

Introduction

The Cairo Geniza Documents as a Source of Mediterranean Social History

Their discovery and transfer to libraries in Europe and America.—Students of the history of the Mediterranean countries during the Middle Ages have often complained about the almost complete absence of archives in Muslim countries. In Europe, the church, feudal lords, cities, and guilds kept their documents as titles of right and for other purposes. Nothing of the kind is to be found in Muslim countries in that period.¹ It is possible now, to reconstruct the main lines of political history and, to a certain extent, also the life of the ruling class with the help of literary sources, supplemented by the study of extant buildings, utensils, inscriptions, and coins. But social and economic history, especially of the middle and lower classes, can hardly be studied without the aid of documents such as letters, deeds, or accounts that actually emanated from people belonging to these classes.

Under these circumstances it is most fortunate that a great treasure of records, hailing from all over the Mediterranean countries, and mainly from the eleventh through the thirteenth centuries, has been preserved in the so-called Cairo Geniza. The Hebrew word *genīza* (pronounced gheneeza), like Arabic *janāza* (which means "burial"), is derived from the Persian. In Persian, *ganj* denotes a storehouse or a treasure, and the closest meaning of its biblical derivative, especially in Ezra 6:1, is archive. In medieval Hebrew, *genīza*, or rather *bēth genīza*, designates a repository of discarded writings. For just as the human body, having fulfilled its task as the container of the soul, should be buried, that is, preserved to await resurrection, thus writings bearing the name of God, after having served their purpose, should not be destroyed by fire or otherwise, but should be put aside in a special room designated for the purpose to await burial in a cemetery.

Similar beliefs were held by Muslims and medieval Christians,² but the Jews were more consistent in this matter, presumably because Hebrew was regarded as God's own language. Soon the notion of holiness was transferred from the language to the letters, and scrupu-

lous persons refrained from destroying anything written in Hebrew characters, even if the content was of a purely secular nature and even if the language used was other than Hebrew. There existed no uniform practice with regard to this; basically and generally, genizas were used for *shēmōth*, writings bearing, or supposed to bear, the name of God.

Genizas were found in many countries where Jews lived. For reasons that are discussed later, only one gained momentous importance for historical research, the Cairo Geniza, the main repository of which was a lumber room attached to a synagogue in Fustat, or, as it is called today, Old Cairo. Fustat was the capital of Muslim Egypt down to 969, when the Fatimids, after the conquest of that country, founded the town Cairo about two miles northeast of the former capital. During the whole of the Fatimid period (969–1171), Old Cairo remained the main city of Egypt and, even during the days of its decay and destruction, it was never entirely abandoned. The same was the case with the Geniza synagogue. Although its environment was mostly deserted, it never ceased to be a house of worship. In 1890, or perhaps the year before, the building was entirely renovated. During these operations, the roof of the Geniza chamber was torn down and its long concealed treasures laid bare.³

Even before this drastic change in the fortunes of the Geniza, some of the material preserved in it had been taken out, mainly, it seems, through the endeavors of the Jewish scholars in Jerusalem, one of whom had penetrated into the Geniza chamber as early as 1864 and given a detailed description of it in a book published two years later.⁴ A particularly studious collector—and seller—of Geniza manuscripts was Rabbi Solomon A. Wertheimer of Jerusalem, who also published some of them in the 1890's, although in a somewhat unscientific way.

In 1890, when Egyptian antique dealers and European scholars visiting Egypt became aware of the newly discovered treasures of Hebrew manuscripts, large quantities of Geniza material began to flow into public and private libraries in Europe and America. Neither dealers nor scholars, although for different reasons, were eager to disclose their source. In the early nineties, when heaps of dilapidated manuscripts and many leaves of ancient documents piled up on the desks of the Bodleian Library in Oxford, largely purchased from the Rabbi Wertheimer mentioned above, professional discretion did not permit the librarian to tell interested scholars where they had originally come from. Thus, it was possible that the first, and one of the best, scientific publications of Geniza documents was made by a scholar who did not know of the existence of the Cairo Geniza. In 1894, Adalbert Merx published in his *Documents de paléographie hébraïque et arabe*, with beautiful reproductions, eleventh- and twelfth-century deeds from the Geniza, which he had purchased in Cairo from a dealer and which he believed had come from family archives.⁵

Fortunately, almost all the Geniza manuscripts that were acquired

in and shortly after 1891 by American collectors, mainly from Philadelphia, were entrusted by them to the custody of Dropsie College for Hebrew and Cognate Studies in that city. They are still there and were described, although in a very preliminary way, in a printed catalogue.⁶ A high dignitary of the Russian Orthodox Church, the Archimandrite Antonin, who had his seat in Jerusalem, purchased many valuable Geniza manuscripts of literary character and also some documents. His collection is preserved in the Saltykov-Shchedrin State Public Library of Leningrad. Another Russian, Arsenev, bought a number of Geniza documents in Jerusalem in 1896, some of which are of great interest. They are kept at present at the Institut Narodov Azii (Institute of the Peoples of Asia) in Leningrad.⁷ David Kaufmann of Budapest, who was as great a collector as a scholar, early recognized the scientific importance of those ancient, although often fragmentary or otherwise damaged papers, and acquired a large quantity of them. After his death they were presented by his family to the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.⁸

Unlike David Kaufmann, some prominent scholars had doubts about the value of the "Egyptian fragments," as the Geniza papers were called in the early nineties.⁹ One of the doubters was the man, whose name, more than that of any one else, is connected with "the discovery" of the Cairo Geniza, Solomon Schechter, at that time Reader in Rabbinics at the University of Cambridge, England, and subsequently President of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York. The archives of the University Library, Cambridge, have preserved eloquent letters by Rabbi Wertheimer to Schechter, impatiently inquiring about the fate of the Egyptian manuscripts offered to him for sale and urging Schechter to send them on to Oxford if he was not keen on them. Schechter's little interest in the Geniza material at that time is vividly demonstrated by the fact that the Geniza papers actually acquired by the University Library in 1893-1894 were never even provisionally classified by him, but left in boxes in a state that cannot be much different from that in which they had arrived.¹⁰

The first European scholar who was granted direct access to the Geniza chamber was that indefatigable traveler and collector, Elkan N. Adler of London. After an unsuccessful attempt in 1888, he was permitted, in January, 1896, to search the room for several hours and to take with him whatever he liked. His collection is one of the most valuable in existence and forms today one of the treasures of the renowned library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York.¹¹

In the same year, on March 13, 1896, there occurred that event which finally led to the liquidation of the Cairo Geniza, as far as manuscripts are concerned, and the wholesale transfer of its remaining contents to the University Library, Cambridge. On that day, two learned Scottish ladies showed Solomon Schechter some leaves from the

Cairo Geniza recently acquired by them, and Schechter recognized in one of them the Hebrew text of Ecclesiasticus, or *Book of Wisdom* by Ben Sira. This book was written about 200 B.C. in Hebrew, but the original had been lost and its content had been known only through Greek and other translations. This startling discovery electrified Schechter. If the Geniza contained one leaf in the original language of such an ancient book, it stood to reason that a systematic search would retrieve more of the same or of similar character. With the zeal of the newly converted, and encouraged by Adler's recent success, Schechter conceived the bold idea to save, with one stroke, the whole of the Cairo Geniza for scientific research. He was fortunate in finding an ardent supporter and Maecenas in Dr. Charles Taylor, Master of St. John's College in Cambridge, and, equipped with letters of recommendation to the Chief Rabbi and the President of the Jewish community in Cairo, he arrived there in December, 1896.¹²

Schechter's mission proved to be entirely successful. He had opportunity to search the Geniza not for hours, but for weeks, and he was able to transfer to Cambridge a hoard of manuscripts of fabulous dimensions. As far as documentary material is concerned, the University Library now possesses at least three times as much as all the other collections together. Thus Schechter's fame as the father of Geniza research is fully deserved. Later visitors to the Geniza chamber have confirmed that nothing but printed matter remained.¹³

The University Library has done much to make this so-called Taylor-Schechter Collection available to interested scholars. The papers were cleaned and otherwise treated and put between glasses or bound in volumes or arranged in boxes. Handlists briefly describing the contents were prepared for the glasses and one section of the volumes. These handlists were the work of the curator of Oriental manuscripts Ernest J. Worman, whose early death in 1909 was a great loss to Geniza research and seems to have brought to a premature end the urgent work of classification. In 1955, with the newly aroused interest in Geniza research, a New Series of the Taylor-Schechter Collection was started under the direction of Librarian H. R. Creswick. Out of the many tens of thousands of unclassified Geniza papers, the documentary material was selected by me and is now conveniently accessible in separate boxes. Some additional material of this type was assembled in the 1960's by Professor Norman Golb of the University of Chicago, a former student of mine. The far more numerous biblical and other literary texts were classified by library personnel, and, as far as expert work was involved, by a number of interested scholars, in particular Professors Jefim Schirmann, Sheraga Abramson, and Nehemia Alloni of Jerusalem, Shalom Spiegel and Moshe Zucker of New York, and Alexander Scheiber of Budapest.¹⁴

New Geniza material was unearthed in the Basātīn cemetery east of Old Cairo at the beginning of this century and was openly sold. In

1908, the comparatively small, but highly valuable collection of Geniza documents now in the Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, was acquired by Charles L. Freer in Gizeh, a suburb of Cairo. Nothing is known about the provenance of these papers, but it seems probable that they had come from that famous old cemetery. The same might be true of the Geniza papers in the possession of the University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, which were purchased in Cairo in 1910.¹⁵ During 1912 and 1913, more systematic searches were made in the Basātīn cemetery by Bernard Chapira of the Société des Études Juives of Paris assisted by Jacques Mosseri, the nephew of Joseph M. Cattawi Pasha, the President of the Jewish community in Cairo, who had already been so helpful to Solomon Schechter. Over 4,000 fragments were found, the majority of which, however, lie outside the scope of this book both as far as contents and periods of provenance are concerned. This material is generally referred to as the Mosseri Collection.¹⁶

The greatest of all collectors of oriental Hebrew manuscripts, the Karaite scholar Abraham Firkovitch (1786–1874), was reticent about the origin of the treasures which he brought together in many years of daring travels. Paul E. Kahle, who devoted a lifetime to the study of the manuscripts of the Bible and other ancient Hebrew literature found in the Firkovitch collections, was of the opinion that some of these manuscripts (which were sold to the Imperial, now Public State, Library of Leningrad) must have come from the Cairo Geniza. An examination of the documents from the eleventh through the fifteenth centuries preserved in those collections, carried out in the summer of 1965, convinced me that there could be no doubt concerning their provenance from that source.¹⁷

The history of the transfer of the Cairo Geniza to the libraries of Europe and America explains the scattered state of this material today. In addition to the five great collections in University Library, Cambridge, Bodleian Library, Oxford, the British Museum, London, Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York, and State Public Library, Leningrad, and in six medium-sized collections in Dropsie College, Philadelphia, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest, Presbyterian Westminster College in Cambridge, England, Library of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, Paris, Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, and National Library in Vienna, there exist at least nine others,¹⁸ and some material is still in private hands. The valuable collection of the Municipal Library in Frankfurt on the Main, Germany, was destroyed during World War II and not even handlists indicating its contents have survived.

Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that pages of one and the same book, nay, fragments of one and the same document, should have been found in such distant places as Leningrad, Cambridge, and New York. There is little comfort in the fact that Greek as well as

Arabic papyrology are afflicted by similar handicaps.¹⁹ The inconvenience of geographical dispersion is aggravated by the fact that only few collections have published catalogues, and those published are incomplete and insufficient for historical research. By far the most important bibliographical guide to Geniza documents is Volume II of the *Catalogue of Hebrew Manuscripts of the Bodleian Library*, Oxford, prepared mainly by A. E. Cowley and printed in 1906. Generations of scholars have based their Geniza studies on this volume. Still, when I began to collect Geniza material about the India trade, I found only one single pertinent detail indicated in the *Catalogue*, recognizable by the name of an Indian seaport registered in the Index. After years of search it appeared that the Bodleian collection of Geniza papers contained no fewer than thirty-five items referring to the subject. There was no way of establishing this other than actually examining all the manuscripts extant. If such a wasteful procedure was necessary with regard to a collection described by a competent librarian, it is easy to imagine what awaits a scholar in the many collections that provide no bibliographical guidance whatsoever.

Just as the manuscripts of the Geniza documents are not easily accessible because of their geographical dispersion and lack of adequate bibliographies, so is it extremely difficult to get hold of all the printed material. Most of the Geniza documents were published in scientific (and sometimes not so scientific) journals, many of which were discontinued years ago. For example, to whom would it occur to search *The Green Bag: An Entertaining Magazine of Lawyers* (Boston) for Geniza manuscripts? At the turn of the century, however, three of them were published there with facsimiles.²⁰ With the exception of a bill of divorce recently acquired by the Speer Library of the Princeton Theological Seminary, these manuscripts, as it appeared after examination, are preserved, at present, at Dropsie College, Philadelphia. The printed catalogue of the Geniza fragments in Philadelphia (cf. above, p. 3 n. 6), does not say a word about their publication in *The Green Bag*, and I too, became aware of this fact only after I had copied the manuscripts kept at Dropsie College and tried to understand them. Many Geniza records are buried in jubilee and memorial volumes or in books where nobody would suspect their existence. There are valuable publications in languages not widely known, such as Hungarian. Thus it has sometimes occurred that one and the same document was published by two different scholars each ignorant of the other's efforts.²¹

In order to put an end to this intolerable situation, a tentative bibliography of all published Geniza documents has been prepared by Dr. S. Shaked under the direction of Professor D. H. Baneth of Jerusalem and myself. Although this first trial perhaps may not have achieved completeness, it is hoped that, as far as published material is concerned, it will put historical Geniza research on firm ground.²²

Geniza v. archive.—The nature of a Geniza hoard of manuscripts can best be illustrated by contrasting it with a type of collection of manuscripts, which for the historian fulfills a similar task of documentary evidence, namely an archive.

From the definition of the term Geniza given above it is evident that it is the very opposite of an archive. In an archive one keeps documents in order to use them, if and when necessary. Therefore, much care is taken to preserve them well, and, in many cases, they are deposited in the archive immediately after having been made out. The opposite was the case with the Geniza. Papers were thrown away there only after they had lost all value to their possessors and consequently in most cases only a long time after they had been written. Even family letters, let alone business correspondence, would not have been deposited in a place accessible to everyone except after having been deprived of all relevance to contemporaries. Legal deeds, which conferred rights on their holders, had to be kept by them and their heirs often for generations, before they could be disposed of in the Geniza chamber.

There was another good reason for keeping a document a long time before throwing it into the Geniza. Paper was expensive so that free space on a document was normally used for all sorts of purposes, such as drafts, short notes, accounts, or even merely for trying out a pen or for exercises. Thus MS TS 16.49 of the University Library, Cambridge, was drawn up in Fustat on April 26, 987. Although long and elaborate, it is just a release in which a widow confirmed to the family of her husband that she had received all that was due her according to her marriage contract. Thus, there was no particular need to keep this document for a very long time. Yet its reverse side was used for trials of the pen, one of which bears the date December 21, 1085, about a hundred years later than that of the original document.

Naturally, during the many years that elapsed from the execution of a document to its disposal, it deteriorated. The writing became faint, the paper was covered with dark-brown stains, it was damaged by holes, and often parts of it were torn away for various uses.

To be sure, many types of paper found in the Geniza, as well as the ink used on them, were of excellent quality, and the scribes of the courts, the clerks of business houses, as well as scholarly persons in general, mostly had a clear and often even a beautiful handwriting. MS TS 18 J 4, f. 18, represents a business letter sent from Aden in South Arabia to a port on the west coast of India. It was addressed to a Jewish merchant from Tunisia, who ran a bronze factory and did other business out in that distant country. The recipient, after having stayed many years in India, returned to Aden in the autumn of 1149, but remained there and in the interior of Yemen for another three years. Then, he had to make the long journey through the Red Sea, the terrible desert between it and the Nile River and, finally, on the Nile from Upper Egypt to Cairo. Despite the humidity of the climate of

India and of Aden and the hazards of the three journeys on sea and through the desert—and the more than eight hundred years that have elapsed since it was written—the letter is in perfect condition, with even the smallest dot and stroke clearly discernible.²³

Unfortunately, such examples are the exception rather than the rule. Even in those Geniza papers that are more or less complete, the writing is often partly effaced, for example, by seawater, or otherwise damaged. Many Geniza papers are mere fragments, representing the beginning, middle, or end, or either side of a document. True, even small scraps of paper sometimes contain valuable information. Still, their incompleteness, often involving the loss of vital details concerning personalities, dates, and localities, is tantalizing and makes heavy demands on the memory and the synthesizing faculty of their student.

There is another difference between an archive and the Geniza which is a great obstacle to research. In an orderly archive, material of the same character is normally kept together in one place, which simplifies research on one topic. In the Geniza, everything is topsy-turvy. The dispersion and scrambling of the Geniza material caused by its transfer to the libraries of Europe and America did not create the total confusion in which it is found now, but only enhanced it. Today, even in the most carefully classified collections, those of the Bodleian Library in Oxford and certain sections of the Taylor-Schechter Collection in Cambridge, the most heterogeneous material is bound together in one volume. To cite just one example, in the comparatively small volume MS Heb. d 65 of the Bodleian, which contains only forty-four items, the subjects range from marriage contracts, bills of divorce, and legal deeds of the most diversified character to private and business correspondence and accounts, to end up with secular and religious poetry, one amulet, and a homily. The dates range from A.D. 956 to 1538, almost 600 years. The places, by chance, show less variety, but still comprise cities as distant from each other as Qayrawān in Tunisia and Damascus in Syria. If this is the condition of the Geniza material after its classification in a library, one can imagine its state of confusion in its original habitat. Solomon Schechter, who had actually seen it in that state, has preserved his impressions for posterity in a vivid and humorous description.²⁴

This jumbling of the contents of the Geniza calls for comment, for there can be no doubt that Jewish families and communities kept archives.²⁵ Thus we find that the Geniza has preserved over 200 letters addressed to Nahray b. Nissim, a prominent businessman, scholar, and community leader, who emigrated around 1045 from Tunisia to Old Cairo where he died fifty years later. A considerable number of other personalities and families are represented in the Geniza by so many papers that we are forced to assume that they were originally part of carefully kept collections. In business letters reference is made regularly to correspondence of preceding years and to account books. In

many cases, pages from record books of courts, referring to successive meetings during several years, such as 1027-1029, or 1097-1099, or from notebooks of judges covering prolonged periods, have been preserved. Why, then, were these collections torn asunder in the Geniza and mixed up with documents emanating from other persons, countries, and centuries and with literary texts of the most variegated character?

This chaos is to be explained, it seems, by the fact that the Geniza was in living use during the whole time of its existence. I remember having seen in one collection a bill of divorce made out in Bombay as late as 1879, and, as it is unlikely that a document of such character was disposed of in faraway Cairo immediately after the legal act attested by it, it is not impossible that it landed in the Geniza only a few days before Solomon Schechter arrived in Cairo ready to carry it off in its entirety.²⁶ The living use of the Geniza was expressed not only by the continuous addition to its contents, but also by the opposite process. Enterprising people took the trouble to get into the dark room, formerly in order to find an ancient prayer book, or even legal formularies, or mere scrap paper, but later in the nineteenth century their aim was to select manuscripts suitable for sale to Europeans and Americans hunting for antiquities. The result of all this was that all the contents of the Cairo Geniza were continuously and completely turned upside down. In this state they were transferred to the libraries in which they are deposited now, and, as far as papers of documentary character are concerned, much of the old disorder has remained.²⁷

The students of Greek and Arabic papyrology and of other papyri unearthed in Egypt may be reminded of their own tribulations while reading those tabulated here. The difference is this: The Greek and other ancient documents, once covered with earth, normally remained undisturbed, while those buried in the Geniza were never left in peace, but were constantly called upon to satisfy the needs and greed of the living. The results, as we have seen, were hardly beneficial.

Types of documents, their numbers, scripts, and languages.—In addition to fragmentation and other damage, as well as the confusion wrought by the very process of the disposal of documents in the Geniza, there is another factor that makes it so utterly different from an archive: its erratic character, the entire absence of selection in the material deposited in it. Alongside carefully worded and magnificently executed deeds, one finds hastily written notes, accounts or letters, jotted down in nearly illegible script and in sloppy or faulty language.

The very shortcomings of the Geniza, however, constitute its uniqueness and glory. It is a true mirror of life, often cracked and blotchy, but very wide in scope and reflecting each and every aspect of the society that originated it. Practically everything for which writing was used has come down to us. In the following, the main types will be characterized. Examples of each category, translated into English, are provided in *Mediterranean People*.²⁸

The largest and most valuable group of Geniza documents is made up of court depositions, either statements made or agreements reached. They appear in three different forms, as drafts, as court records, or as documents handed over to the people concerned. The declarations made by the parties or witnesses are often rendered verbatim, while the case itself would be stated succinctly and clearly by the scribe. Almost every conceivable human relationship is represented in these records, and they often read like local news told by a gifted reporter.

Of legal deeds proper, the marriage contracts, many hundreds of which have survived, are unusually interesting. They are by no means stereotyped, but state in detail and with great variety the conditions regulating the future relations of the newly married, and thus constitute a precious source for our knowledge of family life. In addition, they contain, or are accompanied by, detailed lists of the marriage portion brought by the bride, her jewelry, clothing, bedding and other furniture, her "copper" and other household utensils, and often a bride would also possess a house or houses or parts of a house, as well as one or more maidservants. Often the price of each item is indicated. Needless to say, these lists are an invaluable aid for the study of the material civilization of the period.

Contrariwise, the bills of divorce, of which a great number has also been preserved, are mere formularies. In them, only the names of the divorced and the signatories, as well as the dates and places, are sometimes of interest for social history. On the other hand, the settlements reached between the divorced and the lists of the wife's possessions restored to her are often very instructive.

Marriage contracts were torn up after the wife had received everything owed her in case of divorce or after the death of her husband. Moreover, the contracts were usually written on large pieces of vellum or paper and their reverse sides left blank. Therefore, when no longer needed, they were often torn into pieces for scrap paper. To say that nine out of ten marriage contracts in the Geniza are incomplete is an understatement.

Wills and deathbed declarations are disappointing insofar as they consist almost exclusively of dispositions about property. In the Geniza there are no ethical wills, a document so frequent in later centuries. Yet, very often the last disposition of a person gives a clear idea not only of his possessions, but also of his mind. For economic and social history, of course, the wills are veritable mines of information, and so are the inventories of estates, both of the rich and the poor. The many booklists with or without prices found in the Geniza are mostly enclosures to such inventories of estates.

Deeds of manumission of slaves and slave girls (only the latter are frequent) are mostly stereotyped, but not without interest. Sometimes, the manumission is included in a disposition on the deathbed.

As for transactions in general, one of the most common types of

documents is releases, declarations by one or several persons renouncing all claims against another or others. Many of the longest and best preserved Geniza documents belong to this category. They are more important for legal than for social history, as most of the wording is legal terminology.

Another type of document, the yield of which is in no relation to its length, is the letter of attorney of which there are many. These, too, are mostly composed of legal phrases. Still, because they normally indicate not only the persons and places involved, but also the subject matter for which the power of attorney is given, they are rarely without interest.

Deeds of sale or gifts of houses (more frequently, parts of houses) and of slave girls, as well as leases of apartments or of land, are common and naturally always contain some useful information. With the exception of books, no contracts were made for the sale of goods. In case of litigation, only letters and account books were produced and witnesses called up.

The constitution or dissolution of partnerships normally resulted in interesting documents. On the other hand, loans and promises of payment of debts are mostly disappointing because as a rule the reasons and other circumstances of the indebtedness are not stated.

Very few contracts of employment have been preserved. The reasons for this defect are twofold. First, even a poor laborer preferred to enter into a partnership with a richer fellow craftsman than to become his employee. Secondly, when persons, especially younger ones, hired themselves out as servants or as laborers, normally no written contract was made.

Turning now to correspondence, we find, as was to be expected, that business letters form the largest and most important group. They are our main source not only for our knowledge of commerce and industry, but also for various other subjects, such as travel and seafaring. Normally, a letter, especially when going overseas, deals with many topics at a time: receipt and dispatch of goods, lists of market prices, orders for new commodities, action taken or to be taken for or against third persons, as well as references to private or public affairs. Business was conducted on the basis of trust and friendship, wherefore business letters are rarely without a personal touch.

For this very reason there is no clear-cut demarcation between commercial and private correspondence. Even in a letter of congratulation to the addressee at his wedding, or in a letter of condolence—again, especially when sent overseas—one finds paragraphs dealing with financial matters, while business letters usually contain shorter or longer references to the receiver's health, social status, family, and friends. Nevertheless there are hundreds of letters of a purely personal character covering, of course, a great variety of topics. Although only a small fraction of the female population knew how to write (for this art

was normally practiced only by people engaged in business, administration, or learning), many letters to and from women have survived. In many cases it is evident that the letters were dictated. We hear the female voice guiding the male pen.

Commerce, banking, and industry are further illustrated by accounts, inventories of stores and workshops, or of pawnshops, by bills of lading, promissory notes and orders of payment, while short notes of many types, prescriptions, placards, horoscopes, charms and amulets, and exercise books written for or by children grant us additional glimpses into daily life.

A large portion of the Geniza papers refers to public affairs. There are hundreds of letters addressed to various authorities containing reports, petitions, requests for help, demands for redress of injustice, applications for appointments, and a great variety of other matters. Less in number, but still preserved in considerable quantities, are letters emanating from authorities, such as instructions to communities or public officials, letters of appointment or of introduction or recommendation, certificates, decrees, bans, circulars, in particular those soliciting contributions to certain works of public charity, and, of course, exchanges of letters between one authority and another. Mention must be made also of the endless appeals by the heads of the academies or other institutions of higher learning for funds, or their letters of thanks and appreciation to the donors.

Of particular interest are the letters from communities large and small. We have statutes, public resolutions, and, in particular, many lists of contributors to a great variety of good public causes or of receivers of alms, clothes, or loaves of bread. These lists are priceless sources for the demography of the communities concerned. Another most valuable group of documents comprises the financial reports of honorary treasurers, or of persons farming out the collection of rents, about the sums received from the houses and other property belonging to the community, the expenses on their upkeep and repair, and the emoluments of the officials and other persons on the payroll of the community.

As it was customary to say a public prayer for a meritorious person—and who was not?—and to commemorate in it his forefathers and their descendants, at least up to the sixth or seventh generation, many “memorial lists” have been found in the Geniza. Sometimes the prayer for the person thus honored is attached, but mostly the lists alone were written down. Their correct interpretation often presents no small difficulty, for they are mostly scribbled hastily and more often than not presuppose the knowledge of some details familiar to the members of the congregation but not to us. Still, despite their being sometimes cryptic or ambiguous, most of them are instructive in many respects.

At the present stage of research, it is impossible to state the exact number of Geniza papers of documentary character in existence. In

order to give some idea of the size of the material in question, an estimate is offered, which is, however, of an entirely preliminary character. If we exclude the many thousands that are mere scraps of paper, we arrive at the number of about 10,000 items of some length, of which around 7,000 are self-contained units large enough to be regarded as documents of historical value. Only about half of these are preserved more or less completely.

It should be emphasized that these numbers refer solely to papers of *documentary* character, such as described in the previous pages. The leaves with literary contents—fragments of *books* preserved in the Geniza—number at least twenty times as much. A reasonable estimate would be 250,000 leaves, and this exclusive of the so-called Second Firkovitch Collection in the State Public Library of Leningrad, of which material it is likely that much has come from the Cairo Geniza. Compare this figure with the total number of Arabic papyri and papers unearthed in Egypt which Adolf Grohmann, the most competent authority on the subject, estimates to be around fifty thousand.²⁹

It may be remarked in passing that the remnants of literature assembled in the Geniza are by no means confined to religious texts or to topics of specifically Jewish interest. They comprise practically all subjects on which medieval authors wrote books, ranging from philosophy and medicine to the interpretation of dreams and folktales. Naturally, most of the secular texts come from the orbit of the Islamic civilization. There are also others, though. Recently, a Germanic poem on Horant and Hilde was discovered (or, rather, rediscovered) by L. Fuks in the Taylor-Schechter Collection of the University Library, Cambridge, and edited in an important two-volume publication. The poem, which consists of over one thousand lines, was included, together with other Germanic poems, mostly on biblical themes, in a codex of eighty-four pages, dated 1382 and written, of course, in Hebrew script.³⁰

It is not always possible to distinguish precisely documentary from literary texts. This is true in particular for the most common type of literature found in the Geniza, the so-called *responsa*, or “answers” of authoritative scholars on questions of religious, legal, or general character addressed to them. The *responsa* and their Muslim counterparts, the *fatwa*’s, or opinions of the muftis, were collected in books, which, in Judaism and Islam, fulfill a role similar to the collections of cases and decisions of high courts in English and American law, and, as their scope was wider, were of even more general importance. A considerable number of the *responsa* were purely theoretical. In these, usually one or more ancient texts were quoted by the questioner with the aim of getting an explanation of obscure or apparently contradictory passages. But there are countless *responsa* in the Geniza which contain actual cases, and these, of course, are as valuable source material for social history as the other types of Geniza papers of documentary

character surveyed. On the other hand, the two classes of questions usually were mixed up in the collections of responsa, and what we find in the Geniza mostly are not the original questions and answers, but fragments of books in which the answers of prominent scholars were reproduced, and often the authors of these books omitted all the legally irrelevant aspects of a case, such as dates, names of persons and places, and other local color, in other words those features that interest the social historian most. For this reason, and also because most of the ancient responsa have been published and their contents incorporated in publications, only sparing use will be made of them in this book. An exception will be made only for the responsa of Moses Maimonides (1135–1204) and his son Abraham (1186–1237), not for the sentimental reason that these two great masters actually made legal decisions in the Geniza synagogue, but because of the good luck that the full texts of the original questions and answers have been largely incorporated in the collections of their opinions, a fact we are able to check, as some of their autographed answers have also been preserved.³¹

Another type of writing of half-documentary and half-literary character are the so-called *megilloth*, or scrolls, which, like the biblical scrolls of Ruth or Esther, describe fateful events or periods in the life of a person, a family, or a community. All the *megilloth* found in the Geniza are in Hebrew and obviously were intended to be works of literature, some being cast in rhymed prose. In any case, they do illustrate the society from which they emanated. The autobiography of Johannes-Obadiah, the Norman proselyte, rendered in extract in *Mediterranean People*, is an example.³²

The script of the Geniza documents, irrespective of the language used, is as a rule Hebrew. This is implied in the very definition of a geniza, as explained in the opening paragraphs of this Introduction. Many types of Hebrew script, varying according to the country, time, social class, and profession of the writers, are represented, and a careful study of their paleography is a prerequisite for any attempt at deciphering and correct interpretation. Very considerable quantities of writings in characters other than Hebrew, in particular in Arabic, are to be found among the Geniza documents, and not only in the frequent cases where the reverse side of an Arabic document was used for a text in Hebrew characters, but also when both sides bore a letter or another kind of writing exclusively in Arabic. The disposal of such pieces in the Geniza can best be explained by the assumption that they were kept originally in a family archive or a similar collection together with Hebrew writings, until the whole lot was thrown away by a member of an indiscriminating later generation. This assumption seems to be corroborated by the fact that sometimes an Arabic document is found which refers to the same subject matter as another in Hebrew letters.

Unlike Arabic script, the Arabic language prevails in most of the Geniza material of documentary character; in other words, the Jews,

who have left us the records of their daily life in the Geniza, mostly wrote, as they talked, in one of the various Arabic vernaculars that were then in vogue in Spain, Sicily, and in most of the countries of northern Africa and western Asia. The use of the Hebrew script for this purpose should not be surprising. The habit of writing in a script hallowed by one's own religion was by no means confined to Jews. Thus, the Syriac Christians wrote Arabic in Syriac. And when we find that the Poles write their slavic language in Latin characters, while the Yugoslavs use for theirs the Russian (Cyrillic) script, the reason for this difference is simply that at the time of their becoming literate, the former were Roman Catholics and the latter Greek Orthodox and each adopted the script of the church to which they belonged.

It should be noted that a great many of the nonliterary Geniza papers were composed in the Hebrew language. To begin with, European Jews did not have other means of making themselves understood in the East, and scholarly persons frequently used Hebrew in letters, in particular in those that referred to communal and religious affairs. Arabic was used, however, in most private and family letters, even those written by religious dignitaries, in most official correspondence, and in all business letters. In epistles of a more formal character, such as applications or letters of condolence or congratulations, it was customary to begin with a shorter or longer (and sometimes very long) Hebrew preamble, which, however, consisted mostly of general, although often artistically contrived, and conventional phrases.

The situation is more complicated as far as legal documents are concerned. The ancient language of the Jewish courts was Aramaic, which had been the international language of western Asia for 1,300 years before it was replaced by Arabic. In the tenth century, Aramaic was not known well any more and the Jewish courts began to change over to Hebrew, with which, of course, educated persons had always been familiar. Many deeds and court records from the first half of the eleventh century are composed in that language and their smooth and rich style proves that the usage was general. Since it was required, however, that the records should render verbatim the depositions made in court, and since the spoken language was Arabic, the scribes slowly acquiesced in using the Arabic.³³ It is noteworthy that Hebrew lingered on in the smaller towns of Egypt longer than in the large centers, the reason being perhaps that the scribes in the smaller towns had not yet learned the relevant Arabic terms and style for making out a proper legal document in that language. By the end of the eleventh century and throughout the whole of the twelfth, Arabic was used practically in all transactions of the Jewish courts which have reached us. Then, around 1200, Hebrew begins to reappear, perhaps because of the increasing influx of Jews from Europe, or because Moses Maimonides had written his code of Jewish law in a lucid, flexible Hebrew, which could serve as a model to the scribes of the courts.³⁴

The Arabic used in the Geniza records is by no means a particular Jewish dialect, but represents the language of the time and the country and social group to which the writer belonged. This can be proved by comparison with contemporaneous Arabic writings, especially those of Christian Arabs and Muslim popular literature, especially of a later period. (It always takes some time before the language of every day is allowed to creep into the literary style.) Hebrew words and phrases were inserted only very sparingly, mainly religious and legal terms, but also proverbial expressions and sometimes certain characteristic turns of speech that the Hebrew but not the Arabic language seemed to possess. Still, the Arabic of the Geniza records somehow is a world by itself, because the very fact that it was written in a script other than that of classical Arabic by persons who had not in their childhood memorized the Koran, the holy book of Islam, made for greater independence from the traditional grammar and vocabulary. Therefore the Geniza papers reflect the living language, and they constitute, in their great variety of styles and local idioms, a first-rate source for the history of the Arabic language. In addition, the Hebrew script often brings out features that the Arabic script is unable to express, which means that the pronunciation of many words, as it was in vogue in the eleventh or twelfth century, becomes established through their transcript into Hebrew.³⁵ A similar service was done to the Arabic language, in a later period, by transliteration into Latin characters.

Needless to say, these documents contain many riddles for the scholar, for he encounters words not to be found in any dictionary and linguistic usages unknown to classical grammar. The solution is often to be found in the Arabic dialects of our own time. Thus I would not have been able to understand certain terms and expressions common in letters written in Aden and India during the twelfth century had I not devoted much time to the study of Arabic as it is spoken in Yemen today.³⁶ Another important help is—the Geniza itself. Many obscure words and usages find their explanation when they occur a second or third time. A final aid is the very character of the people speaking to us in the Geniza: the eloquence and lucidity of speech of the Mediterranean man guide the puzzled scholar even where he treads on unfamiliar linguistic ground.³⁷

The times and countries of origin of the Geniza documents.—In attempting to define with more precision the times and countries from which the documents used in this book originated, we are confronted with a number of perplexing phenomena. As shown at the end of this section, the fixing of these details themselves does not present unsurpassable difficulties. It is, however, not self-evident, why we should have so much material from certain times and countries, while from others we have next to none. Explanations are offered with regard to most of the puzzles, but they should be regarded as tentative, so long as they are not confirmed by the express testimony of our sources.

The first strange fact demanding and perhaps defying an explanation is the very existence of the Cairo Geniza. Since its discovery it has been commonplace to say that of the many genizas in the world, that of Fustat, or Old Cairo, has survived thanks to the dry climate of Egypt. While it is true that the climatic factor has contributed to the preservation of the Geniza of Fustat, it by no means sufficiently explains why only this one should have remained. Fustat itself had not one, but three, synagogues; nearby Cairo had another one shortly after its foundation and many others later on.³⁸ About seventy-five towns and villages in Egypt are known from the Geniza as places where Jews were settled. Moreover, certain regions in southern Palestine and in the countries of North Africa have a dry climate similar to that of Egypt. But from nowhere outside Fustat has anything comparable to the Cairo Geniza been found.

Even more so. As explained on page 1, above, the contents of a Geniza chamber were normally removed to a cemetery to make room for other discarded books and writings. This was a general Jewish custom. *Life* magazine of October 24, 1960, page 70, carried a full-page photograph showing the interment of prayerbooks and other worn-out religious objects by a group of orthodox Jewish youngsters in Washington, D.C., explaining that the famous Dead Sea Scrolls also came from a geniza (which is, however, doubtful). In Jerusalem, as late as the nineteenth century, it was customary to empty the genizas every seventh year and also in a year of drought, for it was believed that the burial of dried-out sacred books was conducive to the precipitation of heavenly moisture.³⁹ As a result, no old material was found in any of the genizas of Jerusalem, despite the careful searches made under the direction of the late Dr. J. L. Magnes, the first chancellor of the Hebrew University.⁴⁰ For the same reason, and to the disgust of E. N. Adler, the widely traveled connoisseur of books, even the "huge Geniza" of the famous ancient synagogue of Aleppo in northern Syria contained nothing but late printings. "Though the dust was more acrid, and the work far dirtier than that of Fustat, the matrix was modern, and the dirt not pay dirt."⁴¹ In Old Cairo, however, the very building of the Geniza was of such a size that it was able to hold its contents for a thousand years, and it was constructed in such a way that it could not serve any other purpose than that for which it was destined: a room with no doors or windows and with only one hole in the wall beneath the roof, which could be reached only by a ladder. All this seems to indicate that those who erected the Geniza chamber and those who used it in its early period must have entertained particular ideas about the disposal of Hebrew writings and it was due to these that so much ancient material has been preserved. So far, however, the Geniza has not revealed any direct evidence for such ideas.

Who were these people? Around 1000, the Jews were divided into two groups, the major being formed by the so-called Rabbanites—those

who followed the teachings of the rabbanim or rabbis—and the minor by the Karaites, who professed to rely on the Bible alone. The Rabbanites were subdivided into Palestinians and Iraqians (also called Babylonians). Palestinian Rabbanites were communities whose members had originally come from Palestine and Syria, whose service was conducted according to the liturgy accepted in Palestine, and whose officials were appointed and communal leaders approved by the religious authorities who had their official seat in Jerusalem. Babylonian Rabbanites stood in the same relationship to Iraq and the Jewish seats of learning in that country. All three sections mentioned possessed houses of worship in Old Cairo. The Geniza chamber was attached to the synagogue of the Palestinians. It is therefore necessary to devote special attention to them.

In 882, when the Coptic patriarch was forced to pay a heavy contribution to Aḥmad Ibn Ṭulūn, the ruler of Egypt, he sold a church that originally had been Melchite, that is Greek Orthodox, together with some land, to the Jews, who converted it into a synagogue. It has been generally assumed that this was the Geniza synagogue. A careful weighing of the available evidence seems to show, however, that the Coptic church was acquired by the newcomers from Iraq who had no house of worship of their own, while the synagogue of the Palestinians was pre-Islamic, as reported by Muslim historians.⁴² Be this as it may, next to no documents from the ninth century have come down to us in the Geniza, and only a few dozen from the tenth.⁴³ Perhaps the particular idea of a permanent geniza had not yet been born or else we have to seek an explanation for this deficiency in the subsequent history of the building. Around 1012, the Fatimid caliph al-Ḥākim ordered the destruction of the Christian and Jewish houses of worship, including the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, and, as we know positively, the synagogue of the Palestinians of Fustat was demolished and its bricks and timber were sold. Thus, if a geniza was attached to it at that time, it could hardly have survived.

A few years after that religious persecution, permission was given to repair the desecrated buildings and an inscription on the entrance to the synagogue of the Palestinians, mentioned by various medieval writers, enables us to fix the year 1025 as the date of its restoration.⁴⁴ There is little doubt that the geniza chamber was added during that restoration, for, from 1002 on, we have dated documents for almost every year, and by the twenties of the eleventh century a very sizable quantity. This goes on uninterruptedly for about two hundred and fifty years until 1266, when dated documents begin to become rarer. As is well known, on December 22, 1168, Old Cairo was put to fire at the command of the Fatimid vizier, who dreaded its capture by the advancing Crusaders. For 54 days, the city was ablaze. But this conflagration, albeit referred to in Geniza documents, did not cut off the supply of material from this source. Dated documents are as frequent

after it as they were before. In 1265 great fires again devastated the city. This time, local Christians were accused of having caused them and the Sultan ordered the burning of the Christians and, for completeness' sake, of the Jews as well. As usual, the punishment was converted into a heavy fine. A moving story, how the poor Jews from the countryside helped their brethren in the capital to pay the fine, is to be found in a document from Minyat Ziftā.⁴⁵ It seems, unlikely, however, that it was this event that caused the sudden drop of documentary material in the Cairo Geniza. Similarly, it is difficult to see why so few dated documents have been preserved from the fourteenth century and even less from the fifteenth. To be sure, the majority of the Jewish population moved in that period to Cairo, where we find, around 1400, four synagogues as against three in Fustat. The letters addressed by the Nagid Joshua, the great-great-grandson of Maimonides, to the community in Fustat around 1350, show how destitute it had become, while, at the same time, incessant demands were made on the charity of its members.⁴⁶ Yet, Fustat was still a large city, half the size of Paris, according to the Belgian traveler Georges Lengherand, who visited it in 1486,⁴⁷ and in two Geniza papers dated 1482 and 1496, respectively, Cairo is still defined as "situated near Fustat of Egypt," just as was done by the notaries five hundred years before.⁴⁸ It is interesting to observe that in the type of paper used, in script, and in legal formularies these late documents still resemble the deeds of the classical period of the Geniza, although their workmanship is poor and the care taken in their execution limited.

Then everything suddenly changes. Dated documents begin to appear again in greater quantity from the second quarter of the sixteenth century on, but then the paper obviously is no longer locally made, but European; the script is entirely different; it is Spanish-Jewish; the language, as a rule, is Hebrew and no longer Arabic, in some cases, even Ladino, the Castilian dialect used by the Spanish Jews. In other words, the Jewish East was completely overwhelmed by the refugees from Spain, who had to leave their country in 1492 and became prominent in the Ottoman Empire shortly afterward, just as in modern times the Jewish East became assimilated to the emigrants and refugees from eastern and middle Europe.

This book is solely concerned with what has just been termed as the classical Geniza, that is, documents that appear in a trickle during the second part of the tenth century and become a flood for the subsequent two and a half centuries. This means for Islamic history that the Geniza is a primary source for social and economic history during the Fatimid and Ayyubid periods and, as far as European history is concerned, for the century preceding the Crusades and for Crusaders' times themselves.

As to the countries of origin of the Geniza material, naturally Egypt, where the Geniza was situated, provided most, especially as far as

deeds are concerned. The situation is somewhat different with regard to letters, accounts, and related matters, while the scholarly correspondence of the responsa (cf. above, pp. 13 ff.) originated mostly outside Egypt. At that time, Jews lived not only in the capital and the port cities of Alexandria, Rosetta, and Damietta, but were dispersed all over the Nile delta, the Fayyūm oasis, and Upper Egypt. Letters and legal documents from many of the smaller places have found their way into the Geniza which thus is illustrative of life in Egypt in general. Whether the population reflected in these writings was indigenous to the country, that is, whether it represented a continuation of the Jewish settlements in Egypt in Hellenistic and Roman times, or originated mainly after the Muslim conquest, this is a problem for which no clear-cut solution has been found thus far.⁴⁹

Since the Geniza belonged to the synagogue of the Palestinians, it stands to reason that many documents coming from or referring to the Holy Land should be found in it. This is, indeed, the case. There are also a considerable number of letters sent from the coastal towns of Lebanon and Syria, but written mostly by foreign merchants and not by local people. Astonishingly little, comparatively, is the material from Damascus and from Aleppo, the two great cities of Syria. Considering the close commercial relations of these cities with Egypt and the fact that so many people called *Dimashqī* and *Ḥalabī* (Damascene and Aleppian) appear in the Geniza papers, one wonders, whether these people were in the habit of disposing of their letters in genizas at all.⁵⁰

The most surprising feature in the contents of the Geniza, as far as its geographical distribution is concerned, is the overwhelming preponderance in it of people from Tunisia and Sicily, especially from the time of its inception around 1000 down to the last quarter of the eleventh century. At least 80 percent, but most probably more, of all the business correspondence in this period comes from them. One indeed gets the impression that the Geniza originally served the Maghrebi merchants who commuted from the western to the eastern part of the Mediterranean and partially settled there. This basic fact had necessarily remained concealed until it was possible, through cross references in about four hundred letters and other documents, to establish the identity of the persons mentioned in them. In particular, it became evident that, in many cases, persons bearing family names such as *Andalusī*, *Fasī*, *Tāhertī*, or *İtrābulusī*, did not come from Andalus-Spain, or Fez and *Tāhert*, Morocco, or Tripoli, Libya, but had their base in the Tunisian twin cities of *Qayrawān* and *al-Mahdivya*. Likewise, it could be proved that most of the people writing during this period from the smaller places all over Egypt, where flax and indigo, the staple export crops, grew, were merchants from Tunisia.⁵¹ Thus it seems that the Tunisians were the initiators of the idea of the permanent Geniza, and, in particular, of the widening of its scope to comprise

entirely secular matters. Tunisia was at that time a great seat of Jewish learning, and it may well be that one of the leading scholars there instructed his flock to this effect. Beginning with the last quarter of the eleventh century, the use of the Geniza for secular correspondence became more widespread, but the preeminence of the Maghrebi is still felt during the first half of the twelfth century, especially with regard to trade with India.⁵²

Fortunately, some recently identified documents enable us to explain the close connection of the Maghrebi merchants with the synagogue of the Palestinians in Old Cairo. Shortly after the churches and synagogues in the Fatimid empire had been destroyed during al-Ḥākim's fit of religious insanity (see above, p. 18), permission was given by him to rebuild them. As we know from a number of Geniza papers, as well as from Christian sources, the afflicted communities experienced great difficulties in raising the funds needed for reconstruction. In this time of hardship, the leaders of the Palestinian synagogue hit upon an expedient, often adopted also by modern community leaders: they admitted the Maghrebi, by which mainly the Tunisian and Sicilian merchants were meant, to public offices and showered upon them honorific titles, confirmed in bombastic letters, sent from the seat of the Academy in Jerusalem. The stratagem was successful; the Maghrebi joined the Palestinian synagogue and soon became its most prominent members.⁵³

As impressive as the abundance of Geniza material for Tunisia and Sicily is its dearth in respect to Spain. If we disregard responsa and epistles emanating from, or addressed to, prominent personalities—both of which were collected and copied as pieces of literature and are, of course, important sources of historical information—we would find only about three dozen letters that have been identified, so far, as being written in Spain, and even fewer documents.⁵⁴ But the products of Spain filled the markets of Egypt, and there was much direct traffic between the two countries. Moreover, many persons called Andalusī and actually hailing from the Iberian peninsula are mentioned in the Geniza papers. Why, then, do we not find with regard to the Spanish merchants anything comparable to the wealth of information we have for those originating from Tunisia and Sicily? This deficiency might find some explanation in the technique of international trade (see p. 213, below). But considering the ancient and lasting allegiance of Spanish Jewry to the Jewish seats of learning in Babylonia, we are perhaps justified in assuming that the Spanish Jews sojourning in Egypt were connected with the synagogue of the Iraqians of Old Cairo and left their discarded writings in a geniza there, if they were wont to do so at all. That synagogue, which was still fully in use in the sixteenth century, has since entirely disappeared.⁵⁵

A similar assumption may explain also the almost complete absence of private and business correspondence with Iraq and Persia. As is seen

in chapter i, many persons from those countries settled in Egypt and we can prove that some were newcomers. Still, only very few have left letters received from their countries of origin in the Geniza.

It would be rash to attribute this scarcity of documentary material from Iraq and Persia to the political situation, namely to the fact that these countries were under the sway of the Seljuks, who paid homage to the Abbasid caliphs, while Egypt was ruled by their adversaries, the Fatimids. For we have in the Geniza an enormous amount of letters, responsa, and other writings from the Jewish academies of Iraq; indeed, they form one of its main constituents. These responsa and other writings were sent from Baghdad to North Africa and Spain and even to Italy and France via Old Cairo and often were copied there before being forwarded. This explains why we find them in the Geniza. Conversely, contributions were sent from Egypt to Baghdad, accompanied by letters and queries, which also were copied in Old Cairo, before being forwarded. Thus, political barriers cannot account for the paucity of private documents from the Seljuk domain. The volume of trade between these countries and Egypt seems to have been limited, but was by no means so small as to explain the virtual absence of business correspondence between them in the Cairo Geniza. Thus we are again thrown back on the assumption that the merchants from Iraq and Iran disposed of their disused correspondence in the geniza of their own synagogue—again, if they were in the habit of doing so at all.

The situation was again different with regard to western Europe and the Byzantine Empire. Reference is not made here to persons from the orbit of Islamic civilization who happened to stay or to live in one of these countries, such as the doctor from Silifke, whose delightful letter of July, 1137, was written in Arabic, the language of his country of origin.⁵⁶ As far as the local people are concerned, we have correspondence from them on spiritual matters, public affairs, and works of charity, but no business letters. Since we read in the Geniza papers frequently about commercial relations with Europeans, this deficiency is rather puzzling. An explanation is attempted in chapter i.

Having arrived at the end of this survey, we have to make good the promise given at its start and to explain, how and with what degree of certainty we are able to fix the times and places of origin of a Geniza paper.

In a proper document, of course, the location and date are indicated. In the event that these details are effaced or torn away, or with regard to a draft or a copy that was not filled in completely, we are still able, if the document is long enough, to gauge its approximate date and place of origin, for the handwritings of the more prominent scribes of the eleventh and twelfth centuries are known to us, and often the subject matter, names, geographical details, and accompanying circumstances enable us to fix the desired data with great precision.

With letters it is far more difficult. Very often the place of destina-

tion and still more frequently the place of writing were omitted. As letters were sent by messenger or with friends, one could well forego these details. If dated at all, only the day and the month were indicated, but only in exceptional cases (perhaps in one out of fifty) the year. The name of the addressee usually was given in full, but the writer often designated himself solely with a general phrase, such as "your grateful friend," "your son," "your brother," the latter phrases mostly indicating a social, rather than a family, relationship. Formal accounts were headed by a superscription, but very often we have only a second or third leaf and naturally, many of the accounts found—indeed the majority—are but notes made by the writer for his own use.

If, in spite of these handicaps, we are able to approximate the location and date of at least four-fifths of all the longer pieces preserved, this is owing to the fact that originally whole bunches of papers were deposited together in the Geniza. As noted, the contents of the Geniza were continuously jumbled and, at the end, dispersed in many libraries all over the world. Where we succeed in uniting the scattered parts of a unit, however, we often find that one fragment explains another, and often several fragments taken together provide us with means to fix their time and place of origin. There are many ways to find out where a piece belongs and to what its details refer. The interpretation of an ancient account, attempted below, pages 339-343, can give an idea of the technique applied.

The basis of all this is, of course, that we are familiar with the persons and things prevalent during the classical period of the Geniza. As far as the Mediterranean area is concerned, card indexes containing the names of about 350 more and 3,200 less prominent persons, those of about 200 better-known families, 450 professions, and about the same number of goods form the means for preliminary identification. The list of persons of lesser importance could easily be doubled. After this and similar work is done, we shall be able approximately to place almost any document of some length found in the Geniza.

Research on the Cairo Geniza documents and their value for social history.—The card indexes mentioned in the preceding paragraph have been prepared mostly from unpublished documents. It would not have been possible to do this, had not previous research on the Geniza created the historical framework of the period, so that it was comparatively easy to fit into it the details concerning social and economic life.

It was a happy coincidence that the Geniza was discovered near the turn of the century when Oriental and Jewish studies had reached an unprecedented peak. First-rate scholars used their unique knowledge to identify, or to put into their historical contexts, the literary pieces that came to light, as well as to fix the sequence and mutual relationship in which unknown or little-known personalities or institutions stood to each other. There were no Geniza specialists before World War I, but many of the most important texts were printed and many of the basic

facts about their contents were established between 1896 and 1914. The great achievements of this period of Geniza research are evident from Shaked's *Bibliography*.⁵⁷

It was soon recognized that sporadic publication of particularly interesting documents or texts was not a satisfactory approach to the study of the Geniza. Solomon Schechter planned a systematic corpus,⁵⁸ but, being preoccupied, as of 1902, with his new tasks as President of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America in New York, he was unable to devote much time to the project. After his death, there actually appeared three volumes of literary texts, most of which he himself had selected for publication.⁵⁹ The fourth volume, which was to contain historical material, never came out. The reason for this is easily understood. Documents, in order to make sense, have to be read in their historical context. They cannot be merely "published"; they must first be studied together with the greatest possible number of documents of similar character. Their significance, and often their mere meaning, become evident only after prolonged comparative study. It was the late Jacob Mann of the Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati, who undertook this arduous task.

Jacob Mann was a student of Jewish history. He confined himself mainly to letters written in Hebrew and dealing with Jewish communal affairs. Who were the communal leaders in each period and place, what were their relations amongst themselves, as well as between them and the various governments and the local authorities? These were the questions that interested him and to which he tried to find the answers. A lengthy stay in England gave him the opportunity to study the four main Geniza collections in Cambridge, Oxford, the British Museum, and Elkan N. Adler's library which was later sold to the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York. The result was his book, *The Jews in Egypt and in Palestine under the Fāṭimid Caliphs* (Oxford, 1920 and 1922), the first volume of which contains a consecutive, although somewhat disconnected, narrative, while the second provides a very large selection of texts. Mann did not intend to provide a definitive *edition* of those texts—in many cases, only a short passage out of a long document is given, and those printed in full sometimes need revision. Therefore, historians, let alone linguists, who want to make use of this volume for exact research, are advised always to provide themselves with a photostat of the original. But Mann's book will remain a classic as long as the Geniza is studied.

The Jews . . . under the Fāṭimid Caliphs, although a noteworthy achievement in itself, was only a beginning. Mann continued to publish important Geniza material bearing on Jewish communal and literary history and crowned his efforts with the publication of a 700-page volume of Geniza texts called *Texts and Studies in Jewish History and Literature*, Vol. I (Cincinnati, 1931). Here, too, the subject is mainly communal and literary history, but attention is paid also to social life,

and, unlike Mann's first book, his *Texts and Studies* contains quite a number of texts in Arabic.⁶⁰ In addition to the mass of material made accessible by Mann, it was his constant endeavor to place the information gained from the Geniza geographically and chronologically which makes his publications so valuable. His lasting merit is to have created the historical framework for all future study of the documentary Geniza.

Of an entirely different character was the work of the late Simha Assaf of the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, who also devoted a lifetime to Geniza studies. He came to this field of research from two different angles. First, like his meritorious friend Benjamin M. Lewin, he was devoted to the study of the literature produced by the Geonim, or heads of the Jewish academies of Babylonia (Iraq), who were the acknowledged spiritual leaders of the Jewish community during the Arab period down to the eleventh century.

These leaders were approached by Jewish scholars from all over the world with theoretical and practical questions. The answers of the heads of the academies, the responsa, which were often given after long deliberations with their members, form thus not only an important and authoritative part of Jewish religious literature, but are also a source for the social history of the Jewish communities during the High Middle Ages (cf. above, p. 13).⁶¹

Since the invention of printing, many collections of Geonic responsa have been published, but the texts usually were abridged and, as far as they were in Arabic, translated into Hebrew. A first and most valuable edition of original Geonic responsa was made by A. Harkavy in 1887 on the basis of four manuscripts from the Second Firkovitch Collection of the Imperial Library in St. Petersburg (Leningrad), whose contents, we now know, most probably stem largely from the Cairo Geniza.⁶² After "the discovery" of the latter in 1896, countless—according to Assaf, thousands—of such responsa have come to light. Of the many publications before World War I, the most distinguished was *Geonica* (2 vols.) by Louis Ginzberg (New York, 1909). He was followed by S. Assaf, who, between 1927 and 1942, published four volumes of Geonic responsa from the Cairo Geniza, mainly from manuscripts preserved in Leningrad and Cambridge. At the same time Benjamin M. Lewin planned and began the publication of a huge commentary on the Talmud formed by quotations from Geonic responsa, also taken largely from Geniza material.

Another factor in Assaf's Geniza studies was his interest in social and cultural history. He had published, in 1925, a first volume of a source book for the history of Jewish education (the fourth and final volume came out in 1948), and wrote a great number of studies on subjects as different as "Jewish Criminal Law in Post-Talmudic Times," "History of the Jews in Malta," "Family Life of Byzantine Jews." No wonder that the documents of the Cairo Geniza attracted

his attention. The documents referring to social life are mostly in Arabic, a language with which Assaf was not familiar. Thus there developed a sort of cooperation between him and the members of the School of Oriental Studies of the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, and, in particular its Professor of Arabic, D. H. Baneth, which was most conducive to the furthering of the study of the Geniza documents written in the Arabic language. Baneth either deciphered and translated the documents in question himself or corrected those worked on by others. It was, however, not only his dealing with the individual documents, but his methodological approach to the treatment of texts written in medieval Arabic, which made Baneth's contribution so significant. As explained above, page 16, these texts are not written according to the rules of classical grammar; therefore, a scholar dealing with them has first to find out what degree of colloquialism is apparent in them, in other words, what was the actual language of their writers? A "mistake" is only a deviation from the normal language of each individual. Many phenomena that appear to be gross blunders to a scholar reared on classical grammar were perfectly "normal" and in general use. It is the task of the student of medieval texts to make himself acquainted with that usage and to interpret each individual text in its light.

In addition to his linguistic commentaries to the texts published, Baneth has written special studies about the strange ways of this language and created what could be called the Jerusalem school of the students of medieval Arabic.⁶³ A former student of his, Professor Joshua Blau, wrote a grammar of nonliterary medieval Judeo-Arabic texts, and explained the emergence and nature of this vernacular, which is one of the best-known examples of Middle Arabic, in a series of important studies.⁶⁴

Although Assaf was interested in social history in general, he had an Arabic text translated only when the names of significant persons or places occurring in them or other indications forecast a particularly interesting publication. A systematic perusal of the whole documentary Geniza for the purpose of social studies was not yet envisaged. This is the task incumbent upon the present generation.

"Business letter, and therefore valueless"—this remark about a Geniza paper, appearing in the printed catalogue of a most distinguished library about thirty years ago—betrays the attitude of former generations. Things not connected with theology or literature or, at least, referring to a famous personality, were not regarded as worthy of the attention of a serious scholar. Today we believe that we cannot afford to neglect any type of writing which has come down to us, for life is one single undivided unit, wherefore we cannot form a proper idea of the spiritual aspirations of a society if we do not pay some attention also to its daily life and to its economic foundations. In addition, the

knowledge of how people lived in a region and time so significant for human history is interesting in itself.

The question is, of course, how far are the Cairo Geniza records apt to provide us with an adequate picture of the society that has left them to us, and, secondly, how far is this particular society typical of life around the Mediterranean in this period in general.

As may be concluded from the survey of the types of records preserved (given above, pp. 10-12), they do not illustrate all sides of economic and social life with equal completeness. Thus we learn about agriculture and the technical aspects of arts and crafts far less than we might wish, for the simple reason that the writers of these records had little opportunity to make mention of them. But the working people themselves are comparatively well represented and so are the more general aspects of industry. Commerce and banking, naturally, produced a huge amount of legal documents and business correspondence; therefore, they are richly documented, and so, and for similar reasons, is the life of the scholars and doctors. For special reasons explained on page 77, below, the upper class is reflected in letters for help addressed to its members rather than in correspondence between them.

As the Geniza was located in the same synagogue compound where the courts held their sessions, we have abundant material about them and related matters. The Geniza records reveal also how the actions of the government affected the life of the population and how the various religious communities got along with each other. More than any other topic, family life is illustrated by the Geniza, again, as in the case of commerce and banking, and even more than there, because it is reflected in many types of legal documents as well as in letters. For the things of daily life, such as food, clothing, houses; birth, upbringing, illness, retirement, death and burial; social etiquette and customs, our information is uneven, very rich in some respects and limited in others. For people do not normally speak in their letters about things that everyone knows. There is, however, one domain of daily life for which the Geniza provides many-sided and detailed illustrations: travel and seafaring. The reason for this is again self-evident: when people are away from home, they write. Even if they are, like our men, experienced travelers, who do not waste many words about their experiences, still the very circumstances force them to tell us something about them. Observations on people in foreign countries are scarce. Had the Geniza been found in Spain, on the edge of the Islamic world, instead of Egypt, its very center, the situation perhaps would have been different. The tenth-century Spanish-Jewish traveler Ibrāhīm b. Ya'qūb is a case in point. While visiting Rouen, he remarks that a certain fish in the Seine river had the same taste and smell as a fish, called by him by name, caught in the Nile. Thus, it stands to reason that he had traveled to Egypt before visiting France and Central Europe. But no tale of his

about Muslim countries has been preserved. On the other hand, the cold, Christian north was a new experience for him. Therefore, his report on it is richer than anything found in the Geniza letters whose writers were confined to the Mediterranean.⁶⁵

The subject that interests us most, the mind of the Geniza people, the things they believed in and stood for, is not reflected in one particular type of document, but has to be abstracted from all the material in hand. Here, some sections of the literary fragments, which, as stated above, are at least twenty times as many as the documentary, will also have to be taken into account.

The second question posed earlier, how far the society reflected in the Geniza papers may be regarded as representative of Mediterranean society in medieval times in general, is answered, partly implicitly, in chapter i and in Volume III, chapter x.