What’s in your suitcase?

What do rice, locks, rat traps, a coconut scrapper, several ladles and four bed legs have in common? The foundations of a Two Ronnies’ sketch? Maybe, but they are all items that Abraham ben Yiya, the twelfth-century Jewish trader, packed for a journey back across the sea from his adopted home of Mamluqore. Abraham, who was the subject of Amitav Ghosh’s celebrated in an Antique Land, made two lengthy sojourns on the Malabar Coast, before sailing back across the Indian Ocean to Yemen for the last time in 1149. These items appear, alongside containers and baskets containing all sorts of foodstuffs and commodities in a single document, T-S NS 324.114, a list that Abraham wrote specifying exactly what would be carried on the lengthy and potentially hazardous voyage across the Indian Ocean.

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Aitken, Egger-Wenzel and Reif (eds), Discovering, Deciphering and Dissenting: Ben Sira Manuscripts after 120 years (De Gruyter, 2019)

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Yosef Ofer, one of the world’s leading scholars of the Biblical Masora (and not just Tiberian Masora, as he’s also written definitively on the Babylonian Masora) has a new book out, The Masora on Scripture and its Methods. It covers the Masora in all its aspects, including orthography, ketiv and qere, and manuscripts such as the Aleppo Codex, and its comprehensiveness should ensure it takes its place alongside Yeivin’s The Tiberian Masorah as a standard work on the subject. It’s a real treat for Masoretic scholars and those with any interest in how the text of the Hebrew Bible has been transmitted down the centuries.

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Although the two fragments are not consecutive, the authors argue that they belong to the same biblical scroll. They base this claim on a textual and paleographic examination. Mishar notes that a single column of text from this Torah scroll is missing between MS. London and MS. Ashkar.

Engel and Mishar list the unique features of the scroll, which they date, by paleographic means and on the basis of carbon-14 dating, to the seventh or eighth centuries CE. In the course of a survey and classification of Torah scroll fragments in the Cairo Genizah, I identified two

continued overleaf

More fragments of early Torah scroll come to light


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fragments which directly join the Ashikar and London fragments and completely fill the gap between these two. In addition to these, I identified in the Genizah collections eleven additional fragments that, by palaeographical criteria, belong to this Torah scroll (I am grateful to Edna Engel for her opinion on this question).

Quite surprisingly, one of these fragments came to light in the Ashikar Collection itself, but its illegible condition prevented its identification. The discovery of these fragments shows us that the two previously discovered fragments, too, originated in the Cairo Genizah.

The Torah scroll remnants do not form a completely continuous text. Nonetheless, many fragments survived in two concentrations, one is Gen. 44–Exod. 3; and the second, Exod. 4–17. The scroll is written on leather Gevil (גוויל — a form of skin made from the whole hide). Each column of the scroll contains 42 lines, each line 310 columns.

The Torah scroll remnants comprise about 310 columns. These remnants comprise close to ten percent of a whole Torah scroll. This, then, is the oldest Torah scroll in the world of which such considerable portions are preserved. Very few Hebrew manuscripts from this period have survived.

Consequently, this discovery of a manuscript from the seventh or eighth centuries, which is also the earliest biblical manuscript after the Dead Sea Scrolls, makes a major contribution to the study of Hebrew manuscripts as a whole, and especially to the research of the copying of Torah scrolls.

The following is a list of the fragments and their contents:


Mordechai Veinot
Hebrew University
(Thanks to the Ludwig Jerschick Chair in Caddicography and Palaeography at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem for their support in my research.)

Jews, Money, Myth

A new exhibition in London’s Jewish Museum looks at the subject of money, exploring its role in Jewish life, and how it has affected the relations between Jews and non-Jews, examining the origins of some of the most deeply engrained anti-Semitic stereotypes. The exhibition features a manuscript of the Cairo Genizah, in particular the Cambridge University Library’s Unpublished Maimonides Letters from the Cairo Genizah, which is being completed by Prof. Renée Levine Melammed, and Maimonides’ Epistles and Personal Correspondence (in English translation), which I have been editing.

When I was a Research Associate in the Genizah Research Unit, Kraemer shared with me his musings on C.U.B. and wrote: Aside from Jerusalem, Cambridge to me is the closest place to heaven. I mean the library and the collection in the first place, but also the natural beauty of the place and its tranquillity.

He is survived by his wife, Arvi, three daughters from his marriage to the late Roberta Kree – Judith Maisel, Susan Barak, and Sarah Kretzsch – and nine grandchildren.

Zvi Stamper
Orot Israel College

Schooling and Identity

On 11–13 February 2019 the Unit hosted a workshop on Parenting, Schooling and Identity—Formation and Reformations: From the Middle Ages to the Modern Period, organised by Zvi Stamper, Amir Ashkar and Nadia Virdo in collaboration with Orot Israel College, Campus Rehovot. The workshop brought together thirty scholars from Israel and Europe working on modern educational, family and social historians. They explored the historical links that lie between the formation of minority religious identities in medieval and modern societies and the ways in which modern theoretical approaches can inform the work of medieval social historians.

Talks and discussions addressed the effect of pedagogy on students’ emerging identity in faith-based schools, the influence of teachers’ perception of God on students’ religious identity, Maimonides’ curriculum for post-elementary education, as well as the links between sexuality, religiosity and communal identity, and other matters.

“Aside from Jerusalem, Cambridge to me is the closest place to heaven”

An obituary for Professor Joel L. Kraemer

Prof. Joel Kraemer was intimately familiar with the Cambridge Genizah Collections.

He received his Ph.D. in Near Eastern Studies from Yale, and taught at the faculties of IJS in New York, Yale, Tel Aviv University, and the University of Chicago. Kraemer was distinguished in many fields of scholarship, from Talmud to Islamic philosophy. His celebrated publications in Islamic and Jewish Studies include The Renaissance of Islam and Maimonides: The Life and World of One of Civilization’s Greatest Minds; A Festschrift in his honour, Adaptations and Innovations: Studies on the Interaction between Jewish and Islamic Thought and Literature from the Early Middle Ages to the Late Twentieth Century, appeared in 2007.

Kraemer spent extended periods in Cambridge and became a world-renowned scholar in Genizah research. Many of his publications were based on materials found in the Genizah, in particular the Cambridge University Library Collection. Among the more significant papers are Six Unpublished Maimonides Letters from the Cairo Genizah, Maimonidean Studies 2 (1992: 61–94) and Women Speak for Themselves, in S. C. Reid (ed.), The Cambridge Genizah Collections: Their Contents and Significance (2002: 178–216).

Some of his works remain to be published, including More Precious than Rubies: Women’s Letters from the Cairo Genizah, which is being completed by Prof. Renée Levine Melammed, and Maimonides’ Epistles and Personal Correspondence (in English translation), which I have been editing.

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T-S 12.832, which Kraemer identified in 1991 as a letter written by Moses Maimonides, in which the Rambam is writing to a local judge to retrieve the assets left by a murdered merchant.

Do your utmost to summon the litigants and to caution and intimidate them in the name of God, may He be honoured and exalted, so that they confess in the absence of clear evidence. And mediate among them; perhaps you can settle the issues by compromise...
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‘Jews, Money, Myth’ runs from 19 March to 7 July 2019 at the Jewish Museum. https://jewishmuseum.org.uk/exhibitions/jews-money-myth/

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Genizah Fragments 77
Editor Melvene Schermer-Lee
Design HJ Associates, Cambridge

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Above: T-S A5 37.1, part of the book of Genesis. One of thirteen newly-identified fragments from the same early Torah scroll.

ON OTHER PAGES: Obituary for Professor Joel L. Kraemer | What’s in your suitcase?