

A Letter from the Cairo Genizah

Getting Ready

This activity discusses the idea that **that which is hidden can also reveal**.

The session is based on the [video](#) *A Letter from the Cairo Genizah*. After watching the video, the facilitator will lead a short discussion. Options for small groups or one large group are also included.

Primary sources from the NLI collections

1. [Ephemera Collection](#)
2. [Hannah Szenes Letter to Her Brother](#) (another example of information that was hidden yet revealed)

Background information

1. [The Cairo Genizah](#)
2. [Ben Ezra Synagogue](#)
3. [Karaites](#)
4. ["The Jews You've Never Heard Of"](#)

Material, Equipment, and Preparations: paper and pen

Activities

Introduction - A *genizah* is a depository for discarded religious texts. The texts contain God's name and thus, according to Jewish law, they cannot be thrown out. Genizahs are most commonly found in attics or basements of synagogues. One of the most famous genizahs was found in Cairo, untouched for centuries, its contents hidden until their later rediscovery. We will see how much can be revealed about a community by studying that which was once hidden.

The following [video](#) tells an amazing story that would have remained unknown had the Cairo Genizah not been discovered.



Post-video Discussion

1. How did the story of Rivka and the men who wanted to marry her come to be known in modern times? (A letter was found in the Cairo Genizah)
2. Who sent the letter? To whom? (The Karaite community in Jerusalem to the Karaite community in Cairo)
3. Who were the Karaites? (If no one has heard of the Karaites, the facilitator can provide information about them here. See the paragraph about Karaites at the bottom of the sheet.)
4. What can we learn from the letter about the Karaite community at the time?
5. Do you think that the people who sent the letter ever expected it to be found hundreds of years later?
6. Do you think the people who put the letter in the Genizah imagined that it would be found later or that it contained valuable information?
7. What types of materials do we throw out that might tell our story at a later point in history?
8. Can you think of examples of other objects that have been hidden, whether intentionally or accidentally, and have later revealed interesting or valuable information about the past? (archaeology, artifacts hidden during the Holocaust, time capsules)

Activity (two choices)

Small group

1. What can be learned from your hidden objects?
2. Working in small groups, each participant looks in their bag, pockets, or other places that they might have objects with them. Answer the following questions:
 - What objects did you find?
 - What do the objects reveal about you?
 - What could an archaeologist learn about you from the items?
3. Discuss your answers with your partner/small group.
4. Choose one object to share with the large group.



Large group

What can we “hide” now that will reveal something about you later?

1. Write a story about yourself or an object that is important to you.
2. The story will be put in a time capsule and stored at the National Library of Israel.

Conclusion – Objects that may seem insignificant at the time reveal a lot about their owners and the society in which they lived; when discovered much later in time, they can offer fascinating information. The ephemera collection at the National Library of Israel, which contains items such as photographs, postcards, notices, and more, is a powerful tool for reconstructing Jewish culture from previous generations.

Appendix

Who are the Karaites?

Karaite Judaism dates back to the eighth century CE. Karaites recognise the Bible (*Tanach*) as the supreme authority on Jewish law (*halakhah*), rather than rabbinic Judaism which accepts the Oral Law (Talmud, etc). While Karaites are prepared to consider the insights of the rabbis as expressed in the Oral Law, they don't consider the rulings as binding. As a result, there are many differences in practice between Karaites and mainstream rabbinic Judaism. Some examples of Karaite practice include: eating meat and milk together, as long as the meat is not the calf or kid of the animal that produced the milk, not celebrating rabbinic holidays such as Hanukkah, removing their shoes in synagogue and prostrating themselves, and not requiring a *minyan* (quorum) for communal prayer. Karaite Judaism was based in Egypt, Turkey, and Crimea but since the 1950s, when Jews were expelled from Egypt, the largest Karaite communities are located in Israel and the United States.

