

Organizing Toolkit: Scribes of the Cairo Geniza

A Quick Toolkit for Organizing a Community Event



This quick guide can help walk you through the steps of organizing an event with the Scribes of the Cairo Geniza Project. In addition to the toolkit (available as PDF and DOCX) you also have access to images for promotional use. The most recent version of this guide is available on

If you have more questions after reading this guide, email us directly at judaicadh@gmail.com You can also follow us on social media on Twitter ([@judaicadh](https://twitter.com/judaicadh)) or Instagram ([@judaica_dh](https://www.instagram.com/judaica_dh)).

About Scribes of the Cairo Geniza

History of the Cairo Geniza

The Geniza of Old Cairo was a storage space in the attic of the Ben Ezra synagogue that contained hundreds of thousands of manuscripts and manuscript fragments, mostly from the 10th –13th centuries CE. Jewish custom dictates that these sacred writings, in this case referring to texts with a written form of God's name in Hebrew characters, must be treated respectfully and buried when no longer in use.

For reasons not entirely clear, Jews affiliated with the Ben Ezra synagogue kept their used texts in their Geniza chamber for nearly a millennium rather than burying them. These texts, sacred and everyday (letters, inventories, writing exercises), comprise the most important sources for learning about the social, economic, political, and religious lives of Jews and other inhabitants of the Mediterranean world.

During the 19th century, the contents of the Cairo Geniza began to draw attention when assorted fragments began to come up for sale. Orientalists, traders, collectors, and scholars amassed these fragments for their own collections. Today, Cairo Geniza fragments can be found in collections from throughout the world.

Scribes of the Cairo Geniza Project

[Scribes of the Cairo Geniza](#) is an international collaboration led by the Penn Libraries in partnership with universities, libraries, and scholars to sort and transcribe thousands of medieval fragments. Launched in August 2017, the project has three primary goals:

- Provide our community of volunteer humanists and historians opportunities to view and decipher Cairo Geniza fragments
- Contribute to the classification of fragments by script-type and content
- Produce transcriptions of the material that will help in the work of historians, linguists and other scholars of this material.

In the sorting phase, volunteers sort fragments into different categories based on their script types: whether they are written in Hebrew or Arabic scripts and formal or informal scripts, and whether they contain specific visual characteristics. In the transcription phase, volunteers use custom keyboards to transcribe fragments line-by-line. As of March 2019, volunteers can transcribe Easy Arabic and Easy Hebrew fragments.

Scribes of the Cairo Geniza partners include the Penn Libraries, the Princeton Geniza Lab, the e-Lijah Lab and the Centre for Interdisciplinary Research of the Cairo Genizah at the University of Haifa, the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary, the Genizah Research Unit at Cambridge University Library, The University of Manchester Library, the Bodleian Libraries at University of Oxford, Columbia University Libraries, and the Zooniverse community. Development for this project is supported by a [National Leadership Grant](#) from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS).

Hosting an Event: A Checklist

- **Logistics:** Secure a date, time, and venue for your event. Consider size, technology, and internet access. How many people are you expecting for your transcribe-a-thon? Do you have power outlets or internet access for anyone bringing their own computers or laptops? (Scribes of the Cairo Geniza is NOT available on mobile devices.) If you're providing computers, make sure you have any necessary accounts/passwords on hand beforehand. If you're asking volunteers to bring computers, make sure you include that note on any promotional materials.
- **Contact Us:** If you are hosting a transcribe-a-thon for the first time, let us know! We may be able to provide virtual help and assistance for working with the Zooniverse platform. We may also have members of the research team or moderators on the Talk boards for assistance with content questions, classification questions, or Zooniverse troubleshooting.
- **Get the Word Out:** Use the hashtags #GenizaScribes and #CairoGeniza to advertise your event. If you are on a higher ed campus, which groups or individuals (like center partnership, student organizations, or library liaisons) can you contact to spread the word about your transcribe-a-thon? Are there online calendars, print calendars, newspapers, magazines blogs, or mailing lists with which you can share event information? In our Promotional Images folder, we have included images and GIFs to be used for advanced advertising.
- **During the Event:** Thank attendees for coming to your event! Start off with a host explaining the project and handing out instructions. If possible, have a subject expert give a brief presentation about the project or its related history. Have a few people on hand who can provide guidance on using the Zooniverse platform. You can also direct attendees to instructional videos on our YouTube channel as an overview.
- **After the Event:** Thank everyone who attended! Write a blog post for [Judaica DH](#) about who attended, what was done/discussed, and how it went overall.

Sample Event Copy

Scribes of the Cairo Geniza Transcribe-a-thon

[venue]

[date], [time]

Welcome to Scribes of the Cairo Geniza, your chance to work with others to unlock the secrets of one of the greatest archives of the middle ages. Hidden for centuries in an attic in Cairo, over 300,000 fragments of pre-modern and medieval Jewish texts—from everyday receipts to biblical works—have yet to be fully deciphered. This is your opportunity to participate in the recovery of unknown chapters of the history and culture of medieval Jews, Muslims and others who lived on the southeastern shores of the Mediterranean.

In the first step of the project, volunteers sort fragments into Hebrew or Arabic script. In the second step, volunteers transcribe easy-to-read Hebrew and Arabic fragments. Learn new skills and help make the Cairo Geniza more discoverable at scribesofthecairogeniza.org. No prior knowledge/experience or foreign language proficiency required. Please bring your own laptop. If you do not have a laptop, one may be provided for you – please contact [email] in advance.

The event will take place at [venue]. For more information, and to RSVP, email [email].

Sample Social Media Copy

Join us at [venue]! From [time], all are welcome to join the #GenizaScribes in transcribing Cairo Geniza fragments on @the__zooniverse. For more info, visit scribesofthecairogeniza.org.

Help classify and transcribe medieval fragments from the Cairo Geniza with [your organization] & libraries around the world through @the__zooniverse project - scribesofthecairogeniza.org.

Help transcribe the Cairo Geniza - over 300,000 fragments of pre-modern & medieval Jewish texts - as part of an international effort led by @UPennLib. Learn more at scribesofthecairogeniza.org.

Come classify and transcribe Arabic and Hebrew documents from the incredible #CairoGeniza. No prior knowledge/experience or foreign language proficiency required. Learn more at scribesofthecairogeniza.org

Join us in exploring fragments from the #CairoGeniza at [venue] on [date] at [time]!
Event info: [link]
For more about the project: scribesofthecairogeniza.org

User Instructions (Sorting)

Welcome to Scribes of the Cairo Geniza! Get started at scribesofthecairogeniza.org.

- **Sign in or Register:** In the **upper right corner** of the page, **click** the button either to sign in (returning user) or register (first-time user) and follow instructions. Zooniverse is a free web-based platform for crowdsourced cultural heritage projects. If you register for an account with Zooniverse, you can save your favorite fragments to a collection, save your transcriptions, and participate on the Talk boards. You *do not* need to create an account with Zooniverse to participate in the project.
- **Choose a Workflow:** Now you should be at the “Scribes of the Cairo Geniza” project homepage. **Scroll down** to the “Get Started” section or click **Transcribe** from the top menu and choose the available sorting workflow: **Sort Fragments**.
- **Begin Sorting:** When you start sorting, you’ll have the option of clicking through a short tutorial. Instructions are also below for your reference. You will be asked up to 5 questions for each fragment:
 - In what script is this text written? (Don't worry if you are selecting Hebrew most of the time. There are not as many fragments solely in Arabic script.)
 - Is the ___ script written in a formal or informal style?
 - Do you see evidence of the following on the ____ fragment?
 - Use the point tools to click on the visual characteristics as they are listed below.
- **Don't Forget:** Once you've answered the question, click **Done** to move on to the next subject. If you find a subject you want to share, click **Done & Talk** and leave a note for others about your findings!

User Instructions (Transcription)

Welcome to Scribes of the Cairo Geniza! Get started at scribesofthecairogeniza.org.

- **Sign in or Register:** In the **upper right corner** of the page, **click** the button either to sign in (returning user) or register (first-time user) and follow instructions. Zooniverse is a free web-based platform for crowdsourced cultural heritage projects. If you register for an account with Zooniverse, you can save your favorite fragments to a collection, save your transcriptions, and participate on the Talk boards. You *do not* need to create an account with Zooniverse to participate in the project.
- **Choose a Workflow:** Now you should be at the “Scribes of the Cairo Geniza” project homepage. **Scroll down** to the “Get Started” section or click **Transcribe** from the top menu and choose from the available transcription workflows: **Easy Hebrew** or **Easy Arabic**.
- **Begin Transcribing:**
 - When you start transcribing in either script, you'll have the option of clicking through a short tutorial. Instructions are also below for your reference. If the fragment you see is too difficult for you to transcribe, refresh the page in your browser and repeat the steps of **Choose a Workflow**.
 - To get started on transcribing a fragment, click **Add Transcription** on the Toolbar. Then, place a dot at the start (right side of the page) and the end (the left side of the page) of a line of text. (Remember, Hebrew and Arabic are read from right to left.) A transcription box will automatically appear after you place the second dot.
 - Use the keyboard to transcribe the selected line of text. In the Hebrew workflows, you have the option to choose between modern characters and images of different script types to aid in your transcription. Transcribe all the words in the selected line of text. Please type the words exactly as the scribe wrote them – do not correct spelling or grammar. If you're mostly sure of a word, but are unsure about an individual letter, replace it with a question mark (e.g. "uncl?ar"). There are also text modifiers to insert placeholders or notes into your transcription.
- **Don't Forget:** Once you've completed your transcription of that line, click **Done** and move onto another line of text. When you've transcribed everything you can on a fragment, click **Finished**. You will be asked whether the subject is

complete, or if there is still text left that has not been transcribed. Once you've answered the question, click **Done** to move on to the next subject. If you find a subject you want to share, click **Done & Talk** and leave a note for others about your findings!

User Instructions (General)

Welcome to Scribes of the Cairo Geniza! Get started at scribesofthecairogeniza.org.

- **Sign in or Register:** In the **upper right corner** of the page, **click** the button either to sign in (returning user) or register (first-time user) and follow instructions. Zooniverse is a free web-based platform for crowdsourced cultural heritage projects. If you register for an account with Zooniverse, you can save your favorite fragments to a collection, save your transcriptions, and participate on the Talk boards. You *do not* need to create an account with Zooniverse to participate in the project.
- **Choose a Workflow:** Now you should be at the “Scribes of the Cairo Geniza” project homepage. **Scroll down** to the “Get Started” section or click **Transcribe** from the top menu and choose from the available workflows: **Easy Hebrew**, **Easy Arabic**, or **Sort Fragments**.
- **Begin Classifying:**
 - **Sorting:** If you select **Sort Fragments**, it will take you to a screen that shows you a fragment to **sort**. We **HIGHLY** recommend that you go through the tutorial, which will either automatically pop up or you may need to click on the button on the right side that says **Tutorial**. This offers helpful tips about the interface and the project.
 - **Transcribing:** If you select **Easy Hebrew** or **Easy Arabic**, It will take you to a screen with a fragment to **transcribe**. The toolbars on the left and right sides of the screen will help you view the fragment more closely, learn more about its history, and start transcribing line by line. Remember that both Hebrew and Arabic read right-to-left, so start your transcription on the right side of the screen.
- **Don't Forget:** Check out the **Talk** page where you can see other Geniza scribes discussing fragments in the project. If you find a subject you want to share, click **Done & Talk** and leave a note for others about your findings!