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# SACRED TRASH

The Lost and Found World of  
the Cairo Geniza

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## Hidden Wisdom

Cambridge, May 1896

When the self-taught Scottish scholar of Arabic and Syriac Agnes Lewis and her no-less-learned twin sister, Margaret Gibson, hurried down a street or a hallway, they moved—as a friend later described them—“like ships in full sail.” Their plump frames, thick lips, and slightly hawkish eyes made them, theoretically, identical. And both were rather vain about their dainty hands, which on special occasions they “weighed down with antique rings.” In a poignant and peculiar coincidence, each of the sisters had been widowed after just a few years of happy marriage to a clergyman.

But Mrs. Lewis and Mrs. Gibson were distinct to those who knew them. Older by an entire twenty minutes, Agnes was the more ambitious, colorful, and domineering of the two; Margaret had a quieter intelligence and was, it was said, “more normal.” By age fifty, Agnes had written three travel books and three novels, and had translated a tourist guide from the Greek; Margaret had contributed amply to and probably helped write her sister’s nonfiction books, edited her husband’s translation of Cervantes’ *Journey to Parnassus*, and grown adept at watercolors. They were, meanwhile, exceptionally close—around Cambridge they came to be known as a single unit, the “Giblews”—and after the deaths of their husbands they devoted themselves and their sizable inheritance to a life of travel and study together.

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This followed quite naturally from the maverick manner in which they'd been raised in a small town near Glasgow by their forward-thinking lawyer father, a widower, who subscribed to an educational philosophy that was equal parts Bohemian and Calvinist—as far-out as it was firm. Eschewing the fashion for treating girls' minds like fine china, he assumed his daughters were made of tougher stuff and schooled them as though they were sons, teaching them to think for themselves, to argue and ride horses. Perhaps most important, he had instilled in them early on a passion for philology, promising them that they could travel to any country on condition that they first learned its language. French, Spanish, German, and Italian followed, as did childhood trips around the Continent. He also encouraged the girls' nearly familial friendship with their church's progressive and intellectually daring young preacher, who had once been a protégé of the opium-eating Romantic essayist Thomas de Quincy.

After their father's sudden death when they were twenty-three, Agnes and Margaret sought consolation in strange alphabets and in travel to still more distant climes: Egypt, Palestine, Greece, and Cyprus. By middle age they had learned, between them, some nine languages—adding to their European repertoire Hebrew, Persian, and Syriac written in Estrangelo

script. Having also studied the latest photographic techniques, they journeyed extensively throughout the East, taking thousands of pictures of ancient manuscript pages and buying piles of others, the most interesting of which they then set out to transcribe and translate.

As women, and as devout (not to mention eccentric and



notoriously party-throwing) Presbyterians, they lived and worked on the margins of mostly Anglican, male-centered Cambridge society—women were not granted degrees at the town’s illustrious university until 1948—and they counted as their closest friends a whole host of Quakers, freethinkers, and Jews. Yet Agnes’s 1892 discovery at St. Catherine’s Monastery in Sinai of one of the oldest Syriac versions of the New Testament had brought the sisters respect in learned circles: their multiple books on the subject ranged from the strictly scholarly *A Translation of the Four Gospels from the Syriac of the Sinai Palimpsest* to the more talky and popular *How the Codex Was Found*. Somehow the rumor spread that Mrs. Lewis had just happened to recognize a fragment of the ancient manuscript in the monastery dining hall, where it was being used as a butter dish. In fact, the codex was kept under tight lock and key, and its very fragile condition—to say nothing of its sacred status—certainly precluded its use by the monks as mere tableware. It took serious erudition and diplomacy for the twins to gain access to the manuscript in the monastery library; they then worked painstakingly over a period of years to decode the codex, as it were. “The leaves,” wrote Agnes, “are deeply stained, and in parts ready to crumble. One and all of them were glued together, until the librarian of the Convent and I separated them with our fingers.” She and Margaret proceeded to photograph each of its 358 pages and, on their return to Cambridge, processed the film themselves and labored over the text’s decipherment. Later they arranged for an expedition of several distinguished



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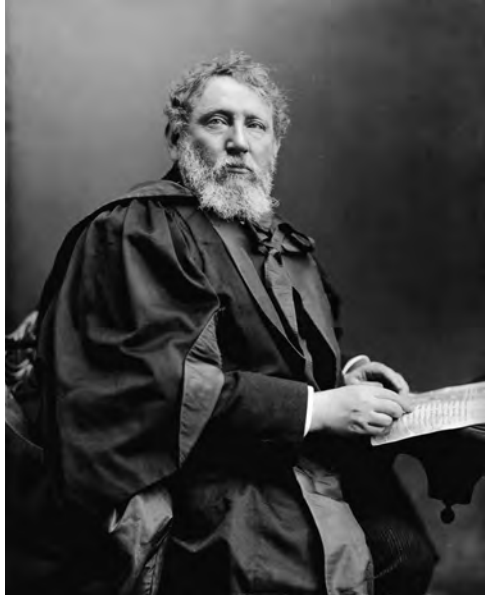
Cambridge scholars to travel with them to Sinai, where they worked as a team, transcribing the codex as a whole.

All these far-flung intellectual adventures had been exciting but also exhausting. And although the twins had resolved to spend a quiet season in Cambridge, immersed in the proofs of the various texts they had lately copied from manuscript, they set out in the early spring of 1896 on still another Middle Eastern trip—their third in almost as many years—bound for Palestine and Egypt. The reason for the journey was reported later in what sounds like deliberately vague terms: “News we received from Cairo,” Agnes wrote enigmatically, “seemed to indicate that there might be some chance of our finding something there.” Weary as they were from their previous travels, they had not been eager to take this particular trip, “and yet,” as she would admit in retrospect, “it had not been the least fruitful in results.”

This understatement was typical of Agnes, and gives little sense of the startling events that had come to pass one historic May day in 1896, soon after the twins’ return. Suffering from what her sister, Margaret, described as “a severe rheumatic illness, caused by undue exposure on the night when we had lost our tents in the valley of Elah,” Agnes had decided that morning to stretch her legs. While out strolling in downtown Cambridge, she was especially glad to bump into a good friend—and, strangely, another twin who also took great pride in his beautiful hands—the Romanian-born Talmud scholar, Solomon Schechter.

Even more of an oddball in the donnish context of Cambridge than Agnes and Margaret, the very Jewish, very blustery Schechter must, too, have cut a remarkable figure as he strode down King’s Parade. With his bushy, red-tinted beard, unruly hair, and tendency to gesticulate broadly as he spoke, Schechter had been known to set off in the broiling heat of midsummer wrapped up in a winter coat and several yards of scarf. An acquaintance remembered first meeting Schechter, with “his dirty black coat, smudged all over with snuff and ashes from his cigar, hands unwashed, nails as black as ink, but rather nice fingers, beard and hair

unkempt, a ruddy complexion . . . One ear was stuffed full of wool, hanging out, and he was always very abrupt in his speech.” Another recalled that his socks never matched. His resemblance to a bag lady apart, there was, as another colleague put it, “the magic of prophecy about the man.” He also had, his wife would write years later, “a genius for friendship; he loved people and they loved him.” Since his 1890 arrival in Cambridge, where he was first given the odd title Lecturer in Talmudic and later appointed Reader in Rabbinics, Schechter had gained the deep respect and affection of a range of the town’s leading intellectuals, including the radical Scottish Bible scholar and



Arabist William Robertson Smith (who arranged for Schechter to join Christ’s College, where special kosher meals were prepared whenever he came to dine); the Africa explorer Mary Kingsley (with whom he much enjoyed swearing); and the pioneering anthropologist and reclusive author of *The Golden Bough*, James Frazer, perhaps Schechter’s best friend at the time. The two took walks together several days a week, discussing as they rambled “all things, human and divine.” Frazer himself praised Schechter as “great in his intellect and learning, greater even in the warmth of his affections and his enthusiasm for every high and noble cause.”

By turns fierce, warm, brusque, tender, biting in his wit, and thundering in his manner, “the king in any society in which he found him-

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self,” Schechter was often described in peculiarly zoological terms. Now he was “a demanding lamb,” now an eagle or a bear. “I can see him in my mind’s eye, at the height of a debate,” wrote yet another friend, “rising from his chair, perhaps kicking it down, and pacing . . . the room, like a wounded lion, roaring retorts.” Lamb or jungle cat, he inspired awe and devotion in most people, though one imagines that the formidable Agnes Lewis would not even have blinked as she sailed—however arthritically—toward Schechter that day in the street.

She and Mrs. Gibson had, she hastened to tell him, spent the last few weeks developing the photographs and sifting through the manuscripts they’d brought back from their most recent trip. Their purchases included what Agnes would later describe as “a bundle of documents from a dealer in the plain of Sharon . . . [and] a similar bundle bought in Cairo.” Margaret, whose turn it was to do the sorting, had managed to identify most of the items that they’d carted home in a trunk—and which had almost been confiscated by overzealous customs officials in Jaffa. She had worked her way through the Hebrew fragments and set aside what she deemed parts of “the Canonical Books of the Old Testament” (the only sections of the Hebrew Bible that she, as a good Presbyterian, would know), assuming that the others were either talmudic passages or “private Jewish documents.” But the twins were eager for Schechter to have a look at some of the items whose contents they did not recognize.

Schechter, of all people, might be able to identify the scraps. Remembered by Romanian relatives and acquaintances as having been the wildest boy in his hometown, one who “constantly had to be pulled down from the top of the chestnut trees,” he had also been a prodigy. It was said that Shneur Zalman Schechter knew the Pentateuch by heart at five. And although he was by now almost fifty and—as the Anglicization of his first name indicated—had traveled a long way in both physical and psychic terms from his Hasidic Russian family in the small Moldavian

town of Focsani (as had his twin brother, Yisrael, who had immigrated to the Jewish agricultural settlement of Zichron Yaakov in Palestine the same year that Schechter moved to England), he brought with him a prodigious Jewish learning, as well as a voracious appetite for all kinds of knowledge, classical and contemporary. Perhaps best known to twenty-first-century American Jews as the man for whom the Conservative movement's network of day schools is named, Schechter had been ordained a rabbi in Vienna and applied himself to the Palestinian Talmud at Berlin's influential new school of liberal Jewish learning, the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums; he'd become skilled at the analysis of ancient manuscripts and absorbed a wide range of subjects at that city's university—everything from psychology and pedagogy to aesthetics, ancient history, Aristotle's ethics, and Syriac grammar. Besides a deep knowledge of biblical and rabbinic texts and a solid grounding in the “scientific” methods that had by then come to dominate in German Jewish scholarly circles, he had also developed a passion for German, French, and English literature.

When he first came to England in 1882—hired to serve as a tutor in Talmud to the aristocratic young Oxford-and-Berlin-trained theologian Claude Montefiore—he had not known a word of English. “The only phrase he had begged Montefiore to teach him,” according to his wife, Mathilde, “was ‘weak tea,’ for he could not stand the strong tea the English used to drink.” But he'd learned the language with typical rapidity, by sitting with his Hebrew Bible, the English translation, and a dictionary—then moving straight on to George Eliot. Herself an avid bookworm and elegant writer, Mathilde described her husband as a “tremendous reader” who took in “every good novel that appeared,” devouring essays, philosophy, history, and theology. He'd wooed Mathilde with the satirical and none-too-romantic *Book of Snobs* by Thackeray, and it was joked that a more accurate title for Schechter than Reader in Rabbimics would have been “Reader in Fiction.” He was espe-



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cially fond of critical works by Charles Lamb, Leslie Stephen, and Matthew Arnold and had a particular fascination with anything written about the French Revolution and the American Civil War (Lincoln was a hero); he “loved Schiller and Heine above all.” He also adored *The Vicar of Wakefield* and “boys’ books like ‘Treasure Island’ and ‘Robinson Crusoe.’ ”

No knowledge of Robert Louis Stevenson or Daniel Defoe, however, was necessary on this particular May day, and when—just a short time after meeting Schechter in town—Agnes arrived home at Castlebrae, the twins’ stately Gothic Revival mansion, she found Schechter already huddled over the large dining-room table, intently examining the fragments that Margaret had spread across its surface.

Without much ado, he identified one vellum leaf as a rare and valuable page from the Palestinian Talmud.

“Then,” according to Agnes, “he held up a dirty scrap of paper. ‘This too is very interesting; may I take it away and identify it?’ ‘Certainly,’ ” she said.

In Margaret’s own account, “I noticed that his eyes were glittering.”

Although the scrap looked, in Margaret’s words, “as if a grocer had used it for something greasy,” Schechter, it seems, realized its importance almost instantly, and within an hour of his racing from Castlebrae with the two items, the twins received a telegram from the Cherry Hinton Road post office, just around the corner from the Schechters’ gabled brick house on Rock Road:

FRAGMENT VERY IMPORTANT; COME TO ME THIS AFTERNOON

Probably accustomed to a certain easy agitation in their friend, the twins did not go rushing out to meet him, but sat down to lunch—at which point a letter arrived, splattered with unblotted ink and scrawled on Cambridge University Library stationery in Schechter’s lurching hand. Agnes realized that it had, in fact, been sent before the telegram

and that they should eat as quickly as possible and get themselves over to Rock Road. (Schechter's sense of urgency was such that he scrambled morning and night, writing p.m. for a.m.)

13/5/96

Dear Mrs Lewis

I think we have  
reason to congratulate  
~~ourselves~~ ourselves. For  
the ~~piece~~ 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 till to-morrow.

I will come to you  
to-morrow about 11  
p.m. and talk over  
the matter with you  
how to make  
the matter known.

In haste and  
great excitement

yours sincerely,  
S. Schechter.

Schechter's plea for secrecy bubbled up from the fact that the original Hebrew of this apocryphal book—also known as Ben Sira—had been missing for nearly a millennium and survived, it was generally believed, only in its Greek and Syriac translations. The haste and great excitement with which he announced the discovery of this text would, however, soon give way to elation of a far more enduring and varied sort, as,

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within months, it brought Schechter to travel to Egypt and haul away one of the greatest finds unearthed in modern times: the astonishing cache of documents that has come to be known as the Cairo Geniza.

“Geniza” is a barely translatable Hebrew term that holds within it an ultimate statement about the worth of words and their place in Jewish life. It derives from the Persian *ganj* (or *kanj*), meaning “hoard” or “hidden treasure,” and while the expression itself doesn’t appear in the Bible, several of the later biblical books composed under Persian rule contain a handful of related inflections: Esther and Ezra, for instance, speak of *ginzei hamelekh*, or *ginzei malka*—“the King’s treasuries,” and the “royal archives.” Rabbinic usage of the root is more common, if also more peculiar: in the Talmud it almost always suggests the notion of “concealment” or “storing away”—though just what that entailed isn’t usually specified. The rabbis describe the light of Creation by which Adam could see from one end of the world to the other as being “hidden” or “stored up” (*ganuz*) for the souls of the righteous in the afterlife. Writing the sages deemed somehow heretical (including, at one point, the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, “because [their] words contradicted one another”) should, some believed, also be *ganuz*, that is, censored in the most physical manner—by being buried. In one instance, a threatening text was placed under a step in a staircase. Likewise, religious manuscripts that time or human error has rendered unfit for use cannot be “thrown out,” but rather “require geniza”—removal, for example, to a clay jar and a safe place, “that they may continue many days” and “decay of their own accord.”

Implied in this latter idea of geniza is that these works, like people, are living things, possessing an element of the sacred about them—and therefore when they “die,” or become worn out, they must be honored and protected from profanation. “The contents of the book,” wrote Solomon Schechter, “go up to heaven like the soul.” The same Hebrew

root, g-n-z, was, he noted, sometimes used on gravestones: “Here lies hidden (*nignaz*) this man.”

The origins and otherworldly aspects of the institution aren’t the only mysterious things about it. Both its development and its precise nature have remained curiously elusive. What we do know is that at some point the verbal noun “geniza” evolved from indicating a *process* to also connoting a *place*, either a burial plot, a storage chamber, or a cabinet where any damaged or somehow dubious holy book would be ritually entombed. In this way, the text’s sanctity would be preserved, and dangerous ideas kept from circulating. Or, as one early scholar of the material neatly put it: “A genizah\* serves . . . the twofold purpose of preserving good things from harm and bad things from harming.”

Often this depositing of the sacred texts in a secure location was only an interim solution and suggested a kind of liminal existence preceding actual interment. In some communities texts that had been stored in a geniza would eventually be buried alongside a saint or righteous individual; more frequently the scrolls and scraps were ritually consigned to the earth alone. In still other cases it appears that removal from circulation to a geniza constituted the terminal stage of the process and brought the writings in question to their final place of rest.

With modifications, the practice of geniza has continued throughout the Jewish world into the present, ranging greatly from community to community. (A related though less well-known tradition exists in Islam, and in Arabic the word for funeral, *janaza*, derives from the same three-letter root implying “concealment.”) In general and over time, it seems the talmudic notion of geniza as a form of censorship waned, and most genizot came to serve the more neutral function of holding obsolete texts. Beyond that, customs were idiosyncratic and highly vari-

\*“Geniza” and “genizah” are two different transliterations of the same Hebrew word. In citations throughout this book, we have maintained the spelling used by the original authors. The plural of geniza is “genizot,” which is also occasionally written “genizoth.”

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able. A nook near or under the synagogue's ark, a basement room, a cubbyhole—all could and did function as genizot. (One Iraqi community chose to honor their bags of tired texts by throwing them into the river.) The fragments that required this sort of treatment became known as *shemot*, or names: they were considered sacred because they bore the name of God. In some towns and cities, the geniza materials were taken out of their receptacles on a designated day and buried in an elaborate ritual that was part funeral, part carnival. Depending on local tradition, the papers and books—and often discarded ritual objects that included or had contact with a written text, such as mezuzot, phylactery straps, and the like—would be placed in straw baskets, leather sheets, or lengths of white cloth, like shrouds. Coffins draped with decorative fabrics were sometimes used to hold a no-longer-valid Torah scroll, and the privilege of pallbearing was bestowed upon those who had donated money to the synagogue. Songs were sung, cakes eaten, and arak was drunk as a procession set out for the cemetery. This act of inhumation served, in fact, as a kind of twin ritual to the dedication of a new Torah scroll, and after the old scroll was buried, pilgrimages to the “grave” would be performed, just as they were made to the tombs of certain holy men.

For reasons that remain obscure, in the case of the Palestinian Jews of Fustat, or Old Cairo—who worshipped in what would eventually become known as the Ben Ezra synagogue—the tradition of geniza was, it seems, extended to include the preservation of *anything written in Hebrew letters*, not only religious documents, and not just in the Hebrew language. Perhaps, as one scholar has proposed, “the very employment of the Hebrew script . . . sanctified written material.” Another theory holds that the Jews of this community may simply have piled up papers in their homes and periodically delivered whole cartfuls to the Geniza without bothering to separate sacred from secular writing. Or, maybe, as another writer has suggested—in an effort to make sense of the hodgepodge of texts that have turned up in the Fustat Geniza—the impulse to



guard the written word may have gone beyond piety and evolved into a “generalized aversion toward casually discarding texts of any kind.” Whatever the explanation, for most of the last millennium, hundreds of thousands of scraps were tossed into the Ben Ezra Geniza, which came to serve as a kind of holy junk heap.

More town square than sanctuary, the Fustat synagogue complex was the pivot around which its community’s life in the busy city spun. In

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addition to serving as a house of prayer and center of study, it provided the congregation's welfare office, soup kitchen, hostel, clerical and book-keeping headquarters, and its court of law. As such, all manner of paperwork passed through it and—when discarded—slowly filled to the actual rafters a windowless box of a room on the synagogue's second floor. Thanks to the dry climate and various legends about a venomous serpent guarding the entrance and a curse that would visit anyone who dared disturb what it held, the haphazardly piled paper and parchment mostly remained hidden behind a wall in the women's section, until Schechter's arrival in late December of 1896.

What he discovered there astonished him, and in fact it seems almost impossible now to imagine how it is that so much could have emerged from so little. Barely more than eight feet long by six and a half feet wide, and extending to a height of some six yards, the Ben Ezra Geniza was the size of glorified walk-in closet. Yet here was an entire civilization. After Schechter had climbed a rickety ladder to reach that dim attic-like opening, and once his widening eyes had adjusted to the dark, he found himself staring into a space crammed to bursting with nearly ten centuries' worth of one Middle Eastern, mostly middle-class Jewish community's detritus—its letters and poems, its wills and marriage contracts, its bills of lading and writs of divorce, its prayers, prescriptions, trousseau lists, Bibles, money orders, amulets, court depositions, shop inventories, rabbinic responsa, contracts, leases, magic charms, and receipts. "A battlefield of books," Schechter called it, and at first glance it must have seemed an unlikely (and unsightly) mess. As another visitor described the physical state of the Geniza's contents: "For centuries, whitewash has tumbled upon them from the walls and ceiling; the sand of the desert has lodged in their folds and wrinkles; water from some unknown source has drenched them; they have squeezed and hurt each other."

It took, in other words, real imagination on Schechter's part to grasp what faced him in the unprepossessing room later referred to by one

Cambridge professor as “that pestiferous wrack.” But grasp it he did: in the dank and musty chaos, Schechter soon came to understand that he had uncovered no less than a cross section of an entire society, and one that lay at the very navel of the medieval world—linking East and West, Arab and Jew, the daily imprint of the sacred and the venerable extension of the profane. Written on vellum or on rag paper, in ink of gallnut and soot and gum, these pages and scrolls were composed in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Judeo-Arabic, as well as Greek, Persian, Latin, Ladino, and even Yiddish—all written in Hebrew characters. Because those family and business papers were often tossed in unsorted, and stationery was precious and regularly “recycled,” we also find Syriac, Arabic, Coptic, and—in one odd instance—Chinese. Their words were set down by young men and old, by women, children, students, and scribes, by rabbis and rebels, rich and poor, the famous and the forgotten.

Such was the miraculous nature of what Schechter found in the Cairo Geniza that some have compared its discovery to that of the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Cairo Geniza, goes this argument, is actually the more important find, since the sensational, ancient scriptures from Qumran were—as most scholars have seen them—a cultic aberration, “the work of men who gave up the world . . . to find God in a wilderness,” whereas the Geniza embraces and embodies the world as it really was, warts and wonders alike, for the vast majority of medieval Jews. One of the twentieth century’s greatest historians, S. D. Goitein, whose writing about the daily and most mundane Geniza documents unfurled a vibrant panorama of this Mediterranean society, clearly had such a comparison in mind when he titled a 1970 talk about the Geniza “The Living Sea Scrolls.”

The materials of the so-called classical period of the Geniza alone (the later tenth through mid-thirteenth centuries) have occupied scores of scholars for more than a hundred years, transforming in the most fundamental way how we might understand Jewish history, leadership, literature, economics, marriage, charity, prayer, family, sex, and almost every other subject imaginable—from the nature of the silk trade to astrology,



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religious dissent, Hebrew grammar, glassmaking, and medieval attitudes toward death. There is, in point of fact, no other premodern period of the Jewish past about which we have so many and varied details. Because of the Geniza, we can nearly hear and see—and often almost smell and touch—the urbane world of the Arabized Jews who populated Fustat. If one is used to thinking of Judaism as a straight shot from the Bible to the shtetl, followed by a brief stopover on the Lower East Side, it may seem strange to realize that this socially integrated Jewish society was not just a product of some peculiar local circumstance but was, instead, emblematic of its epoch. Lest we forget, from the time of antiquity until around 1200, over 90 percent of the world's Jewish population lived in the East and, after the Muslim conquest, under the rule of Islam. Fustat was, in its medieval heyday, home to the most prosperous Jewish community on earth, and served as a commercial axis for Jews throughout North Africa and the Middle East and as far away as India. At the same time, the city contained nearly every race, class, occupation, and religious strain the region had to offer. "It was," as Goitein saw it, "a mirror of the world."

**T**he story of the Geniza and its recovery is, by nature, a tale with numerous heroes, medieval and modern. Although Schechter deserves much of the credit for having, by force of his expansive historical vision and truly exceptional personality, rescued some 190,000 Geniza fragments from a kind of oblivion (or random dispersal), he was hardly the first to be drawn to the cache. Its presence was known—and at least partly appreciated—well before he arrived on the scene, and this book is, accordingly, also a chronicle of those who came before him, and others who would follow. "Looking over this enormous mass of fragments about me," Schechter wrote, in Moses-on-Nebo-like fashion, after several years of hard work breathing in the dust and spirit of this culture's *disjecta membra*, "I cannot overcome a sad feeling stealing over me, that I shall hardly be worthy to see all the results which the Genizah will add to our

knowledge of Jews and Judaism. The work is not for one man, and not for one generation.”

But this is perhaps as it should be. For the Geniza itself tells the tale of many generations, each of which preserved and transformed a part of the tradition it received. Maintaining the practice of concealment, ironically, made future revelation possible, as, over the centuries, an inadvertent archive was amassed. And so, in an almost unconscious manner, the Fustat community restored to the notion of *geniza* its ancient and essential dimension—that of history as hidden treasure. The protagonists of this story are the men and women who have brought its wisdom to light.

