

The Cairo Genizah

Students investigate real documents from a thousand year old synagogue storeroom in Cairo and discover what ordinary letters, contracts, and lessons reveal about Jewish life in the medieval Islamic world

GRADE AND SETTING

Grades 9 to 12: public, independent, and Jewish schools; adaptable for grades 6 to 8

TIME

Two 45 minute class periods, or one 90 minute block

APPENDICES

A: Background Reading
B: Document Cards
C: Document Analysis

Overview

For roughly eight hundred years, the Jews of Fustat, the old city of Cairo, placed worn out writings in a storeroom, or *genizah*, in the Ben Ezra Synagogue. Jewish custom held that writings that might contain the name of God should not be thrown away, so the community saved nearly everything: Bibles and prayer books, but also business letters, marriage and divorce contracts, shopping lists, prescriptions, and children's school exercises. When scholars brought these papers to the world's attention in the 1890s, they found about 400,000 fragments, one of the richest records of everyday life to survive from the medieval world. In this lesson, students work as historians with eight real Genizah documents, viewing the originals online, and use them to build an evidence based picture of Jewish life and of relations among Jews, Muslims, and Christians in the medieval Mediterranean.

Essential Questions

1. What can a community's everyday papers reveal that the writings of rulers and scholars cannot?
2. What do the Genizah documents show about Jewish life, and about relations among Jews, Muslims, and Christians, in medieval Egypt?
3. Whose voices does an archive preserve, and whose might it leave out?

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to:

1. Explain what a genizah is and why the Cairo Genizah preserved so many everyday documents.
2. Source a primary document by identifying its type, author, audience, date, and purpose.
3. Draw evidence based conclusions about daily life, family, economy, education, and religion in medieval Fustat.
4. Analyze what the documents reveal about relations among Jews, Muslims, and Christians.
5. Evaluate the strengths and limits of an archive as a historical source.

Curriculum Connections

- **Social Studies (C3 Framework):** D2.His.9.9-12 (analyze the relationship between historical sources and the questions they can answer); D2.His.10.9-12 (detect limitations in the historical record); D2.His.16.9-12 (integrate evidence from multiple sources into an argument).
- **World History:** the Fatimid and Ayyubid periods in Egypt; Mediterranean and Indian Ocean trade; religious minorities in the medieval Islamic world.
- **English Language Arts (Common Core):** RH.9-10.1 and RH.11-12.1 (cite textual evidence); RH.11-12.9 (integrate information from diverse sources); WHST.9-10.1 (write arguments).
- **Jewish Studies (Jewish settings):** the custom of *genizah* and respect for sacred writing; Maimonides; Sephardic and Mizrahi history.

Key Vocabulary

- **Genizah** (גִּנְזָה): a storeroom for worn out sacred writings, from a Hebrew root meaning “to store away.”
- **Fustat:** the old city of Cairo, founded in 641; home of the Ben Ezra Synagogue.
- **Fatimids:** the dynasty that ruled Egypt from 969 to 1171 and founded the city of Cairo.
- **Judeo-Arabic:** Arabic written in Hebrew letters, the everyday written language of many Genizah documents.
- **Fragment:** a torn or partial piece of a manuscript.
- **Shelfmark:** the catalog number a library uses to identify a manuscript, such as T-S K5.13.
- **Archive:** a collection of historical records, or the place where they are kept.
- **Primary source:** a document created at the time being studied.
- **Sourcing:** asking who created a source, when, for whom, and why.

Teacher Background

Jews lived in Egypt from ancient times, and under the Fatimid caliphs (969 to 1171) Fustat became a center of Jewish life tied by trade and family to communities from Spain and Sicily to Yemen and India. The Ben Ezra Synagogue was destroyed around 1012, when Caliph al-Hakim ordered the destruction of churches and synagogues, and was rebuilt between about 1025 and 1040 with a large genizah chamber. Documents accumulated there for about 850 years.

In 1896, the Scottish twin scholars Agnes Lewis and Margaret Gibson brought Genizah fragments to Solomon Schechter at Cambridge, who recognized one as part of the lost Hebrew original of the Wisdom of Ben Sira. That winter Schechter traveled to Cairo and returned with roughly 190,000 fragments, now the Taylor-Schechter Collection at Cambridge University Library. Other Genizah collections are held at the Jewish Theological Seminary, Oxford, Manchester, St. Petersburg, and elsewhere. The historian S. D. Goitein spent decades reading the everyday documents and described the world they reveal in his multivolume work *A Mediterranean Society*.

The Genizah shows Jews, Muslims, and Christians living in the same neighborhoods, trading, lending, renting, and going to one another's courts. It also records hardship and persecution, including al-Hakim's campaign against non-Muslim houses of worship. Encourage students to hold both truths and to avoid simple stories of either harmony or hostility. Today the restored Ben Ezra Synagogue is open to visitors, but only a handful of Jews still live in Egypt, a community that numbered about 80,000 in the twentieth century before most were forced out (see JIMENA's Oral Histories lesson).

Sources: Cambridge University Library, Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit and Cambridge Digital Library; Princeton Geniza Project; Adina Hoffman and Peter Cole, *Sacred Trash* (Schocken, 2011); S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society* (University of California Press).

A note on the original resource: This page previously linked to a PBS LearningMedia video and materials from *The Story of the Jews*. That resource is no longer available, and the PBS materials were licensed for classroom use only, not for redistribution. This JIMENA lesson replaces it with original materials and free videos from the National Library of Israel and Cambridge University Library.

Materials

- Projector and speakers; devices for small groups to view manuscripts online
- [Video: The Hidden Treasures of the Cairo Genizah](#) (National Library of Israel, 3.5 minutes)
- Optional: [A Brush With History](#) (Cambridge University Library, 10 minutes), on how Genizah fragments are conserved
- Handouts:
 - [Appendix A: Background Reading](#) (one per student)
 - [Appendix B: Document Cards](#) (one card per group)
 - [Appendix C: Document Analysis](#) (one per student)

Procedures

Day 1. Introduction (15 minutes)

- 1 Trash or treasure? (7 min).** Students list five things they wrote, received, or threw away this week: a text, a receipt, a note, a homework page. Ask: If a historian found only these items a thousand years from now, what would they conclude about your life? What would they get wrong?
- 2 Introduce the genizah (3 min).** Explain that Jewish custom holds that writings that may contain the name of God should not be destroyed. Instead, worn out books and papers were placed in a storeroom called a *genizah* and later buried. In Fustat, the community rarely emptied its genizah, and it saved far more than sacred texts.
- 3 Watch (5 min).** Show "The Hidden Treasures of the Cairo Genizah." Ask: What surprised you? Why would ordinary papers end up in a synagogue storeroom?

Day 1. Body of the Lesson (30 minutes)

- 4 Background reading (12 min).** Students read Appendix A, annotating one fact that surprised them, one new term, and one question. Review the timeline together, and ask: Why did Schechter call the Genizah a "battlefield of books"?
- 5 Document groups (3 min).** Divide the class into eight groups (or four groups with two cards each). Give each group one card from Appendix B and a copy of Appendix C.
- 6 Analyze (15 min).** Groups read their card and open the original manuscript on the Cambridge Digital Library using the link on the card. Even without reading Hebrew or Arabic, students should look closely: the material, the handwriting, the size, decorations, corrections, and damage. Groups complete Part 1 of Appendix C.

Day 2. Building the Picture (20 minutes)

- 7 **Share (12 min).** Each group presents its document in one minute: what it is, who made it and why, and the most important thing it reveals. On the board, the class fills a chart with columns for daily life, family, economy and trade, education, religion and law, and relations with neighbors. Students record the chart in Part 2 of Appendix C.
- 8 **Discuss (8 min).** Ask: Which documents show Jews and Muslims working together? Which show risk or danger? Which people are well represented here, and who is missing or speaks only through others (women, enslaved people, the poor, Muslims and Christians in their own words)? What questions can the Genizah not answer?

Day 2. Conclusion (25 minutes)

- 9 **Write (18 min).** Using Part 3 of Appendix C, students write an evidence based paragraph answering: *What does the Cairo Genizah reveal about Jewish life in the medieval Islamic world?* Paragraphs must cite at least three documents by name and shelfmark and include one sentence on a limit of the evidence.
- 10 **Reflect (7 min).** Return to the opening activity. Ask: If your community kept a genizah today, what would it save, and what would historians in a thousand years learn about us? Exit ticket: Name one thing you learned from an ordinary document that you could not have learned from a famous one.

Assessment

- **Formative:** annotations on Appendix A, Part 1 analysis, and group presentations.
- **Summative:** the evidence based paragraph. A strong paragraph makes a clear claim; supports it with specific details from at least three documents, cited by shelfmark; explains how each detail supports the claim; and names at least one limit of the Genizah as a source.

Differentiation

- **Middle school students or English learners:** use four cards (the alphabet primer, the shopping order, the loan, and the last letter home); preteach vocabulary; provide sentence frames ("This document shows that ___ because ___").
- **Students who need support:** pair readers; complete Part 1 together as a class with one card before groups begin; shorten the paragraph to a claim and two pieces of evidence.
- **Advanced learners:** search the Princeton Geniza Project for a document related to their card and compare the two, or read the opening chapter of *Sacred Trash* and evaluate how the discovery was told at the time.

Extension Activities

- **A class genizah.** Students each contribute one ordinary item that documents their lives, write a catalog card for it with a "shelfmark," and discuss what the collection would and would not reveal to a future historian.
- **Mapping a merchant's world.** Using David Maimonides' letter and the Princeton Geniza Project, students map trade routes linking Spain, North Africa, Egypt, Yemen, and India.
- **Two discoveries.** Compare the Cairo Genizah with the Dead Sea Scrolls. Both preserved copies of the Wisdom of Ben Sira, and the Ben Sira scroll found at Masada in 1964 confirmed the Hebrew text first recovered from the Genizah.

- **From Fustat to the twentieth century.** Connect to JIMENA's [Jews in the Islamic World](#) and [Oral Histories](#) lessons, including Mark Levy's testimony about Jewish life in Alexandria.

Resources and External Links

- [Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit \(JIMENA\)](#)
www.sepharditoolkit.org/
- [Jewish History \(Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit\)](#)
www.sepharditoolkit.org/recommendation/jewish-history/
- [JIMENA Cultural Heritage: Egypt](#)
qua.jimena.org/cultural-heritage/egypt
- [The Hidden Treasures of the Cairo Genizah \(National Library of Israel, video\)](#)
www.youtube.com/watch?v=JqIPKqkM-u0
- [A Brush With History: conserving the Genizah fragments \(Cambridge University Library, video\)](#)
www.youtube.com/watch?v=abqlm9KdiiQ
- [Cairo Genizah Collection \(Cambridge Digital Library\)](#)
cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/collections/genizah
- [Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit \(Cambridge University Library\)](#)
www.lib.cam.ac.uk/collections/departments/taylor-schechter-genizah-research-unit
- [Discarded History: Treasures of the Cairo Genizah \(University of Cambridge\)](#)
www.cam.ac.uk/stories/discarded-history-treasures-of-the-cairo-genizah
- [Princeton Geniza Project](#)
geniza.princeton.edu/en/
- [Sacred Trash: The Lost and Found World of the Cairo Geniza, by Adina Hoffman and Peter Cole \(Schocken\)](#)
www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/81238/sacred-trash-by-adina-hoffman-and-peter-cole/
- [The Cairo Genizah, The Story of the Jews \(PBS; archived page, video no longer available\)](#)
www.pbs.org/wnet/story-jews/classroom/lesson-plans/the-cairo-genizah/