

The Famous Genizah: Some Personal Reminiscences

By Stefan C. Reif

In February 2013, it was widely reported that Oxford and Cambridge had put aside their centuries-old rivalry to join forces in a campaign to raise funds for the purchase of a major Genizah collection. A theological seminary of the United Reformed Church in Cambridge – Westminster College – had offered for sale its 1,700 Genizah documents, including a virtually priceless text written in the hand of Moses Maimonides (1138–1204), for the bargain price of £1.2m. The Polonsky Foundation had pledged £500,000 and Cambridge University Library, headed by Anne Jarvis, and the Bodleian Library, led by Sarah Thomas, had undertaken to locate the remainder of the required sum.

At a launch in the British Academy in London in May, there was universal agreement about the major importance of Genizah material for cultural awareness, for broader education and for general history, as well as for academic research. A Cambridge professor of history, who had once described the collection as “literally a rubbish dump of medieval papers”, was interviewed by the *Jewish Chronicle* of London. He opined that “the Cairo Genizah documents are like a searchlight, illuminating dark corners of the history of the Mediterranean and shedding a bright light on the social, economic and religious life of the Jews not just of medieval Egypt but of lands far away. There is nothing to compare with them.” Further proof of the universal attraction enjoyed by the Genizah manuscripts came in the summer when the Littman Foundation came forward with the money required to complete the purchase from Westminster.

On May 26 2013, the *New York Times* enlightened its readers about recent efforts “to harness technology to help reassemble more than 100,000 document fragments collected across 1,000 years that reveal details of Jewish life along the Mediterranean, including marriage, medicine and mysticism.” The exciting computer programs developed by Roni and Yaacov Choueka at Tel Aviv University in Israel were making it possible to match up pages, and parts of pages, of about a third of a million items held around the world. Credit was due not only to the Choueka family but also to the Friedberg Genizah Project, funded by Albert Dov Friedberg of Toronto, for providing the necessary finance. Scholars in Princeton and Baltimore, in the USA, as well as in Paris and Cambridge in Europe, each took their turn to stress the Genizah texts’ unique significance and praised the project to re-join, online, those fragments that had long been separated from each other by the exigencies of deterioration, discovery and dispatch.

Not wishing to be left out of this remarkable and universally recognized story of how a massive jig-saw of Mediterranean history is gradually being pieced together, BBC Radio in London devoted five short programs (May 27–31, 2013) to the Genizah Collection at Cambridge University Library, which currently houses about 75% of all Genizah material known in the world. Staff in the Library’s Genizah Research Unit gave short and lively talks about the exciting story of the discovery; the interplay between Jews, Muslims and Christians in the Mediterranean society of Crusader times; and what the Genizah tells us about the lives of medieval women. Other topics covered three important, but somewhat different personalities, from medieval Egypt, as well as magic, alchemy and the occult.

And, of course, it is not only professional scholars and journalists who can be intrigued by the historical uniqueness of the Genizah texts, by the astonishing tale of their survival through many centuries in the arid heat of Cairo, and by their discovery and analysis in modern times. Those who still pursue the

ancient practice of reading books can now entertain themselves with snippets of intriguing information and piquant portrayals of sects and tracts, as well as of sex and tax, that have been compiled by authors with an eye for the broader market. Marc Glickman, rabbi of congregations near Seattle in Washington State has explained for his readership “what you get when you combine Indiana Jones with The Da Vinci Code in an old Egyptian synagogue”. His volume *Sacred Treasure, the Cairo Genizah: The Amazing Discoveries of Forgotten Jewish History in an Egyptian Synagogue Attic*, published in 2011 by Jewish Lights, presented the subject in such a lively, entertaining and interesting way, that even those with no interest in history or ancient documents would be hard-pressed not to be excited and enthused.

Another volume of the popular rather than academic variety perhaps sought to target a more literary and cultured readership. With their combined talents in poetry, translation, cultural history and biography, American writers Peter Cole and Adina Hoffman, who live in Jerusalem, told the story of the Genizah collections from the middle of the nineteenth century until the early 1970s. Like Glickman, they toured all the major collections, spent time at Cambridge University Library, spoke to numerous scholars and put together a volume entitled *Sacred Trash: The Lost and Found World of the Cairo Geniza*. The volume was published by Schocken in New York in 2011. Their close studies of the major figures in the tale of the Genizah discoveries, primarily between 1890 and 1970, are interestingly constructed and pay due tribute, in an intelligent and balanced fashion, to the major impact made by each of them. They also provide helpful, detailed and sound guidance to the topics championed by each of these early explorers. A recent coffee-table book about Cairo, published by its American University and entitled *The History and Religious Heritage of Old Cairo*, also gives major attention to the Genizah documents.

In the course of the past decade or two, libraries with Genizah collections in various academic centers around the world have been busy protecting their precious materials by employing the latest methods of professional conservation. They have been engaged in drawing up lists and compiling inventories of various sorts. Attempts have also been made to interest the broader public in seeing exhibitions of such material, and in sending some of the most famous items to other libraries and museums for temporary display.

Institutions with such holdings have also joined projects to describe these items and taken steps to make copies of them available to scholars who cannot personally visit their literary treasures. This was at first done by microfilming them but the preferred method of more recent times has of course been the creation of digital images. This means that those interested in seeing a text written by Maimonides, whether they are sitting in Cambridge University Library itself, or writing a project at a senior school in Australia, will ultimately be able to access the item almost instantly on their computer screens. Campaigns have been launched to raise funds to cover the cost of such activities.

How exciting that so much attention is being paid by so many people and places, and in such diverse ways and contexts, to a collection of medieval Jewish manuscripts, and that they are being recognized as of equal importance to the Dead Sea scrolls. It would seem that since their discovery some 120 years ago they have been, just like the Dead Sea scrolls, at the virtual center of popular, as well as academic Jewish education. How did they achieve that? Did Cambridge University Library and all the other centers of Genizah always accord their Jewish treasures such high standards of conscientious treatment?

I fear not. What exactly was the situation when I arrived at Cambridge University Library in the summer of 1973 to take responsibility for its Cairo Genizah Collection? I had in February that year flown into the UK from the USA (where I was teaching at Dropsie College in Philadelphia, after a lectureship at the University of Glasgow) to be interviewed for the post. In a few hours of hectic meetings and discussions,

I had been given a short tour of the University Library, introduced to the relevant scholars and librarians, briefly shown the many shelves where the Genizah documents were stored, and duly offered the appointment. If the truth be told, I had been warned by some who were acquainted with the situation that there had been many years of virtual neglect in the attention given to these manuscript materials and that it would prove impossible to find the resources to rectify this. But I was 29-years-old, keen to find an academic cause that would help me make my name, and willing to apply masses of energy and the talents I believed I had, to one of the Library's great collections. It all appeared very exciting and I decided to ignore the warnings and try to build on whatever foundations had already been laid for a comprehensive project.

After no more than a week or two, I came to the realization not only that there were no such foundations for anything other than some slow work of conservation and microfilming but that there were neither plans, blueprints nor trial trenches for anything systematic and all-encompassing. If one looked for inspiration and any sort of precedent to other Genizah collections – all of them much smaller than that of Cambridge – they were wholly conspicuous by their undoubted absence. No matter, I thought, I can draw up a list of what needs to be done. It all seemed fairly straightforward. Given the massive historical, religious and cultural significance of the Genizah texts, staff should be employed to reduce the estimated time-frame of fifty years for conservation and microfilming, and to undertake the cataloguing of what turned out to be nearly 200,000 items. The thirty-two large crates of wholly unconserved fragments should be carefully examined, extensive fund-raising and public relations exercises should be initiated, and a publication program should get under way. The cardboard boxes housing folders that contained loose fragments would have to be replaced by a more secure and modern system of protection, while the fragments in glass, some of it broken, also required professional attention. The small card index with a few references to what had been published about Cambridge Genizah fragments should be expanded into a lengthy volume, providing scholars with a first step in their pursuit of data on an item that might have caught their interest.

I asked to see the University Librarian, as he/she is called in the University of Cambridge, and enthusiastically outlined the work I proposed to do if only I could have funding and staffing to realize my ambitions. Skillfully managerial as he was, Eric Ceadel, who had begun his academic career at Cambridge as a teacher of Japanese, gave a reply that was in no sense inscrutable. The outline was totally acceptable to him but, as for finding the resources: "That is your task, Dr Reif; that is why we appointed you." I took him at his word (he was indeed a man of his word) and spent the next few months publicizing the exciting content of the Cambridge Genizah and making applications for support, both financial and scholastic, to foundations, philanthropists and academic institutions. I had hoped that some secretarial assistance would be forthcoming. I was told "leave what needs doing in the general office and it should be possible to do some of it for you within a few days." I saw the writing on the wall – if nowhere else – and brought from home an old manual typewriter on which I proceeded to prepare all my letters so that they could be sent off without delay.

That level of administrative encouragement from the Library's clerical staff was matched by a sniffy insouciance on the part of some colleagues, and a downright indignation at what they saw as my pushiness on the part of others. "The Library has many special collections. Why should one receive more attention than any of the others" was the rationale for the resentment. It seemed to me absurd that they were opting for an equal degree of indolence towards all the Library's treasures. But I had my allies, usually among those who saw the need for the kind of overall change that Eric Ceadel was championing. I was fortunate in having his support as he, with the aid of those who sympathized with

his aims, dragged the Library, at times kicking and screaming, from the late nineteenth to the final third of the twentieth century.

When my first major grants were awarded early in 1974, I obtained the Library Syndicate's agreement to the establishment of the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit, with me as its director. This meant a more elevated status for me when I made my fund-raising forays, but no additional salary. Financial increments came only when I received promotions through the academic scales, reaching a personal chair many years later. I was destined from 1974 onwards, for a period of over thirty-years, to spend an increasing amount of time on work relating to the Genizah Collection, but I never received a penny more in salary that I would have done had I continued with the relaxed attitudes of the past. I saw the Unit's establishment as the first major achievement although, by that time, I had already published a small booklet about the collection, started to draw the attention of the media to its contents and potential, arranged public and scholarly lectures, and laid plans for tackling the imposing and disturbing thirty-two crates.

Some 70,000 fragments lay in these crates, containing significant historical content but effectively out of the reach of researchers. By obtaining the necessary funding to conserve and microfilm these, I was hoping to be able to solve the physical problem, but how could one sort that amount of miscellaneous material, single-handed, while also undertaking all the other tasks that I had set myself in the University Library, as well as teaching and researching as a faculty member, activities that I regarded as essential for my academic standing, as well as close to my intellectual heart? I approached the Israel Academy in Jerusalem and arrangements were made for two of its most distinguished fellows, Professor Ephraim Urbach and Professor Haim Beinart to inspect the situation in Cambridge and report back. They lunched with my late wife, Shulie (z"l), and me in our modest Cambridge home and we spoke of all the possibilities. Whether it was her personal charm and catering skills, or my enthusiasm, that impressed them, I know not, but they agreed to send leading scholars such as Ezra Fleischer, Israel Yeivin and Jacob Sussmann to work with me on the sorting of the contents of the crates.

The Faculty of Oriental Studies, as it was then called, endorsed the project, and followed the example of the University Library in doing so only as long as the major part of the necessary budget could be provided from funds external to the University of Cambridge. I was recently at a Cambridge reception at which a colleague from those distant days (who had risen to head one of the Cambridge colleges) explained to the group around him the significance of my efforts. "Stefan was one of the first scholars in humanities in Cambridge to promote the ideas of fund-raising and joint academic projects", he recalled. He himself had approved and encouraged my schemes but for others this all smacked more of entrepreneurial skill than scholarly standards.

A few years ago a contributor to the *Times Literary Supplement*, who had made the terrible "mistake" of publishing a "popular" book, mused on how those academics who were also active in the broader public context could benefit from the experience. "It forces them to engage with the here and now, to test their theories against reality, to apply their understanding of history to the specific events of the day, and to write with a clarity that will make their ideas accessible to the general public. It can also provide the satisfaction of achieving immediate results: there are few greater pleasures than publishing an article which sparks off controversy, or infuriates the high and mighty." The variegated tasks I had set myself brought similar satisfaction to me but some colleagues at the time refused to accept the possibility that a genuine scholar could also be a curator, a fund-raiser, a popularizer who could present his research in an exciting fashion, and a competent administrator. However *haute* the *vulgarisation*, those of such a bent never thought it *haute* enough to merit their admiration.

Depressing as it often was to encounter such condescension, discouragement, and even antagonism, I pressed on and what was particularly gratifying was the involvement in the Genizah Research Unit of internationally renowned scholars from various centers who had agreed to work with me on some aspect of the Genizah project. Perhaps even more satisfying were the successive generations of young scholars who honed their scholarly skills by functioning as research assistants in my team and went on to occupy senior academic posts around the world. Most of them are grateful for the years they spent with me at Cambridge University Library, and a few still modest enough to say so publicly. While working on the preparation of catalogues of the Cambridge Genizah manuscripts, they were also encouraged to do their own research. Consequently, the Unit created many thousands of descriptions of Genizah texts and those who undertook this work also made excellent progress with their personal research. I myself was able to use the fascinating material that I found among such texts for reconstructing the history of medieval Jewish liturgy in my own books and articles.

A program to introduce visiting groups to the Genizah treasures by way of short lectures and small exhibitions was set up, leading public figures were encouraged to view the Genizah Collection, a newsletter was established and became popular reading among scholars as well as lay folk, television and radio took a growing interest, and it became clear just how beneficial it would be to use computing skills to ensure even greater progress with the Unit's schemes. Clear rules were laid down for the use and citation of Genizah material so that it would no longer be possible – or at least less likely – that a fragment would be cited without permission or without any clear indication of where precisely it was to be found. Needless to say, some scholars thought that this was spoiling their fun and took great exception to such systematic arrangements. Turning crates upside down to scramble among their dusty contents was much more to their liking.

When Dov Friedberg generously established a fund to support the idea of ultimately having all the world's Genizah material available on everyone's home computer, the foundations had already been laid at Cambridge for much of what would be undertaken at his instigation and with his support. Before her retirement and her terminal illness, Shulie began the process of creating an inventory of the Cambridge Genizah material so that all of it could in due course be digitized. For years she had taken on various such tasks in the Unit, many of them requiring the kind of painstaking accuracy and back-breaking devotion that made others hesitate to get involved. What is more, she tolerated my lengthy hours and my work obsession and encouraged me when I was struggling to establish the broader educational significance of the Genizah and meeting no shortage of obstacles.

And so, in the course of over thirty years of such struggles, my list of aims has been accomplished. It has gradually become accepted that the Genizah's collection may fairly be assessed as the world's greatest collection of medieval hebraica and judaica, that it should be allocated time and attention by the media, and that it deserves major funding. Journals such as *Ginzei Qedem* are devoted to the Genizah; popular books enthuse about its discovery and its historical pertinence; and when collections come up for sale, it is of course taken for granted that Cambridge University Library should make a bid. Indeed the Genizah has now become so attractive that a long line of individuals and institutions has formed, each clamoring to be recognized as one of those who had effected this remarkable transformation. Success has many parents; failure is an orphan. When I commented on this remarkable turn of events to the current University Librarian, Anne Jarvis, she offered two responses. The first was a kind comment to the effect that I had much of which I could be proud, together with the suggestion that, at some point, I should put on record how that transformation was achieved. The second was to cite the saying of the Chinese philosopher, Lao-Tzu, in the sixth pre-Christian century: "A leader is best when people barely know he

exists. When his work is done, his aims fulfilled, they will say: We did it ourselves.”