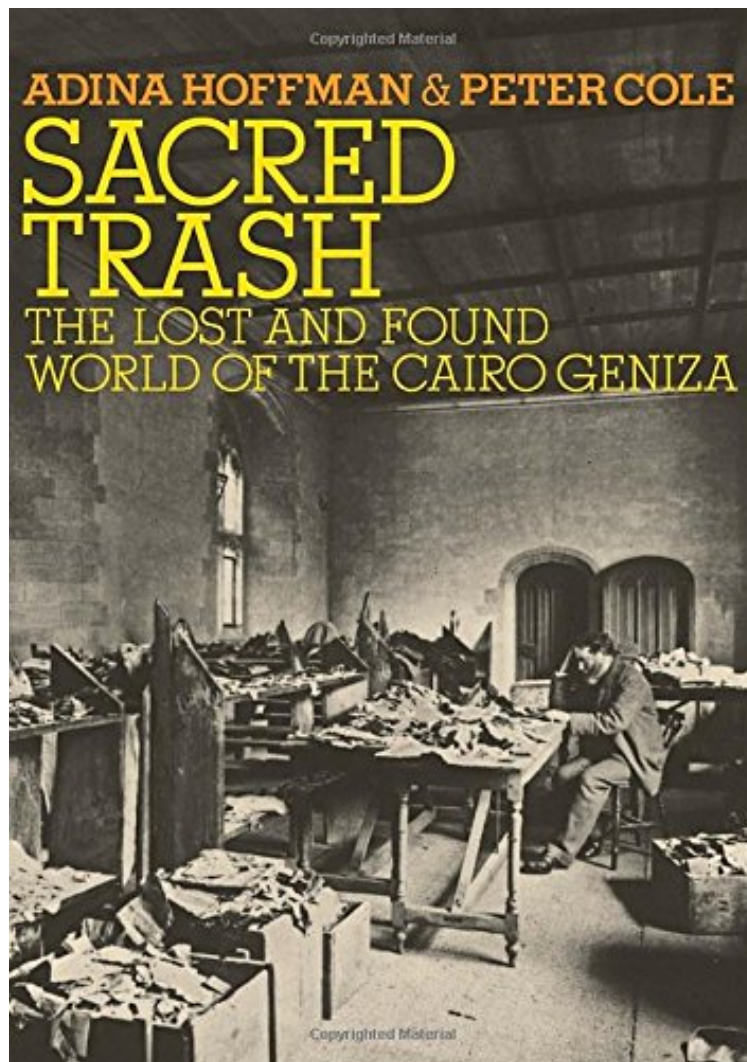


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## Sacred Trash: The Lost and Found World of the Cairo Geniza (Jewish Encounters Series)

*Adina Hoffman, Peter Cole*  
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#460925 in Books 2016-06-21 2016-06-21 Original language: English PDF # 1 8.47 x .83 x 5.971, .81 #File Name: 080521223X304 pages | File size: 20.Mb

**Adina Hoffman, Peter Cole : Sacred Trash: The Lost and Found World of the Cairo Geniza (Jewish Encounters Series)** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Sacred Trash: The Lost and Found World of the Cairo Geniza (Jewish Encounters Series):

10 of 10 people found the following review helpful. Wonderful story By Doctor.Generosity The first part of the book is a wonderful scholarship - adventure story from the 1890's about the exciting discovery of a massive cache of a quarter million Hebrew documents spanning centuries, piled up in a storeroom in an ancient, long occupied synagogue in the old Jewish quarter of Cairo. The authors have researched the details how members of the British academic community,

particularly Solomon Schechter, became aware of the cache and eventually recovered it, complete with inter-library competition, secrecy and personal ambition. It's part history buff, part Raiders of the Lost Ark. I found it interesting that the academics of the time were as competitive over texts from late antiquity as scientists today will be over some high profile discovery. Readers today might criticize that the recovery took place within an arrogant set of colonialist assumptions typical of the age, when English explorers assumed it was their right to appropriate major classical artworks and drag them from Greece and Rome back to London without asking anyone's permission. But in defense of Schechter it is likely that these documents, if not 'stolen' from Egypt, would subsequently have been lost in the upheavals of the following century. There are fascinating details such as the style of travel in late 1890's England - I did not know it was relatively easy to travel from London to Cairo in those days; train to Marseille and then a boat across the Mediterranean. The narrative bogs down in the second half of the book when the authors, who are poets and literary historians, concentrate on their own special interest in medieval Hebrew poetry to the exclusion of much else in the collection. Nor do they make any attempt to bring out this subject for the general reader, presenting few actual examples of said poetry. The best part of the book is the glimpse into the remaining content of the material, not only the biblically significant sources but the secular documents relating to the everyday life of the Jewish community of Egypt in the middle ages - personal letters, divorce legal documents. A page turner, well written by two authors with fluent Hebrew background. A door into a vast but little known era of Jewish life.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. A long lost trove of Jewish Culture discovered as part of a mystery story and in honor of a line of modern scholars. By Phred In reading the book *The Sisters of Sinai, The Sisters of Sinai: How Two Lady Adventurers Discovered the Hidden Gospels* (Vintage); I was fascinated by a short chapter that outlined the way the sisters passed information to Prof. Solomon Schechter about a possible trove of Judaica in a hidden room in Cairo. The sisters were Agnes Lewis and Margaret Gibson, Scottish twins and largely self-taught scholars of many languages and discoverers and translators of what remains after 130 one of the oldest copies of the new testament. Prof Schechter was a Romanian born, Cambridge Talmud Scholar and the hidden room whose contents the Professor would reveal to modern scholars was the ancient Geniza of the Ben Ezra synagogue in Fustat, the old city of Cairo. Sacred Trash is the book that completes this story, linking the various scholars of the Geniza of Cairo to their many finds. The reader is given a taste of the many significant finds scattered among the more than 100,000 rotting, stuck together and over written documents, fragments, seemingly random remains recovered from this 1000 year-old heap. That the Heap existed at all was something nearing a fluke. In Jewish believe there had been a reluctance place into the trash any document that may contain reference to G-D. Almost anything written by a religious leader, Rabbi, Jewish merchant or Jewish mother might contain such a reference. Many communities would interpret this practice to include ceremonial burial of collections- called Geniza- and at least one community took to dropping their Geniza into the local river. At the Ben Ezra Synagogue the practice was to place them in disordered stacks in a hard to access room above the Women's Section. Co Authors Adina Hoffman and Peter Cole have performed an admirable job in writing a generally readable discussion that balances between biographies of leading scholars involved in the on going analysis of this material, and helping to reader to appreciate the historic, cultural and religious value of this Cambridge and related Geniza collections. They have deliberately avoided some of the more purely religious and superstitious findings while mentioning that some of these may have greater value than some topic given more coverage. Some of what is discussed helps the reader to appreciate areas of Jewish Poetry and personalities that had been completely lost except for what has been recovered for modern analysis. One can only marvel at the fact that Geniza documents were from the beginning published to worlds' academic audience and through them to anyone interested in such material. Contrast this with the long time segregation of Dead Sea Scroll studies. There is an almost ironic parallel in the fact that Geniza documents were collected from a population of Jews living in open and daily contact with the world, while the Dead Sea Scrolls are the documents of a Jewish population that had deliberately withdrawn for the world. The authors of Sacred Trash succeeded in writing a mostly readable, entertaining and scholarly history of a complex topic. A reader will gain respect for dedicated and tireless modern scholars as well as the complexities of an ancient religion, surviving in an exiled people. Unfortunately, the authors seem to envision their readers as people who by scholarly interest of Jewish heritage have a fair Hebrew and Jewish training. For Example we are told that the poetry of the previously lost Yannai made use of "collections of Midrash that were edited in the late fifth century C. E. ...." What a midrash is not entirely clear. The point being that some Hebrew is explained while other terms are assumed to be understood by the reader. This assumption becomes more common towards the end of the book. It also struck me that several mentions of women as writers of poetry, business leaders and related roles are not given sufficient attention while it is suggested, if only humorously that Geniza fragments would support a study focused on Jewish Mothers and their sons. Hoffman and Cole have not, nor was it their intention to publish a definitive history of Geniza scholarship. In fact the field is not close to ripe for its elegy. Instead Sacred Trash is a complete book the of Sisters of Sinai teaser, and a generally easy read for those with a curiosity for this kind of unlikely story.

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Out of the Depths By R. Farr I started with Rabbi Glickman's Sacred Treasure. That led to Ghosh's novel about a slave in the India Trade mentioned in a fragment from the Ben Ezra genizah, In an Ancient Land. Soskice's The Sisters of Sinai went back to the genizah discovery as well as delightful side trips with the two

ladies. Now comes Hoffman and Cole's Sacred Trash. All these were purchased through .Sacred Trash starts at the genizah, the dedicated persons through more than a century who bring the treasures to light, and follows the multitude of ripples that reach out from this into many directions, from Scripture to every day life, from Maimonides to that unnamed slave, and they continue over time with each new discovery. Their final sentence sums up the challenge here, "And there are, it would seem, as many ways to write a history of the Geniza as there are scholars or readers who have stepped, or might step, through the looking glass of its scattered leaves."

NATIONAL JEWISH BOOK AWARD FINALIST  
WINNER OF THE 2012 AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION'S SOPHIE BRODY AWARD FOR OUTSTANDING ACHIEVEMENT IN JEWISH LITERATURE  
Sacred Trash tells the remarkable story of the Cairo Geniza synagogue repository for worn-out texts that turned out to contain the most vital cache of Jewish manuscripts ever discovered. This tale of buried communal treasure weaves together unforgettable portraits of Solomon Schechter and the other modern heroes responsible for the collections rescue with explorations of the medieval documents themselves—letters and poems, wills and marriage contracts, Bibles, money orders, fiery dissenting religious tracts, fashion-conscious trousseaux lists, prescriptions, petitions, and mysterious magical charms. Presenting a panoramic view of almost a thousand years of vibrant Mediterranean Judaism, Adina Hoffman and Peter Cole bring contemporary readers into the heart of this little-known trove, whose contents have rightly been dubbed the Living Sea Scrolls. Part biography, part meditation on the supreme value the Jewish people has long placed in the written word, Sacred Trash is above all a gripping tale of adventure and redemption. (With black-and-white illustrations throughout.)

WINNER OF THE 2012 AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION'S SOPHIE BRODY AWARD FOR OUTSTANDING ACHIEVEMENT IN JEWISH LITERATURE  
Beautifully written, learned and lucid, Sacred Trash is a treasure that should not be hidden . . . Exquisitely realized. San Francisco Chronicle  
A literary jewel whose pages turn like those of a well-paced thriller, but with all the chiseled elegance and flashes of linguistic surprise that we associate with poetry . . . Sacred Trash has made history beautiful and exciting. The Nation  
Hoffman and Cole unfold this saga with dramatic flair, peppering their narrative with the Geniza's own distinct voices, from the ancient and medieval to the modern and contemporary. Skillfully they embed the drama contained within the old texts with the contemporary dramas of the people handling the texts . . . It is a testament to [them] that they have fleshed out these ghosts, and patiently constructed a vivid, human saga every bit as extraordinary as a miracle. Haaretz (Israel)  
Both lively and elevating . . . An extended act of celebration of Cairo's historical Jewish community, their documents, and their documents  
20th-century students . . . wonderfully revived by Hoffman and Cole. Anthony Julius, The New York Times  
Book A multi-layered work that provokes admiration and excites the imagination on many levels. Moment  
Hoffman and Cole's vivid portrayal of the discovery of the ancient Cairo Geniza . . . is equal parts treasure hunt for the sacred and historical, and Herculean rescue of important texts . . . Sacred Trash is a wonderfully accessible and exciting account of numerous heroes, medieval and modern and their discoveries of artifacts that have transformed our understanding of the interplay between history and religion. The Boston Globe  
The real behind-the-scenes story of the Cairo Geniza and the Western scholars who retrieved and studied it is . . . also a very human story, as Adina Hoffman and Peter Cole show in their charming and unobtrusively erudite new book. The Jewish of Books  
A wonderfully passionate and lively account of a civilization we could not have imagined existed and of the men and women whose enthusiasm and dedication brought it to light. Gabriel Josipovici, The Wall Street Journal  
"Absorbing . . . Hoffman and Cole are adroit in their exegesis . . . [Sacred Trash is] an accessible, neatly narrated story of hallowed detritus and the resurrection of nearly 1,000 years of culture and learning." Kirkus  
sWhat a delight to have the story of the Cairo Geniza, its romantic recovery and spectacular contents, told here by two such brilliant wordsmiths as Adina Hoffman and Peter Cole. This book takes readers to the very navel of the medieval world, east and west, Arab and Jew, shattering many preconceptions along the way. Janet Soskice, author of Sisters of Sinai  
Hoffman and Cole spin an extraordinary tale of intellectual adventure and lasting scholarly accomplishment. The men and women who brought the Cairo Geniza to light are presented here in painstaking detail, their quirks and their brilliance exposed in equal measure. Carefully researched and beautifully written. James Kugel, author of How to Read the Bible  
Sacred Trash is a jewel of a book: a lively and deeply informed account of the Cairo Geniza, a magnificent Egyptian treasure-house of Jewish religion, literature, and history that was forgotten for centuries, and of the extraordinary crew of scholars and impresarios who saved the documents, fitted the scraps back together, and made them speak and sing. Anthony Grafton, Princeton University  
One hundred and twenty years ago, time travel was all at once realized: With the discovery of the Cairo Geniza, medieval Jewish life in all its sacred and mundane efflorescence came tumbling out in thousands of manuscript fragments, each one a distinct and living voice of an ancestral civilization. No longer can we speak of the seven wonders of the world in this astounding and acutely relevant tale, Adina Hoffman and Peter Cole have uncovered a remarkable eighth; and in its connection to our own humanity, it surpasses all the rest. Cynthia Ozick  
Sacred Trash is a small masterpiece. The romance of Hebrew scholarship has never been so vividly conveyed. This book is extraordinary in characterization, thought, and prose style. It will teach common readers, Jewish and

gentile, how much spiritual tradition owes to the greatest scholars. This teaching comes through delight. Harold Bloom From the Hardcover edition. About the Author ADINA HOFFMAN is the author of several books, including *House of Windows: Portraits from a Jerusalem Neighborhood* and *Till We Have Built Jerusalem: Architects of a New City*. She was named one of the inaugural (2013) winners of the Windham Campbell Literature Prize. PETER COLES most recent book of poems is *The Invention of Influence*. His award-winning translations include *The Poetry of Kabbalah: Mystical Verse from the Jewish Tradition*. He was named a MacArthur Fellow in 2007. Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. 1 Hidden Wisdom Cambridge, May 1896

When the self-taught Scottish scholar of Arabic and Syriac Agnes Lewis and her no-less-learned twin sister, Margaret Gibson, hurried down a street or a hallway, they moved as a friend later described them like ships in full sail. Their plump frames, thick lips, and slightly hawkish eyes made them, theoretically, identical. And both were rather vain about their dainty hands, which on special occasions they weighed down with antique rings. In a poignant and peculiar coincidence, each of the sisters had been widowed after just a few years of happy marriage to a clergyman. But Mrs. Lewis and Mrs. Gibson were distinct to those who knew them. Older by an entire twenty minutes, Agnes was the more ambitious, colorful, and domineering of the two; Margaret had a quieter intelligence and was, it was said, more normal. By age forty, Agnes had written three travel books and three novels, and had translated a tourist guide from the Greek; Margaret had contributed amply to and probably helped write her sisters' nonfiction books, edited her husband's translation of Cervantes' *Journey to Parnassus*, and grown adept at watercolors. They were, meanwhile, exceptionally close around Cambridge they came to be known as a single unit, the Giblews, and after the deaths of their husbands they devoted themselves and their sizable inheritance to a life of travel and study together. This followed quite naturally from the maverick manner in which they had been raised in a small town near Glasgow by their forward-thinking lawyer father, a widower, who subscribed to an educational philosophy that was equal parts Bohemian and Calvinist as far as it was concerned. Eschewing the fashion for treating girls' minds like *ne china*, he assumed his daughters were made of tougher stuff and schooled them as though they were sons, teaching them to think for themselves, to argue and ride horses. Perhaps most important, he had instilled in them early on a passion for philology, promising them that they could travel to any country on condition that they first learned its language. French, Spanish, German, and Italian followed, as did childhood trips around the Continent. He also encouraged the girls' nearly familial friendship with their church's progressive and intellectually daring young preacher, who had once been a protégé of the opium-eating Romantic essayist Thomas de Quincy. After their father's sudden death when they were twenty-three, Agnes and Margaret sought consolation in strange alphabets and in travel to still more distant climes: Egypt, Palestine, Greece, and Cyprus. By middle age they had learned, between them, some nine languages, adding to their European repertoire Hebrew, Persian, and Syriac written in Estrangelo script. Having also studied the latest photographic techniques, they journeyed extensively throughout the East, taking thousands of pictures of ancient manuscript pages and buying piles of others, the most interesting of which they then set out to transcribe and translate. As women, and as devout (not to mention eccentric and notoriously party-throwing) Presbyterians, they lived and worked on the margins of mostly Anglican, male-centered Cambridge society; women were not granted degrees at the town's illustrious university until 1948 and they counted as their closest friends a whole host of Quakers, freethinkers, and Jews. Yet Agnes's 1892 discovery at St. Catherine's Monastery in Sinai of one of the oldest Syriac versions of the New Testament had brought the sisters respect in learned circles: their multiple books on the subject ranged from the strictly scholarly *A Translation of the Four Gospels from the Syriac of the Sinai Palimpsest* to the more talky and popular *How the Codex Was Found*. Somehow the rumor spread that Mrs. Lewis had just happened to recognize a fragment of the ancient manuscript in the monastery dining hall, where it was being used as a butter dish. In fact, the codex was kept under tight lock and key, and its very fragile condition to say nothing of its sacred status certainly precluded its use by the monks as mere tableware. It took serious erudition and diplomacy for the twins to gain access to the manuscript in the monastery library; they then worked painstakingly over a period of years to decode the codex, as it were. The leaves, wrote Agnes, are deeply stained, and in parts ready to crumble. One and all of them were glued together, until the librarian of the Convent and I separated them with our fingers. She and Margaret proceeded to photograph each of its 358 pages and, on their return to Cambridge, processed the film themselves and labored over the text's decipherment. Later they arranged for an expedition of several distinguished Cambridge scholars to travel with them to Sinai, where they worked as a team, transcribing the codex as a whole. All these far-ung intellectual adventures had been exciting but also exhausting. And although the twins had resolved to spend a quiet season in Cambridge, immersed in the proofs of the various texts they had lately copied from manuscript, they set out in the early spring of 1896 on still another Middle Eastern trip, their third in almost as many years bound for Palestine and Egypt. The reason for the journey was reported later in what sounds like deliberately vague terms: News we received from Cairo, Agnes wrote enigmatically, seemed to indicate that there might be some chance of our finding something there. Weary as they were from their previous travels, they had not been eager to take this particular trip, and yet, as she would admit in retrospect, it had not been the least fruitful in results. This understatement was typical of Agnes, and gives little sense of the startling events that had come to pass one historic May day in 1896, soon after the twins' return. Suffering from what her sister, Margaret, described as a severe rheumatic illness, caused by undue exposure on the night when we had lost our tents in

the valley of Elah, Agnes had decided that morning to stretch her legs. While out strolling in downtown Cambridge, she was especially glad to bump into a good friend and, strangely, another twin who also took great pride in his beautiful hands—the Romanian-born Talmud scholar, Solomon Schechter. Even more of an oddball in the donnish context of Cambridge than Agnes and Margaret, the very Jewish, very blustery Schechter must, too, have cut a remarkable figure as he strode down Kings 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. Another recalled that his socks never matched. His resemblance to a bag lady apart, there was, as another colleague put it, the magic of prophecy about the man. He also had, his wife would write years later, a genius for friendship; he loved people and they loved him. Since his 1890 arrival in Cambridge, where he was first given the odd title Lecturer in Talmudic and later appointed Reader in Rabbinics, Schechter had gained the deep respect and affection of a range of the towns leading intellectuals, including the radical Scottish Bible scholar and Arabist William Robertson Smith (who arranged for Schechter to join Christs College, where special kosher meals were prepared whenever he came to dine); the Africa explorer Mary Kingsley (with whom he much enjoyed swearing); and the pioneering anthropologist and reclusive author of *The Golden Bough*, James Frazer, perhaps Schechters best friend at the time. The two took walks together several days a week, discussing as they rambled all things, human and divine. Frazer himself praised Schechter as great in his intellect and learning, greater even in the warmth of his affections and his enthusiasm for every high and noble cause. By turns fierce, warm, brusque, tender, biting in his wit, and thundering in his manner, the king in any society in which he found himself, Schechter was often described in peculiarly zoological terms. Now he was a demanding lamb, now an eagle or a bear. I can see him in my minds eye, at the height of a debate, wrote yet another friend, rising from his chair, perhaps kicking it down, and pacing... the room, like a wounded lion, roaring retorts. Lamb or jungle cat, he inspired awe and devotion in most people, though one imagines that the formidable Agnes Lewis would not even have blinked as she sailed—however arthritically—toward Schechter that day in the street. She and Mrs. Gibson had, she hastened to tell him, spent the last few weeks developing the photographs and sifting through the manuscripts theyd brought back from their most recent trip. Their purchases included what Agnes would later describe as a bundle of documents from a dealer in the plain of Sharon... [and] a similar bundle bought in Cairo. Margaret, whose turn it was to do the sorting, had managed to identify most of the items that theyd carted home in a trunk and which had almost been confiscated by overzealous customs officials in Jaffa. She had worked her way through the Hebrew fragments and set aside what she deemed parts of the Canonical Books of the Old Testament (the only sections of the Hebrew Bible that she, as a good Presbyterian, would know), assuming that the others were either talmudic passages or private Jewish documents. But the twins were eager for Schechter to have a look at some of the items whose contents they did not recognize. Schechter, of all people, might be able to identify the scraps. Remembered by Romanian relatives and acquaintances as having been the wildest boy in his hometown, one who constantly had to be pulled down from the top of the chestnut trees, he had also been a prodigy. It was said that Shneur Zalman Schechter knew the Pentateuch by heart at five. And although he was by now almost fifty and as the Anglicization of his first name indicated had traveled a long way in both physical and psychic terms from his Hasidic Russian family in the small Moldavian town of Focsani (as had his twin brother, Yisrael, who had immigrated to the Jewish agricultural settlement of Zichron Yaakov in Palestine the same year that Schechter moved to England), he brought with him a prodigious Jewish learning, as well as a voracious appetite for all kinds of knowledge, classical and contemporary. Perhaps best known to twentieth-century American Jews as the man for whom the Conservative movements network of day schools is named, Schechter had been ordained a rabbi in Vienna and applied himself to the Palestinian Talmud at Berlins influential new school of liberal Jewish learning, the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums; he had become skilled at the analysis of ancient manuscripts and absorbed a wide range of subjects at that citys university—everything from psychology and pedagogy to aesthetics, ancient history, Aristotles ethics, and Syriac grammar. Besides a deep knowledge of biblical and rabbinic texts and a solid grounding in the scientific methods that had by then come to dominate in German Jewish scholarly circles, he had also developed a passion for German, French, and English literature. When he first came to England in 1882—hired to serve as a tutor in Talmud to the aristocratic young Oxford-and-Berlin-trained theologian Claude Montefiore—he had not known a word of English. The only phrase he had begged Montefiore to teach him, according to his wife, Mathilde, was weak tea, for he could not stand the strong tea the English used to drink. But he had learned the language with typical rapidity, by sitting with his Hebrew Bible, the English translation, and a dictionary—then moving straight on to George Eliot. Herself an avid bookworm and elegant writer, Mathilde described her husband as a tremendous reader who took in every good novel that appeared, devouring essays, philosophy, history, and theology. He wooed Mathilde with the satirical and none-too-romantic *Book of Snobs* by Thackeray, and it was joked that a more accurate title for Schechter than Reader in Rabbinics would have been Reader in Fiction. He was especially fond of critical works by Charles Lamb, Leslie Stephen, and Matthew Arnold and had a particular fascination with anything written about the French Revolution and

the American Civil War (Lincoln was a hero); he loved Schiller and Heine above all. He also adored *The Vicar of Wakefield* and boys books like *Treasure Island* and *Robinson Crusoe*. No knowledge of Robert Louis Stevenson or Daniel Defoe, however, was necessary on this particular May day, and when just a short time after meeting Schechter in town Agnes arrived home at Castlebrae, the twins stately Gothic Revival mansion, she found Schechter already huddled over the large dining-room table, intently examining the fragments that Margaret had spread across its surface. Without much ado, he identified one vellum leaf as a rare and valuable page from the Palestinian Talmud. Then, according to Agnes, he held up a dirty scrap of paper. This too is very interesting; may I take it away and identify it? Certainly, she said. In Margaret's own account, I noticed that his eyes were glittering. Although the scrap looked, in Margaret's words, as if a grocer had used it for something greasy, Schechter, it seems, realized its importance almost instantly, and within an hour of his racing from Castlebrae with the two items, the twins received a telegram from the Cherry Hinton Road post office, just around the corner from the Schechters' gabled brick house on Rock Road: fragment very important; come to me this afternoon. Probably accustomed to a certain easy agitation in their friend, the twins did not go rushing out to meet him, but sat down to lunch at which point a letter arrived, splattered with unblotted ink and scrawled on Cambridge University Library stationery in Schechter's lurching hand. Agnes realized that it had, in fact, been sent before the telegram and that they should eat as quickly as possible and get themselves over to Rock Road. (Schechter's sense of urgency was such that he scrambled morning and night, writing p.m. for a.m.) 13/5/96 Dear Mrs Lewis I think we have reason to congratulate ourselves. For the pice fragment I took with me represents a piece of the original Hebrew of Ecclesiasticus. It is the first time that such a thing was discovered. Please do not speak yet about the matter till to-morrow. I will come to you to-morrow about 11 p.m. and talk over the matter with you how to make the matter known. In haste and great excitement yours sincerely, S. Schechter. Schechter's plea for secrecy bubbled up from the fact that the original Hebrew of this apocryphal book also known as *Ben Sirah* had been missing for nearly a millennium and survived, it was generally believed, only in its Greek and Syriac translations. The haste and great excitement with which he announced the discovery of this text would, however, soon give way to elation of a far more enduring and varied sort, as, within months, it brought Schechter to travel to Egypt and haul away one of the greatest finds unearthed in modern times: the astonishing cache of documents that has come to be known as the Cairo Geniza.