In recent years, the contribution of the Cairo Genizah to the history of the Hebrew book and script has been increasingly recognised. Stefan Reif has always been among those who stressed the importance of studying the external physical aspects of manuscripts for better understanding the texts they carried and the context of their production; it is a pleasure to dedicate this paper to him.

Since the discovery and, more importantly, the systematic study of the Cairo Genizah, its corpus of dated or datable manuscripts in Hebrew script has been considerably enriched with documents and fragments of codices dating from as early as the ninth and tenth centuries. This evidence is particularly precious: in between the latest of the Judaean Desert documents (second century CE) and the earliest dated codices from the tenth century, dated Hebrew documents and especially Hebrew books are extremely scarce. We know of only twelve explicitly-dated Hebrew books and book fragments from the tenth century.1 Only one medieval document, a marriage contract, bears a date before 900 (870/871).2 It is therefore evident that manuscript specialists watch with great expectation all new discoveries of early

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1 Dated codices and book fragments up to 1020 have been described in M. Beit-Arié, C. Sirat, M. Glatzer, *Codices hebraicis litteris exarati quo tempore scripti fuerint exhibentes, tome I jusqu’à 1020* (Turnhout, 1997). For an inventory of Hebrew papyri (which are of relatively early date—papyrus being only scarcely used as a writing support after the beginning of the eleventh century), see C. Sirat, *Les papyrus en caractères hébraïques trouvés en Égypte* (Paris, 1985).

manuscripts which could help them reconstruct the still unclear picture of the history of the Hebrew book and script.

The Genizah chamber in Ben Ezra synagogue began to function as a receptacle for the worn-out books and documents only some time around 1040. Indeed, this synagogue, probably originally built in the tenth century, was destroyed in 1012 during anti-Jewish (and anti-Christian) persecutions ordered by the Fatimid Caliph al-Hākim (996–1021), and was rebuilt some thirty years later. It is therefore not surprising that the bulk of fragments date from the eleventh century and later. However, a considerable number of manuscripts that found their way to the Genizah of the Ben Ezra Synagogue are earlier than the mid-eleventh century. Of course, books and documents had a long life before they were finally deposited in the Genizah where they awaited burial or natural decay. Books could be read dozens of years after they were copied, and the validity of legal contracts often extended beyond one generation. Books formed part of libraries and collections, and documents were kept for years in private family or institutional archives, before they were committed to a genizah. Furthermore, throughout their vicissitudes, worn-out books and documents that lost their actuality and legal relevance were reemployed for other writings. A great number of fragments found in the Cairo Genizah are books, letters, documents or writing exercises written on the blank versos, on the wide margins or even between the lines of other much earlier texts, such as liturgical scrolls (traditionally written only on one side), earlier documents or Arabic official letters or petitions written on particularly large sheets of good quality paper.

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4 J. Olszowy-Schlanger, Karaite Marriage Documents from the Cairo Geniza. Legal Tradition and Community Life in Mediaeval Egypt and Palestine (Leiden-New York-Köln, 1998), pp. 29–31. To quote just a few early eleventh-century texts written on earlier reused manuscripts: T-S H10.167 is a Hebrew liturgy rotulus made from a reused parchment Bible scroll; Oxford Bodleian Or. MS. Heb. a. 2 is another liturgy rotulus whose parchment sheets were cut out from tenth-century legal documents; T-S H5.119 contains another liturgical composition written on the verso of strips cut out of a very large paper document in Arabic script; London, BL Ms. Or 5553 B is a paper codex bifolium containing a personal copy of a grammatical work produced from a large Arabic chancery document (the Judaeo-Arabic grammatical text covers not only the blank verso of the original document, but is also written in the blank spaces between the Arabic letters of the original recto).