed for the preservation the documents.

The discovery of the documents in the Cairo *Geniza* has been likened to the 20th century discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. In addition to valuable Biblical and Talmudic documents, it gave a detailed picture of the economic and cultural life of the Middle Eastern and Mediterranean region over many centuries. No other library in the world possessed such an array of religious and private documents from the 10th to 13th centuries, when the Fatimid caliphs (10-12th centuries) and Ayyubid sultans (12th-13th centuries) ruled. The *geniza* revealed a wealth of information from this

period, an era previously not well-known in Jewish history. Its leaves described the vital role the Jews played in the economic and cultural life of the medieval Middle East as well as the warm relations between Jews and Arabs, through community minutes, rabbinical court records, leases, title-deeds, endowment contracts, debt acknowledgments, marriage contracts and private letters. More than 200 previously unknown poems by Yehuda Halevy (c. 1080-1145) were found in the *geniza*. Perhaps the most important papers found belong to Rabbi Moses Ben Maimon (Maimonides or the Rambam, 1135-1204), the greatest medieval Jewish philosopher and physician. The geniza contained over thirty works authored by the Rambam, including commentary on some Mishna tractates and a number of letters. Before this discovery, only a few lines of original Rambam writings had ever been found.

Sources : <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/History/Genizah.html> and [Encyclopedia Judaica](#)