DISCARDED HISTORY

THE GENIZAH OF MEDIEVAL CAIRO

EXHIBITION GUIDE AND TRANSLATIONS
When the spirit is gone, we put the corpse out of sight to protect it from abuse. In like manner, when the writing is worn out, we hide the book to preserve it from profanation. The contents of the book go up to heaven like the soul...

SOLOMON SCHECHTER

Genizah is a Hebrew word meaning ‘treasury’. To the Jews of medieval Cairo, a Genizah was a place for worn out scrolls or other sacred texts. Brought to Cambridge by scholar Solomon Schechter in 1897 the contents of the Genizah of the Ben Ezra Synagogue are among the University Library’s greatest treasures.

Through the Genizah manuscripts in Discarded History, we reveal the social, business and personal lives of the remarkable Jewish community of Fustat, Old Cairo, a thousand years ago.
In 1896, intrepid twins Agnes Lewis and Margaret Gibson returned to Cambridge from a research trip to Egypt and Palestine. They brought with them a treasure lost for a thousand years: a page from the original Hebrew Bible. The page had accumulated along with thousands of other documents in the Genizah since at least the 11th century CE. Schechter described the Genizah as a ‘battlefield of books’. 120 years later almost all of Cambridge’s 200,000 Genizah fragments have been carefully conserved. This small copy of the Hebrew Pentateuch has been left in its original condition to show something of the task that confronted Schechter in Cairo.

In haste and great excitement, Yours sincerely

Solomon Schechter

3

HEBREW BIBLE, THE BOOK OF NUMBERS
Palestine or Egypt, 11th century

This manuscript changed the course of scholarship. It prompted Schechter to travel to Cairo and retrieve the contents of the Genizah. The book of Numbers, known in Christian circles as Ecclesiasticus, was composed in the 2nd century BCE, but doubts about its sanctity led to its exclusion from the Hebrew Bible and the loss of its Hebrew text in the Middle Ages. In Solomon Schechter’s day, the oldest known version was in Greek, and some questioned the existence of a Hebrew original. When Schechter saw that this manuscript preserved a copy of the original text, he made plans to track down its source in Cairo.

Hebrew, paper
Or. 1102

2

SOLOMON SCHECHTER TO AGNES LEWIS

Schechter wrote to Mrs Lewis declaring his excitement at identifying the Ben Sira/Ecclesiasticus fragment. He insists that for the time being they keep the discovery secret.

Dear Mrs Lewis,

I think we have reason to congratulate ourselves. For the fragment I took with me represents a piece of the Original Hebrew of Ecclesiasticus. It is the first time that such a thing was discovered. Please do not speak yet about the matter. I will come to you tomorrow about 11 pm and talk over the matter with you how to make the matter known.

In haste and great excitement
Yours sincerely
S. Schechter

4

QUR’AN in Hebrew script
Egypt, 11th century

In the Genizah we can see evidence of close relations between the different faiths of Egypt. Some Jews were clearly interested in learning about Islamic theology. This fragment contains Suras 1 and 2 from the Qur’an, followed by omens for undertaking a journey. The text of the Qur’an has been transliterated into Hebrew script, suggesting that it can only have belonged to a Jew.

Judaico-Arabic, paper
T-S Ar. 51.62

1

THE BOOK OF BEN SIRA
Palestine or Egypt, 10th century

This manuscript changed the course of scholarship. It prompted Schechter to travel to Cairo and retrieve the contents of the Genizah. The book of Ben Sira, known in Christian circles as Ecclesiasticus, was composed in the 2nd century BCE, but doubts about its sanctity led to its exclusion from the Hebrew Bible and the loss of its Hebrew text in the Middle Ages. In Solomon Schechter’s day, the oldest known version was in Greek, and some questioned the existence of a Hebrew original. When Schechter saw that this manuscript preserved a copy of the original text, he made plans to track down its source in Cairo.

Hebrew in Arabic characters, paper
T-S Ar. 52.242

5

JERUSALEM TALMUD, TRACTATE GITTIN
Palestine, 9/10th century

The Ben Ezra Genizah preserved many sacred texts unique to the Jews of Syria and Palestine. This large page from a magnificent copy of the Jerusalem Talmud (The Talmud of the Land of Israel) was an important discovery when Schechter first saw it in the sisters’ possession. Syro-Palestinian traditions of Jewish worship were almost entirely forgotten until the discovery of the Genizah.

Aramaic, Hebrew, parchment
Lewis-Gibson Talmud 2.4

6

HEBREW BIBLE, THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH
Du Gunbadan, Iran, 903–4 CE

When sacred books and scrolls became damaged and were no longer fit for use they were placed in the Genizah chamber. These two leaves from a small, personal copy of the Bible were written by a scribe called Joseph in Du Gunbadan in Iran. This Bible – the oldest dated medieval Hebrew manuscript – travelled far before it was eventually deposited in the Genizah.

Hebrew, parchment
T-S Nf 246.26.2

7

UNCONSERVED TORAH
Egypt (?), 3011th century

Schechter described the Genizah as a ‘battlefield of books’. 120 years later almost all of Cambridge’s 200,000 Genizah fragments have been carefully conserved. This small copy of the Hebrew Pentateuch has been left in its original condition to show something of the task that confronted Schechter in Cairo.

Hebrew, parchment
T-S 6k3

In 1896, intrepid twins Agnes Lewis and Margaret Gibson returned to Cambridge from a research trip to Egypt and Palestine. They brought with them a treasure lost for a thousand years: a page from the original Hebrew book of Ben Sira. The page had accumulated along with thousands of other documents in the Ben Ezra Synagogue, Old Cairo, in a chamber called a Genizah. The Jewish community had been placing their worn-out books and documents in the Genizah since at least the 11th century CE.
In 1896, intrepid twins Agnes Lewis and Margaret Gibson returned to Cambridge from a research trip to Egypt and Palestine. After returning from their trip, they brought with them a treasure lost for a thousand years: a page from the original Hebrew book of Ben Sira. The page had been lost for so long, and the twins were able to find it in a chamber called a Genizah. The Genizah was a place of worship, education, and charity, and it provided a place for worship, education, and charity. It also served as a place for worship, education, and charity.

The congregation prayed there three times a day, sent their children to study the Hebrew Bible, and assembled to exchange news and collect the charitable donations that supported the poor, the sick and refugees. People were proud of their magnificent building, and the wealthy donated cash for its upkeep, colourful hangings for its walls, and books and scrolls for its library.
On 15 July 1099 CE Christian armies of the First Crusade captured Jerusalem from its Fatimid defenders. The city was looted and burned, and many of its inhabitants slaughtered.

Among the Genizah manuscripts are rare accounts of the fate of the Jewish community in Jerusalem following the Crusader occupation. We learn that Jewish captives were taken, and came under pressure to convert to Christianity. Even the community’s large collection of books and scrolls was looted and then ransomed back to them. The Egyptian Jews came to Jerusalem’s aid. Many books previously in Jerusalem ended up in Egypt and eventually in the Genizah itself.

The Crusader conquest was the latest in a series of wars that had afflicted the Holy Land throughout the 11th century. The relative silence of Genizah sources in the immediate aftermath is indicative of the widespread destruction of the traditional centres of Jewish life and learning in Palestine.

We were not informed, praise be to the Most High, that the occurred ones who are called Ashkenazim [Germans] violated or raped women, as did the others. Now, among those who have reached safety are some who escaped on the second and third days following the battle and left with the governor who was granted safe conduct; and others who, after having been caught by the Franks, remained in their hands for some time but escaped in the end; these are but few. The majority consists of those who were ransomed. To our sorrow, some of them ended their lives under all kind of suffering and affliction. The privations which they had to endure caused some of them to leave for this country without food or protection against the cold, and they died on the way. Others in a similar way perished at sea; and yet others, after having arrived here safely, became exposed to a change of air; they came at the height of the plague, and a number of them died. We had, at the time, reported the arrival of each group. And when the aforementioned honoured sheikh arrived, he brought a group of them, the bulk of those who had reached Ashkelon; he spent the Sabbath and celebrated Passover with them on the sea in the manner as is required by such circumstances.

He contracted a private loan for the sum that he had to pay the camel drivers and for their maintenance on the way, as well as the caravan guards and for other expenses, after having already spent other sums of money, which he did not charge to the community. All this is in addition to what was borrowed and spent in order to buy back 220 volumes, 100 codices and 8 Torah scrolls. All these are communal property and are now in Ashkelon.

The community, after having disbursed about 500 dinars for the actual ransom of the individuals, for maintenance of some of them and for the ransom, as mentioned above, of the sacred books remained indebted for the sum of 200 dinars. This is in addition to what has been spent on behalf of those who have been arriving from the beginning until now, on water and other drinks, medical treatment, maintenance, and, in so far as possible, clothing. If it could be calculated how much this has cost over such a long period, the sum would indeed be great.

Had the accepted practice been followed, that is, of selling three Jewish captives for 100 dinars, the whole available sum would have been spent for the ransom of only a few. However, the grace of the Lord, may His Name be exalted, and his ever-ready mercy, has been bestowed upon these wretched people.

Translation by SDG

2

A CRUSADER NOTE
Acre Palestine, 11th century

During their conquest of the Holy Land, the Crusaders took prisoners for ransom, and plundered ancient synagogues for books and scrolls to sell. Someone, a Westerner, has made a neat Medieval Latin note of the content of this looted book ‘interpretatio ex qua propheta’ (a commentary on the prophet Isaiah). The words probably helped indicate resale value. The book was at least 70 years old when the Crusaders seized it. An earlier owner’s note states that it was purchased by a man from Acre in 1031 CE.

Latin, Hebrew, parchment
T-S 12.722

A Crusader note
T-S 12.722
In 1896, intrepid twins Agnes Lewis and Margaret Gibson returned to Cambridge from a research trip to Egypt and Palestine. They brought with them a treasure lost for a thousand years: a page from the original Hebrew book of Ben Sira. The page had accumulated along with thousands of other documents in the Ben Ezra Synagogue, Old Cairo, in a chamber called a Genizah. The Jewish community had been placing their worn-out books and documents in the Genizah since at least the 10th century CE. Cambridge lecturer Solomon Schechter was so excited by the sisters’ remarkable discovery he travelled to Old Cairo to see for himself what the Genizah held. The Chief Rabbi of Egypt gave Schechter permission to take whatever he liked. Schechter declared that he ‘liked all’, and shipped almost 200,000 manuscripts back to Cambridge.

All citizens of the Islamic Empire had the right to petition the ruler directly to seek justice. When Abd al-Baqi, a Jew in the Nile Delta town of Malij found himself in trouble, he petitioned Saladin, the ruler of the Ayyubid Empire, directly and asked for his help.

If there has been a precedent for you to work as a tax collector, you have no excuse with regard to the service of the aforementioned people.
1 LETTER FROM A REFUGEE
Tripoli, Lebanon, 1070s CE

The invasion of the Holy Land by the Seljuk Turks in the later 11th century was extremely violent and created large numbers of refugees, Jewish, Muslim, and Christian. This letter is from a Jewish woman who had to flee Jerusalem, ending up in Tripoli in Lebanon. There she writes: ‘I am an ill woman on the brink of insanity, on top of the hunger of my family and the little girl who are all with me, and the horrible news I heard about my son. She suggests it would be better to be captured since those in captivity ‘find someone to give them food and drink’ as refugees, she and her children are starving.

Judaeo-Arabic, parchment
Lewis-Gibson Misc. 35

I was with him on the day I saw them killed in terrible fashion...

2 LETTER FROM A WOMAN WITH LEPROSY
Egypt, c. 1090 CE

Hebrew, paper
T-S 15311.16

The Lord answer you in the day of trouble! The name of the God of Jacob protest you!' (Psalms 20:2) ‘May He send you help from the sanctuary, and give you support from Zion’ (Psalms 20:3) ‘He has pity on the weak and the afflicted, the poor and needy, and saves the lives of the needy’ (Psalms 72:12) To the honourable, great and holy, glorious crown and diadem, a good name from above. To our master and teacher, our lord David the Great Prince, Head of all Israel in Exile, may our God keep him and our Creator preserve him and our Creator protect him, and may God allow us to see male offspring (from his loins, to take his place and the place of his righteous ancestors. May He extend his days and his years in delight. Amen.

Your poor maidservant – pathetic, grievous, stricken, wretched, worried and impoverished by my sins – I hereby present my supplication [before the LORD and] before you, that you may pay heed to the words of your maidservant, ‘because my sighs are many and my heart is faint’ (Lamentations 1:22). For I am all alone: I have neither husband, nor son, nor daughter, nor brother, nor sister.

3 LETTER FROM THE LEPERS OF TIBERIAS
Tiberias, Palestine, 11th century

Hebrew, paper
Lewis-Gibson Misc. 25

They sent an emissary, a leper by the name of Ka’ifel of Aleppo, and with him was another healthy man.

We've recently received a report that he has departed this life...

4 AN EARTHQUAKE AND ITS AFTERMATH
Ramla, Palestine, 1033 CE

Hebrew, paper
T-S 1831.9

They came out of the houses into the streets because they saw in the houses that the walls were buckling back and forth, and the beams were flexing in and out of position in the walls. The fortifed structures collapsed and the new dwellings were thrown down, and many died under the rubble because they had no means of escape. Everyone came out of their houses, each one leaving behind all that they had, and fled for their lives. Wherever they turned, they could see the evidence of God’s mighty deeds. Walls had been thrown one on top of another and cast down, and all those that remained were damaged and broken open. No one is living within them because their owners are afraid that they might even now fall on them.

Even to write a little of what occurred causes my hand to grow weary of writing, and my mind is troubled by what the eye has seen and the ear has heard. Scripture has indeed been fulfilled: ‘Behold, the LORD empties the earth, and makes it waste, and turns it upside down, and empties the earth, and makes it waste, and turns it upside down, and scatters its inhabitants’ (Isaiah 24:1). The intelligent man will understand its interpretation. Everyone was alike, the ordinary person like the priest, the slave like his master, when they left their cities seeking to save their own lives. Many resigned themselves to divine judgement, reciting ‘The LORD is the true God, the living God and the everlasting King etc’ (Jeremiah 10:10). ‘Who looks at the earth and it shakes etc’ (Psalms 104:32), ‘Who shakes the earth from its place etc’ (Job 9:6). ‘Who touches the land and it melts’ (Amos 9:5), ‘And everyone who dwells in it will languish etc’ (Mozes 4:3). ‘Who can stand before His indignation etc’ (Nahum 1:3).

And this event occurred on Thursday, the twelfth day of the month of Tevet, before sunset, all of a sudden in Ramla, and in all of the land of Palestine, in the fortified towns and the rural
villages alike, even in all the coastal fortresses up to the fortress of [...] and in all the towns of the Negan and in the hill country as far as Jerusalem, and in all the towns up to Shechem (modern Nablus) and the villages as far as Tiberias, and in all the [...] of the hills of Galilee and all of the Land of Israel. And those who had been out travelling on the roads tell of the mighty deeds of the living God, saying ‘We have seen the mountains shaking, slipping like the rams, their stones shattered, the hills rocked and the trees bent down. Even the well water, in places, came up to the brim.’ The tongue is too short to tell the full tale. Were it not for the mercy of our God, who showed us mercy because of his great kindness, and caused it to happen before the end of the day, so that everyone could see each other and warn each other, then it might have happened in the night, when everyone would have been asleep in their beds unable to escape, bar a very few. But His mercies are great and His kindnesses are numerous, and though He does not show us mercy His kindnesses are numerous, and though He does not show us mercy of His anger and we shall not perish. And the great miracle was that all the days that the people were cast out into the open and in the streets, no rain fell. Also the governor of the city, with the men in the caliph’s employ, put up tents for them outside the town, and they are still there even now. May the Everlasting God, the LORD, look down in His mercy at His world, show mercy to His creations and save man and beast, and may He have compassion for babies and sucklings and those that can’t distinguish right from left, so that we shall not perish. And may He save you from this and things like it, and may He hide you from all harsh decrees and shelter you in His hair on an evil day, and may He hide you in the shelter of His wings. May He exalt you, and preserve for you your good deeds, your kindnesses and your charitable acts, and may He let you dwell in safety and free of the fear of evil. Peace to you, and peace to your household, and peace to all that you have. Receive peace from the Lord of Peace.

Translation by BMO

Letter from the Head of the Jerusalem Academy

Ramla, Palestine, 11th century

Hebrew, paper

T-S 13J14.5

To the dear, glorious, honourable, great, holy master and teacher Abraham ha-Kohen ‘Prince of the Congregation’ – may the Rock be his aid and his shelter’s shade, and may he crown him and help him find grace, and hope and trust in Him – so of the honourable, holy master and teacher Isaac ha-Kohen – his rest be in Eden. Accept, our mighty Prince of the Congregation, a blessing from the LORD and righteousness from the God of his salvation, as well as from me and from my son, much wellbeing without end. The intention of these lines to his Honour concerns a request that was asked of me by an elder from the city’s nobles by the name Maruiq, one of my greatest friends who honours me exceedingly. Men of his acquaintance came to him and asked him to make a request of his Honour.

The one known as Qoyun ibn Abd al-Qadir had reported that the second, whose name and byname is Abu-l Futuh, Ruler of the District, has been seeking [his arrest] due to his earlier deeds. [Qoyun] came to ask for a letter to his Honour asking this Abu-l Futuh the Ruler to do him no harm because he had already repented. And this man Qoyun came and threw himself down on the floor: ‘I am your supplicant!’ And so I am requesting of his Honour to speak to the Ruler so that he does not harm him. And inform him of my standing with [his Honour] and of my standing with the elder so that my request will be more acceptable to him. And whatever he does to this man Qoyun he also does to me, because members of his household came to the place where I am living now: they know that I am in good standing with our elder Prince of the Congregation. And may his wellbeing and the wellbeing of his honour and of his retinue and of his friends grow and not be laid. A great salvation! Solomon the downtrodden, who looks for and awaits God’s salvation.

Translation by BMO

An earthquake and its aftermath

T-S 13J14.9

‘Come, let us return to the LORD etc’ (Hosea 6:1), ‘Who knows? He may still turn and relent etc’ (Jonah 2:9). Perhaps he will turn from the ferocity of his anger and we shall not perish. And the great miracle was that all the days that the people were cast out into the open and in the streets, no rain fell. Also the governor of the city, with the men in the caliph’s employ, put up tents for them outside the town, and they are still there even now. May the Everlasting God, the LORD, look down in His mercy at His world, show mercy to His creations and save man and beast, and may He have compassion for babies and sucklings and those that can’t distinguish right from left, so that we shall not perish. And may He save you from this and things like it, and may He hide you from all harsh decrees and shelter you in His hair on an evil day, and may He hide you in the shelter of His wings. May He exalt you, and preserve for you your good deeds, your kindnesses and your charitable acts, and may He let you dwell in safety and free of the fear of evil. Peace to you, and peace to your household, and peace to all that you have. Receive peace from the Lord of Peace.

Translation by BMO
The Jewish community, like the Muslim society around it in Egypt, put special emphasis on public charity. The disadvantaged – the poor, the sick and foreign immigrants – could have their stories told in the synagogue and collections held for them. Money was pledged to support widows, orphans, to pay taxes, to provide bread, to support the pilgrims in Jerusalem and to maintain the synagogues there. People left property to the community so that its rents could help those in need, and generosity was recognised as one of the highest personal virtues.

**GOOD WORKS**

**LETTER FROM THE HEAD OF THE Pumbeditha Academy**

Pumbeditha, Iraq, c. 970 CE

Hebrew, paper
T-S 13425.5

(W) thank His Holy Name for ransoming it; as it is written: ‘My lips will jubilantly cry out when I sing praises to you, and my soul, which you have ransomed’. And (we are hereby) informing (you) that though you — our brothers, the delights of our eyes, and the joys of our hearts and our friends in spirit — may have forsaken us, we have not forgotten you; for you are considered by us the very essence of our life, and how can a man forget the essence of his life?! And (we have not forgotten) your contributions, of which we have heard and known, and of which our forefathers told us, for you used to provide our daily bread, and how can a man forget the food that is his need! And (we have not forgotten) that the precision of our water is from you, and how can a man fail to recall the source of his life?

Therefore, though many years have passed and many days have gone by and you have not been in contact with us, (whether in the form of letters, (legal) questions, votive offerings or donations, as was your forefathers’ custom – may the memory of the righteous be for a blessing — [yet], despite all this) you are foremost in our thoughts. You are inscribed like a seal upon our heart; you murmur with its stirring; like a seal upon our arms you are engraven. And despite the fact that it is not always seen, it is the place of an important precept. And ‘behold on the palms we have engraven you, which will be seen.

Therefore, with their movements you will appear to us from a distance like lightning in the darkness, like the shade of a rock in the wilderness. And indeed it is said: the Lord is ‘the one who knows and a witness’ in these matters. If we should forget you, may our strength be forgotten. And we (pray) the memory of your parents so often, our tongues become dry. And above our highest joy [you will be set as] the messenger prepossessed, saying: ‘If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither, let my tongue cleave to my palate, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy’. And with a great deal of contemplation we say: ‘For what reason have you forgotten us?’ Our elders sit desolate, our young men are sighing, our teachers are grieving, and we suffer bitterly because we see how the world continues to be laid waste. Though surely it is in accordance with the bidding of our Holy One, because on His covenant, which is His Law, [the world] stands. As it is written: ‘Thus said the Lord: “As surely as I have established my covenant with day and night, the laws of heaven and earth”. And because His Torah is found continually to be diminishing, so also the world that rests upon it continues to perish, as it is written: ‘They neither know nor understand. They walk about in darkness. All the foundations of the world are shaken’. And what profit is there that you forge a path for the world’s destruction? If you say [about us] that we are lacking and that our wisdom has diminished, truly it is so.

Certainly our splendour has been tarnished, our learning is diminished and our schools are desolate. We are left, few from many. The school of the teachers is like a wasteland, for every bright-eyed lad used to be brought to the house of study, but now no one brings his son and we must employ strategems to bring them one by one so that the Mishnah will not be forgotten. Also many of the children of the talmudic scholars are leaving for other activities and taking their place among the salary-earners or emigrating. And from generation to generation we are becoming fewer, and from year to year [we are shrinking in number...].

What has brought about all this? The inaction of Israel, who withhold from them their stipend and their sustenance. For who can stand without sustenance? When He gave his Torah to his people, ordering them to study it, each according to the sufficiency of his needs, did not manna descend every day so that they could not find a pretext not to follow it? As it is written: ‘Behold, I will rain down bread from the heavens for you, and the people will go out and gather it etc’. And when He brought them to their land, and ordered the priests and the Levites to study and to teach because He knew that not all were able to delineate themselves to the study of law, he also ordered the people to attend to their needs. As it is written: ‘He ordered the people, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to deliver the portions of the priests and the Levites so that they might devote themselves to the Torah of the Lord’. And if the people display inaction, what will their sages do? Should they go hungry and thirsty? For we are left now calculating and toiling in order to get enough food — we and our children — and we will use the food to satisfy the remainder [of the sages] that are left and their children. And as it has been said about us: ‘For you will be like an oak whose leaf withers and like a garden that is without water’. For our leaves have withered and our water is exhausted, because when the sages of the law were compared to a cluster of grapes, so also the wealthier people [...] the clusters. And because of what Rav Shimon ben Lakshus said [...] Translation by BMO

Sherira Gaon laments the decline of the Babylonian centres of learning.

T-S 13425.5
In 1896, intrepid twins Agnes Lewis and Margaret Gibson returned to Cambridge from a research trip to Egypt and Palestine. They brought with them a treasure lost for a thousand years: a page from the original Hebrew book of Ben Sira. The page had accumulated along with thousands of other documents in the Ben Ezra Synagogue, Old Cairo, in a chamber called a Genizah. The Jewish community had been placing their worn-out books and documents in the Genizah since at least the 10th century CE. Cambridge lecturer Solomon Schechter was so excited by the sisters’ remarkable discovery he travelled to Old Cairo to see for himself what the Genizah held. The Chief Rabbi of Egypt gave Schechter permission to take whatever he liked. Schechter declared that he ‘liked all’, and shipped almost 200,000 manuscripts back to Cambridge.

**LETTER FROM THE POET JUDAH HA-LEVI**

Toledo, Spain, 12th century

Judaean-Arabic, paper
T-S 10J15.1

My lord and master, may God unite us soon under desirable circumstances! You have strained my yearnings. Please mend soon what you have impaired. May I ask you a favour? Kindly approach your uncle and your paternal aunt, as well as the Head of the Police Abu Brahkim Ibn Baron, who values you very much and who is my support – may God make his honoured position permanent – that they should talk to Ibn al-Shayyani with regard to the balance of the pledge made for the imprisoned woman. For we are in trouble with regard to the small balance remaining as we had been with regard to the large sum. The bearer of this letter of mine – may God restore his health – asks you to kindly recommend him to someone who could be of help to him. For he was a man of means and has become the opposite; on top of this, he has lost his health and eyesight and is far away from his family and native country. And God may let you be the originator of every charity and good work. Peace upon my lord and God’s mercy.

P.S. Convey my highest regards to the illustrious Master, the Light of Israel, may the All Merciful preserve him, and substitute for me in asking him to reply to the people of Toledo. They rely on me in this matter, and I cannot say that my requests find no friendly response with the Master – may his Rock protect him. Peace upon my lord.

Translation by SDG

**RESTORING A SITE OF PILGRIMAGE**

Jerusalem, 1035 CE

In the 11th century the most important synagogue in Jerusalem and major site of pilgrimage was ‘the Cave’. It was damaged following a devastating earthquake across Palestine. Among Solomon son of Judah’s duties as Head of the Academy of Jerusalem was the upkeep of Jewish property there. In this letter, Solomon solicits help from the wealthy members of the Egyptian Jewish community to help restore ‘the Cave’. He describes work that has already been undertaken including the removal of rubble and the use of 62 beams and 600 planks.

Hebrew, paper
T-S 13J34.2

Dinars for the stones, for the plaster and for the workers...
SYRIAN PRINCE SEES A BOOST

Many leading members of the Egyptian Jewish community practised medicine. Among them was the thinker Moses Maimonides (d. 1204 CE), who acquired his theoretical knowledge from Arabic translations of Galen, Hippocrates and the other great writings of Classical Antiquity. Maimonides worked as a physician at the Caliph’s court in Cairo, but also dispensed medical advice to his neighbours and in letters to friends.

The Genizah contains many samples of his medical writings in his own hand. These reveal the most common ailments and their treatments. Despite advances in medical science, there also continued to be a strong reliance on magical cures for everyday problems. And so we find many amulets and collections of magical spells, which call upon God, his angels and even demons to solve problems, bring wealth or help find love.

1 MEDICAL RECIPE BY THE INDIA TRADER IBN YIYU
Mangalore, India, 12th century

A shortage of paper in India meant that cloth was often used as a writing material. The document was written by the trader Abraham Ibn Yiju. Here he copies a medical recipe that includes a wide variety of exotic ingredients from India, Persia and elsewhere. Abraham lived for 17 years in India. Soon after he arrived he got married, but by an unusual route: he bought a slave called Ashu and freed her, so that, in accordance with Jewish law, she became a Jew and he could then marry her. When Abraham returned to Cairo he brought back two decades’ worth of correspondence and business accounts.

Arabic, cloth
T-S AS 143.26

2 GOOD LUCK CHARM
Egypt, 12th century

Excellent fortune has come to you – good luck and a happy omens! Your fortune is on the increase every day, in a pure, new flourishing. Be thankful to God, and he will give you increase, for with Him is the greatest increase.

Translation by GK

3 SCORPION AMULETS
Egypt, 11/12th century

These magical amulets are intended to protect the purchasers against the bites of scorpions. They would have been worn in an amulet case around the neck. The magician, no great artist, copied them over and over, taking little care. There must have been a market for them, however, since some have evidently been cut off and sold.

Hebrew, Aramaic and gibberish, paper
T-S AS 143.26

4 MAIMONIDES’ TREATISE ON APHRODISIACS
Fustat or Cairo, 12th century

Long pepper, galangal, ginger and aristolochia, an ounce of each, cinnamon and anise, two ounces of each, clove, mace and nutmeg, one quarter ounce of each, grind these medicaments so that they will be ready to season any dish to be cooked and stew them over the dish. Strew it according to what will be mentioned in detail.

What one must avoid in foods and medicaments is all that makes cold or dry or drives away the winds. Of the things customary among us, lentils, senna, and cold vegetables as cucumber, donkey cucumber, melons, garden arach and spinach belong to this group and more especially lettuce, which is very harmful in this...

For that is the most efficient treatment to warm the genitals, to conduct good blood to them, to strengthen them and to strengthen erection. One should also make a point to constantly drink iron water, as it is prescribed for people with dysentery. Let it be filed and drunk at the time of need. If it is possible, then the broth of all dishes should be iron water, since this is very useful for strengthening the erection and strengthening all the inner organs. Know that the physicians only designate by ‘joy-bringing drink’ drink prepared with ox-tongue. Experience shows that if ox-tongue is placed in wine until its strength is extracted, it greatly increases the joy and strengthens sexual intercourse. If one takes this famous iron water and boils in it four dhrams of ox-tongue, half an ounce of lemon peel, half a dhram of beaten carnation, and one mixes in two rils of wine or a ril of honey (for one who does not consider wine permissible) and drinks this little by little, it will be of great avail. This much is sufficient for what the servant was ordered to do. The master may choose out of this that which is easy to do, do sometimes this, and another time that. May God lengthen his life in happiness and delight, and join for him this with the everlasting bliss, in His mercy.

Translation by SMS

5 A CONTRACT FOR EYE SURGERY
Egypt, 12th century

Nasir ibn Jibril came to Makurin ibn Ishaq, the Jewish physician, together with his biological daughter called Sulayt, in whose left eye there was pus. He requested the aforementioned physician treat her eye with a sharp knife. If God, exalted is he, grants sight, his remuneration will be two dirhams. If the outcome is the opposite, he will evaluate the fee accordingly and the physician will be free from liability for that.

Translation by GK

Translation by SMS

Medical recipes on cloth
T-S Ar. 41.81

Good luck charm
T-S AS 183.272

Translation by SMS
In 1896, intrepid twins Agnes Lewis and Margaret Gibson returned to Cambridge from a research trip to Egypt and Palestine. The Egyptian government gave Schechter permission to take manuscripts back to Cambridge. He liked all, and shipped almost 200,000 manuscripts back to Cambridge.

Jewish boys and girls attended school in Fustat (Old Cairo) in order to learn the Hebrew Bible. Through the Genizah we learn how children studied with writing boards balanced on their knees, clustered around the textbook. Schoolbooks were valuable and had to be shared, so the parents of children encouraged them to learn to read a book upside down or sideways. This way children could read it wherever they sat.

Manuscripts in juvenile handwriting show children practising their alphabet and copying biblical verses. Doodles in the margins of once-cherished books seem immediately familiar. Notes sent home from exasperated teachers reveal the punishments given to naughty children, and the crimes of schoolroom bullies.
In 1896, intrepid twins Agnes Lewis and Margaret Gibson returned to Cambridge from a research trip to Egypt and ... he liked. Schechter declared that he ‘liked all’, and shipped almost 200,000 manuscripts back to Cambridge.

The Jewish community had been placing their worn-out books and documents in the Genizah since at least the 10th century CE. They relied on bonds of trust to ensure a smooth flow of goods and the settlement of debts. Shipwrecks and piracy were a constant threat. Commerce flourished across the barriers of language, religion and ethnicity. The Mediterranean shores included aromatic spices, metals and textiles, while clothing, carpets, books and soap travelled East. Apearl of learning, son of the scholar Joseph, Bet Din, who loves him like his soul. A covenant of peace, and master [...] and your wellbeing increase forever and for eternity.

Translation by AA and BMO

The backbone of the medieval Egyptian economy was the trade route to India. Many of the commercial documents in the Genizah are related to this highly lucrative route, which flourished in the 12th century. Goods carried from India to Egypt for sale around the Mediterranean shores included aromatic spices, metals and textiles, while clothing, carpets, books and soap travelled East. Shipwrecks and piracy were a constant threat.
In 1896, intrepid twins Agnes Lewis and Margaret Gibson returned to Cambridge from a research trip to Egypt and Palestine. They were so excited by the sisters’ remarkable discovery that he travelled to Old Cairo to see for himself what the Genizah held. The Chief Rabbi of Egypt gave Schechter permission to take whatever he liked. Schechter declared that he ‘liked all’, and shipped almost 200,000 manuscripts back to Cambridge.

The month of Av, 1451 of the Seleucid Era

The last letter of David Maimonides
Or.1081 J1

Translation by SDG

Order of payment
T-S Ar.30.184
In 1896, intrepid twins Agnes Lewis and Margaret Gibson returned to Cambridge from a research trip to Egypt and Palestine. The sisters, so excited by the sisters’ remarkable discovery of the Genizah, declared that he ‘liked all’, and shipped almost 200,000 manuscripts back to Cambridge.

The Genizah is a storehouse of worn-out books and documents in the Ben Ezra Synagogue, accumulated along with thousands of other manuscripts from the 8th to the 13th centuries. These are rich sources of social history, shining a light on the lives of ordinary people.

Jewish marriage is symbolised by the ketuba, the marriage deed. Often this was the largest, most magnificent document a couple would own. In Judaism there are several other stages to marriage: engagement, betrothal and the wedding itself. All were marked with written deeds, hundreds of which are preserved in the Genizah. These are rich sources of social history, shining a light on the lives of ordinary people.

Prewedding agreements aimed to ensure a cordial married life by solving problems in advance: no living with the in-laws, no buying a slave girl and no wild partying! Hundreds of trousseau lists survive, valuing in minute detail all the clothes, jewellery, bed linen and other property – including slaves – that women brought into a marriage. Such lists provided security in case of divorce or widowhood, ensuring that the woman would be no worse off financially than when she entered the marriage.

A MATCH MADE IN HEAVEN

1 ENGAGEMENT DEED

Pastat, 1119 CE

Judaeo-Arabic, paper
Lewis-Gibson Misc. 42

The honourable, great and holy, our master and teacher Toviyya, the exalted elder – may God protect him – son of the honourable, great and holy, our master and teacher Tobiyya, the exalted elder – may his end be good – concluded a match with Sitt al-Kull daughter of the honourable, great and holy, our master and teacher Peresha ha-Kohen, the exalted elder, who is known for his good deeds – may his end be good. And they both agreed that the early marriage payment will be forty gold dinars, as a complete, clear and open gift from the time of marriage, and the late payment will be [...] good gold dinars.

And her paternal uncle received in our presence two gold-set rings, one [...] ring, [...] silver ring, one amber ring, silver tubes, small pieces of [...] amber, a silk carpet, a golden green kerchief, and a head cover [...]. And the honourable, great and holy, our teacher and master Toviyya, the fiancé, took upon himself that Gold tubes 6 will be regarded as trustworthy in her statements, in the conduct of her household and her ketuba, with regard to her outfit and all other implements used by her in every respect, by him and all his heirs after his death; that she has the status of two trustworthy witnesses; and that no oath, grace or light may be imposed on her under any circumstances, for ever an anonymous ban.

We performed an act of acquisition with him regarding everything imposed upon him with an implement fit for doing so, nullifying all secret dispositions and conditions. And we have written and signed it so that it will be as a title of rights and as proof. All this took place on Friday eve, 2nd of Kislev, year 1421 of the Era of Documents. Strong and valid. Everything is strong, firm and valid. Abraham ben Shemaiah, Member of the Academy, son of Shemaiah Gaon – may he rest in Eden. [Isaac] son of Samuel the Spanish – the memory of the righteous he blessed, may he live in the world to come. Halfson son of Manasseh ha-Levi

Translation by AA and BMO

2 KARAITE-RABBANITE MARRIAGE CONTRACT

Egypt, 1082 CE

Aramaic and Hebrew, parchment
T-S 24.1

And our Prince, this David, also stipulated that, if God forbid, this Nashiah shall die without offspring, half of this dowry should be returned to her father’s house according to the custom of the children of the Land of Israel and ... moreover he agreed not to force this Nashiah, his wife, to sit with him in the light of the Sabbath, nor to eat the fat (of the sheep)’s tail, nor to profane her own festivals, on condition that she observe with him the festivals ...

And we have carried out an act of acquisition from the honourable, great, holy, our master and teacher, our Prince, this David the Prince, Prince of the Exile of all Israel, son of the honourable, great, holy, our master and teacher, our lord, our Prince, Daniel the [great] Prince, Head of the Academy of the Pride of da’acah – may his sacred memory be for a blessing – for this Nashiah, a young woman, this virgin bride, daughter of the honourable, great, holy, our master and teacher, our lord, our noble, Moses ha-Kohen, Banner of the Jews, their Stronghold, and the Joy of [their] Crown, with an implement suitable for acquisition, regarding all that is written and explained above. Fit and established.

Translation by BMO

3 CONDITIONAL BILL OF DIVORCE

Pastat, 1169 CE

Judaeo-Arabic, paper
T-S 56.23

This bill of divorce was delivered into the hand of Sitt [full] Fakhri, who is being divorced, from the hand of master [Messiah, who is doing the divorcing, on condition that should he die it will go into effect as a valid bill of divorce and should he not die it will not go into effect as a valid bill of divorce. And so he has said to her in our presence: “This is your bill of divorce on condition that if I do not die it will not go into effect as a valid bill of divorce, and if I do die it will go into effect as a valid bill of divorce, and if I do not die it will not go into effect as a valid bill of divorce”.

She has sworn a legal oath as a witness. And this took place on the first day of the week, the 16th day of the month of Av, 1440 (of the Seleucid Era) May he rest in Eden! Meverruh son of Nathan, Member of the Academy – May he rest in Eden!

Translation by AA and BMO

4 TRousseau List

Egypt, 12th century

Judaeo-Arabic, paper
T-S 31.29

With good luck and success! A gold tiara 80 dinars A shoulder band with 11 dishes of gold and 20 of amber 70 A pair of pins with clusters of pearls 20 A pair of peacock pins 18 A pair of earrings 5 A pair of pins 5 A pair of niello-work bracelets 32 A pair of beaded bracelets 30 A single enamelled (bride) 25 A mynman necklace of amber divided by cylinders and a box of gold 8 A pearl band divided by (beads of) gold 8 A silver comb 4 Two rings 4 An ornamented mirror 10 A water container (for the table) and a cover, a silver goblet, and a laddle 15 A shallow bowl 4 A turban, an earring, a mixing vessel with feet 5 A crystal mixing vessel 5 Another mixing vessel 5 A gold [...] 2 An ivory knob container 3 A crystal cock (a knickknack) 4 A pen-box made in China, with 2 knives, a sand sprinkler (for blotting), and an ivory plate (on which the pen is nibbed) 13 A silver comb 4 A pair of gold bracelets 15 2 gold rings 4 A locally-made scent-box of porcelain ornamented with silver 20 A round ornamented mirror 6 A perforated) lion and a needle for perfuming 5 2 silver vases and a jewel box 5 An amber shallow bowl with a gold rim 5 A chest and its stand 10 Equipment for bloodletting 2 Total (value of jewellery) 471 dinars
The Clothing
A cloud-coloured festive attire, consisting of a robe, a wimple, and a greyish headband 50
A white wimple with gold threads 15
A hood with stripes 'as the pen runs' and a robe, both with gold threads 10
A kerchief of dabiqi linen 8
A skullcap of dabiqi linen
A wrap with two ends in gold threads
And a veil with gold threads 22
A wrap of dabiqi linen and silk 4
A blue Rumi (dress of European style) 6
A silk wimple in double layers 6
A silken festive attire consisting of a robe
[...]
A greyish robe of silk and dabiqi linen and a greyish Rumi 15
A greyish cloak 5
A pomegranate-coloured festive robe and its wimple 15
A blue wimple with gold threads 5
A jukaniyya with bird patterns 4
A pale-blue-coloured wimple 5
An apricot-coloured jukaniyya, and a silk cloak with gold threads and an apricot-coloured silk Rumi 10
A green robe with gold threads, and a wax-coloured wimple 5
A home-made makhtuma (embroidered clothing) 6
A jukaniyya of siglaton (precious brocade) 3
A jukaniyya of red siglaton 4
A makhtuma of siglaton 7
A home-made tabby makhtuma 6
A starch-coloured tabby makhtuma 5
A jukaniyya of brocade with borders 10
A jukaniyya of red brocade 10
A makhtuma of pistachio brocade 15
A greenish festive attire, consisting of a robe, a wimple, a headband, and a Rumi 30
Panelled robes and pieces of cloth 20
[deleted]
A handbag of siglaton 12
A handbag of blue brocade 20
Total of the Clothing 373 dinars
A bedspread of Rumi brocade 10
Another bedspread 10
2 chameleon-coloured canopies 60
A sofa of Rumi brocade, 6 pieces 40
A sofa of 'Islets' brocade 15
A sofa of brilliant colour, 4 pieces 15
An 'Islets' sofa, 2 pieces 15
A sofa of Rumi brocade, 3 pieces 15
A siglaton couch 5
A siglaton sofa 5
A couch made of reeds 3
A brocade pod 5
Total of the spreads and hangings 198 dinars
The Copper
A candle-lamp, an oil lamp, 2 complete Spanish lamps, a large box and another box inside it,
A pitcher, a large washsibin, a large ewer,
And another washsibin, an ewer, a soda ash container, a box,
A part of a box, an ozen, a round bucket, 3 candlesticks,
A copper stool, and a bathrobe with hems.
Total 200 dinars
Vases with their perfume 8 dinars
The maids
‘Izz (‘Glory’) and Dalal (‘Coquetry’) and two personal attendants,
Nusa (‘Rainbow’ or ‘Lantern’) and Wafa (‘Fidelity’) 100
Total 1250
The books 250
Total 1600
The first and final instalment 500
Grand total 2100 dinars
Translation by SDG

PRENUPTIAL AGREEMENT

T-S 20.160

Egypt, 1047 CE
Hebrew, paper
I shall not allow into my house the dissolute, jokers, frivolous company or good-for-nothings.
Nor shall I enter the house of anyone who clings to licentiousness, corruption or immoral acts.
Nor shall I associate with them for the purposes of eating, drinking or anything else.
And I shall not acquire for myself a ‘maid’ (slave concubine) for as long as this Faiza is with me, except by her express desire and command.
Nor shall I leave Fustat to take to the road all the time that this Faiza is with me, except by her wish and with her knowledge.
I, Toviyya son of Eli, take upon myself all these conditions...
Translation by BMO
From the end of the 10th century, Egypt was incorporated into the Shi'ite Fatimid Caliphate. The large Jewish and Christian population was generally treated fairly by the Fatimids, and Jews were even admitted into senior government positions. But the second-class status given to the dhimmi under Islamic law meant that restrictions and oppression could be employed, and the Genizah records outbreaks of harsh discriminatory actions and even violence against the Jews.

Most of the world’s Jewish population lived in Islamic lands in the Middle Ages. As dhimmi, ‘protected people’, Jews and Christians in Egypt were free to practise their religion provided they recognised the absolute rule of Islam, paid the jizya – a severe poll-tax – and did not seek converts from among the Muslim population.

He appointed judges in the land and ordered them to give fair judgments and dispense lawful verdicts. He banished men of violence and turned away the wicked. He abhorred those of perverse ways or shameful deeds. He loved prudent men, the establishing of justice and the right path.

And out of his great love of righteousness, he set up reliable witnesses for the places of execution, the officers of judges, and the night-watchmen, such as never had been in the mind of a king or been done by any ruler before. Everyone knew that he desired neither silver nor gold, nor plunder nor to rule by oppression or tyranny.

Now, on the third day of the month of Shevat in the year four thousand seven hundred and seventy of the Creation of the World (= 1010 CE), which is the year one thousand three hundred and twenty-three from the Creation of Prophecy, which is the year nine hundred and forty-three of the Destruction of the Holy Dwelling, one of the cantors of the community, by the name of Pustel, died....

Translation by BMO

...The increase of our iniquities caused the hand of the Arabs to strengthen its rule, until, growing bold, the tyrants of the city, its notables, its elders and the qadis there, called ‘the Nephew of Abu’Suyur’ — ‘May the name of the wicked rot!’ — conspired to cut off our water supply. For they said, ‘How can the Hebrews drink from our water?’ And whenever we called on a leader or governor to reopen our access to the water, they would neither answer nor attest that ‘They have no share or legal right over our water’. This went on until the arrival this year of the governor called Hadsara ‘Treasure of the Realm’. We saw that his hand ruled over the people of the city and the surrounding area.

So we sent our emissary to Egypt to obtain a letter and a decree to deal with these matters: to reopen the water supply to us as it was previously, to allow us to slaughter in the market according to the law, because they (i.e. the locals) had prevented us from slaughtering; and that the collection of tax should be from the beginning of the month called al-Muharram until the month called Da’l Hijja, and they should not take tax from us until the beginning of the year.

Our emissary came back and brought with him the decree dealing with the aforementioned three points. We took the papers and we sent, a group of us, to the governor Hadsara. He took the decree and some letters that we had brought to him from the ‘Notable of the Realm’ and other important people in the government, and he read them before throwing them from his hand and seeking to obtain a bribe for doing all that they contained.

And so we went away afflicted and troubled, and we made a collection from every side and corner until we had given him a great many dinars, thus depriving the poor, the orphans and widows, after eights, trouble and distress. We also gave bribes to his officials and retainers, until we had been refined like the refining of silver and the testing of gold. After all this he sent for an elder called ‘the Preacher’ who testified before him that the Jews had previously enjoyed rights to the water... And so the day came that he reopened the water for us, and all the elders, the young men and all the notables of the city gathered and testified before him saying: ‘They have no legal right to share our water and they have no share among us in this city.’

He replied to them: ‘My lord the Caliph has spoken and has enacted a decree: I will not negate a word of it until you bring me from him another decree like this one but an annulment of it’. When they heard this, everybody got up in front of him, in shame and reproach. He said to the qadi of the city: ‘Look I have reopened the water for them; now I am returning to you alone the edict concerning their slaughtering because you alone can enact the edict’. The qadi left him as he was and the day our destinies began.

The governor heard of the arrival of soldiers (to his jurisdiction) and so he went word to the Jews and sought to obtain the tax for the forthcoming year, five months in advance. He said, ‘I desire two hundred and fifty dinars from you. I will not speak to you again till after the end of next year...’

Translation by BMO
1  **LEGAL QUERY ANSWERED BY MOSES MAIMONIDES**

Fustat, 12th century

Judaean-Arabic, paper

T-S 8K13.8

**Question:** An aged widow, who is above suspicion, has reported that [the teacher] jokingly expressed to her a desire to sleep with her. But she has no witness to this and no proof. And nothing like this has previously happened to him except for her allegation, which she made with the intention of harming him, damaging his reputation, cutting off his livelihood and putting him to public shame. Is her report concerning him credible or not? And if the aforementioned man wishes to free himself of suspicion, should he place a public ban on anyone alleging that he has done such a thing or telling lies about him or harbouring suspicions about him? Let our teacher instruct us and may he receive a double reward from Heaven.

The answer:

Her testimony is not acceptable. And every individual has the right to excommunicate by name anyone who has publicly impugned his reputation, but not to pronounce an excommunication over someone who merely harbours suspicions about him. And the correct way to proceed in this case is to silence the gossiping and not to pronounce a ban and not to have any further discussion in public. Written by Moses.

Translation by BMO

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2  **A CHRISTIAN-JEWISH LOVE AFFAIR**

Egypt, 11th century

Judaean-Arabic, paper

Or.1080.J91

Amram ibn Sa'id ibn Musa appeared before the court and reported that he was working in the apothecary practice of Abu'l-Faraj ibn Ma'amar al-Sharabi and that there was a physician, Abu Ghalib, there who wrote out prescriptions for the apothecary. The aforementioned Amram ibn Sa'id stated that he noticed a woman sitting rather frequently with this aforementioned doctor, Abu Ghalib, and thought her to be a Muslim woman since he saw her so often. After learning that she was a Jew, he inquired about her and found out that she was the daughter of Ibn al-Mashita. Some of the Muslims were seized with righteous zeal because of this and spied on her, suspecting her of having an affair with a Christian, the aforementioned doctor. This went on for about forty days, more or less. One day, she came to him and said I would like you to come and take a ride with me to a patient. And she stayed with him until he had finished work. Then he got up and rode with her, and they went away together....

Translation by FN

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3  **A FATHER-IN-LAW WRITES TO HIS LONG-LOST SON-IN-LAW**

Egypt, 10th/11th century

Hebrew, parchment

T-S 12.179

Accept greetings from me, Sa'd. I am letting you know that my soul longs to see your face and to gaze upon your honour. May the Holy One, blessed be He, let me soon look upon your face. I would not have ceased my constant writing to you except we heard that you had been killed by the enemy. And I was sad about this news. But subsequently I have heard that you are alive and so I have written this letter. I implore you to reply to me and let me know what you are up to and whether you have any needs and how you are. [ ...

I am informing you that your wife suffers great distress with your children. You've abandoned them these past twenty-three years and have shown no desire to see them. Why do you act this way towards your wife and your children? You should consider what to do about your children. You said: Inform me about the water. The Nile has already flooded and is at peace. As for the price of bread, twelve pounds for a silver coin. And a garden of the Lord is the land of Egypt.

Translation by BMO

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4  **WIFE THREATENS DAYTIME HUNGER STRIKE**

Egypt, 12th century

A woman pleads with her husband to return home after he chose to move out in a dispute over having to live with her family and pay them rent. To avoid a charge of 'abandonment', the husband has been returning on Sabbaths for brief conjugal visits. The woman threatens to start a hunger strike (but only during the daytime) if her husband does not move back home. On the back of the letter he writes If you don't break your fast, I won't come back Sabbaths or any other day!

Judaean-Arabic, paper

Lewis-Gibson Arabic 2.51

I swear that I shall not break my fast by day.

Translation by BMO
In 1896, intrepid twins Agnes Lewis and Margaret Gibson returned to Cambridge from a research trip to Egypt and Palestine. They brought with them a treasure lost for a thousand years: a page from the original Hebrew book of Ben Sira. The page had accumulated along with thousands of other documents in the Ben Ezra Synagogue, Old Cairo, in a chamber called a Genizah. The Jewish community had been placing their worn-out books and documents in the Genizah since at least the 10th century CE.

Cambridge lecturer Solomon Schechter was so excited by the sisters’ remarkable discovery he travelled to Old Cairo to see for himself what the Genizah held. The Chief Rabbi of Egypt gave Schechter permission to take whatever he liked. Schechter declared that he ‘liked all’, and shipped almost 200,000 manuscripts back to Cambridge.

Translation by SDG

WITNESSES TESTIFY TO AN ILICIT RELATIONSHIP
Fustat, 12th century

Judaean-Arabic, paper
T-S 10J7.10

…I was with the cantor Hillel ben Eli... when al-Wuhsha, the broker, came in and said to him: ‘Do you have any advice for me? I had an affair with al-Hassan and became pregnant.

Our marriage document has been lodged with the Muslims, but I am afraid that he may refuse to acknowledge the child.’ She then lived in the house of Ben al-Sukkari on the uppermost floor. He (the cantor) said: ‘Go and gather some people, and let them surprise you with him so that your assertion might be confirmed’. She did so, gathering two who surprised her with him, and confirmed her assertion.

She was then pregnant with this Abu Sa’d, her son, from her illicit relations with Hassan. And I know that she went on Yom Kippur to the synagogue of the Babylonian community, but when the Nasi (the Prince – leader of the community) – of blessed memory – noticed her, he threw her out of the synagogue. I confirm all this and offer it as my true testimony. There appeared also in court the ritual slaughterer Abu Sa’d ha-Kohen, son of Joseph ha-Kohen – may he rest in Eden – and deposited the following testimony in our presence: ‘I was living in the house of Hibat Allah Ben al-Sukkari – may God accept him with favour – on the ground floor for many years, while Wuhsha the broker had her domicile in the uppermost part of the house. In those days she came down once to one of the tenants, namely Abu Naser the Kohen, the cantor Ben al-Kamukhi, and to Abraham the Jerusalemite known as the son of the poet, and said to them: ‘Please, come up with me room for something. The two went up with her and found Hassan sitting in her place and…’

Translation by SDG

TRANSLATOR KEY
AA  Amir Ashur
BMO Benjamin M. Outhwaite
FN  Friedrich Niessen
GK  Geoffrey Khan
MC  Mark R. Cohen
SDG  S.D. Goitein
SMS  S.M. Stern
In 1896, intrepid twins Agnes Lewis and Margaret Gibson returned to Cambridge from a research trip to Egypt and Palestine. They brought with them a treasure lost for a thousand years: a page from the original Hebrew book of Ben Sira. The page had accumulated along with thousands of other documents in the Ben Ezra Synagogue, Old Cairo, in a chamber called a Genizah. The Jewish community had been placing their worn-out books and documents in the Genizah since at least the 10th century CE. Cambridge lecturer Solomon Schechter was so excited by the sisters’ remarkable discovery he travelled to Old Cairo to see for himself what the Genizah held. The Chief Rabbi of Egypt gave Schechter permission to take whatever he liked. Schechter declared that he ‘liked all’, and shipped almost 200,000 manuscripts back to Cambridge.

Where do the Genizah fragments come from?

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Museum of the Bible
The Polonsky Foundation
Wellcome Trust (Research Resources)

Thank you all for your generous support.
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One can hardly realise the confusion in such a real old Genizah until one has seen it. It is a battlefield of books, a battle in which the literary productions of many centuries had their share...

SOLOMON SCHECHTER