



כולל רבנים
רבינו צבי אשכנזי

An Initiative of Amsterdam Community Kollel

THIS WEEK IN JEWISH HISTORY

6 Tammuz

- Crusaders massacred Jews of Mehr, 1096.
- 24 wagonloads of Sifrei Kodesh burned in Paris, 1242.

7 Tammuz

- Ukrainian rioters kill many Jews, 1919.
- Hundreds of Jews of Yurburg, Lithuania executed by the Nazis, 1941.

8 Tammuz

- Jews expelled from Genoa, 1567.
- Pogrom in Bialystok, 1903.

9 Tammuz

- Nevuchadnezer's army breached the walls of Jerusalem, 586bce.
- Pompey captured Jerusalem and killed 12,000 Jews, 63bce.

10 Tammuz

- Tzidkiyahu HaMelech was captured by the Babylonians, 586bce.
- Fast observed by the Jewish community of Frankfort on the Maine to mark the escape of the Jewish quarter from a major fire, 1720.

11 Tammuz

- Purim of Tammuz for Jews of Algiers to mark their escape from attack by the Spanish army, 1774.

12 Tammuz

- Yahrzeit of the Baal HaTurim, 1340.
- Yahrzeit of Rabbi Elchanan Wasserman, HY"D, 1941.

EFFORT AND BELIEF

In Parshas Chukas we come across the Mei Meriva episode, where Moshe and Aharon were commanded to bring forth water from a rock by speaking to the rock. What happened was that Moshe caused the water to flow by hitting the rock twice. Hashem punished Moshe and Aharon by not allowing them to enter Eretz Yisrael. Perhaps the most common explanation of the mistake they made is that Hashem had commanded them to speak to the rock, and instead Moshe hit it with his staff (Rashi).

A thought to understand this a bit deeper: The be'er (the well) represents the livelihood of a person. Hashem explicitly asked them to speak to the rock. Had they done so, they would have demonstrated that it is not our physical investments that bring the blessing of Parnassa, rather, it is heeding the word of Hashem. We do, of course, work to put bread on the table. But that's with the recognition that Hashem decides how successful we will be. Perhaps the command to speak to the rock while holding the staff in hand was to demonstrate this very point; the staff represents the efforts of man, which must be done, but only with the recognition that the main thing is the trust in Hashem and following His Torah. By Moshe hitting the rock, the Yidden saw a physical act that caused their needs to be met.

A story is told that a Chassid came to the Tchortkover Rebbe to take leave of him. He had bought a ticket on an ocean liner to sail to America in search of a better financial future. The Rebbe responded by saying, 'Send regards to the American god!'. His message was that the same G-d that you think will provide for you in America has the ability to help you here in Europe. He does not need your extraordinary effort of moving continents to sustain you and your family. The Chassid took his Rebbe's rebuke to heart and did not go to America. (It so happened that the ship he was meant to sail on was none other than the Titanic!)

ZOS CHUKAS HATORAH: REMEMBERING THE BURNING OF THE TALMUD

Jews are all too familiar with the burning of our holy books. As recently as the Nazis or as far back as Antiochus[1] we have suffered the tragic desecration of our holy books. The destruction of books often doesn't stop there. They are a warning of darker things to come. "Where they burn books, they will ultimately burn people as well." [2] This Friday, Erev Shabbos Chukas commemorates what was perhaps the largest and most consequential book burning in Jewish history. On 17 June 1242, in the month of Tammuz 5002[3], twenty-four wagonloads of manuscripts, consisting primarily of copies of the Talmud and its commentaries, were publicly burnt in Paris. The burning was carried out by Dominican friars under the authority of King Louis IX of France and followed a lengthy campaign against the Talmud that had begun several years earlier.

Nicholas Donin

Nicholas Donin, a Jew from La Rochelle, had studied in the Yeshiva of R. Yechiel of Paris. After expressing views that rejected the authority of the Oral Law, he was expelled from the institution and excommunicated. He later converted to Christianity and entered the Franciscan Order.

In 1238 Donin presented Pope Gregory IX with a formal denunciation of the Jews and, in particular, of the Talmud. He set out thirty-five articles of accusations, alleging that the Talmud contained passages blasphemous toward Christianity and that it encouraged hostility toward Christians.[4] He concluded that as the Talmud was the reason why the Jews stubbornly refused to accept Christianity, its elimination would lead to their conversion.

Papal Decree

In 1239, Pope Gregory IX responded to Donin's accusations by issuing a papal decree to the kings of France, England, Castile, Aragon and Portugal. The decree ordered the confiscation of Jewish books throughout their realms. The pope instructed "that on the first Saturday of the coming Lent ... while the Jews are gathered in the synagogues you shall by your order seize all the books of the Jews who live in your districts and have

[1] *1 Maccabees* 1:56–57: during the persecutions of Antiochus, the authorities "tore up and burnt with fire" the Torah scrolls found in their possession.

[2] Heinrich Heine, *Almansor* (1821): "Dort, wo man Bücher verbrennt, verbrennt man am Ende auch Menschen"

[3] The contemporary Latin sources date the burning to 17 June 1242 (Julian calendar). Hebrew accounts generally place the event in the month of Tammuz 5002, though the precise day varies as modern conversions between Julian and Hebrew calendars yield slightly different results depending on the model used. See note 23.

[4] He claimed that Jews were permitted to kill non-Jews and break their promises to them. He said that Jews believed Mary to have been a common woman of ill repute. Furthermore, according to him, the Talmud contained 'odd and obscene folklore'.

these books carefully guarded in the possession of the Dominican and Franciscan Friars." [5]

The only monarch to comply with the papal order was Louis IX of France. On the designated day, thousands [6] of handwritten Talmudic manuscripts were confiscated and placed in the custody of the Dominican friars. The papal order was for books containing heresy "to be summarily burnt." [7] Louis IX, however, decided to hold a public disputation in Paris, in which France's leading rabbinic authorities would defend the Talmud against Donin's accusations.

The Disputation

The trial took place in June, 1240, in Paris and lasted for several days. On the Christian side, Nicholas Donin presented the accusations under royal authority. The Jewish defence was led by R. Yechiel of Paris alongside R. Moshe of Coucy, [8] R. Yehuda of Melun and R. Shmuel ben Shlomo of Falaise. [9]

The disputation centred on the thirty-five charges brought by Donin against the Talmud. He focused on passages that he alleged were blasphemous towards Christianity, attacked Christians and obscene folk stories. Beyond specific textual allegations, Donin argued that the Talmud had come to function as a legal system in its own right, superseding the authority of the Old Testament and thereby prevented the Jews from accepting Christianity.

R. Yechiel and his colleagues faced a difficult task. They had to defend a vast and complex text before an audience largely unfamiliar with its language, methods and historical context. They argued that the majority of the passages cited by Donin had been misunderstood or misidentified. Regarding passages that were said to contain derogatory references to Jesus of Nazareth, R. Yechiel maintained they referred to different individuals, [10] remarking that "not every Louis born in France is king." Where passages appeared critical of non-Jews, the rabbis said that they referred to idolaters of antiquity rather than contemporary Christians.

[5] See S. Grayzel, *The Church and the Jews in the XIIIth century*, 240-243.

[6] *Vikuach Rabbeinu Yechiel mi-Paris* (p. 3) refers to the confiscation and subsequent burning of approximately 1200 manuscripts. See *Shu"t Menachem Meishiv* (vol. 2, p. 262, 62; part of the sefer *Tziyon L'Menachem*) who cites that approximately 12,000 individual volumes were burnt.

[7] Quoted in Chazan, *Church, State, and Jew*, pp. 92-94.

[8] R. Moshe was a student of R. Yehudah haChassid. He was also known as Moshe miKotsi and was an expert on Halacha who authored one of the first codifications of Law in his *Sefer Mitzvos haGadol* (or *SeMaG*).

[9] R. Shmuel is known by his French name, Sir Morel, by which he is sometimes referred to in rabbinical literature. See *Mordechai* on *Chulin* 680 and *Or Zarua* on *Chulin* 453. He was also the author of the simanim of the Seder, *Kadeish Urchatz*. See *Pninei ShaDaL* p. 149

[10] According to the *Sefer Vikuach* (pp. 15-17) Rabbi Yechiel assumed the possibility of the existence of the four following Jesus's:

1. The pupil of R. Yoshua ben Perahya (Sotah 47a).
2. The contemporary of Titus, who told his nephew that he was being boiled in hot excrements for having mocked at the words of the sages (Gitin 56b-57a).
3. The son of Miriam, the hair-dresser (Sanhedrin 67a).
4. The Christian Jesus who isn't mentioned in the Talmud.

Our knowledge of these exchanges derives primarily from the Hebrew *Viknuach Rabbeinu Yechiel mi-Paris* and various Latin accounts.[11] The *Viknuach*, associated with students of R. Yechiel, contains a number of arguments not mentioned in the Latin accounts. It is possible that this version includes remarks that were not made, but would have been said had the Jews been free to express themselves.[12]

Despite the efforts of the Jewish representatives, none of the arguments convinced the court. The outcome of the proceedings was effectively determined in advance. The court issued its formal judgement against the Talmud, condemning it as blasphemous and heretical and ordering its destruction.

The sentence, however, was not immediately carried out. One of the members of the court, the Archbishop of Sens, is said to have interceded on behalf of the Jewish community, delaying the implementation of the decree. However, his sudden death two years later was interpreted as divine retribution for this intervention.[13] Only then was the sentence finally executed. On 17 June, 1242, twenty-four wagonloads of manuscripts were publicly burnt in Paris before a large gathering.[14]

Response to Tragedy

It is difficult to overstate the scale of the loss. In the age before the printing press, each manuscript was the product of manual copying. Among the works destroyed were commentaries of the Ba'alei Tosafos and the works of hundreds of years of French Tosafists. The French Yeshivos were suddenly deprived of the texts around which their learning revolved.

Despite the profound loss, French Jewish learning showed remarkable resilience. Even without any manuscripts to study from, the Yeshiva of R. Yechiel of Paris remained open and R. Yechiel is said to have taught his 300 students from memory.[15] In the aftermath of the burning, seeing that the lack of texts could lead to Halacha being forgotten, R. Moshe of Coucy authored his monumental work, *Sefer Mitzvos HaGadol* (SeMaG), one of the major halachic works of the thirteenth-century.

Perhaps the most enduring memorial to the tragedy is the kinah composed by R. Meir of Rothenburg, (the Maharam) *Sha'ali Serufah Ba-Esh*, which continues to be recited on Tishah B'Av to this day. R. Meir, who was a student of R. Yechiel of Paris, is said to have witnessed the burning itself. In the kinah he describes his immense grief, “my tears formed a river that reached to the Sinai desert ... Is there another Torah to replace the Torah which you have taken from us?”

[11] Latin material relating to the disputation survives in papal correspondence and records of Pope Gregory IX, as well as the *Extractiones de Talmud*, a Latin anthology of Talmudic passages compiled in the wake of the Paris controversy. Further relevant material is preserved in *Revue des Études Juives*, which publishes the Latin disputation records from medieval manuscripts.

[12] Alternatively, these were omitted from the Latin accounts.

[13] *Viknuach* p. 8

[14] The burning likely took place at Place de Grève, the city's principal site of public executions. See Chazan, *Church, State, and Jew in the Middle Ages* pp. 229–233 and *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, “Talmud, Burning of.”

[15] Heinrich Graetz, *Geschichte der Juden*, vol. 7, ch. 4; Zev Yavetz, *Toldos Yisrael*, vol. 12, pp. 111-112

He compares the burning of the Talmud to the destruction of the Temple. The kinah moves from lamentation to consolation and concludes with a prayer for the redemption.

The Rambam Controversy

The tragedy of 1242 also became intertwined with another controversy that had shaken the Jewish world only a few years earlier: the dispute surrounding the writings of the Rambam. Many great scholars disagreed with the philosophical writings of the Rambam, particularly in his *Moreh Nevuchim* and *Sefer HaMada*. In Provence and Catalonia, opponents of the Rambam's works went so far as to appeal to the Dominican Order who subsequently declared the Rambam's writings heretical. This led to the public burning of copies of his works.

R. Hillel of Verona, a student of Rabbeinu Yonah, wrote a letter connecting the burning of the Talmud and the burning of the Rambam's works.[16] He writes that "G-d looked down from the heavens and avenged the Rambam's honour", in the very place where the Rambam's works had been burnt, only forty days later the Talmud was burnt and the ashes of the two became mingled.[17]

The letter further describes when Rabbeinu Yonah, one of the leading figures in the opposition to the Rambam's writings, learnt of the burnings in Paris, he publicly renounced his former position and vowed to travel to the Rambam's grave to seek forgiveness.[18]

Fast day: Zos Chukas HaTorah

Beyond the immediate grief and attempts to understand its meaning, the memory of the tragedy became embedded in the Jewish calendar. The *Magen Avraham*[19] quotes "certain writings"[20] which state that it is "fitting for every Jew to cry over the burning of the Torah". He then writes in the name of the *Sefer Tanya*[21] of a custom among "select individuals" to fast on Erev Shabbos Chukas in commemoration of the twenty

[16] *Taam Zekeinim* pp. 71-73; *Chemdah Genuzah* p. 18.

[17] This particular claim is regarded by some scholars as apocryphal, since the burning of the Rambam's works is generally held to have taken place in Montpellier rather than Paris, and approximately a decade before the burning of the Talmud. See H. Graetz, *Geschichte der Juden*, vol. 7, ch. 4; Yossef Schwartz, "Authority, Control, and Conflict in Thirteenth-Century Paris," p. 103. See however, S.C Kook, *Kiryat Sefer* p. 160 who suggests that a second burning of the Rambam's works took place in Paris in 1242, thereby rendering plausible that the ashes of the two burnings became mingled.

[18] R. Hillel also writes that because Rabbeinu Yonah failed to fulfil his vow he died suddenly, "במיתה שאינה ראוי לזכרה". Some suggest this tragic incident was the catalyst of Rabbeinu Yonah's writing his magnum opus, 'Shaarei Teshuva'

[19] O.C. 580:9

[20] *Shaar HaKavanos* of R. Chaim Vital, *Drushei Tikkun Chatzos 1; Pri Eitz Chaim, Shaar Tikkun Chatzos* ch.3. See *Mishna Berura* (Oz V'Hadar edition) O.C. 580:16

[21] The *Tanya Rabbasi* is an early halachic work written anonymously by a *Rishon*. See the Mossad Rav Kook edition who identify the author as *Rav Yechiel ben Rav Yekusiel* of Rome.

wagonloads[22] of Talmud that were burnt in Paris.

The reason that this fast was designated without a specific date[23] is due to a remarkable she'elas chalom that took place. The rabbis at the time, struggling to understand the magnitude of the tragedy, sought a heavenly explanation by way of a dream. The response they received was '*Da Gezeiras Oraysa*'. This is the Aramaic translation of the opening words of Parshas Chukas, "*Zos Chukas HaTorah*". Based on this dream the rabbis understood that the significance of the burning lay not in the date on which it occurred but in its association with Parshas Chukas.[24]

Aftermath

Jewish life in France was undoubtedly significantly impacted by this decree. The loss of so many texts had severely affected their ability not only to study the Torah but also to follow Halacha. But, as so many before and after them, they responded with resilience. R. Yechiel continued teaching in his yeshiva, and the *SeMaG* was written as a response to the burning. Unfortunately, in 1306 the Jews were expelled from France, bringing an end to this remarkable chapter in French Ashkenazi history.[25]

The Church, too, shifted its approach. Whilst other burnings of the Talmud took place after this,[26] Pope Innocent IV - who became pontiff in 1243 - ruled that the Talmud should be corrected rather than outright banned, making it possible to censor offensive passages while Jews were able to continue studying the work.

[22] See *Biurei Maharsha*"b (on the *Tanya Rabbas*) who notes that there was likely a printing error in the *Magen Avraham*. In the original source he is quoting it states twenty-four wagonloads, rather than twenty. The *Korei HaDoros* (pp. 23a-b) writes that twenty-one wagonloads were burnt.

Interestingly, he dates the burning to 5066/1306, immediately preceding the expulsion of the Jews from France in the same year. He notes that it is unlikely that the burning took place earlier, as it is difficult to understand how the Jewish community could have survived for some sixty years without any texts.

[23] See *Perushei HaTorah* L'Rabi Chaim Paltiel, Introduction to *Parashas Chukas*, p. 527 who writes that the custom in France was to fast on the sixth of Tammuz, as that was the **date** of the burning

[24] See *Shibolei Haleket* (263, *Ha'arugah HaTishi's Seder Taanis, Din Arba Tzomos*), who also mentions this dream. In his version, the response was '*V'da Gezeiras Oraysa*'. Accordingly, the rabbis understood the response to mean that the sixth day (*Yom Var*) of *Parashas Chukas* was specifically the day of the *gezeira*.

[25] See note 23

[26] Other notable medieval and early modern burnings of the Talmud include: the Bologna burning of 1322, the burning in Rome in the 1550s, and later confiscations in Spain in the early 15th century surrounding the Disputation of Tortosa (1413-1414).