

GENIZAH FRAGMENTS

The Newsletter of the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit, Cambridge University Library

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Out of the land of Egypt



Left: Mosseri IXa.1.28, in the badly crumpled state in which it arrived in Cambridge.

Right: After careful conservation, the Masoretic Text of Leviticus 9:4–6 is revealed.

Work on conserving the tattered fragments of the Jacques Mosseri Genizah Collection, so long out of the public eye and unavailable to scholars, began in Cambridge University Library in earnest in April 2004 and, to date, half of the Collection of approximately 7250 fragments has been conserved.

Since its arrival in Cambridge, the Collection has proven a draw, with a number of scholars making a special journey here to view particular treasures, and hundreds more images supplied to researchers around the world. Several thousand have now been digitised and will be going online through the Friedberg Genizah Project and new Cambridge Digital Library

websites. A complete catalogue of the responsa manuscripts in the Collection, compiled by a team under Professor Shmuel Glick of the Schocken Institute will be published by Brill later this year with the title *Seride Teshuvot: a Descriptive Catalogue of Responsa Fragments from the Jacques Mosseri Collection, Cambridge University Library*.

Conserving the fragments to the point that they can be photographed or consulted has been a challenge in more ways than one: their condition was in many cases quite bad, most still with the dust of Egypt clinging to them. Expert manuscript conservation is an expensive process and raising the necessary

funds to continue the work has been difficult. The special status of the Collection – on loan in Cambridge for twenty years before finding a permanent home at the National Library of Israel – has actually proven a hindrance, as certain grant-giving bodies, who could normally be relied upon to fund such work, will not provide funds for a Collection only temporarily housed in the UK. Thus, despite the generosity of the Mosseri family and other donors, we shall need to raise a substantial amount of money – estimated at £350,000 – over the coming years to continue and complete the conservation and digitisation of the Collection.

Ben Outhwaite

Mosseri IXa.1.28 is a paper fragment, which was crumpled and exposed to dust due to less than ideal storage in the past. After testing the stability of the inks, the fragment was cleaned by gentle brushing, and encrustation of dirt or dust was broken down with pressure from a small spatula and the debris brushed away. To remove creasing, moisture was applied with a damp brush and then the area was first covered with a sheet of blotter, then a small square of glass and a light weight. The light pressure helps the crease to relax into a flat surface. Tears along the edges of the fragment were either repaired with direct application of a 16% wheat starch paste or by using a re-moistenable mending paper, made with a 2.5 gsm Japanese paper (German-made Gossamer Paper) and a 50/50 mixture of 3% DOW Methocel A4M methylcellulose and diluted wheat starch paste.

Lucy Cheng
Genizah Conservator

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Conservation challenges

Conservation of the Jacques Mosseri Collection has progressed steadily since April 2004. While a standardised method of repairing and protecting the paper and parchment fragments has been developed, particular challenges have arisen in the process of examining and planning for the Collection.

The Mosseri Collection is currently on loan to Cambridge University Library for 20 years. It is the wish of the Mosseri family that at the end of this period, the conserved fragments should be deposited in the National Library of Israel. With the eventual travel and final storage of the Collection in mind, the conservation team designed a binding that could accommodate fragments that have been welded into archival polyester sleeves and could open flat for ease of access by readers. It takes about a week for one conservator to produce a binding, and an estimated 75 bindings will have to be produced by the end of the project.

One of the unexpected discoveries during the first year of active conservation of the Collection was the finding of a letter by the Babylonian Gaon Nehemiah ha-Kohen with his personal seal still attached at the lower right-hand corner.

This extremely rare 10th-century clay and hair seal poses an unusual problem for the conservator who is more familiar with materials such as paper and parchment. The object appears very fragile, and the advice of specialists has been sought, but while, on the one hand, the appearance of fragility prompted suggestions of using consolidants such as Klucel G or Paraloid B72, the rarity of the object and the desirability to preserve its original appearance discourage the use of treatments that might stain it. Further expert advice is being sought so that the eventual treatment and storage of this valuable object can be decided on.

Another challenge encountered during conservation is friable and crumbling ink. The problem is not prevalent: out of 3514 fragments conserved so far, only 16 fragments are deemed in need of particularly special attention. However, the problem nevertheless has required careful preparation. A comparison made of the properties of three consolidants – gelatin, isinglass and EHEC (a cellulosic consolidant) – has established isinglass as the most ideal material to use due to its tackiness at low viscosity, less likelihood of giving a glossy finish and possession of the necessary flexibility. Methods have been tested and developed



The letter of Nehemiah Gaon with seal attached (Mosseri VIII.479.9)

to minimise the staining effect of the consolidant on paper. A medical nebuliser is currently being tried to see if it can produce the necessary fine mist of isinglass at the appropriate concentration that will allow the consolidant to fall gently on to the ink and the substrate underneath to create an adhesive bond between them.

Most of the fragments within the Mosseri Collection are single-sheet flat objects that once conserved are easily stored in polyester sleeves. A small number of items, however, which are referred to as 'structures', were originally parts of codices and have retained their original sewing. These objects pose fresh challenges to the conservator because once conserved, they cannot be stored in single-sheet polyester sleeves, since these would only allow the viewing of one side each of the top and bottom sheet and make the text sandwiched between them impossible to access. While one could remove the thread

binding the sheets together and so separate the structures, this is undesirable as the original structure should be preserved wherever possible. Currently, 19 such structures have been located within the Collection and more are being gathered as the conservation process progresses. Extra resources will need to be allocated to the research and execution of storage solutions for these special items so that the integrity of their original form can be protected while, at the same time, maximising access to the text they contain.

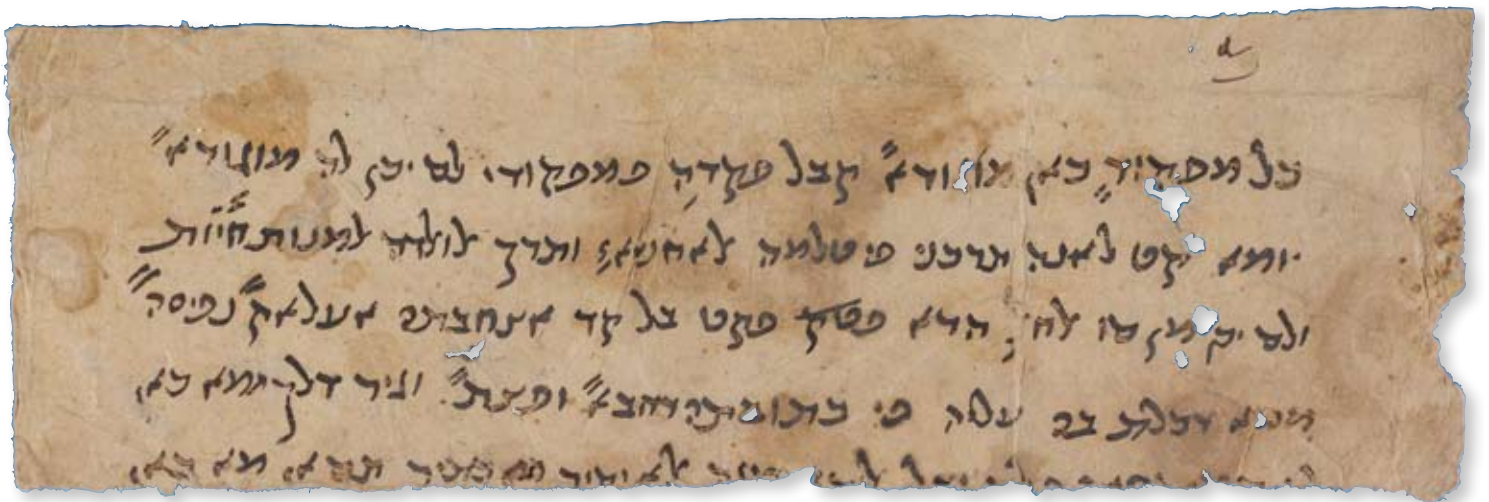
While the day to day task of conserving the Mosseri fragments progresses apace, these additional challenges pose a number of distinct problems to the conservation of the Collection, and will require a significant investment of time and resources to overcome, enabling the completion of this historic project.

Lucy Cheng



Several highly fragile vellum leaves bound together (Mosseri VIII.478)

Three Glimpses of 'Those behind the Veil' in the Mosseri Collection



A son describes his abandoned mother's predicament, *almenut hayyut*, in an historical document from the Mosseri Collection, Mosseri II.163.3.

One of the pleasures of Genizah research in Cambridge is the way one stumbles across fascinating human stories while leafing through the Collection. Though my dissertation research revolves around marital disputes in the Genizah, when examining some of the documentary material in the recently-acquired Mosseri Collection in the Genizah Research Unit in the summer of 2011, I could not resist the lure of also reading any petitions involving widows and *'agunot* that caught my eye. Such documents are precious for offering a glimpse of the lives and voices of medieval Jewish women, about whom information is sorely lacking in sources outside the Genizah.

In order to ensure a positive response, petitions often combined a literary flourish with a tale of woe so as to both capture the attention of the addressee and to reach his heart. This combination is apparent in the opening of a letter written by a son through which we hear at second-hand of his mother's predicament, abandoned by her husband while pregnant:

Everything lost was present before its loss, but what I have lost was not present for even a single day. For he abandoned me

in 'the darkness of the bowels' (an Arabic expression, 'before I was born') and abandoned my mother 'a widow of the living' (2 Samuel 20:3). And it was not just this bad situation, but she also gave him possession of precious objects from what she had brought into the marriage in the ketubba, both gold and silver... (Mosseri II.163.3)

Women relinquishing their monetary rights to their husbands, and husbands running away and leaving their wives *'agunot* were not uncommon occurrences in Genizah society. The combination of the two was truly devastating for women and their children. A widow's beautifully-written petition reveals to us an interesting self-assessment of her predicament:

Were your servant to describe her situation and the state of the orphans that are 'on her neck', it would take too long. Your lofty presence knows what hardship men endure these days, and how they cannot make ends meet. How then can those behind a veil, who do not know their right hand from their left? (Mosseri IV.57, ll. 7–10)

By portraying herself as helpless, the widow asserts the social hierarchy between her and the

communal leader. In this way, she obliges him 'to act his role' and assist her. This 'instrument of weakness' was common in Genizah petitions. The petition continues by reminding the benefactor politely but firmly that the orphans' father was his client for many years and it is now his responsibility to take care of them when their father is dead, further demonstrating the importance of patronage in Genizah society.

The last petition, apparently to Abraham Maimonides (1186–1237), is of a widow who lived in 'a small upper apartment of a ruin, which time has dishevelled, with no closet, no vestibule, no solid wall, no standing roof'. The apartment belonged to the communal pious foundation (*heqdash*) and the monthly rent had recently increased from two dirhams to three and a half (still a very small sum). The widow, who has a son who 'leaves in the morning and does not come back until evening', declares that she has no love for the apartment itself but 'when she sits in her house she hears the cantor in the synagogue saying *qadosh, barukh* and *qaddish*' (Mosseri IV.88). She therefore asks not to be removed from the apartment so that she can continue to obtain blessing

through its proximity to the synagogue. While her experience of the sacred may seem to be of outmost passivity (sitting at home and enjoying the sound of prayers flowing into the wall-less ruin), it is clear how important it was for her and to what length she was willing to go to retain it. This mixture of passivity and initiative is a rare hint of women's spirituality in Genizah society.

Oded Zinger

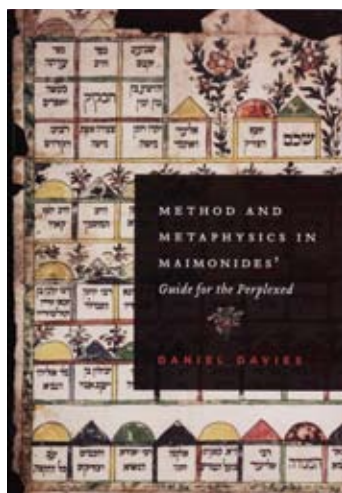
ozinger@princeton.edu

The full transcription of the three documents can be viewed in the Princeton Geniza Browser: <http://gravitas.princeton.edu/tg/tt/>

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Maimonides' method



The study of Maimonides continues to be a fertile area for scholars. One of our researchers, Daniel Davies, has recently joined the field with *Method and Metaphysics in Maimonides' Guide for the Perplexed* (OUP, 2011). The book considers a number of theological questions that have

been hotly debated for many years, some of them for centuries. Throughout that time people have argued over what they think Maimonides was really saying, and even over whether or not he meant what he said. Maimonides himself seems to have set off these discussions by warning that the *Guide* contains contradictions of different kinds, and that he put some of them there to hide secrets from those unqualified to perceive them. Davies offers new explanations of Maimonides' arguments, which allow them to be read in a way that preserves Maimonides' professed meaning while also accounting for how and why they are written in such enigmatic fashion.

A recent review of the book concludes with the following

words: 'Davies successfully completes what he sets out to do, which is to build on recent philosophical and historical research and introduce a new and significant approach to reading Maimonides's *Guide*. The book serves as a fine contribution to the literature for scholars who work on the area as well as an introduction to important issues that should serve graduate students and faculty well. Maimonides studies have been an exciting area in recent decades and Davies's important work opens new doors for reconstructing the *Guide for the Perplexed*.'

The whole of the review can be read online at *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*: <http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/28516/>

Festival of magic

When it comes to presenting the marvels of the Genizah to the general public, researchers from the Unit are keen on taking up any kind of challenge. A great opportunity to engage with people outside the academic world was provided by last year's Festival of Ideas, Cambridge University's twelve-day 'tour de force' of cultural events, lectures, debates and activities for adults and children alike, aimed at strengthening the ties between town and gown.

On a Saturday in October, researchers of the Unit dressed up as medieval Egyptian magicians and welcomed a lively group of thirty children to the Library's Morison Room. They were met with dimmed lights and a spooky soundtrack



evoking the atmosphere of *Angels, Demons and Scorpions*, a workshop on magic and alchemy in medieval Egypt.

The children followed with interest, and laughter, as Dr Miriam Wagner and chief alchemist Dr Gabriele Ferrario attempted – and failed – to produce gold from an ancient recipe found among Genizah fragments. Thereafter, they were invited to participate in various activities relating to the magical practices of medieval Egypt uncovered by the Genizah,



including the blockprinting of amulets against biting insects, the mysteries of *gematria*, and the writing of the mysterious magical alphabet.

Such was the success of the event, that the University has requested it be repeated next year, when, once again, the Unit will unveil the hidden mysteries of the Genizah.

The Lauffer Family Charitable Trust has generously contributed towards the cost of producing this newsletter in memory of the late David and Renee Lauffer, enthusiastic students of history and supporters of the Genizah Research Unit.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

To receive *Genizah Fragments*, to inquire about the Collection, or to learn how to assist with its preservation and study, please write to Dr Ben Outhwaite, Head of the Genizah Research Unit, at Cambridge University Library, West Road, Cambridge, CB3 9DR, UK.

The Library can be reached by fax (01223) 333160 or by telephone (01223) 333000. Inquiries by email should be addressed to the Unit at: genizah@lib.cam.ac.uk

Contributions to the Unit are made to the "University of Cambridge," which enjoys charitable status for tax and similar purposes.

In the USA the Collection is supported through "Cambridge in America". For further information please contact them on 212-984-0960 or see their website: www.cantab.org

"Cambridge in America" is recognised by the IRS as a charitable organization, and contributions for the benefit of the Genizah Research Unit are legally deductible for USA income tax purposes. Contributions are similarly deductible in Canada even if made directly to the Development Office at the University of Cambridge.