Sacred trash

The lost and found world of the Cairo geniza

By adina hoffman and peter cole

(Nextbook/schoken; 286 pages; $26.95)

For centuries, the Jews of Fustat, or Old Cairo, preserved anything - and everything - written in Hebrew letters. They deposited, or dumped, books, letters and poems, bills of lading, writs of marriage and divorce, shop inventories, receipts and magic charms into a room 8 feet long and 6 1/2 feet wide in what became known as the Ben Ezra synagogue.

In 1896, Solomon Schechter, a Romanian-born reader in rabbinics at Cambridge University in England, climbed up a rickety ladder to peer into the geniza (the almost untranslatable word means "hoard" or "hidden treasure"), with its cache of hundreds of thousands of documents, and understood at once that he had uncovered a road map to the religious and secular world of medieval Jews.

In "Sacred Trash," essayist and biographer Adina Hoffman and poet and translator Peter Cole tell the story of Schechter and the scholar-adventurers who came after him - and explain how the geniza has transformed in fundamental ways our knowledge of medieval history. Beautifully written, learned and lucid, "Sacred Trash" is a treasure that should not be hidden.

Hoffman and Cole understand that there is a fine line "between ransack and redemption." Working for months, sorting, gathering and bagging fragments in a dark, suffocating room, Schechter complained to his wife in a language all his own about dust ("Genizaschmutz") and mosquito bites ("Ich full of spots bin") - and came to believe that the manuscripts were his private property. After all, he emphasized, the grand rabbi of Cairo and the wealthy Jewish families of Fustat had given him permission to take anything he wanted. Uncomfortable with his claim that the geniza was "mine by right," the authors nevertheless give Schechter credit for understanding that the collection would be virtually worthless "if picked apart and sold off by various profiteers."

The greatest discovery of the Cairo Geniza was a text in the original Hebrew (composed in the transitional period of the Second Temple) of "The Wisdom of Ben Sira," a collection of hymns and homiletical verse later known as Ecclesiasticus. Citing passages "unsurpassed in beauty of diction and grandeur of thought," Schechter used "Ben Sira" to show that Protestant critics erred in their dating of biblical books. His passion, the authors indicate, was also ignited "by a more fundamental concern": that modern Jews as well as Christians become better informed about Judaism's vitality and authority.

"Ben Sira" was not the only "aha finding" in the geniza. Nonetheless, Hoffman and Cole suggest, just as important was the examination of thousands and thousands of discrete documents, "grounded in the grittiest minutiae of daily life" in Fustat, which in its prime was home to the most prosperous Jewish community in the world and a hub for merchants in North Africa, the Middle East and India, "and their eventual deployment in a larger frame."

In the mid-20th century, the authors reveal, S.D. Goitein, a German-trained scholar of Islam, Zionist educator, aspiring playwright, professor at the Hebrew University and the University of Pennsylvania, and self-styled "interpretive sociographer," developed a system for working with the texts, whether they were "elegantly calligraphed scrolls" or "hastily scrawled scraps." Working ceaselessly for three decades ("I've completely stopped living and become the 'Genizer' "), he built a "mirror of life, often cracked and blotchy but very wide in scope."

Thanks to Goitein we know a lot about the medieval Mediterranean postal service; twice-a-week food distribution to Fustat's Jewish poor; attitudes toward homosexuality, remarriage and pigeon racing; the absence of a bar mitzvah ritual; and the existence of take-out food. In a relatively open, tolerant, loosely organized and competitive society, Goitein asserted, Jews could practice nearly all the professions, enter into partnerships with Muslims and live side by side with gentiles.

Hoffman and Cole do not assess Goitein's controversial, and widely criticized, characterization of this world as a "religious
democracy ... similar to that prevailing today in the United States." Nor do they try to measure the impact on Judaism of the contrarians and heretics who show up in the geniza, advocating that the father, not the youngest child, ask the Four Questions at the Passover seder; allowing the consumption of milk with meat; prescribing circumcision with a scalpel and not a scalpel; and proscribing sexual intercourse on the Sabbath.

Their aim, exquisitely realized in "Sacred Trash," is at once simpler and more ambitious. They want us to look back across the millennia at the Geniza documents, at the "systole and diastole of dismissal and deliverance" they embody, and at the redeemers, the Schechters and Goiteins, "meticulous even in their dreams," who have brought us back "to the glory of the famous" and "the fate of the inconspicuous," each of them "links in a chain of transmission," carrying us back to Ben Sira, "from that spirit to its source," and inviting us to "partake of eternity."

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This article appeared on page GF - 4 of the San Francisco Chronicle

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