The Cairo Genizah

an introduction to the greatest discovery
of Jewish texts ever made

Rebecca J. W. Jefferson
What is a Genizah?

• From the Hebrew root letters *gimel, nun, zayin* meaning ‘hiding’ or ‘storing’

• The noun ‘genizah’ describes a special place to store worn out or invalid books and manuscripts, particularly Bible scrolls and other religious texts

• The material is usually buried
Genizah manuscripts excavated in the Basatin Cemetery in Fostat (Old Cairo)
What is the Cairo Genizah?

A collection of around 500,000 manuscript fragments amassed in a synagogue attic in Old Cairo between the 10th and 19th centuries.
“The Living Sea Scrolls”
Why was the Genizah in the Ben Ezra synagogue different?
Map of Fostat (Old Cairo)
Eye witness account from the Cairo Genizah testifying to the local practice of burying materials (11th century CE)

Image: courtesy of the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit and the Syndics of Cambridge University Library
The Ben Ezra Synagogue, Fostat (Old Cairo) before restoration
The Ben Ezra synagogue today
Rabbi Mark Glickman, author of *Sacred Treasure*, climbs a ladder to peer into the now empty Genizah chamber.
When was the Cairo Genizah discovered?

It was slowly re-discovered in the 19th century by a succession of Western travelers, collectors and scholars ...
Scholar, traveler, collector: Jacob Saphir (1822-1886)

Saphir’s travelogue: Even Sapir (1866)
Collector (and forger): Abraham Firkovich (1776-1874) visited the Ben Ezra synagogue in 1863 at the age of 87!
Dear Prof Poole,

I had brought the excavations at Old Cairo to a close at the beginning of this week ... Nine boxes I have forwarded they contain Kufic tombstones & a number of fragments of some Hebrew manuscripts found at Fostat [Old Cairo] ... 

February, 1890

Excavator: Count Riamo d’Hulst (c. 1850-1915)?
The Cairo Genizah laid open... 

The collector, Rev. Greville John Chester (1831-1892)

Chester’s toe!

A letter from Chester to the Bodleian Library, Oxford, December 1889, swearing them to secrecy
Oxford scholar and librarian: Dr. Adolf Neubauer (1831-1907)
Scholar and collector: Rabbi Solomon Wertheimer (1866-1934)
Excavations in Old Cairo

Oxford scholar and Egyptologist: Professor Archibald Henry Sayce (1846-1933)

A letter from Sayce to Neubauer, March 1895: D’Hulst has discovered the Cairo Genizah …
The chance discovery of one fragment was about to change everything ...
Two intrepid ladies hunt for manuscripts

Agnes Smith Lewis (1843-1926)
Margaret Dunlop Gibson (1843-1920)

Intrepid twin sisters, scholars, travelers, discoverers …
Cambridge scholar: Solomon Schechter (1847-1915) … later known in America as the founder and President of the United Synagogue of America and architect of the American Conservative Jewish movement
A medieval fragment of the lost Hebrew original of the 
Book of Ben Sira (Ecclesiasticus)

Images courtesy of the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit and the Syndics of Cambridge University Library
Master of St John’s College, Cambridge, mathematician and Hebraist: Dr. Charles Taylor (1840-1908)
Schechter retrieved 193,000 fragments for Cambridge University
Genizah material around the world

Cambridge University Library
Westminster College Cambridge
Budapest
St Petersburg
Geneva
New York
Washington
Manchester
Paris
London

... Philadelphia, Berlin, Strasbourg, Vienna, Jerusalem and private collections
Maimonides autograph fragment of *Guide for the Perplexed*

Or.1081 2.44 & JNUL Gaster Collection B2597 & B4094
What does the Cairo Genizah contain?
Most of the Genizah fragments date from the 11-13\textsuperscript{th} century

The earliest manuscripts are palimpsests from the 6th century

Another significant amount of material was added after the expulsion from Spain in 1492

The latest dated document is a bill of divorce from Bombay in 1864
Why is the discovery of the Cairo Genizah so important?

- The social, economic and religious aspects of the medieval Mediterranean
- Jewish law and medicine
- Rabbinic literature
- Famous Jewish scholars
- Languages
- Palestinian and Babylonian customs and rites
- The Karaite Jews
- Medieval Hebrew poetry
- Jewish artistic, musical and scientific efforts
Dead Sea Scroll, 4Q271
(www.archaeology.org.il)

CUL MS T-S 10K6

Image: courtesy of the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit and the Syndics of Cambridge University Library
CUL MS T-S K17.20: a copy of the Jerusalem Talmud
The development of Jewish liturgy

CUL MS Or.1080
15.14: A copy of a 10th century Palestinian version of *Birkat ha-Mazon*
CUL T-S 12.192: A signed letter of recommendation from Maimonides

CUL MS Or.1080 J1: a letter from his brother David

Image: courtesy of the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit and the Syndics of Cambridge University Library
CUL MS T-S 12.202: a responsum signed by Maimonides
CUL MS T-S AR.30.184: checks

Image: courtesy of the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit and the Syndics of Cambridge University Library
CUL MS T-S K5.10: Alphabet primer

Image: courtesy of the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit and the Syndics of Cambridge University Library
CUL MS T-S K5.19: doodles!

Image: courtesy of the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit and the Syndics of Cambridge University Library
The problem with kids...

CUL MS T-S 8J28.7: teacher’s report

Image: courtesy of the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit and the Syndics of Cambridge University Library
CUL MS T-S 13J20.3: father’s letter
CUL MS T-S 20.44: record of sale of books

Image: courtesy of the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit and the Syndics of Cambridge University Library
CUL MS T-S 20.60: marriage contract

Image: courtesy of the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit and the Syndics of Cambridge University Library
CUL MS T-S J1.29: dowry

Image: courtesy of the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit and the Syndics of Cambridge University Library
CUL MS T-S 24.68: divorce clause

Image: courtesy of the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit and the Syndics of Cambridge University Library
CUL MS T-S 10J7.10: Wuhsa the businesswoman

Image: courtesy of the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit and the Syndics of Cambridge University Library
Koran in Hebrew; Bible in Arabic!

CUL MS T-S Ar.51.62: Koran in Hebrew

CUL MS T-S Ar.52.242: Hebrew Bible in Arabic

Images: courtesy of the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit and the Syndics of Cambridge University Library
CUL MS T-S K5.41: early music

Image: courtesy of the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit and the Syndics of Cambridge University Library
CUL MS T-S Ar.30.305: a prescription

Image: courtesy of the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit and the Syndics of Cambridge University Library
CUL MS T-S AS 143.26: amulets

Image: courtesy of the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit and the Syndics of Cambridge University Library
Conserving the fragments
Preserved for scholarship ...
Unsorted Mosseri fragments

Image: courtesy of the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit and the Syndics of Cambridge University Library
Digitizing the collections around the world …
Putting the pieces back together …
The field of Jewish Studies expands with new discoveries every day …

Good background reading ...
A Genizah Secret: the Count d’Hulst and letters revealing the race to recover the lost leaves of the original Ecclesiasticus ...

Read online at: http://ufdc.ufl.edu/
Save the date!

The authors of *Sacred Trash* will be here in Gainesville to talk about their book on February 9th at the University of Florida Hillel.
Any Questions?

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