

Cairo Genizah

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We've all experienced losing something and then forgetting about it. When we stumble upon it sometimes years later, we are rejuvenated and savor the lost item all over again. How many of us, have lost old photographs only to rediscover them years later; they may be pictures of a deceased loved one or of our children when they were babies. We open our mother's old cookbook and out of it falls a note or a recipe that we wrote to them, or better yet a note they wrote to us. When these messages from the past are found, or an old forgotten picture remembered, our lost loved ones are brought them back to us once again.

At times, we rediscover lost things that we are totally unaware of their importance. Eli Wiesel in his book, "Legends of our Time" tells us about his trip to Saragossa, Spain, back in the early 1990's. You see, before 1492, Saragossa was a thriving Jewish community, but now there are no Jews left. When Wiesel was at the Cathedral in Saragossa, a man approached him and started speaking to him in French, which Wiesel speaks and writes fluently. The man offered to be his guide for no fee and was very proud to show Wiesel around. They started talking and the man asked Wiesel some personal questions. When it became obvious that Wiesel was Jewish and that he knew Hebrew, the man said to him: "There have been no Jews here for almost 500 years. I've e been waiting to meet one so I could ask for some help. There is something I want to show you at my home." The two of them walked off to a small apartment on the third floor and there he took out a fragment of yellow parchment. "Is this Hebrew?" he asked. Wiesel examined the yellowed document and as he started to read it, he was visibly shaken. These were not only Hebrew letters, but they had been written over 500 years ago. He started to read and translate for the man: "I, Moses, the son of Abraham, forced to break all ties with my people and my faith leave these lines to the children of my children and theirs, in order that on the day when Israel

will be able to walk again, its head high under the sun without fear and without remorse, they will know where their roots lie. Written at Saragossa, this 9th of the month of Av, in the year of punishment and exile. The year of course, was 1492, the year of the Spanish Inquisition.

The man explained to Wiesel that this document was cherished by his family and passed on almost as an amulet from one generation to the next. He wanted to know more about this Jew and the Jewish background that he professed, for he was a Catholic. On the most fundamental level, the man was asking, who am I? Who came before me? What does this mean? So, Wiesel took many hours to explain who the Jewish people were and are. He then left Saragossa to continue his travels.

Lost papers. Lost documents. Lost memories. Today, I want to teach you about lost papers that we didn't even know existed, fragments of our past that define us, diaries and histories and sacred texts that illuminate our values and our journey through time. Like Wiesel, we didn't even know they existed. And yet, they have been miraculously restored to us through archeology and patient research.

Most know about the Dead Sea Scrolls that were documents hidden in caves in Qumran, near the Dead Sea in Israel, by Essenes, a sect of very ascetic Jews who no longer exist. Qumran was destroyed in 67 CE, just before the Romans demolished the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. Extremely pious, these Essenes separated men from women, lived a life of asceticism and ritual purity. They created a library, and to preserve their spiritual treasures hid their scrolls in jars and buried them in caves. These manuscripts, found in the 1940s, describe their ideology, strivings, fears, hopes, and their antagonism to the rest of Jewry and the Temple. They speak about the messiah whom they expected to arrive shortly to save them. The library also contains copies of other books, including parts of all of the Hebrew Bible, except for the book of Esther. These books are an intellectual and spiritual gift, for they reveal new information about the very identity of ancient Jewry during the first century.

In rabbinic school, I studied a lesser-known trove of Jewish literature from the Nag Hammadi library found in Egypt in 1945. These texts, written by Jews in the first century give us accounts of the early life of Jesus, that are radically different than what we read in Christian literature. They include a gospel that describes Mary Magdalene as the favorite disciple of Jesus and another that describes Judas Iscariot as Jesus' true disciple, who carried out Jesus' orders to hand him over to the Romans to be killed, in order to fulfill his dream of being the Pascal offering. In other words, Judas is the hero of the gospel not the villain. Scholars are convinced that when the Church condemned these texts in the 4th century, these early believers who wrote them, chose to bury them for they felt that the condemned books were still holy. This find of buried texts open a new vision of early Christianity was all about.

But without a doubt some of the most amazing rediscovered lost texts come from the Ben Ezra synagogue, founded in 882, in Cairo. This synagogue had a genizah with over 250,000 Jewish texts. A Genizah is a depository for discarded documents. The Cairo Genizah is two stories high. Jews felt that it is wrong to treat documents that contain God's name improperly, so they deposited them in a Genizah, a crypt of sorts. Soon, the Egyptian Jews began to place all the papers and scrolls that they no longer wanted in their Genizah. Thus the Genizah held hundreds of thousands of documents that reveal the lives and thinking - businesses, family life, and religious - of Jews and Arabs of the Middle Ages until the permanent closing of the Genizah.

The finds are remarkable. They were completely lost for almost one thousand years. Then all of these magnificent texts came to the light of day, and we as a community embraced them. One, for example, is the last letter from David ben Maimon to his brother, Moses ben Maimon or Maimonides, the great medieval rabbi, philosopher and doctor. David wrote to Maimonides just before he died in a shipwreck. The letter reveals why he, a merchant, undertook his fatal trip to India. He was unable to find enough merchandise in Lower Egypt, and rather than return home empty-handed, he decided to sail to India to purchase goods. (Not much has changed, has it.)? Maimonides loved his brother intensely. He became severely depressed for a

full year when he heard of his brother's death. We can easily imagine that he must have handled this very letter many times. Before he died, he lovingly placed the letter in the Genizah for safekeeping. Other Maimonidian finds include many original documents in his own handwriting; some have cross outs, changes he made in his monumental Code of Jewish Law, called the Mishneh Torah. To see the real edits he made with his own hand is monumental. Rabbinic scholars today ponder the cross outs and seek to understand the evolution of his thinking. This analysis is only possible because of the Genizah find.

Some of the documents are liturgical poems. Some are even by non-Jews. Interestingly, we find documents by an eleventh century Italian Roman Catholic priest, Giovan who was horrified and revolted by the massacres of innocent Jews during the first crusade of 1096. We learn that he converted to Judaism and took the name Ovadiah, which means servant of God. We read how Christians persecuted him for his conversion and how he was treated by Jews. He composed Jewish music, wrote poems and grappled with Jewish law. His history along with the sheet of music was found in the Genizah, and his music can now be heard on the Internet.

Just this past summer, I read in the New York Times about the politics of one lesser-known genizah in of all places, Iraq. Thousands of book and scrolls were in Sadaam Hussein's police stations. These documents, taken from genizahs and active synagogues across Iraq were the confiscated property of the decimated Jewish communities, destroyed when Israel was founded. Once discovered by the U.S. military, they were taken to the U.S. in 2003 for cataloging and cleaning. Now, the Iraqis are fighting to get them back. Our community is petitioning to have them remain either in the US or go to Israel where scholars can have access to them. No one knows how this issue will be resolved.

Our lost scrolls, letters, contracts and Biblical passages give us a glimpse into the lives and faith of our ancestors. Most know of the Dead Sea Scrolls, fewer about Nag Hammadi and even less about the Cairo Genizah. But now you do.

I can almost picture a book wrapped tenderly in a piece of cloth, a contract folded

carefully into an envelope, a diary brought for safekeeping. I wonder about those who brought their documents to the shul for be preserved.... how proud they were of their very existence, how respectful they were of the name of God...how they knew of the significance of their past and the importance of establishing a link to the future. As you came to services today, I hope you saw some of the documents and photos of the genizah. They move, inspire and educate me.

Today, so many of you come to me and to Rabbi Axler with old prayer books, tefillin, talleisim and once our own Torah scroll that was no longer kosher. You ask us to bury them and we do. We bury them at various cemeteries across Philadelphia. But no longer. Beth Or is opening and will eventually, way off in the future, seal a genizah here at Beth Or.

We have already had one, of sorts. It has been our archives, which houses old pictures, documents and physical items of interest from Beth Or's past. But now, it will house our old Jewish books and photographs from you. We will not stuff them into boxes but house them lovingly and display them respectfully for posterity.

Margaret Mead, wrote in her book "Culture and Commitment" that there are essentially three types of societies. She identifies the **post-figurative culture**, which gets its guidance from its elders. A Post-figurative society looks to its past, to those who have come before us, to chart its future. The second type is called the **Co-figurative culture**, which essentially has given up on its elders and instead looks to our contemporaries to find our identity. The co-figurative model is usually most prevalent in immigrant generations. Our grandparents and great-grandparents who came to this new world, no longer wanted to look back to Europe or to the Jewish culture of the Old world for guidance. They rejected the old ways and embraced being new Americans. For that time it was good to be co-figurative. The third type, is the **pre-figurative culture**, which relies not on the past or even today, but on tomorrow. The pre-figurative world trust in our children and what they can create, because we have lost faith in our models from yesterday and even ourselves.

So which one are we? I believe that we are pre-figurative. Many of today's generation no

longer values the lessons of yesterday. We often don't respect our leaders of today. As a consequence we place tremendous faith in what our children can create. We are the generation of **YouTube**, which is often kitschy, ill informed, filled with sexual innuendo and unabashedly crass. But it's where so many of our young people learn. YouTube is fun, but it shouldn't be our fountain of wisdom and morality. And yet it is.

A healthy society, Meade writes must incorporate all aspects. We must learn from yesterday, embrace today and hope for tomorrow. Losing any dimension of our orientation, we get out of balance.

The Beth Or Genizah will be our attempt to give us more history, even as we focus on today and tomorrow. It's not only going to be storehouse of discarded texts. It's going to be a repository of our past, and the journey's of our parents and grandparents

I ask you to do three things.

First hand write a statement of your Jewish journey. Tell us how you journeyed to this community. What are your struggles, your dreams, your hopes and concerns? Don't type it. Hand write it, and then sign it. Discuss this journey with your family and then bring it to us for safekeeping.

In the past year alone. I have seen wonderful examples of family piety. I have been brought to tears by a daughter's devotion to her aging father. At a time of loss, a daughter and her daughter lovingly attended to her father and grandfather's physical and emotional needs. It was heartwarming and inspiring. We should all know of this devotion.

I have seen the unceasing devotion of parents to their special needs child. They go to tremendous ends to see that their child can read torah, lead us in prayer and celebrate at a party like most other children. I have seen regular attenders for services come every Friday night to say kaddish or to join the community in prayer and to see that we have a minyan. They are the saving remnant of our community.

Tell your story and inspire us. Then let us put it into a book for posterity.

Second, bring in any old Jewish book that you no longer value. We will safeguard it. But more than that, we hope to show it our children so that we might teach them about their heritage. Let them see and learn from a Talmud. Let them see a pair of tefillin, or find the shema in an old and tattered prayer book from the 1800s. No longer will I bury them. I will lovingly protect them and give them the honor of continuing to teach. I want our children to feel the books, look at the pictures, and relive the historical, spiritual and physical journey of our people.

Third, and finally, appreciate with me for a moment another ethno-logical reason for Beth Or to exist. Yes, we are here to teach, to comfort, to console and to motivate. We are here to perform acts of social justice and to make the world a better place. We are here to advocate for Israel. But we are also here to be a genizah of sorts. We are the repository of our traditions, our faith, and of our ancient texts. Perhaps, some of us may no longer value that heritage and want to discard it. Or perhaps some no longer see its relevance. I know this sadly, to be true. So, our task is to store our lost property and hopefully restore it for the benefit of the future so that one-day our children may reclaim it.

Beth Or has always been in the restoration business. We have always safeguarded our values, culture and spiritual heritage. When you think about it; we are a metaphoric lost and found. We are tasked to hold on to our lost property and to restore it to their rightful owners. We hold on to the texts, customs, and rituals of our tradition, lovingly care for them, and seek to keep them in good order until such time as their owners may return. We tend Judaism's garden, sow its seeds, nourish and care for it, enabling its flourishing and productivity.

There is a miraculous ending to the Eli Wiesel's story about the man and the text of Saragossa. Years later, Wiesel saw the man on the streets of Jerusalem, but this time, he was not speaking Spanish or French, but Hebrew. You see, he had converted to Judaism and taken the name, Moshe ben Avraham, the same name of his exiled ancestor 500 years earlier. An old lost text restored this man to his people and faith.

Who knows what our gathering of texts and ritual items may yet restore our lost souls. I can't help but hope that there will be more miraculous endings still to unfold, as future generations have the opportunity to peruse the items in our Beth Or Genizah. We are all searching for identity, we are all looking to leave something behind, and we are all looking for inspiration.

Moshe ben Abraham is alive after 500 years, because of a lost document and because of one who could read it and teach its meaning.

Some shuls in our community have a pool. Some have a mikvah. Some want to open up a gym. We will have a genizah, and as far as I know, we are the only progressive synagogue to do so. The late great chief rabbi of Israel, Rav Kook, wrote about our task, "Hayashan itchadash, ve hachadash yitkadash." Here the new shall be sanctified and the old shall be renewed.

Today, we will secure the past so that we can have a tomorrow.