

# **Rosaline and Myer Feinstein Lecture Series, 1997**

## **One Hundred Years of Genizah Discovery and Research: The American Share**

**By Menahem Schmelzer**

Not long ago Frank Rich wrote an interesting column in The New York Times. It was called "Reverse Exodus" and was subtitled "American Jews go back downtown." The main thrust of the article was that American Jews should not have to seek their roots or identity in the "old country" or Israel or the Holocaust, because there is pride to be derived from their rich American Jewish heritage. He pointed out that the past of American Judaism could well serve as a source of inspiration of younger generations of Jews. The story told here of a little known chapter of American Jewish scholarship, is for sure glorious, rich of great achievement, and part of the proud American Jewish past.

Nineteen ninety-seven marked the centennial of the removal of hundreds of thousands of old and worn Hebrew manuscript fragments from a chamber—the Genizah—of the ancient Ben Ezra synagogue in Old Cairo. This feat is forever tied to Solomon Schechter, whose name has indeed become a household word, mainly because of the success of the network of Schechter schools named after him. However, Solomon Schechter's name is memorable for the reasons of his own watershed achievements. Schechter, a hundred years ago, was a teacher of Rabbinics at Cambridge University in England, enjoying fame as a scholar, whose pioneering publications made a great impression on Jews and non-Jews alike. It is well-known how two Scottish tourist ladies, returning from a trip to Egypt, showed Schechter some old Hebrew manuscript fragments that they had acquired there, and how Schechter, in great excitement, identified these fragments as part of the long-lost original of the ancient Hebrew work, the Book of Ben Sira. Schechter, with the full support of the authorities of Cambridge University journeyed to Cairo and removed the contents of that old chamber, called, The Genizah, and transferred it to Cambridge. With this event, a century of exciting discoveries began.

Solomon Schechter was the most influential figure in Genizah discoveries, but he was not the only one. Cyrus Adler, an American scholar and public leader, played an important role as well in this endeavor. Grace Cohen Grossman recently painted an intricate portrait of Cyrus Adler, who, among his many public Jewish and non-Jewish roles, was instrumental in acquiring Judaica items for the Smithsonian Institution, where he served as secretary. In 1890 Adler became involved in the preparation of a large scale exposition to take place in Chicago to celebrate the four hundredth anniversary of the discovery of America. He was asked to travel to the Orient to secure objects for the Exposition. On his way to the Middle East he stopped for a few days in England where he met for the first time two men who later became important in Genizah history, Solomon Schechter and Elkan Nathan Adler. Cyrus Adler, no relation to Elkan, proceeded on his trip and spent the Spring of 1891 in Cairo. In his memoirs, he recorded his acquisition of Genizah fragments: "I was always looking out for Museum specimens that could be bought within reason, and I wandered about the shops very often. I happened one day to find several trays full of parchment leaves written in Hebrew, which the merchant had labeled anticas. I saw

at a glance that these were very old. As I wore a pith helmet and khaki suit, like every other tourist, he thought I wanted one as a souvenir. But indicating an interest in the whole lot I purchased them, big and little, some of the pieces only one sheet, some of them forty or fifty pages, at the enormous price of one shilling per unit and thus brought back to Europe what was probably the second largest collection from the Genizah, certainly the first to America, out of which has come at least one book and several important articles. These are now in the Dropsie College . . . I showed these documents to Dr. Schechter of Cambridge in 1892. He promptly borrowed a few, and I have always flattered myself that this accidental purchase of mine was at least one of the leads that enabled Dr. Schechter to make his discovery of the Cairo Genizah."

That Adler did a good job of arousing Schechter's interest in the Genizah is obvious. When Adler returned to Cairo in 1929 and wanted to see the Genizah, the shammash told him: "Schechter carried it away." But what did Adler carry away? Fortunately, we do have a catalogue of the Dropsie College Genizah fragments, now at the University of Pennsylvania. This relatively small collection is a kind of a microcosm of the Genizah as a whole. By the way, in the Dropsie collection, in addition to the Cyrus Adler acquisition, there were also manuscripts that several other American collectors, Mayer Sulzberger, Herbert Friedenwald, David Werner Amram, and Camden M. Cobern obtained in Cairo. In the Dropsie Collection there are fragments of Bible and Talmud, liturgy and poetry, documents and letters, amulets and philosophical texts. The oldest known text of the Passover Haggadah is the proud possession of the collection, as is a 4,000 word letter from Sicily, from the year 1064, in which various business matters and a civil war in Tunisia where the writer faced death, are described. The Dropsie Haggadah is not only old, but it is very different from the text that we are using today. The availability of this collection in the United States spurred great activity among scholars in this country, who devoted themselves to studying the treasures hidden in these fragments.

Solomon Schechter's arrival in New York as president of the Jewish Theological Seminary in 1902 made New York into a capital of Genizah research. Schechter himself continued to publish his discoveries, and others joined him. Many of these discoveries were first published in the scholarly journal, *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, which was issued since 1910 under the auspices of Dropsie College in Philadelphia, and was edited by Adler and Schechter. The transfer of the prestigious journal from England, where it had been published from its inception in 1889 until 1910, to the United States, was another important step in the development of Jewish studies in this country. Schechter also brought with himself several important fragments that were owned by him personally. One of them was a famous letter signed by the own hand of Maimonides. In the letter, Maimonides pleads for funds for the redemption of Jewish prisoners who were captured in a caravan in Erez Yisrael and were held for ransom by the Crusader King of Jerusalem. Maimonides describes how he and the dayyanim (the judges of Rabbinical courts), the elders and learned people (talmidei hakhamim), worked day and night, in the synagogues, in the market places, and in private homes to gather together the sums needed to ransom the captives. At Schechter's death his own Genizah fragments became part of the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary.

There is an interesting episode that is connected with Schechter's coming to America and the Genizah. The manuscripts that Schechter removed from Cairo in 1897 had become part of the library of Cambridge University in England. When Schechter prepared his move to New York,

he borrowed from the library more than a hundred documents on which he intended to work; the manuscripts were given call numbers as Cambridge Loan Fragments. Some of them were indeed published. In the 1920's and 1930's the Cambridge authorities turned to the Seminary Library in New York and asked for the return of the original of these "Loan" manuscripts. Despite diligent searches by the then Librarian, Alexander Marx, the originals could not be located. They were rediscovered in the Seminary Library in the late 1960's among huge, long sheets of paper on which Schechter himself transcribed the original texts. The late Professor Louis Finkelstein asked me to return them, in person, to Cambridge, which I did; and obviously, I received a royal treatment at the Cambridge University Library as the bearer of such treasures.

In the first two decades of our century, Detroit joined Philadelphia and New York as a depository of Genizah fragments. Charles Freer, the famous collector of oriental art objects, purchased Genizah documents in Egypt from a dealer. In all likelihood, the dealer had acquired them earlier from the Genizah synagogue. An alternative source could have been an ancient cemetery where they had been originally buried. Be that as it may, the documents are now in the Freer Gallery of the Smithsonian in Washington D.C. A detailed and elegant catalogue of the fragments was published, describing some fascinating aspects of Jewish life in the Middle Ages, relating to trade, travel and marriage. The Freer catalogue is in itself a model work, as it includes photographs, transcriptions, and full translations of the texts.

The major boost to the Genizah collection in America came in 1922 through the purchase by the Seminary Library of the library of Elkan Nathan Adler, the famous British traveler, collector and scholar, who was mentioned above. Elkan Adler traveled to Cairo in 1888 and again in 1895-1896, still before Schechter's 1897 trip. On Adler's second journey, "The Cairo synagogue authorities accompanied me to the Genizah and permitted me to take away the first sackful of fragments from that famous hoard. Neubauer rated me soundly for not carrying the whole lot away, Schechter admired my continence but was not foolish enough to follow my example." Elsewhere, Elkan Adler wrote the following on his visit to the Cairo Genizah Synagogue: "I ...was conducted...to the extreme end of the ladies' gallery, permitted to climb to the topmost rung of a ladder, to enter the secret chamber of the Genizah through a hole in the wall, and to take away with me a sackful of paper and parchment writings—as much in fact as I could gather up in the three or four hours I was permitted to linger there."

What was in the sack that Adler called "a very Benjamin's sack"? The best description of the original state and contents of the Genizah is still one that comes from the pen of Schechter:

One can hardly realize the confusion in a genuine, old Genizah until one has seen it. It is a battlefield of books, and the literary productions of many centuries had their share in the battle, and their disjecta membra are now strewn over its area. Some of the belligerents have perished outright, and are literally ground to dust in the terrible struggle for space, whilst others, as if overtaken by a general crush, are squeezed into big, unshapely lumps, which even with the aid of chemical appliances can no longer be separated without serious damage to their constituents. In their present condition these lumps sometimes afford curiously suggestive combinations; as, for instance, when you find a piece of some rational work, in which the very existence of either angels or devils is denied, clinging for its very life to an amulet in which these same beings (mostly the latter) are bound over to be on their good behavior and not interfere with Miss Jair's

love for somebody. The development of the romance is obscured by the fact that the last lines of the amulet are mounted on some I.O.U., or lease, and this in turn is squeezed between the sheets of an old moralist, who treats all attention to money affairs with scorn and indignation. Again, all these contradictory matters cleave tightly to some sheets from a very old bible. This, indeed, ought to be the last umpire between them, but it is hardly legible without peeling off from its surface the fragments of some printed work, which clings to old nobility with all the obstinacy and obstructiveness of the Parvenu.

Another interesting collection of Genizah fragments in the United States was once owned by Johann Kregel, who served as rabbi in several Central European communities. Kregel received these fragments in the early years of the century and wrote an article on some of them. They disappeared during World War II and were found in the Seminary Library in the 1970's in an old, worn, leather briefcase, mixed up with Kregel's typewritten sermons in German. The collection is now called the Kregel Genizah.

The easy availability of these collections in American libraries, combined with the great impact of the magnetic personality of Solomon Schechter and the lure and challenge of the opportunity for a veritable treasure hunt among the dispersed leaves, inspired many leading Jewish scholars in the United States to devote their lives to the exploration of this immense accumulation of old Hebrew, Aramaic, and Judeo-Arabic fragments.

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I would like to single out four great scholars who were closely associated with American institutions of learning most of their lives and whose work had an immense impact on Genizah scholarship. There were others, whose names I can only mention: Henry Malter, S.L. Skoss, Ben Zion Halper, Richard Gottheil, Moshe Zucker, Shalom Spiegel, all deceased, and Norman Golb, Marc Cohen, Norman Stillman, the Friedman brothers, Shamma and Mordecai (now in Israel), Elazar Hurvitz, and Neil Danzig, who fortunately are still with us and continue to be active in Genizah research.

Let us start with Louis Ginzberg, best known in the general community for his monumental *Legends of the Jews*. A native of Lithuania, a descendant of the Gaon of Vilna, a student of Lithuania yeshivoth and German universities, he came to this country in 1899. For the next half a century he taught at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York and was regarded as the foremost scholar of his generation. In 1909, Ginzberg published a two volume work, *Geonica*. In the first volume he provided a synthesis of the Geonic era, an approximately 500 year period in Jewish history, mainly in Babylonia. This span of time, between the end of the Talmudic period and the beginning of the emergence of the great European Jewish centers in Spain, Italy, France and Germany, contained the seeds of many later developments in Jewish life, culture and religion. The knowledge on this period was meager, scattered and fragmentary. Ginzberg, in the second volume of *Geonica*, entitled *Genizah Studies*, published and analyzed for the first time many manuscripts relating to this subject. In Ginzberg's words: "There is no exaggeration in maintaining that the discovery of the Genizah by Prof. Solomon Schechter was in no other department of Jewish learning so epoch making as in the history of the Geonim. Ginzberg continued to enrich this field and in 1929 published a further volume of *Genizah studies on Geonic Halakhah*. In the introduction to this volume, Ginzberg maintained that the results of his

1909 publications were still valid and listed some of the major scholarly challenges posed by the Geonic period: "the evolution of the Talmud from a literary compilation to the mold of Jewish thought and feeling, the hegemony of Babylonian Jewry over all Israel, the rise of sects, the growth of mysticism, and the attempts at an interpretation of Talmudic Judaism by the light of Graeco-Arabic philosophy."

The Genizah documents, as deciphered and analyzed by Ginzberg, and others, played a major role in contributing to the solution of these scholarly challenges. Ginzberg also published a major work containing Genizah manuscripts that elucidate many obscure passages of the Talmud of Jerusalem. Ginzberg consciously chose to write his Geonic history in English: "having cast in my lot with American Jewry, I felt myself bound to write in the language of the land of my adoption, and trust I shall not suffer in regarding myself as an American Jew". This remark must be understood against the background of his times: most modern Jewish scholarship in the first decades of our century was written in German, often referred to as the second-most-used Jewish language. The important discoveries of Ginzberg, achieved in America and published in English, placed American Jewish scholarship into the mainstream of the academic study of Judaism and contributed toward the gradual transfer of Jewish learning from Europe to America, already in the pre-Holocaust period. In subsequent Genizah research of Rabbinics, particularly Geonic literature, Ginzberg remained the pioneering authority, whose work still constitutes the starting point in every serious study of the topic. Historical, Halakhic and sociological research of the Geonate builds on the foundations Ginzberg had laid.

Another major American figure in a different discipline of Genizah research was Israel Davidson. He was also a native of Lithuania, who arrived in America in 1888. Among various occupations of his early career, being a chaplain in the Sing Sing prison deserves mention. A product of City College and Columbia University, Davidson became a professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America and specialized in medieval Hebrew literature. His best known work is the four volume *Thesaurus of Medieval Hebrew Poetry* in which he listed more than 35,000 poems. In terms of originality, however, his discovery of Yannai was most decisive. Yannai's name as composer of liturgical poems had been known for a long time. His poetry, however, was unknown and no facts were available about his life or times until Davidson published his findings in 1919. About twenty years before Davidson's book appeared, one of the first and more sensational Genizah finds was made by the English scholars, F. Crawford Burkitt and Charles Taylor. In one of the fragments at Cambridge University, the two scholars identified, underneath some Hebrew script, remnants of a lost Greek translation of the Bible. They edited the Greek, without paying attention to the Hebrew written over it. Davidson, observing the facsimiles of these manuscripts, became attracted to the Hebrew text and found to his great amazement that it contained poems that were connected to the weekly Bible sections, divided according to the ancient triennial cycle of public Torah reading. He recognized in the texts the signature of Yannai and was able to reconstruct the structure of these poetic compositions. The language was innovative, fresh and supple; the content mirrored the conditions of Eretz Yisrael toward the end of the Byzantine period; and the function revealed a synagogue practice of including creative new poetry into the weekly Shabbat service. Davidson's discovery opened up a new area of study of ancient Hebrew poetry. Scholars expressed their admiration for Davidson's work and stood in awe of the rich and beautiful poetry discovered by him; one scholar remarked that Yannai's work belongs alongside the folio volumes of the classics of

Talmud and Midrash. In the last seventy years and more, the field of Hebrew poetry in Eretz Yisrael has indeed exploded with many important new discoveries, which were ultimately started by Davidson's initial identification and publication of Yannai. Davidson received the recognition of his colleagues in Europe and Eretz Yisrael, was honored by the Bialik Prize, and a street was named after him in Jerusalem. The immigrant boy, the City College graduate, the American scholar became a central figure in the still unfolding scholarship of Genizah poetry.

The third scholar I want to mention is Jacob Mann. For a change, Mann was not from Lithuania, but from Galicia. He came to England in 1908 and then to the United States in 1920. First Mann taught at the Baltimore Hebrew College and later, until the end of his life, at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. Examining the holdings of Genizah in the various libraries, he became, in the words of Gerson D. Cohen, "an insatiable investigation of manuscripts" and, "a hunter who was determined to confine his quest to new game", the new game being the Genizah. While Ginzberg and Davidson were mainly interested in literary and halakhic texts, Mann wanted to find and utilize documentary evidence: letters, contracts, court records. These shed light on the communal life of the Jews in Babylonia, Palestine and Egypt in the classic Genizah centuries, namely, from ca. 900 until ca. 1200. The non-literary fragments of the Cairo Genizah moved into the forefront through the work of Jacob Mann. He organized the huge quantities of data in chronological sequence in three monumental works, each of two volumes: *The Jews in Egypt and Palestine*, *Texts and Studies in Jewish History and Literature*, and *The Bible as Read and Preached in the Old Synagogue*. Mann reconstructed events, restored forgotten names, and described the communal, political and organizational aspects of the life of the Jews, both Rabbinites and Karaites. Mann provided the raw materials for the continuing exploration of the history of the Jews in those areas. From Cincinnati Jacob Mann dominated the field and provided the solid bricks needed for future work. As he himself put it: "The more the material stored up in manuscripts is made accessible in a scientific manner, the better will the history of the Jewish life and activities in the course of the past ages be reconstructed anew."

With his familiarity with all aspects of the Genizah, literary, Halakhic, and documentary, Jacob Mann avoided the pitfalls of narrow specialization and provided the outlines of a synthesis of the life of the Jewish communities in the Near and Middle East that would later serve as the foundation of the scholarly achievements of the fourth scholar, S.D. Goitein. Goitein, where the G could stand for Genizah, has spent his life, more or less equally divided, between Germany, Israel and the United States. A native of Germany, the son of a rabbi, he was trained in traditional Jewish sources, and also acquired highly advanced knowledge in Semitic and classical philology. In Palestine, in the 1920's and later, Goitein immersed himself in Arabic studies, especially Islamic law, as well as in research on the Yemenite communities. Around 1950 his single-minded devotion to Genizah studies had begun, a preoccupation that lasted until his death in 1985. In the United States he was associated with the University of Pennsylvania and later with the Institute of Advanced Studies at Princeton University. He was also the recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship. Before turning to the majestic volumes containing Goitein's brilliant Genizah research, a word is in place on Goitein's role in cataloging, classifying and organizing Genizah fragments and the data derived from them. Goitein himself regarded this aspect of his activity "not less vital than [his] published work." He acquired an almost complete collection of photostats of the fragments and arranged them in order of the manuscript collections, creating a subject catalog, arranged around groups such as letters on trade between the Mediterranean and

India, accounts, and marriage contracts. The following indexes were devised: persons, families, honorific titles, Arabic words and phrases, dated manuscripts in chronological order, and occupations. This catalogue is now at Princeton University, where Genizah research is being continued by Goitein's student, Professor Marc Cohen.

The undisputed crowning achievement of 100 years of non-literary Genizah research is Goitein's five volume *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Genizah*. These large volumes provide a panoramic sweep, based on the most minute attention to detail, of the life of the Jewish communities and their coexistence with the Arab world. Goitein created a new term to describe his scholarly specialization: he called himself a sociographer. The main feature that grabs the reader is the liveliness of the society described through his discussions. In the masterly portrayals, his subjects, their lives, and their mentalities become vivid and palpably concrete. Goitein presents a picture of the totality of an active, dynamic, living community or rather communities: the Jewish, the Arab and the Christian. As Amitav Ghosh, the author of a semi-fictional, semi-anthropological book, inspired by the Genizah, writes, "a trapdoor into a vast network of foxholes where real life continues uninterrupted" was opened by Goitein and his colleagues.

Just a brief glance at the table of contents of the five volumes gives an idea of the richness of this work. Here are some chapter headings: "The working people: craftsman, wage earners, agriculture and fishery; professions of women"; "The world of commerce and finance: producers, dealers, brokers, auctioneers, travel and seafaring, types of vessels"; "Communal organization and institutions, medieval democracy, social services, education, interfaith relations"; "The family: marriage, the nuclear family, the extended family, the world of women"; "Daily Life: the city, domestic architecture, clothing and jewelry, food and drink"; "The Individual: gatherings, poverty, illness, death, awareness of personality, the ideal person, rank and renown, sex, the true believer, the prestige of scholarship." At the end of the fifth volume Goitein paints the portrait of seven prominent personalities, among them that of Abraham, the son of Maimonides.

Besides the brilliance and hard work, what made this monumental achievement possible? Goitein himself was not reticent in speaking and writing about the forces that shaped him. Among other things, he wrote:

Last, and strangest of all, I believe I would have missed many aspects of the Genizah documents had I not been granted the opportunity of observing the American scene for many years. Authoritarian Germany, where I spent my childhood and youth and the Jewish society in Palestine and later Israel with its socialist, welfare and protectionist tendencies which saw most of my working life, were utterly different from the Genizah society, which was loosely organized and competitive in every aspect. This vigorous free-enterprise society of the United States, which is not without petty jealousies and often cheap public honors, its endless fund-raising campaigns and all that goes with them, its general involvement in public affairs and deep concerns (or lip service, as the case may be) for the underdog - all proved to be extremely instructive. We do not wear turbans here; but while reading many a Genizah document one feels quite at home. American institution building, collecting zeal, scholarly ambition, concern for the preservation of our heritage, contributed to Genizah research world-wide and made American Jewish scholarship to be a proud partner in the ongoing effort of unraveling the multitude of documents preserved

among the treasures of the Genizah.