

GENIZAH FRAGMENTS

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

No. 67 April 2014

Prof. Moshe Gil (8 February 1921 – 23 January 2014)

Words on my teacher

The community of Genizah researchers lost one of their leading lights in January when Professor Moshe Gil passed away at the age of 92 years. Born in Bialystock, Poland, he grew up in Romania, where he was a leader in the Zionist underground movement Ha-shomer ha-tsa'ir and was imprisoned for his activities. Gil emigrated to Eretz Israel in 1945, and became a founding member of Kibbutz Reshafim. He began his academic career in 1965, at the age of 44, and went on to gain a Masters degree on Roman Palestine from Tel Aviv University. He would eventually serve there in a number of public positions, including as the Head of the Chaim Rosenberg School of Jewish Studies, and as the Dean. He held the Joseph and Ceil Mazer Chair in the History of Jews in Muslim Lands, and in 1998 he was awarded the prestigious Israel Prize for his work on the Cairo Genizah manuscripts.

Prof. Gil's research dealt with three major issues, and what follows is based on his writings (*naṣṣ*) and conversations with him (*ḥadīth*).

In his early days at Tel Aviv University, Gil devoted himself



Moshe Gil examining manuscripts in Cambridge University Library in the 1980s.

to the study of ancient Jewish history, in particular economics, halakha and theology. He never abandoned this interest, and in 2008 published his book *והרומאי אז בארץ* (*And the Roman Was Then in the Land*). Prof. Gil studied with Prof. S. Safrai, but saw Prof. Y. Efron as his primary mentor. As a student of Efron, Gil viewed the Dead Sea Scrolls (as well as the Enoch literature) as late, non-Jewish literature. These views are not widely accepted, and many researchers of the Second Temple Period have ignored them, as they ignored the works of Efron.

In his final years, Gil was occupied with research on the tribe of Kinda. In numerous publications he attempted to identify the Jews of the Arabian Peninsula at the time of Muhammad, and focused on

the early relationship between the Jews and the first Muslims. He believed that the Enoch literature and the Manichaeans were important influences on early Islam. Both Gil and his mentor, Prof. M. Y. Kister, held

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Muslim sources to be reliable for the history of the period of Muhammad, and criticized those who denied their worth as historical sources.

Prof. S. Simonsohn sent Gil to study with Prof. S. D. Goitein, setting Gil on course to become a Genizah scholar. His studies of the Genizah cover various topics, including Jewish pious foundation documents, the history of the Jews of the Land of Israel and of Babylonia during the geonic period, and the history of the Jews of Sicily. Economics were an important aspect of his research, and he made significant contributions to the study of the Karaite movement.

In his studies on the Genizah, Gil sketched broad lines alongside careful attention to detailed points. He never hesitated to draw conclusions that he felt

were necessary. His findings on Bustenai, the *resh galuta* at the time of the Muslim conquest of Persia, led him to state incorrectly that the Jews believed that the Muslim conquest would improve their lot. His findings regarding the descendants of 'Anan, who served in key positions in the Rabbanite leadership of Iraq and the Land of Israel, led him to conclude that the Ananite movement coalesced only in the second half of the ninth century with the Karaite movement.

Gil read Muslim historiography alongside Genizah documents, an approach which led him to important conclusions. Genizah documents reveal that the Rabbanite settlement in Jerusalem was near the "Priest Gate." Gil's identification was not accepted by many; however he was the first to examine the location of the gate in light of

Genizah documents as well as in light of medieval Muslim literature on the gates of Jerusalem.

Gil set high standards for Israeli historians to follow. Following Gil, the would-be historian must learn many languages – and above all, must learn about the broader society in which Jews lived. He regretted bitterly that Goitein's *Mediterranean Society* was only partially translated into Hebrew and stated his belief that Israeli intellectuals merited a full translation of this important work.

Although a historian, Moshe Gil was always a man of the present, and continued to work on his research until a few days before he passed away. When we gathered in honor of his ninetieth birthday, he spoke for five minutes – not about his earlier research – but rather about his current projects. This attitude captures exactly

his character and enthusiasm for scholarship. He is survived by two of his three daughters, nine grandchildren and one great granddaughter.

Prof. Yoram Erder (translated by Dr. Miriam Goldstein)

Tel Aviv University

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, England.

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 recognized 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.



Geoffrey Khan, Avi Shvitiel, and Nicholas De Lange are pictured with Stefan Reif, who gave the inaugural annual Genizah lecture in March 2014. The lecture, "Why Medieval Jewish Liturgy is not Dull", was extremely well attended, and is the outcome of a collaboration between the Genizah Research Unit and the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies.

The Second Revolution in Documentary Geniza Research

I made Moshe Gil's acquaintance in 1968, when he came to study with Prof. S. D. Goitein at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. Having already studied with Goitein for several years, I was completing my dissertation. When I asked Moshe about his plans, he said forthright: "I'll complete my studies and submit my Ph.D. dissertation within two years and then go back to teach at Tel-Aviv University." Gil was twenty years my senior and, at that time, almost as old as Goitein had been when he began his Geniza career. He had a wonderful sense of humor. In his late eighties, when asked how he was, he still answered that he was training to swim *la Manche* (the English Channel). When in 1968 I heard of his career plans, I chuckled at the naivety of this new-old-fellow-graduate student. But there was no humor in his plans, and it was I who was naive. In two years he completed his dissertation, "Documents of the Jewish Pious Foundations from the Cairo Geniza," earned his degree and returned to Tel-Aviv University to commence his meteoric academic career.

The revolution in research of the Geniza documents, masterminded and executed by Goitein has long been acclaimed and is well known to readers of *Genizah Fragments*. He characterized his magnum opus *A Mediterranean Society* as "spadework." The significance of this ostensibly modest description was explained in the preface to volume two: "I regard this book and similar publications of mine solely as preparatory stages leading to the main task of Geniza research, the systematic edition of the original texts with full translations, commentaries, and facsimiles." Goitein envisioned setting up a team of young

T-S 13J16.14, one of the many letters in the Cairo Genizah written by the Ga'on Solomon b. Judah. The life of the colourful Ga'on and the lost history of the Palestinian Yeshiva were illuminated by Moshe Gil in his *History of Palestine*. This image, and 15,000 others, are now available on Cambridge University Digital Library (cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk).

scholars for this task. When he wrote those remarks in April 1970, he could not have imagined that much of the work would be accomplished singlehandedly by his graduate student Moshe Gil, who was then putting the final touches on his dissertation.

Only those who have experienced the daunting challenge of identifying, deciphering, translating, annotating and analyzing a Judeo-Arabic Geniza fragment can begin to fathom the heroic dimensions of Gil's achievement. The numbers alone are overwhelming. A simple calculation of the fragments edited in Gil's two multi-voluminous, comprehensive, historical

masterpieces, *Palestine during the First Muslim Period* (634–1099) (Parts 2–3: *Cairo Geniza Documents*) and *In the Kingdom of Ishmael* (Vols. 2–4: *Texts from the Cairo Geniza*) and in his *Yehuda Ha-Levi and his Circle: 55 Geniza Documents*, together with *Documents of the Jewish Pious Foundations*, shows that they number 1667. When one takes into account Gil's many other studies, the number approaches two thousand. This momentous accomplishment is not only without parallel in the annals of Geniza research, it is of historical proportions in the humanities in general.

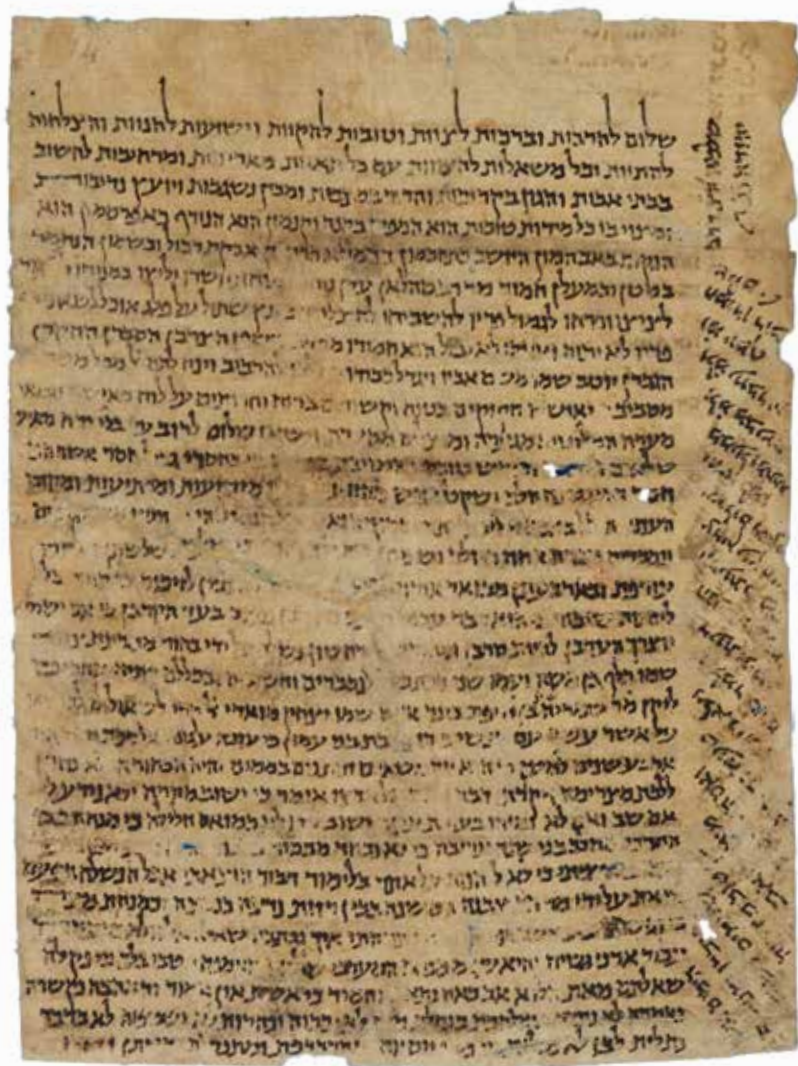
Present and future generations of scholars will re-examine, refine and supplement Gil's editions of Geniza texts. Some editions

and their creative analyses will be challenged. None of this can detract an iota from his remarkable contribution. Innumerable dissertations and researches have already been based on his corpuses. Geniza scholarship will never be the same after Gil's work.

Goitein's seminal "spadework" generated the first revolution of the documentary Geniza. Gil's superb historical studies that were firmly grounded on colossal editions of texts provided the second revolution.

Moshe Gil was not only a scholars' scholar, he was a friend. He will be sorely missed.

Prof. Mordechai A. Friedman
Tel Aviv University



Mourning a Mentor

Professor Moshe Gil was the “Rabbi Akiva” of our days, and like Akiva he started his academic studies late in life. From that moment he never ceased researching, innovating and standing his ground before those who opposed his new ideas. He was a beacon of light to many students and left behind an impressive legacy. The page is too short to mention all of his important contributions in the many areas of his research, including the history of the Jews in ancient Palestine, Jewish history in

the Arab Peninsula prior to and after the rise of Islam, and – his main focus – Jewish and Muslim societies in the east, during the early Middle Ages, in light of the Genizah documents and Arab and Christian sources.

It is difficult for me to digest his departure. He left behind a desk full of new research, as despite his advanced age and health problems, he continued working tirelessly. I was his first research student, and he chose me and paved the way for me with help and support. He kept me

on track by making me cross every t and dot every i, with no compromises, no short cuts, verifying every finding, while at the same time adhering to a high academic standard and precise Hebrew language. I have been truly blessed to have such a great scholar as my mentor, and say, with a sad smile, that “the song of his life was cut short”.

Elinoar Bareket
Achva Academic College

Cohen on Gil

My memories of Moshe Gil begin with his warm reception of me and my family in Kibbutz Reshafim on my earliest sabbatical in Israel. Chatting about his life in Israel and his relatively late entrance into the university and a life of scholarship, he told us: “I spent the first part of my adult life building the State, then I decided to build myself.” Moshe did both exceptionally well. It was a pleasure to have known him as colleague and friend.

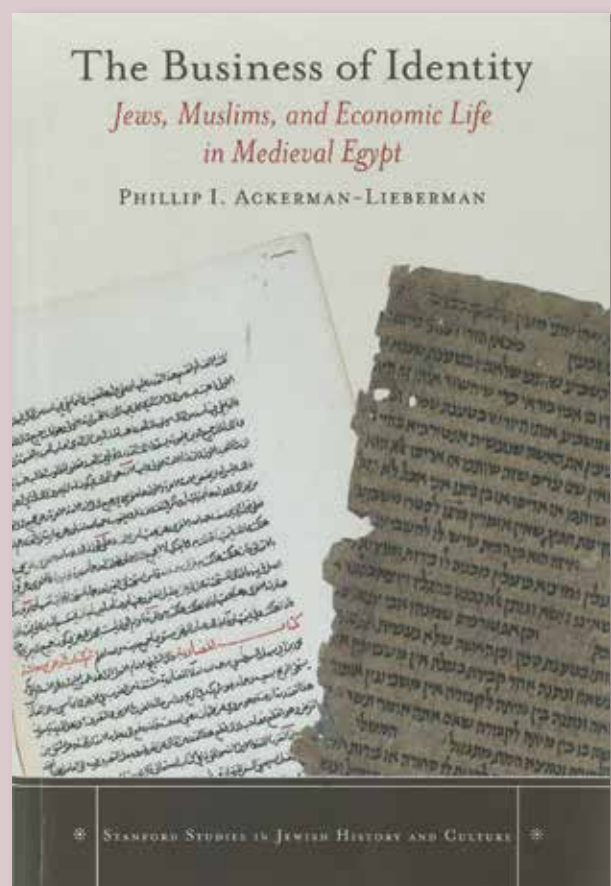
Prof. Mark R. Cohen
Princeton University

The Business of Identity in Medieval Egypt

Phillip Lieberman’s new book, a reworking of his 2007 PhD thesis, ‘A partnership culture’, is the culmination of a long interest in the legal documents relating to the activities of Genizah merchants and what they can tell us about the medieval world in which they were written – or, rather, what we can sensibly extrapolate from them about the historical context. Phillip concentrates on partnership deeds, which are one of the most frequently occurring documents in the Genizah Collection, and examines in detail how Jewish mercantile practice differed from that of contemporary Muslim traders, most notably in the way that the different sets of partners handled the sharing of profit and loss. Building on this, he questions one of the central assumptions of

S. D. Goitein, that the Genizah is typical of the medieval world in which it was written, i.e., of the wider Islamic milieu, and instead proposes an alternative model for using Genizah documents to provide a ‘window’ on that world. This is an important, opinionated book. It is not for the casual reader, but it examines interesting historical material and presents some highly stimulating argument. The first chapter, in particular, in which Phillip assesses the work of scholars who have trodden this path before him (‘the Princeton School’, Goitein, Udovitch and others), includes much that could be seen as critical of previous scholarship, but the rigour with which he approaches his subject can only be admired.

Ben Outhwaite
Genizah Research Unit



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