

# A Jewish Time Capsule

By Rabbi David Wolpe

What would you place in a Jewish time capsule? A photograph, a genealogical list, a DVD or copy of a Jewish newspaper? Perhaps a list of dreams and wishes for future generations to read with wistfulness — or amusement.

Judaism has such time capsules. They contain not photographs, but books and documents. We call it a *genizah* (pronounced ge-nee-zah).

A genizah is a place where documents containing God's name, which may not be destroyed, are stored when they are no longer usable, or needed.

The best known genizah is that of the Great synagogue of Cairo. Fragments from this genizah circulated among collectors for years and rumors abounded of its treasures. But no one examined its abundant riches until Solomon Schechter, at that time a scholar at Cambridge University, gained access in 1896. Fostat (Old Cairo) was a center of Jewish life for centuries. It was the community of Maimonides, among other luminaries. Schechter describes it in an elegant essay published in the London Times in 1897:

"... one can hardly realize the confusion in a genuine, old genizah until one has seen it. It is a battlefield of books ... some of the belligerents have perished outright, and are literally ground to dust in the terrible struggle for space, whilst others, as if overtaken by the general crush, are squeezed into big, unshapely lumps ..."

Schechter describes moralistic writings decrying money wrapped around old IOUs, and a rationalistic work denying angels and devils "clinging for its very life to an amulet in which these same beings (mostly the latter) are bound over to be on their good behavior and not interfere with Miss Jair's love for somebody." All the conditions of life are found in the genizah. In a society where God is constantly invoked, it is natural that all sorts of documents will have to be preserved.

*Ganuz* means hidden; sacred books are hidden away when they can no longer be used. But that which is hidden can be uncovered. Faded documents of the past can unlock secrets. The Genizah is a Jewish time capsule, a magic cache where sanctity and memory intermingle.