

Sacred Treasure: The Cairo Genizah

- “As the renowned Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon – Maimonides – wrote in thirteenth-century Cairo: ‘It is forbidden to destroy any sacred writing or its commentary or its interpretation.’”¹
- “So what are Jews to do when their Hebrew books and papers become damaged, destroyed, or simply out-of-date? One option is to bury them in a Jewish cemetery, customarily near the grave of a scholar. The other (often more convenient) option is to designate a room, usually an attic or a cellar in the synagogue, as a genizah – a repository for damaged sacred documents.”
- “Eventually, not only documents including the name of God, but *any* document with *any* Hebrew on it also went into a genizah.”
- “The texts were unusable, but in a literal sense, they were also indispensable. And into the [Cairo] Genizah they went...for nearly a thousand years.”

Introduction: Treasure in the Synagogue Attic

- “...the Ben Ezra Synagogue was established prior to 822 and might date back much farther...Sometime around 1012, the caliph Al-Hakim ordered the destruction of all Jewish and Christian houses of worship in Egypt.”
- “...genizah was larger than most – two stories high...”
- “‘Written Torah’... ‘Oral Torah,’ and eventually they, too, began to be written down in the Talmud, Rabbinic commentaries, law codes, and other sacred texts. According to Jewish tradition, they are all revelations of God’s wisdom.”
- “Before studying, Jews praise God: ‘Blessed are You, O Eternal our God, Ruler of the Universe, who has sanctified us with commandments, and commanded us to engage in the words of Torah.’ In Judaism, relating to these ancient words is a holy act.”
- “In the Torah, the holiest word of all is the name of God. The Torah sometimes refers to God as *El* or *Elohim*, derived from an ancient word for judge, but many scholars see this as a divine title or job description rather

than a private name. God's intimate name, God's 'first name,' is a word so sacred that we never pronounce it. As mortals, we are not on a first-name basis with God."

- "God's secret name is the Tetragrammaton, the ineffable four-letter word spelled with the Hebrew letters corresponding to YHVH. The Hebrew alphabet is all consonants; its vowels are usually dots and dashes beneath the letters, and the vowels don't appear in Torah scrolls."

Endnote:

¹Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, *Hilkhot Yesodei Hatorah*, 8:1

(Rabbi Mark Glickman, "Sacred Treasure – the Cairo Genizah," Jewish Lights Publishing, Woodstock, Vermont, 2012)