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# MANUSCRIPTS CONSERVATION

M. Blank, N. Stavisky

## CONSERVATION OF MEDIEVAL MANUSCRIPTS IN THE LIBRARY OF THE JEWISH THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY OF AMERICA\*

The Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America in New York is the repository of one of the great collections of source material for Jewish studies. It includes manuscripts, *genizah* fragments, incunables, sixteenth to twentieth century broadsides, a unique collection of *ketubot* (marriage contracts), *Megillot Esther* (Esther scrolls), archival material, graphics, and rare printed books from the sixteenth century to the present time. The Library is used extensively by international scholars as well as faculty and students of the Seminary.

This paper describes some selected methods and materials used in the conservation of three types of objects in the collection: Maimonides *genizah* fragments, a German thirteenth century *Mahzor* (a holy day prayer book), and a fourteenth century Spanish *Haggadah*. While the techniques described are well known in the United States, they are probably less familiar to practicing conservators in other countries. Though not every stage of the conservation process is described, we hope the selection will be of interest to our European colleagues.

### 1. Maimonides Material

Over the ages, Jewish communities have followed an established custom whereby worn texts, containing God's name, are not discarded but are gathered in a designated place called a *genizah*, usually prior to collective burial. Over one hundred years ago, the value of such a depository was discovered in the Ben Ezra synagogue in Fustat, old Cairo. The astounding thing was that this hidden collection contained not only sacred texts, but a whole gamut of documents — literary works, poetry, scientific and grammatical texts, philosophical treatises, letters written by both historical personalities and ordinary people, *ketubot* (marriage contracts), commercial inventory records and legal documents, and lost or previously unknown works such as those relating to the Dead Sea Scrolls and *Ecclesiasticus*. These contents shed a new light on a period of Jewish history, particularly in the Islamic world, dating from about the tenth century C.E., about which very little was previously known.

The first significant collector of *genizah* material was a Russian Karaite, Abraham Firkovich, active during the 1860s. His collection was later sold to the Imperial Russian Library in St. Petersburg. In 1897, Professor Solomon Schechter, the primary discoverer of the *genizah*, acquired

by far the greatest number of *genizah* documents which are now at Cambridge University. The Seminary collection contains approximately 30,000 fragments [1], the bulk of which were purchased from the great Anglo-Jewish collector Elkan Nathan Adler (1861—1946) in 1923. Adler, an inveterate traveler and lawyer, was among the first laymen to appreciate the significance of the *genizah* fragments he acquired during two trips to Egypt, in 1888 and 1895—6, prior to Schechter's acquisition.

In 1996 and 1997, the Library undertook the conservation of 23 manuscript fragments from manuscripts by Moses Maimonides (1138—1204) and his descendants. Maimonides — who was born in Cordoba, Spain and who died in Fustat, Egypt — was a philosopher, codifier and commentator on Jewish law and texts, a renowned physician, and the seminal figure in Jewish life during the post-Talmudic period. (It is remarkable that when the conservation project had been almost completed, an additional fragment was found and identified.)

All 23 fragments originate from the Cairo *genizah*, with two coming from Schechter's own collection, a gift to the Seminary from his widow Mathilde. This famous letter, signed by Maimonides himself, solicits funds from the

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