Cover Letter

The book Living Geniza delves into a range of topics, including theology, identity psychology, immigration, integration, and the meeting of cultures, all explored through the unique lens of Ethiopian Jews' encounter with rabbinic tradition. This groundbreaking work integrates multiple fields of knowledge, offering a fresh and invigorating perspective on identity, religion, migration, and assimilation—a rare meeting of biblical and rabbinic traditions. In this sense, the phenomenon it addresses is unparalleled: a people reconnecting with its distant past through the return of a lost community into its midst. This is the extraordinary story of Beta Israel, the Ethiopian Jewish community, Israel’s oldest diaspora, returning to live among its historical people, bringing with it ancient traditions, narratives, and unique customs.

Within the pages of the book, the reader feels the ongoing tension between differences and commonalities—between diverse religious and cultural worldviews, traditional ways, and global modern influences. Living Geniza defies conventional categories: it is not merely a theological work, nor purely psychological or sociological research, nor solely philosophical—it is all of these. It speaks to the connection between the “small village,” symbolizing the defined and traditional, and the global world where individuals move freely, sometimes losing their primary sense of belonging. This conflict between the “local” and the “universal” is a pressing issue for millions worldwide in the modern era, and Living Geniza offers a profound reflection on navigating this tension—between preserving personal identity and the desire to integrate into a new culture.

Underlying the book is the crucial question of cultural boundaries between the local and the universal, the national and the religious, the traditional and the innovative. These are precisely the questions that preoccupy many facing migration or exposure to global processes—both in Israel and globally. The book serves as a vital key for understanding these processes, making its target audience broad and diverse, appealing to research communities and anyone seeking a way to address identity challenges in the modern age.

This book aligns with the works of other scholars who address identity, tradition, and modernity. Notable examples include Gabriel Shmueli’s Immigration Absorption: A Collection of Studies, which discusses the integration and migration processes of various communities in Israel; Emanuel Sivan’s Split Identities: Israelis in a Critical View, exploring the tension between local and global identities and examining the impact of migration on identity and culture. Similarly, David Hartman’s A Covenant of Sinai: Modern Orthodoxy and Jewish Identity discusses the tension between tradition and modern principles, proposing a flexible and dynamic Judaism that preserves its core values—a perspective that echoes Sharon Shalom’s multidisciplinary approach combining tradition and innovation.

Books on immigration, globalization, and multiculturalism also share these themes, such as Globalization and Identity: The Tension between the Local and the Global by Emanuel Sivan and Orit Avidev-Oron; Stuart Hall’s Cultural Identity and Diaspora, analyzing personal, cultural, and national identity conflicts in a changing world; Charles Taylor’s Politics of Recognition, discussing minority groups' struggles to preserve their cultural and religious identity amid dominant cultures, emphasizing that group identity often depends on broad social recognition.

The book also mirrors the work of Malka Shabtai in Between Hammer and Anvil: Identity Struggles Among Ethiopian Immigrants, which examines Ethiopian Jews’ struggle to preserve their religious identity while integrating into Israeli society. Rabbi Menachem Waldman’s The Oral Tradition of Ethiopian Jews explores the Ethiopian Jewish community's religious and cultural traditions as preserved orally, offering insight into their worldview.

Living Geniza draws intriguing parallels between Ethiopian Jews and Muslim immigrants facing similar cultural, religious, and national identity challenges. For instance, Tariq Ramadan’s Western Muslims and the Future of Islam examines Muslim identity in Europe, proposing methods to bridge the gap between faith and citizenship. Similarly, Jocelyne Cesari’s Islam, Gender, and Democracy in Comparative Perspective discusses the religious and cultural challenges faced by Muslim immigrants in the West. Philippe Castro’s Islam in Europe: Integration or Alienation? explores the cultural and religious conflicts experienced by Muslims in Europe, and Asma Ben Ahmed’s Migration and Cultural Encounters: Muslim Communities in Germany addresses the integration difficulties of Muslim immigrants in Germany and the impact of integration on their religious and cultural identity.

The author, himself a senior researcher and academic lecturer, personally experienced the journey of migration. Born in Ethiopia and surviving the journey to Israel, he embodies the complex reality of living in two worlds simultaneously, grappling with dual identity. His birth name, Zewde, was changed to a Hebrew name upon arrival in Israel, but both names appear on his identity card—a testament to the clash and harmony of these worlds. Sharon Shalom is deeply rooted in both worlds, enabling him to cast a new and critical light on the experiences of first-generation immigrants.