

One New Book for the Preacher

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Adina Hoffman and Peter Cole, *Sacred Trash: The Lost and Found World of the Cairo Geniza* (New York, NY: Schocken, 2011)

I used to save all my sermons. (This was in the days before I relied upon the *Ruach HaKodesh*...the Holy Spirit, for immediate inspiration!) It did not matter whether a sermon was well reviewed by my congregants. It did not even matter whether or not I liked it. It did not matter that the sermon's theme focused on some passing event of the moment. These were my words, my essence, and so they were destined for my ever-fattening manila file folder.

The same fate awaited programs, poems, parodies, and prayers that I penned (literally, as this was B.C., before computers). I kept them all neatly filed and organized by date, holiday, or Torah portion. Woe to my heirs who would discover this sacred trash. Would they decide to read through these reams of rambling? Or would they sensibly conclude that this was asking too much of filial piety and chuck the whole heap?

There are those of us who effortlessly throw things out and work in orderly, uncluttered offices and those who cannot bear to discard the least item however so chipped, valueless, or ugly. We Jews generally find ourselves among the latter, especially as regards religious items. To deal with our particular desire to preserve Jewish books and documents that have become so worn or dated as to be unusable, our ancestors conceived the *geniza*.

The *geniza* is a religious solution to the problem of needing to discard documents or manuscripts that contain the actual name of God, most sacred among Jews. Even during worship, we do not pronounce the tetragrammaton, using the word *Adonai*, Hebrew for "my Lord," instead. To the observant, consigning a page on which the "Name" is actually written seems positively impious. A *geniza* or repository may be a room, attic, closet, or even a grave that the Jewish community sanctifies as the final resting place of holy documents containing God's name. It is usually found within the synagogue itself, though less and less often in modernity.

Imagine that you came upon a *geniza* in a synagogue that was 500 or 1,000 years old. What would you expect to find? In *Sacred Trash: The Lost and Found World of the Cairo Geniza*, Adina Hoffman and Peter Cole tell the tale of the most famous *geniza* in history, the one unearthed, brought to light, and retrieved by Solomon Schechter, Reader in Rabbinics at Cambridge University in the last decade of the nineteenth century and later President of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City.

The *geniza* of the ancient city of Fustat or Old Cairo held hundreds of thousands of holy documents and fragments--biblical, rabbinic, and medieval--deposited there between the tenth and fourteenth centuries. Schechter's first clue as to the nature and bounty that awaited him in Egypt came when, in May of 1896, the learned Cambridge sisters Agnes Lewis and Margaret Gibson showed him the fragment of an ancient manuscript that they had purchased at an antiquities dealer in Cairo. The scholar

recognized the Hebrew passage as coming from the apocryphal book, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira* or *Ecclisiasticus* as Christians know it. What made this find so exciting was that Ben Sira's Hebrew version had not been sighted since the tenth century when it was mentioned in an important Jewish text. The last Christian reference to the Hebrew version was by Jerome in the fourth century.

Schechter set sail for Egypt on December 16, 1896 "armed with a pile of visiting cards, his good black suit, and a letter of introduction to Cairo's grand rabbi from England's chief rabbi, Hermann Adler...." Five days after arriving in Cairo, he was given access to the *geniza* in the Ben Ezra Synagogue. What he found was a "hoard of Hebrew manuscripts." The "excavation" of this small eight feet long and six and a half feet wide room above the women's section of the synagogue took the Cambridge scholar four weeks of grueling, uncomfortable physical labor in odorous, infested, and cramped conditions. In the end, Schechter shipped 190,000 items back to Francis Jenkinson, University Librarian in Cambridge.

In Cambridge, as Schechter toiled day and night in his gargantuan find, he realized that the Jews of ancient Cairo, so it seemed, had extended the commandments pertaining to the disposition of sacred texts to include everything and anything actually written down! Together with unique rabbinic documents and newly discovered religious poetry lay shipping documents, divorce agreements, money orders, and magic charms, a veritable portrait of antiquity.

Furthermore, the texts that were shipped in 1897 to Cambridge University were not uniformly Hebrew. Documents included the expected tongues: Judeo Arabic, Arabic, and Aramaic, but also Yiddish and Chinese! When he began work on his miraculous "battlefield," Schechter estimated that the sorting and publishing of the Cairo *Geniza* fragments would require a decade. In the late 1990's, the final fragments were still being examined, and work on them continues to this day.

In 1901, Schechter accepted an invitation from American Jews to become the Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. He was quite ready to leave England, having been exhausted by the sheer size of his *geniza* project. While he did not leave the *geniza* entirely behind him--he arranged to have 251 fragments sent to New York for his continued attention--he was ready for a new challenge.

The Geniza Project did not, of course, cease with Schechter's departure. A parade of extraordinary scholars continued his exertions. The work of Israel Davidson in the 1920's revealed a cache of palimpsests, sacred texts written on paper that had been nearly washed clean of another important document. Davidson worked painstakingly to reveal the original text beneath. Among his palimpsest finds was a growing collection of liturgical poetry by Yannai, a barely known poet who lived a thousand years before. Davidson's successor, Galician refugee Menahem Zulay, collected more of Yanai's poems and, in 1938 published *Piyyutei Yannai* (The Poems of Yannai), culled nearly entirely from the *Geniza*.

Shelomo Dov Goitein came to full time *Geniza* work as a professor at University of Pennsylvania in 1957. He revealed a picture of life in *Geniza* times, discovering the dealings of a successful Fustat business woman named Wuhsha, drawing a picture of the overworked head of the Cairo Jewish community, Abraham Maimonides (son of the great Moses Maimonides), and publishing his magnum opus, *A Mediterranean Society*, based on *Geniza* documentation, in 1967.

Sacred Trash is the colorful record of scholarly heroes patiently examining

Schechter's treasures, reimagining life in medieval Egyptian culture, and revealing to us the origin and originality of sacred tradition. We Westerners venerate our books and testaments, whether new or old. In lively prose, Hoffman and Cole remind us that our bibles and commentaries deserve the attention and praise we shower upon them not because of their pedigrees, humble or celestial, but because of the personal and communal relationship we build with them by studying their contents and permitting their authors to help us reflect on the nature of the ordinary and the divine. Schechter and his successors began the process of resacralizing these newfound, ancient texts from the Near Eastern Jewish world. That is why, for Judaism, the importance of the discovery of the Cairo Geniza surpasses even the Dead Sea Scrolls. This is a book about the humble origins of holiness and well worthy of your pulpit.

P.S. Hang on to those old sermons.