In these two studies, Mark Cohen seeks to bring to life the daily life of the poor Jews of medieval Cairo. Like previous studies by S. D. Goitein and Moshe Gil, Cohen's material is drawn from the Cairo Geniza, a unique source for writing the social and religious history of a Jewish community in the Middle Ages. Poverty and Charity in the Jewish Community of Medieval Egypt is a study based on lists of recipients of charity, letters appealing for charity, wills, legal treatises, and other documents. The fortuitous survival of so many documents in the “anti-archive” of the Geniza provides an unprecedented opportunity to study the workings of charitable collections and dispersals in a medieval society. The Voice of the Poor in the Middle Ages provides English translations and commentaries on ninety-four of these documents. Most of them are translated for the first time.

The great strength of both of these works is the level of detail they convey to the reader. As the title of the collection of documents indicates, Cohen seeks to identify and make audible the “voice of the poor.” Where most studies of medieval poverty and charity have been forced to make do with examining the attitudes of donors or religious figures towards the poor, Cohen believes that he can accurately represent the views of the poor as articulated in the documents. Although one sympathizes with Cohen’s endeavor, it is not an unqualified success. The poor speak in Cohen’s work through the medium of letters requesting aid from a patron. In some cases, the letters are recommendations written on behalf of the poor individual from one prominent person to another. Cohen argues that despite this fact, one finds convincing details about the circumstances and dilemmas faced by poor individuals and families. Indeed, the documents are full of such details, many of which ring true. Nonetheless, the fact that the poor always appear as the grateful and hopeful petitioners of the well-to-do necessarily determines the tone that the letters will take. One wonders whether the poor Jews of medieval Cairo, like the poor working people of Paris described by Sharon Farmer, engaged in mutual aid. Many of the letters cited and translated by Cohen remind the prospective patron that he too might find himself poor one day. It seems likely that this prospect would be have been all the more real to the laboring poor of the community.
As one would expect, the rhetoric of petitioning for charity and of bestowing is framed in the language of religion. Over and over, petitioners remind their patrons of their common religious bond, and aver their commitment to the Jewish faith and its teachings. For their part, rabbis, most famously Maimonides, remind the Jewish communities of their responsibility for their less fortunate co-religionists. Yet, here and there, one detects sounds of dissonance. The petitioners frequently claim that this is the first time that they ask for aid, and that they wish it to be the last. The lists of recipients of communal charity, however, show that some of the same persons regularly received the community’s aid. It is hardly surprising that the blind, widows, and orphans might be in need of sustained help, but the petitions usually present the man in need as a victim of circumstance whose lack of economic independence is temporary. C. E. Bosworth revealed the existence of a medieval Islamic underworld, and subsequent research has shown that beggars and paupers often were suspected of deceit and parasitism. In Cohen’s documents, there are no beggars, no prostitutes, no undeserving poor. One wonders if reality can have been so neat.

Nonetheless, the ties of religion bound the Jews of medieval Egypt tightly. Goitein demonstrated that the poll tax (jizya) was a major economic burden for many medieval Jews, and that some were dependent on aid from their co-religionist to pay it. Of course, this sense of obligation could also create a sense of entitlement. Requests for aid in paying the poll tax, with the implied threat to convert to Islam, created an entitlement by which poor Jews could demand the aid of their community. The same might be said of debts contracted to gentiles.

When compared with what we know about charitable giving in the Muslim communities of Egypt at the time, the careful organization of poor relief in the Jewish community, especially that of Cairo, stands out as unique. Mosques, like synagogues, were places of charity, but we have no evidence of the alms rolls such as those organized to provide for the Jewish poor. Both Jews and Muslims founded charitable trusts, but the Muslim foundations tended to be the product of individual initiative rather than communal organization. Of course, as Cohen notes, private charity existed in the Jewish community as well, although it did not leave a documentary record behind. The bread distributions amounted to approximately 500 loaves per week, which would have been distributed to approximately 125 persons. This amount of bread would not have been sufficient to feed the persons in question, who would have used it to supplement wages or alms obtained from other sources. In many ways, this system is similar to the