

Goitein, the Geniza, and Muslim History

by Mark R. Cohen

Shelomo Dov Goitein was born in 1900, in the little village of Burgkundstat in southern Germany, and died 85 years later in Princeton, New Jersey. He had both a thorough Jewish and secular education. Goitein spent his university years, between 1918 and 1923, at the University of Frankfurt, where he studied Arabic and Islam under Joseph Horowitz, while continuing his Talmudic training with a private tutor. Goitein's knowledge of Talmud would later serve him well when he turned to the Geniza and to the study of medieval Jewish society.

But Goitein initially set out in another direction. For his doctorate he studied Islam, and in 1923 he completed his doctoral dissertation on the subject of prayer in the Qur'an. Nor did he seek a career in the academy. Rather, immediately upon completing his thesis, Goitein fulfilled his long-held Zionist ambition to emigrate to Palestine. Goitein liked to relate that he sailed to the Holy Land on the same ship as Gershom Scholem: the value of Palestinian imports that year was certainly high, at least in intellectual terms! In Palestine, Goitein planned to work as a teacher, living in a youth village. Like many other immigrants with European university training, he found employment in secondary education, teaching in the Reali School in Haifa.

In 1925, two years after his arrival, the new Hebrew University of Jerusalem opened its doors, and in 1928 Goitein joined the faculty as its first instructor in Islamic studies. And so, by chance, not design, Goitein became the orientalist his university education had prepared him to be. But even though the world of scholarship and the university dominated the rest of his career, Goitein retained his original interest in the education of the young, publishing books on the teaching of Hebrew and the Bible, and serving as senior educa-

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tion officer of the British mandatory government in Palestine, a post he held from 1938 to 1948.

Shortly after joining the faculty of the Hebrew University, Goitein began to do field work among the Yemenites, a research endeavor that intensified with the mass migration to Israel of the bulk of the remaining Jews of Yemen following the establishment of the State of Israel. Here Goitein found himself blending Arabic and Jewish studies. Only an Arabist with the Judaic training Goitein had acquired in his youth could have understood Yemenite Jewish culture as well as he did. Goitein published seminal works on their Arabic dialect and their way of life. This early ethnographic work among what Goitein called “those most Jewish and most Arab of all Jews” profoundly influenced his later study of the life of medieval Arab-Jewish communities as reflected in the documents of the Cairo Geniza.

Goitein first encountered the Geniza on a trip to Budapest in 1948. While there he had the opportunity to examine the Geniza manuscript fragments that had once belonged to the collection of the late-nineteenth-century scholar, David Kaufmann. Thus began a preoccupation that would last for the remainder of his life with these fascinating letters, legal records, marriage contracts, business accounts, and other documents that reveal daily life in the medieval Mediterranean Islamic world

Upon his move to the United States in 1957 to take up a position at the University of Pennsylvania, Goitein was already deeply committed to Geniza research. Many myths arose later on to explain Goitein’s departure from Israel, some of them unkind. I do not pretend to know his motive in 1957. I *do* know that he later came to believe he would not have accomplished as much as he did had he remained in Israel. Even those who bore him ill will for (in their words) “abandoning” Israel would have conceded Goitein’s point.

In the mid-1950s, Goitein concentrated on Geniza documents relating to the India trade. Soon, however, he transferred his energies to what he considered propaedeutic: a survey of the entire corpus of historical Geniza documents (today estimated to number about 15,000 fragments, from the tiniest to specimens of substantial size). This bore fruit in hundreds of publications, of which the five volumes of *A Mediterranean Society* constitute the *summa*.

In this work and in scores upon scores of articles in which he published and interpreted hundreds of Geniza texts, Goitein broke new ground in every respect. He described in fine and often intimate detail the economic activities, communal organization, family life, material civilization, and *mentalité* of the Arabic-speaking Jews of medieval Islam during the eleventh to thirteenth centuries.

As a teacher at the University of Pennsylvania, as a writer, as a speaker at countless learned conferences, and as someone always willing to help others with their research, Goitein inspired many aspiring scholars to follow his path.

The Geniza in Context

Because he is so thoroughly identified with Jewish history, the contribution of Goitein's Geniza studies to the general Islamic field has not always been appreciated. Increasingly, however, orientalists—and I include orientalists living in the Arab world—have begun to recognize how much Goitein's work feeds into Islamic history in general.

This goes back, I think, to his own training as an Islamicist. Goitein was very much in touch with the world of Islamic scholarship and with Islamicists. He knew what the issues of Islamic history were, and he knew how to spot nuggets of evidence about Islamic society buried in the Geniza records. Read, for instance, the section on "Muslim Government" in the second volume of *Mediterranean Society* to see how Goitein made the Geniza illuminate institutions of Muslim administration from Jewish sources. To be sure, much of the detail can be found in Muslim chronicles and administrative treatises. But there are glimpses that are not to be had if one relies exclusively on Muslim sources. The best example, not surprisingly, is Goitein's depiction of the poll tax administration.

But there are peeks at the Muslim judiciary and the police, and the information often confirms in passing or adds vivid detail to what the Arabic literary sources tell us. For instance, the most common form of police punishment in the Geniza is a form of house arrest called *tarsim*. People in debt or who stood in arrears with their poll tax obligation often ended up confined to their own homes until they paid what they owed. The word *tarsim* refers to the pay-

ments (*rusum*) that were made *by the detained person himself* to the guardsman to cover his wages. The term *tarsim* also applied to a warrant which preceded imprisonment, requiring payment for each day the warrant was in effect without the debt being discharged. I am not aware that this aspect of police administration is known from Muslim sources, and if it is, the Geniza gives the institution flesh and blood in its unmediated descriptions from real life.

In the very first volume of *Mediterranean Society*, subtitled “Economic Foundations” and published in 1967, Goitein beckoned to Islamicists to pay attention to the world of the Geniza. The Jews were thoroughly integrated into the commercial life of the Mediterranean in the eleventh-thirteenth centuries. Goitein showed that information about commercial arrangements, the world of finance, and the industrial sector—to name just a few walks of life in which Jews were active—could be applied to the general population. I remember how struck I was when I first saw photos of some of the Arabic, that is Islamic, merchant letters from the Austrian State Library in Vienna. The words were written in Arabic characters, and the names were those of Muslims, but the style and content were completely familiar to me from reading Judaeo-Arabic commercial letters from the Cairo Geniza.

Glance at the fourth volume, “Daily Life.” In it, Goitein has assembled a remarkable and rich collage of detail about the material life of Islamic civilization. The Geniza people were essentially urban, and the Geniza offers a unique opportunity to assess and annotate some of the assumptions about Islamic urban history, as Goitein himself announced at the beginning of the volume. Peek at the subtitles of his chapters on the city: “Topographic Features,” “Zoning” (meaning division into residential and commercial sectors), “Ruins,” “Unoccupied Premises,” “Semi-public Buildings and Other Landmarks,” “The House of God and the Gathering Place for the People,” “The Presence of the Government” (Goitein quotes from his student Moshe Gil an Islamic literary source that mentions garbage removal—the Geniza is replete with detail about how much it cost), “The Individual and his Hometown.” Look at just some of the running heads in the rest of the volume: “Domestic Architecture,” “Furnishings of the Home,” “Clothing,” “Jewelry,” “Food.” Goitein wrote this about food prices: “The data from the Geniza, which reflect actual experience, are generally more realistic and reli-

able than those provided by Islamic literary sources, which are often given in round sums and written down long after their occurrence.”

This is not a volume about Jewish daily life, although the data comes from Jews. Jews lived like Muslims, and so the fourth volume of *Mediterranean Society* is a gold mine of information for the Islamicist seeking to learn what may not be so readily learned from Muslim sources.

Goitein wanted Arabists and Islamic orientalists to buy into the Geniza. Occasionally he published Judaeo-Arabic documents in Arabic transcription for the convenience of his non-Hebrew reading colleagues. He did this, for instance, in his last published article, “Portrait of a Medieval India Trader,” which appeared posthumously in 1987, along with English translations and facsimiles of the original texts.

The India trade was a good choice with which to make the pitch to generalists. Very little was known about the trade between the Mediterranean and India before the documentary discoveries in the Geniza. A seminal article by Bernard Lewis on “The Fatimids and the Route to India,” published in 1953 and based on Islamic sources, hypothesized that the Fatimids spread their Isma‘ili propaganda in India and encouraged trade along the Red Sea route to India as part of a policy to divert the Far Eastern trade away from the old Persian Gulf route controlled by their Abbasid rivals. Lewis intuited Fatimid strategy without knowledge of the exciting material that Goitein was at that very moment uncovering in the Geniza.

Goitein began writing about the India trade shortly thereafter. Two of the articles with which he made the transition from Islamic studies to the Geniza featured the India trade: “The Jewish India-Merchants of the Middle Ages,” published in *India and Israel* in June 1953); and “From the Mediterranean to India: Documents on the Trade to India, South Arabia, and East Africa from the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries,” published in *Speculum* in 1954. Another article, updating the original forays of the 1950s, appeared in *Islamic Culture* in 1963. It is not surprising that Goitein chose *Speculum* and *Islamic Culture* as forums for these articles. He was anxious to disseminate the information among general medievalists, both Europeanists and Islamicists. He believed that they, even more than Jewish historians, could benefit what the Geniza had to say about this subject. For the same reason he sent his last article, “Portrait of

a Medieval India Trader,” to the *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*.

Goitein did not continue working on the “India Book,” realizing that he must first set the stage by documenting and describing life in the Mediterranean. We are probably fortunate that he established this priority, for otherwise we might not have the magnum opus of *A Mediterranean Society*. At his death, after submitting the fifth and final volume of *Mediterranean Society*, Goitein had just returned with excitement and vigor to the India project. I remember visiting him shortly before his death and listening with wonderment to this man who had just completed a masterpiece of twentieth century historical scholarship and had yet another one at his fingertips. It is a pity that he did not live long enough to complete it. (The work is presently in the hands of his disciple, Mordechai A. Friedman of Tel Aviv University, to complete and see through the press.)

Beyond Jewish Scholarship

Later, the world-at-large got the chance—from an unexpected corner—to read about the thrills of the India trade as portrayed in Goitein’s Geniza. The story I am about to tell exemplifies Goitein’s global impact. I refer to the Indian writer Amitav Ghosh and his wonderful book, *In an Antique Land*, published in 1992. Ghosh, while an Oxford doctoral student in social anthropology in 1978, chanced upon the India trade while reading Goitein’s magnificent collection, *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders* (1973). In that medieval, cosmopolitan world of commerce and travel, Ghosh met up with one of Goitein’s twelfth-century India merchants and his Indian slave and business agent. The young scholar from Calcutta identified with his twelfth-century countryman and resolved to tell his story.

He began by choosing to do his anthropological fieldwork in Egypt. His quest later brought him to Princeton in 1985: he wanted to meet Goitein. But Goitein had recently died, so poor Amitav Ghosh got me instead, a distant runner-up. That began an association that lasted several years while Amitav researched the Indian trade documents in the Geniza, first in Princeton, then in Cambridge, England, reading the Judaeo-Arabic texts about his charac-

ters in the original, and writing chapters for his book. It is a riveting story, interweaving his own experience as an Indian living in Egyptian villages of the late twentieth century with that of Bomma, the Egyptian slave of that Jewish merchant who travelled between Egypt and India 850 years earlier.

Ghosh's book catapulted Goitein and his research into the world of fiction readers, for Ghosh was already known by 1993 for two acclaimed novels set in India. Indeed, *In an Antique Land* reads like a novel. Early on I told Amitav that his book, when published, would do more for the Geniza and for Goitein's reputation as a scholar than any number of the books Goitein or his students had written or ever would write. I was not wrong. The book has sold many thousands of copies, and many of the reviews mentioned Goitein. Readers of the *Washington Post* learned that "S.D. Goitein, almost certainly the greatest scholar to have written on the social and economic history of the Near East, made brilliant use of the Geniza materials in his exhaustively researched, fluently written, and magisterial five-volume work, *A Mediterranean Society*." Clifford Geertz, who knew Goitein during the years he spent as a long-term member of the Institute for Advanced Study, told readers of *The New Republic*: "It is on these materials that Goitein based *A Mediterranean Society*, his magnificent synthesis of medieval society in the region, one of the most considerable historical works of our time."

Goitein would have loved *In an Antique Land*, for he was deeply committed to broad educational goals. And Goitein deeply wished to see the importance of the Geniza broadcast beyond the confines of the world of Jewish scholarship. It was fitting, therefore, that he published his final article in a form that would be convenient for orientalists unfamiliar with Hebrew or even the Hebrew script.

I think that we are now entering a period in which Goitein's dream is beginning to be realized. I will give a few examples. The late Jeanette Wakin's book on the formulary treatise of the tenth-century al-Tahawi is sprinkled with notes based on communications with Goitein about parallels between written legal documents in Islam and court records from the Cairo Geniza.

I have to add a personal vignette to this. Several years ago we hosted a visiting professor from Riyadh in my department at Princeton, a noted scholar of *hadith*. This Muslim knew very little about Judaism, and absolutely nothing about the Geniza. We be-

came friendly: he pumped me discretely for information about Judaism and for bibliography on the subject, which he purchased and had sent to him in Riyadh. I told him about my Judaeo-Arabic seminar, and suggested he sit in because we were reading things that might interest him. He demurred: I think he was deterred by the Hebrew script, and by the “Jewishness” of the subject. But I showed him a legal document that I was reading with my students and began reciting it to him. “That’s exactly what we say in our documents,” he blurted out in excitement. The next day, he came to my class.

My colleague at Princeton, Avrom Udovitch, has for many years been writing about Islamic economic and social history as it is illuminated by the Cairo Geniza. A close collaborator of Goitein during the fifteen years Goitein lived in Princeton, Udovitch has taken the Geniza finds well beyond the foundations laid by the master of us all.

Two recent Princeton dissertations written in the Department of Near Eastern Studies, based in part on Geniza research, have come forth in book form: Olivia Remie Constable’s *Trade and Traders in Muslim Spain* (Cambridge, 1994) and Hassan Khalilieh’s *Islamic Maritime Law: An Introduction* (Leiden, 1998). Four current graduate students at Princeton are preparing dissertations based in part on the Geniza: one, on the office of the *nesiut*, the second, on the Almohad movement, the third, on the medieval port city of Aden, and the fourth, on Muslim family law in the Mamluk period.

My next example is that of an Egyptian scholar, and the story actually begins with Bernard Lewis. I met Hassanein Muhammad Rabie in the mid-1970s when he spent a year as a visitor in my department at Princeton. He had completed his dissertation under Lewis’s direction at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, on “The Financial System of Egypt 1169-1341.” His book by that title had been published in Arabic in 1964, and an English version appeared in 1972. Remarkable for an Arab scholar, I thought, Rabie used Geniza documents. When I asked him about this, he told me that his advisor had recommended (maybe he said “insisted”) he look for material in the Geniza, so he had learned the Hebrew alphabet and gone off to Cambridge. But that was only the beginning. In his subsequent career, Rabie has continued publishing articles illustrating the importance of the Geniza for Islamic history,

and Goitein's name is writ large in his footnotes. Today, as president of Cairo University, Rabie continues to preach the importance of the Geniza and the work of Goitein that his teacher, Bernard Lewis, made sure he absorbed while a doctoral student in London.

Since Goitein's death in 1985, there have been some tantalizing developments in Egypt, and I am sure that Goitein would have followed them with enthusiasm had he lived longer. It was always known, though not much emphasized, that Cairo had *genizot* (plural), not just the one geniza, the famous Geniza discovered in a chamber behind a wall in the Ben Ezra Synagogue. For instance, between 1909 and 1912, the wealthy Egyptian Jew Jack Mosseri, working with Jewish orientalists among others, dug up a geniza in the section of Basatine cemetery where Mosseri's family and other, less notable Jews were interred. The fragments they exhumed were medieval, of the same type that Schechter and his predecessors had removed from the Ben Ezra Synagogue. Mosseri referred to this find as "a new Ghenizah" in an article he published in 1913. Later it came to be known as the Mosseri Genizah Collection, and while the location of the originals is not a matter of public knowledge, photographs of the collection were made by the Jewish National and University Library in 1970, and a catalogue of its some 5,600 fragments was published in 1990.

With the knowledge of the Mosseri expedition in mind, in the late 1980s a team of Egyptian scholars, under the auspices of the Egyptian Department of Antiquities, dug in those same cemetery grounds and unearthed three buried geniza sites. Much new material was removed from the ground. A catalogue in Arabic of a selection of the documents was published in 1993. In the introduction it describes in some detail the discovery of the original Geniza and the importance of its documentary fragments for general Mediterranean Islamic history. Although the items in this catalogue date mostly from the twentieth century, the scope of the material is the same as that which was found in the Ben Ezra Geniza: from religious books to secular papers reflecting everyday Jewish communal and commercial life. The Egyptians call this *al-geniza al-gedida*, the "New Geniza." For anyone wishing to work on the modern Egyptian Jewish community, this find furnishes information that supplements the literary and archival sources.

What is most interesting, in terms of what I have been saying

about Goitein and his impact on general orientalists, is what this catalogue says about him in the introduction:

Goitein is considered one of the most famous Jewish orientalists (*min ashhar al-mustashriqin al-yahud*) to have published and made use of the Geniza documents.

Without making explicit Goitein's contribution to the Islamic field, the introduction lauds his greatness as a Jewish orientalist. The introduction further bemoans, somewhat inaccurately, that "all of the orientalists" who have worked on the Geniza have been Jews, and no more than a handful have been non-Jews. That is unfortunate, the introduction goes on, since "the Geniza is very important for the study of the economic, social and intellectual history of Egypt and the Arab world in the Middle Ages." The introduction enumerates five specific contributions of the Geniza documents: (1) they preserve information on trade, prices, and monetary values; (2) they fill gaps left by Islamic chronicles; (3) they provide information on the lower classes of society; (4) they include copies of documents from the government chancery; (5) they illuminate the history of the Arabic language, particularly medieval Arabic dialects. I see here the hand of Rabie, who is identified as the head of the committee of the scientific research center that oversees the "New Geniza" and whose own book and articles on the significance of the Geniza for Islamic history are cited in the notes.

The authors of the Arabic catalogue are fully aware of the role Goitein's work has played in this matter. Their reticence about this is not surprising. There is a great deal of resentment in the Egyptian scholarly community about the fact that the Ben Ezra Geniza was exported from Egypt at the end of the nineteenth century, which inevitably led to its monopolization by foreign, mainly Jewish scholars. One can only hope that more orientalists from the Arab and non-Arab world will seize the opportunity open to them to study the Geniza documents, including the "Old Geniza," and exploit these for Islamic history, so realizing Goitein's dream that the Geniza become the legacy not only of the Jews.

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