

Background Reading

A thousand years of saved paper

What is a genizah?

Jewish tradition teaches that writings that may contain the name of God should be treated with respect and not thrown away or burned. Instead, worn out Torah scrolls, prayer books, and other writings are placed in a storeroom called a *genizah*, from a Hebrew root meaning “to store away,” and are later buried. Many communities extended the custom to almost anything written in Hebrew letters, which meant that ordinary papers were saved along with sacred ones.

The Ben Ezra Synagogue

Fustat, the old city of Cairo, was a busy port and market on the Nile. Under the Fatimid caliphs, it was home to Jews, Muslims, and Christians who traded and lived side by side. Around 1012, Caliph al-Hakim ordered the destruction of non-Muslim houses of worship, and the Ben Ezra Synagogue was torn down. It was rebuilt between about 1025 and 1040 with a genizah chamber high in its wall. Because the community rarely emptied it, and because Egypt’s dry climate preserved paper and parchment, documents piled up there for about 850 years.

What was inside?

The Genizah held about 400,000 fragments in Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic, and Judeo-Arabic, which is Arabic written in Hebrew letters. Alongside Bibles, prayer books, poetry, and works of law and philosophy were thousands of everyday documents: letters between merchants and family members, marriage and divorce contracts, court records, leases, loans, shopping lists, medical prescriptions, and children’s school exercises. Some pages had been reused, with a business note on one side and a sacred text on the other.

The discovery

Dealers and scholars began removing pages in the nineteenth century. In 1896, the Scottish twin scholars Agnes Lewis and Margaret Gibson showed fragments to Solomon Schechter, a scholar at Cambridge University, who recognized one as part of the Wisdom of Ben Sira, a book whose original Hebrew had been lost for centuries. Schechter traveled to Cairo that winter. He described the chamber as “a battlefield of books” and brought home about 190,000 fragments, the core of Cambridge University Library’s Taylor-Schechter Collection. Other Genizah pages are now held in New York, Oxford, Manchester, St. Petersburg, Jerusalem, and elsewhere.

Why it matters

Most medieval records were written by and about rulers, scholars, and religious leaders. The Genizah preserves the lives of ordinary people: merchants and craftsmen, wives and widows, teachers and students. The historian S. D. Goitein spent decades reading these documents and showed that they reveal a connected world stretching from Spain to India, in which Jews, Muslims, and Christians shared markets, neighborhoods, and sometimes business partnerships, while minorities also faced restrictions and periods of danger. Today much of the Genizah can be viewed online, and scholars are still identifying new fragments.

Timeline

641	Arab armies found Fustat beside the Nile.
969	The Fatimid dynasty conquers Egypt and founds Cairo next to Fustat.
c. 1012	Caliph al-Hakim orders churches and synagogues destroyed, including the Ben Ezra Synagogue.
1025 to 1040	The synagogue is rebuilt with a large genizah chamber.
c. 1166	Moses Maimonides arrives in Egypt and later leads the Jewish community of Fustat.
1896	Agnes Lewis and Margaret Gibson bring fragments to Solomon Schechter, who identifies the lost Hebrew Ben Sira.
1897	Schechter returns from Cairo with about 190,000 fragments for Cambridge.
1964	A Ben Sira scroll found at Masada confirms the Hebrew text first found in the Genizah.
2023	The restored Ben Ezra Synagogue reopens to visitors.

Sources: Cambridge University Library, Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit; Princeton Geniza Project; Adina Hoffman and Peter Cole, *Sacred Trash* (2011). Schechter's description is from his report in *The Times* of London, August 3, 1897.