

Genizah, Genizah, . . . and More Genizah

WILLIAM BUTTS

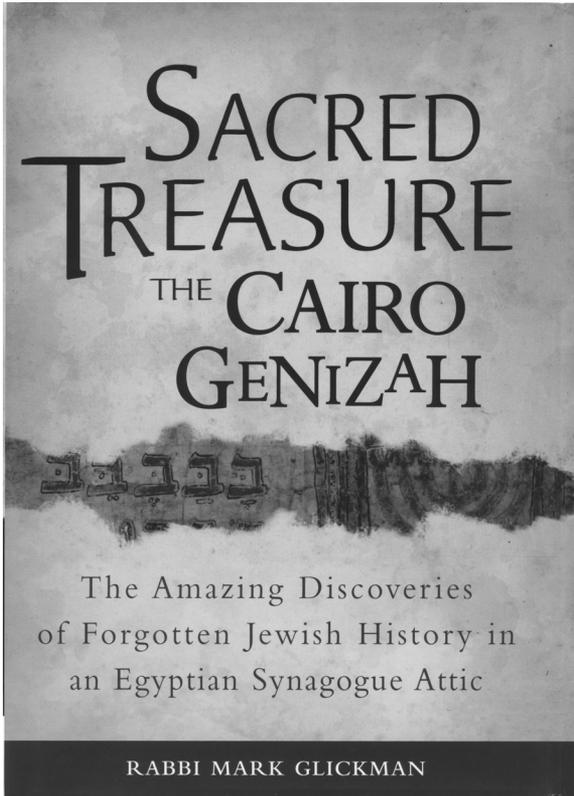
GLICKMAN, Mark. *Sacred Treasure: The Cairo Genizah – The Amazing Discoveries of Forgotten Jewish History in an Egyptian Synagogue Attic.* Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2011. Small 4to. Clothbound, dust jacket. xv, 255pp. Illustrations. **24.99.**

HOFFMAN, Adina, and COLE, Peter. *Sacred Trash: The Lost and Found World of the Cairo Genizah.* New York: Schocken Books, 2011. 8vo. Clothbound, dust jacket. 286pp. Illustrations. **\$26.95.**

COLE, Peter. *Things on Which I've Stumbled.* New York: New Directions, 2008. 8vo. Softbound. iv, 101pp. **\$14.95.**

Who hasn't heard of Tutankhamen's tomb? The Dead Sea Scrolls? The Cairo Genizah—*huh?* The what? Almost as intriguing as this enormous treasure itself is how it could remain so little known to the general public for more than a century.

A geniza or genizah is a room in the basement or attic of a synagogue in which worn, damaged or outdated religious writings were deposited instead of destroying them. The concept evolved and broadened over the centuries to include any writings in Hebrew and eventually non-religious writings as well. But while the Dead Sea Scrolls and Tutankhamen's tomb achieved household-name fame, one wonders why this staggeringly sig-



nificant hoard of medieval Egyptian Jewish documents remains practically unknown except for a small number of scholars and archivists. Best guess is that the importance of the Cairo genizah's countless paper treasures has been uncovered slowly and painstakingly over the course of many decades – and their significance has been of a cerebral, academic nature that doesn't lend itself to news bytes and splashy headlines. “*Fragment of Maimonides Responsum Identified!*” and “*7th Century Translation of Psalm 102 Discovered!*” just don't grab people's attention like a life-size gold mask of a dead king's face or a mummified cat in a gold casket. The genizah contains no precious metals, no gemstones – just a huge, dusty, crumbling, evil-smelling mass of paper, papyrus and vellum. Not sexy by most standards. (One might argue that the Dead Sea Scrolls were also merely scrolls – but

the romantic and *true* story of a Bedouin shepherd boy tossing stones at a cliff face and striking pottery urns containing 2,000 year old Biblical texts captured the public's fancy in a big way.) Perhaps 2011 will be remembered as the year of the genizah – a turning point in the public neglect of this unbelievable trove.

What are the odds of two first-ever books on a highly specialized topic, bearing nearly identical titles, being published within weeks of each other? Well, that's precisely what happened when Mark Glickman's *Sacred Treasure* and Adina Hoffman and Peter Cole's *Sacred Trash* released almost simultaneously. Did the authors arrive at their titles independent of each other? Or did one party get wind of the other's title and decide to play off of it? Did Glickman's *Sacred Treasure* (a rather commonplace phrase) spark Hoffman and Cole's edgier, more memorable title *Sacred Trash*?

A third-rate Hollywood screenwriter couldn't come up with a more unlikely scenario: The middle-aged, heavyset, Romanian-born rabbinical scholar complete with thick accent and big crazy hair who pulls an Indie Jones and makes the greatest Judaica find of all time. *Coming soon to a theatre near you.* Yeah, right. But happen it did – and thus begins Glickman:

In late December 1896, on a balcony overlooking the main floor of Cairo's Ben Ezra Synagogue, Rabbi Solomon Schechter of Cambridge University climbed a crudely built ladder set against a limestone wall, his eyes fixed on a dark opening above. The opening led to the synagogue's genizah, an attic-like chamber where Cairo's Jews had been depositing texts and documents of every kind for more than eight hundred years.

This real life Indiana Jones may never have brandished a whip in his life, but Glickman's *Sacred Treasure* is a competent, satisfying chronicle of this very involved tale. After describing the myriad reasons why countless genizahs did not survive the centuries – fire, flood, anti-Semitism, decay, mice – Glickman sums up the incredible luck that led to the Cairo genizah's survival. "For a genizah to last," he notes, "it would need a Jewish community healthy enough to stay in one place, secure enough to escape attack, dry enough to avoid the ravages of water, mold, and worms, and lucky enough to avoid accidental destruction. For all of these genizah-friendly factors to converge in a single

community would have been a very rare occurrence indeed. Rare. But not impossible.”

Glickman tells the compelling but also complex story of the Cairo genizah well. His clear style and straightforward chronological narrative help keep the large cast of characters from overwhelming the reader. For those of us unschooled in all things Jewish, he surveys the early Jewish subcultures of that first millennia: the Ashkenazic Jews of northern Europe, Sephardic Jews of Spain, Greece and the northern Mediterranean, and Arab Jews – how they evolved over the centuries, their attitudes toward each other.

The slow realization among Western Jews that manuscript treasures lay awaiting in Cairo is ably demonstrated by Glickman, who gives us thumbnail portraits of the bizarre trail of eccentrics who made the first inroads into that ancient synagogue attic. In the 18th century the great-uncle of German author Heinrich Heine, the dashing adventurer Simon Von Geldern, made the pilgrimage and snuck a peek. There was Romanian Jacob Saphir, a rabbi who in 1864 slipped a caretaker a few coins and spent two days rummaging through mounds of manuscripts. And the Ukrainian Karaite Jew Abraham Firkovitch, who scoured far and wide seeking Karaite documents (occasionally forging them if it suited his purpose), paid a visit. The genizah may also have been visited by a Slovakian rabbi and antiquities dealer, Solomon Wertheimer, who “had some medieval Jewish manuscripts to sell, cheap” to Cambridge University Library (“And they were good ones, too.”). A bit later Glickman contradicts himself, commenting on “the very same material for which they [customers] had paid so dearly.” There were others, such as the wealthy British Jewish attorney and collector Elkan Nathan Adler, who wrote he was allowed to purchase “a sackful of paper and parchment writings – as much as I could gather up in the three or four hours I was permitted to linger there.” But the scholarly community was unimpressed and took little notice.

Most importantly, there’s the story of “The Giblews,” two brilliant, wealthy, widowed, middle-aged sisters named Margaret Dunlop Gibson and Agnes Lewis who were so joined at the hip Cambridge students combined their names into Giblews. These remarkable siblings taught themselves modern and ancient languages the way some read romance novels and traveled ex-

tensively, even making arduous and difficult journeys to ancient Biblical sites. Their affinity for ancient manuscripts led them to seek out neglected texts, and before long these two unlikely scholars were making significant finds, translating them and publishing them. In Cairo they picked up some odd Hebrew scraps and showed them to their friend, Rabbi Schechter.

One of these anonymous writings shown Schechter changed his life: He identified it as the first-ever early Hebrew scrap found from the book of Ben Sirah, Ecclesiasticus, a book deleted from the Jewish Bible and Protestant Bible but included in the Catholic Bible as part of the Apocrypha. This hugely important discovery helped settle a nasty long-running dispute between Schechter and a Jewish-turned-Anglican academic who argued that the original language of Ecclesiasticus wasn't Hebrew. (This academic feud intensified over the years as the genizah and other sources began identifying dozens of Ben Sirah leaves in Hebrew. Glickman summarizes the story nicely, but it would make an enlightening full-length study in itself.)

The race, it seems, was on. The Ben Sirah bomb had put Schechter on the scent. With private backing from a wealthy colleague to preserve secrecy, Schechter spirited himself off to Cairo in December 1896. A few had glimpsed the Ben Ezra Synagogue genizah in recent decades, and a few had even succeeded in buying tidbits from it, but Schechter seems to have been the first to recognize the value of it in its gargantuan entirety. Glickman describes the 12' by 14' room Schechter climbed into:

It was a mountain of texts... packed tightly from wall to wall. There were no boxes or baskets, just papers and words – more words than could ever be counted. Some documents lay flat; others were crinkled and clumped together like monstrous, dried-up spitballs; still others seemed to crumble before his eyes. Many of the old documents had turned to dust; they floated in the air all around him, and he couldn't help but inhale some of them. The quantity and the chaos were staggering.

Schechter later wrote: "It is a battlefield of books, and the literary production of many centuries had their share in the battle, and their *disjecta membra* are now strewn over its area. Some of the belligerents have perished outright, and are literally

ground to dust in the terrible struggle for space, whilst others, as if overtaken by a general crush, are squeezed into big, unshapely lumps, which even with the aid of chemical appliances can no longer be separated from their contents....” The genizah contained circa three hundred thousand unorganized documents of every size and shape, in many languages, on every topic imaginable, chronicling every facet of life as a Jew in Egypt and other parts of the medieval world over a period of many hundreds of years. Three hundred English pounds later Schechter struck a deal with synagogue officials, who must have thought (as we say in the book world) he had a few pages stuck together. A crew of hired laborers began the weeks-long, laborious task of hauling the cache out of its attic prison after Schechter’s basic sorting, packing it into crates for shipment to Cambridge. The oppressive heat, the choking dust, the bugs that “swarmed out of the festering pile of texts,” the dishonest workers pilfering documents in order to sell them back to Schechter – he was relieved to arrive back in Cambridge with his priceless hoard in early 1897.

But this, as Glickman shows, is all background to where the *real* work begins. The remaining two-thirds of *Sacred Treasure* concerns the research that’s taken place on the genizah in the century-plus since, the revolving door of extraordinary scholars who’ve sifted, sorted, studied and struggled to impose order out of manuscript chaos and make sense of its contents. Heading this charge was of course Schechter, who for years spent long days at the filthy task (often wearing a cumbersome air-filtering mask) of organizing to make the manuscripts accessible to those who would follow, making many worthwhile discoveries himself in the process. But in 1902 he accepted a position as the first president of The Jewish Theological Seminary in New York and moved to the U.S. He continued researching genizah documents, though. Amazingly, the collection of 30,000 genizah manuscripts of Elkan Nathan Adler mentioned earlier was purchased by the seminary in the 1920s, making theirs the second largest holding of genizah material. “No longer, it seems, was it just Schechter who was following the Genizah documents,” writes Glickman. “Now, having moved from Egypt to England to New York, many of the Genizah documents were following him!”

One of the scholars who established himself early on as a

genizah genius was the eastern European Jacob Mann of Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. His specialty was the study of 6th through 11th century responses of rabbinic academies to questions about Jewish law sent them by individuals and groups. The questions and answers concerned many aspects of everyday medieval Jewish life, they came from all over the eastern Jewish world – and there were lots of them, though often in miserable condition. No one had given them any scholarly attention. These and thousands of other documents Mann studied resulted in his two-volume opus, *The Jews in Egypt and in Palestine under the Fatimid Caliphs: A Contribution to Their Political and Communal History Based Chiefly on Genizah Material Hitherto Unpublished* (1920-22). As important as this epic work is, Glickman points out the sad irony that his set, “purchased... from a used book dealer over the Internet in early 2009... had previously been part of the library at a major American university.... they were in factory condition.... Pasted inside the back cover of each volume were ‘Due Date’ slips, both of which were blank. It had been eighty-nine years since that book was published and shelved at the university library. And in all of that time, nobody had ever read it.”

Glickman also tells the moving story of genizah giant Shelomo Dov Goitein, a Cambridge University professor who at one point researched the handfuls of Cairo genizah manuscripts the university had purchased “just prior to and immediately after Schechter’s 1897 trip to Cairo” and which had never been examined since. Just the week before, while Goitein lectured on the genizah documents at The Jewish Theological Seminary, a professor wistfully asked if he’d found any letters from David Maimonides to his brother, the famed Jewish scholar Moses. Back at Cambridge, what should the *very first* document Goitein remove from the genizah pile be but an outstanding content letter from David to Moses – apparently the last letter he penned before being lost at sea at age 33. The loss threw Maimonides into many years of deep depression. Ponders Glickman, “How often must the great sage have returned to it during the years of his grief....”

Goitein’s research over many years opened a whole new world of genizah studies, for he focused on everyday life letters and scraps rejected by other scholars. His many books and articles

examined “the far more ‘mundane’ papers that documented the daily lives of medieval Jews. For the first time, the Genizah yielded literary truths not only about Judaism, but also historical truths about Jews and non-Jews who lived in medieval Egypt and beyond.” Goitein’s five-volume *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Genizah* (1967-88) took decades to compile and “uncovers a world.”

Discoveries galore have piled up among other scholars researching the genizah cache. The early genizah pioneer Israel Abrahams, for instance, uncovered fragments of Passover Haggadot prayer books that show distinct, long-forgotten Palestinian variations to rituals Jews thought had remained unchanged for millennia. “It was only due to documents such as the Abrahams’s Haggadot that scholars and students of the Jewish past were able to reclaim knowledge otherwise lost of Palestinian forms of Jewish religious practice.” The genizah is rich in palimpsests – parchments on which the original writing was scraped off and the writing surface reused. “The upper, newer, of these manuscripts were usually Hebrew Rabbinic texts, such as Talmud or Midrash,” Glickman notes. “The texts that hovered beneath the Hebrew, however, were usually Christian passages in Greek or Syriac, often from the New Testament.”

Incredible tales abound. In 1964, the earliest piece of Jewish sheet music was identified – a cryptic, difficult small document that had stumped earlier researchers. “The music was written by perhaps the only person capable of writing a Hebrew poem in Egypt using Babylonian script and setting it to Gregorian chant with an Italian notational system....” In 1976, a scholar at The Jewish Theological Seminary was able to match up one half of an 11th century document with its missing half, a Cairo genizah fragment that Jacob Mann had published in 1920. And as recently as 2003 another scholar identified one more Maimonides scrap at Cambridge that had gone unrecognized for more than a century.

Today Stefan Reif (“a short, spry man with a big smile who exudes a palpable enthusiasm for all things Genizah”) heads up the modest Cambridge facility that continues the genizah research. A wealthy Canadian businessman and philanthropist, Albert Freidberg, has created the Friedberg Genizah Project and

put together “a true Genizah dream team” whose goal is to complete the never-ending task of cataloguing the Cairo genizah and to make it accessible online in digital form. State-of-the-art artificial intelligence utilized in this extraordinary digitization process is even helping rejoin fragment manuscripts found within the Cairo genizah or separated amongst genizah holdings at different institutions. Remarkably, “Before this technology, scholars had identified a total of about four thousand Genizah rejoins. Now, with the new tools... one technician working part-time has already identified several hundred more. As they refine the program and run more manuscripts through it, [they] will be able to reconnect thousands of additional manuscripts that have fallen apart in the Genizah crush.”

Mark Glickman makes a thoughtful and patient guide through a dense, complicated topic which in lesser hands could make for confusing reading indeed. For judaically-challenged reader such as myself, *Sacred Treasure* makes the perfect launching point – truly the most exciting manuscript-related book of the year.

Not to take away from the accomplishment of husband and wife team Peter Cole and Adina Hoffman in their book *Sacred Trash: The Lost and Found World of the Cairo Genizah* – which, being the second of two reviews of titles covering the same topic, will appear to receive short shrift. Hoffman, an author and essayist, and Cole, a translator and poet, make a formidable writing team – although their approach to the Cairo genizah tale is quite different than that of Glickman.

Sacred Treasure and Sacred Trash

Sacred Treasure and *Sacred Trash* are fine examples of authors telling the same story from different vantage points and coming up with very different products. Glickman represents readable chronological reporting and storytelling enjoyable to Jew and Gentile. Hoffman and Cole are enjoyable and accessible to your general Gentile as well, but their slant is a bit more intense, more in depth – more intellectual if you will. Their narrative isn’t strictly straightforward chronological, but moves about in time and space in a more challenging journalistic style. Glickman is meat and potatoes, Hoffman and Cole are *gebratenes und sauerbraten*. Neither approach is “better” than the other; they’re

just different.

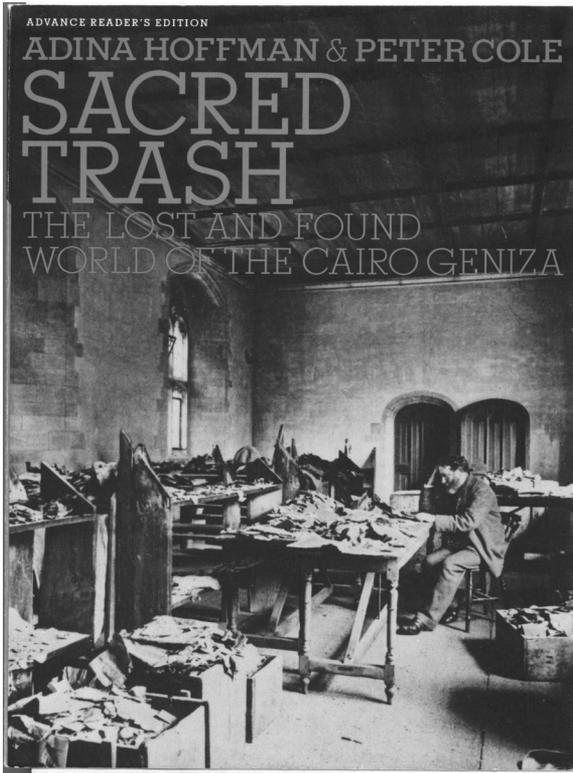
Hoffman and Cole, for example, open *Sacred Trash* with the “Giblews sisters” front and center, whereas Glickman opens with a discussion of the concept of “genizah” and the earliest visitors to the Cairo genizah. Glickman’s Solomon Schechter is an intriguing, salt-of-the-earth scholar whose appearance is hardly mentioned, while Hoffman and Cole offer a striking visual impression of a lively flesh and blood character:

...the very Jewish, very blustery Schechter must... have cut a remarkable figure as he strode down King's Parade. With his bushy, red-tinted beard, unruly hair, and tendency to gesticulate broadly as he spoke, Schechter had been known to set off in the broiling heat of midsummer wrapped up in a winter coat and several yards of scarf. An acquaintance remembered first meeting Schechter, with "his dirty black coat, smudged all over with snuff and ashes from his cigar, hands unwashed, nails as black as ink, but rather nice fingers, beard and hair unkempt, a ruddy complexion... One ear was stuffed full of wool, hanging out, and he was always very abrupt in his speech."

Hoffman and Cole’s description of the genizah’s contents likewise contrasts markedly with Glickman’s (and, strangely enough, differs in size, for Glickman’s 12’ by 14’ room measures 6½” by 8’ here!):

After Schechter had climbed a rickety ladder to reach that dim attic-like opening... he found himself staring into a space crammed to bursting with nearly ten centuries’ worth of one Middle Eastern, mostly middle-class Jewish community’s detritus – its letters and poems, its wills and marriage contracts, its bills of lading and writs of divorce, its prayers, prescriptions, trousseau lists, Bibles, money orders, amulets, court depositions, shop inventories, rabbinic response, contracts, leases, magic charms, and receipts. Quite a change from Glickman’s version of the same scene (quoted earlier), but also instructive in seeing the authors’ different approaches.

Glickman and Hoffman/Cole certainly stress different players and different incidents in telling the genizah story. Hoffman and



Cole mentions among the pre-Schechter genizah visitors the Columbian Exposition official Cyrus Adler – who appears nowhere in *Sacred Treasure*. Adler visited Cairo in 1891 and bought ancient parchment scraps that may have been genizah manuscripts from a street vendor, shows them to Schechter and helped to plant a seed in Schechter’s mind – or so he believed. Perhaps Glickman simply found Adler’s claim far-fetched and not worth mentioning. Hoffman and Cole also give far more attention to Schechter’s back-stabbing friend Adolf Neubauer from Oxford, a fussy scholar of notorious frugality who bought and sold genizah fragments. Neubauer berated Elkan Nathan Adler for having not emptied out the entire Cairo genizah when he entered and took “a sackful of paper and parchment writings,” noting that “science knows no law” – typically unscrupulous behavior from the unprincipled academic. And while Glickman simply gives

the nuts and bolts of Schechter's victory in identifying Ben Sirah leaves and proving Hebrew the original language of Ecclesiasticus, Hoffman and Cole give page after page (after page after page...) of textual criticism and interpretation.

Another example would be the medieval Jewish poet Yannai, who was known in name only prior to the Cairo genizah. No doubt because co-author Cole is a poet himself, he and Hoffman give full-blown treatment to the series of Yannai discoveries that Glickman lightly skims over. The discovery on the neglected *upper writing* of a palimpsest of a Yannai poem on a genizah manuscript published by Cambridge University Press, hiding right there in plain sight, is thrilling. It "was a find that would, in time, lead scholars to the complete works of one of the titans of Hebrew poetry and a thorough reconsideration of the evolution and nature of Hebrew literature." A great deal of detail on Yannai's liturgical poems and their influence follows – some might say too much.

Hoffman and Cole also tend to delve into some of the hoary theological content and issues raised by genizah documents. Most notably, there's an overly-lengthy discussion of heretical Jewish sects such as the Karaites, whose existence first came to light because of genizah manuscripts. While in some circles this may be considered one of the more important genizah discoveries, in a general interest book such as *Sacred Trash* the *Cliff's Notes* version of this lecture might be more appropriate.

My only beef with *Sacred Trash* may be with the publisher, not the authors. This book contains **no index**, a major gaffe in the eyes of this reviewer (and former book editor) caused perhaps by a desire to economize. If you wish to refresh your memory on when Elkan Nathan Adler first appeared, or what have you, you're SOL. Scholarly notes on each chapter are lengthy and detailed, which makes the index oversight all the more puzzling. *Sacred Trash's* illustrations offer another annoyance. While they're far more plentiful than the illustrations in *Sacred Treasure*, they bear **no captions**. Sure, the text on the page on which they appear relates to the illustration, but often in a non-specific way. The reader is forced to deduce details that should be plainly spelled out. There is indeed a list of captions at the back of the book with corresponding page numbers, but why make the

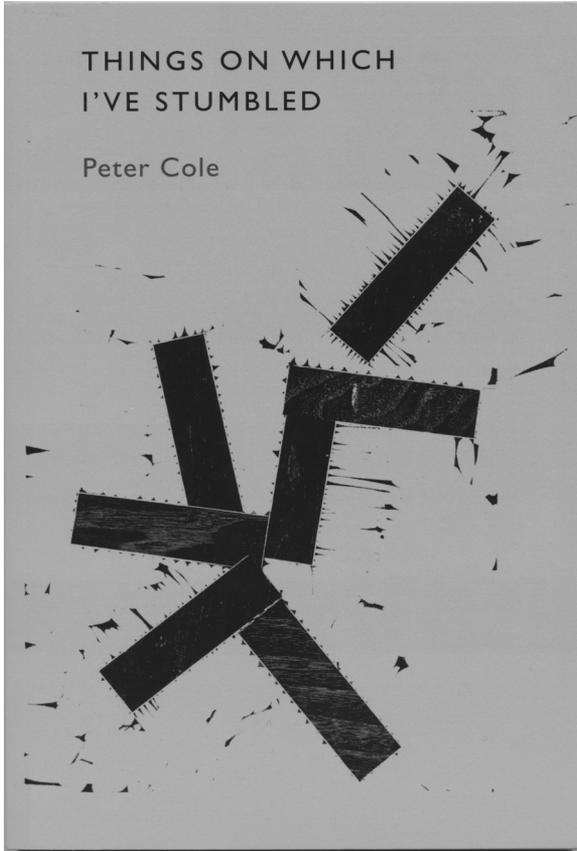
reader flip back and forth when with today's computerized type-setting placing the caption below the illustration isn't the ordeal it once was? I haven't the patience to do so, and doubt that many readers do.

That *Sacred Treasure* and *Sacred Trash* differ so markedly in their approach shouldn't surprise; they make pleasant companion volumes. A treasure as large and complex as the Cairo genizah makes a story as challenging to tame as the manuscripts themselves. Glickman takes a classic, mainstream A to Z narrative approach, and a superb effort it is. Hoffman and Cole display an edgier, more contemporary style. Each brings out aspects of the genizah the other may have emphasized less. I can't help but recommend them not only individually but as a pair.

If you still – *still!* – haven't had enough genizah, Peter Cole's poetry collection *Things on Which I've Stumbled* makes the perfect digestif and concludes this genizah trilogy. The Cairo genizah is the subject of the title poem of this slim collection, and at 24 pages in length represents fully one quarter of the book. If ever a topic seems impossible to capture in poetry, the genizah might well be it. "There once was a rabbi named Schechter" just won't cut it.

Cole's slim, sparse style may seem an odd juxtaposition with a subject as massive and overflowing and chaotic as the Cairo genizah. A lush, full, verbose style such as Whitman might come to mind, or in prose a style as thick and hearty as Thomas Wolfe, as a natural fit for so large a subject. Yet Cole's minimalist style may be just the curative to impose some order on such enormous disorder as the genizah. His penchancy for short, sharp lines and brief memorable images mirrors the disjointed, fragmentary nature of the genizah documents themselves. Take the mood-setting opening stanza, which in few words succeeds in capturing some of the genizah's eclectic nature:

*Poetry and all that garbage,
Left in a pocket
of the mind
or a pair of pants,
a robe,
or slipped inside a book –*



*thought's disjecta membra –
 a letter forgotten
 (a recipe scribbled on its back)
 a shopping list,
 or bill once due,
 living's marginalia –
 the rubble of what we've known was true...*

Subtitled “among the remains of the Cairo Genizah” and divided into five brief sections, “Things on Which I’ve Stumbled” provides a bare narrative framework that provides context for the genizah’s sprawling contents. Cole sets the scene, lightly,

with a few narrative details of the genizah's discovery, as when "In a crawl space over the prayer floor, / a storeroom perched on Coptic columns, / high in the wall of the women's gallery / (reached by ascent on a ladder only / and entered doubled over...)."

Cole actually takes a large number of actual text snippets of genizah documents to fill in this framework – often just a telling phrase or a few words, a sentence or two – to give a sense of the glimpse into everyday medieval Jewish life the genizah provides. Deceptively simple in appearance (and difficult to describe!), this technique is surprisingly effective and moving, a collage that strives to capture a community's essence as portrayed in the paper it leaves behind. Thus Cole characterizes our castoffs:

Garbage is

*what isn't wanted,
what's no longer put to use
and worthless in a certain eye –
old amulets, and bills of lading,
pledges, contracts, i.o.u.'s –
the weakened pages of fading hymns
or poems that meant the world to someone
once—
copied out and shipped
with silk and cloves
across The Sea –
tossed now
onto the scrap-heap,
longing's junkyard....*

Consider *Things on Which I've Stumbled* a poetic condensation of *Sacred Trash* and *Sacred Treasure*. An impressive attempt it is.

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