

# Parshat Chukat & The Burning of the Talmud in 1242

## SHULCHAN ARUCH Orach Chayim 580

(א) אלו הימים שארעו בהם צרות לאבותינו וראוי להתענות בהם; ואף על פי שמקצתם בראש חדש, יש מי שאומר שיתענו בו (וטוב שלא להשלים בראש חדש)

(ב) באחד בניסן מתו בני אהרן; בעשרה בו מתה מרים ונסתלק הבאר; בכ"ו בו מת יהושע בן נון, בעשרה באיר מת עלי הכהן ושני בניו, ונשבה ארון ה'; בכ"ח בו מת שמואל הנביא; בכ"ג בסיון בטלו הבכורים מלעלות לירושלים בימי ירבעם בן נבט; בכ"ה בו נהרג רשב"ג ורבי ישמעאל ור' חנינא סגן הכהנים; בכ"ז בו נשרף רבי חנינא בן תרדיון וספר תורה עמו; באחד באב מת אהרן הכהן; ב"ח בו כבה נר מערבי בימי אחז. ב"ז באלול מתו מוציא דבת הארץ; בה' בתשרי מתו עשרים איש מישראל ונחבש רבי עקיבא; בז' בו נגזרה גזרה על אבותינו שימותו בחרב ובדבר, מפני מעשה העגל; בז' במרחשון עורו עיני צדקיהו ושחטו בניו לעיניו; בכ"ח בכסלו שרף יהויקים המגלה שכתב ברוך מפי ירמיהו; בשמונה בטבת נכתבה התורה יונת בימי תלמי המלך והיה חשך בעולם שלשה ימים; ובט' בו לא נודע איזו היא הצרה שארע בו; בה' בשבט מתו הזקנים שהיו בימי יהושע; בכ"ג בו נתקצצו כל ישראל על שבט בנימין על ענין פלגש בגבעה; בז' באדר מת משה רבנו ע"ה; בט' בו נחלקו בית שמאי ובית הלל.

### Magen Avraham

כתב התניא ביום הששי פ' חקת נהגו יחידים להתענו' שבאותו היום נשרפו כ' קרונות מלאים ספרים בצרפת ולא קבעו אותו בימי החדש מפני שמתוך שאלת חלום נודע להם שיום הפרשה גורם גזיר' התורה זאת חקת התורה מתרגמי' דא גזירת אורייתא, וגם בשנת ת"ח נחרבו שני קהילו' גדולות באותו היום כמ"ש בסליחו' שחבר בעל השפתי כהן: גם נוהגין להתענות עשרי' בסיון בכל מלכות פולין נהרא נהרא ופשטי' רפא שבריה כי מטה:

### Shibolei Haleket

ועל שאנו עסוקין בהלכות תענית ובענין שריפת התורה כתבנו זה לזכר על מה שאירע בימינו על רוב עונותינו אשר גרמו לנו ונשרפה תורת אלהינו בשנת חמשת אלפים וב' שנים לבריאת עולם ביום ששי פרשת וזאת חקת התורה כעשרים וארבעה קרונות מלאים ספרי תלמוד והלכות והגדות נשרפו בצרפת כאשר שמענו לשמע אוזן וגם מן הרבנים שהיו שם שמענו שעשו שאילת חלום לדעת אם גזירה היא מאת הבורא והשיבו להם ודא גזירת אורייתא ופירושו ביום ו' זאת חקת התורה היא הגזירה ומאותו היום ואילך קבעוהו היחידים עליהם להתענות בו בכל שנה ושנה ביום ששי של פרשת זאת חקת התורה ולא קבעוהו לימי החודש תהא אפרה עלינו לכפרה (כאשה) [כעולה] על מוקדה וערבה לבני יהודה כמנחתה הקריבה כהילכתה.

**במדבר יש חקת**

**אונקלוס**

יש"א וידבר  זה אל-משה ואל-  
אהרן לאמר:  זאת חקת  
התורה אשר-צוה  הלאמר דברו

א ומליי יי עם משה  
ועם אהרן למימר:  
ב דא גזרת אורייתא די  
פקיד יי למימר מליי עם  
תרא זאת חקת סתורס יוסא כ סג זכתיס יי  
מניזוס יי מונין כד יי דבר חל בני  
סחלא ס"ג כ

שָׂנְאֵי שְׂרָפָה בְּאֵשׁ — O [Torah] by fire consumed, seek... Twenty-four cartloads of the Talmud and its commentaries were publicly burned in the streets of Paris, France in the year 1242. The events leading to this tragedy give us a glimpse of the terrible persecution which hounded our ancestors in those dark times.

The French king, Louis IX (1226-1270), was a fanatical religious zealot, so much so, in fact, that he earned himself the title of Saint Louis. His piety, however, did not extend to his Jewish subjects, against whom he enacted many harsh and discriminatory laws. The king's pious zeal manifested itself most clearly in the favor he extended to apostates who abandoned Judaism. To encourage conversion, the king himself would often attend their baptisms.

Nicholas Donin of La Rochelle was an apostate who was especially vicious in his hatred for his former co-religionists, and who caused the forced baptism of the Jews of Anjou and Poitiers. Five hundred Jews from these cities surrendered before the threat of death and were baptized, while the majority of Jews, 3,000 martyrs in all, chose to meet their death while sanctifying God's Name.

Donin realized that the bulwark of firm Jewish faith was the holy Talmud, the repository of our traditions and teachings. He felt that if he could destroy the Talmud he could easily eradicate the Jews. To that end, he went to Pope Gregory IX in Rome, where he presented a formal accusation against the Talmud. He charged that it contained blasphemies against God and against Christianity, and that it alone was the cause of the Jews' steadfast refusal to accept the 'true' faith.

The Pope issued orders for a seizure of all copies of the Talmud and for a thorough examination and evaluation of its contents. The churchmen of France were only too eager to obey this decree, so on March 3, 1240, while the Jews were in their synagogues, all of their sacred tomes were seized and confiscated. On June 12th of that year a public debate was held in Paris between Donin and four of the most eminent rabbinical authorities in France.

The Jewish deputation was led by R' Yechiel ben Yosef (died 1268) who headed the Yeshiva in Paris. He was the father of Rabbeinu Asher (known as the *Rock*) and many of the major seges of that period studied under him. These include R' Yitzchok of Corbeil (his son-in-law) and Maharam of Rothenburg.

The other representatives were R' Moshe of Coacy, R' Yehudah ben David of Melun and R' Shmuel ben Shlomo of Falaise.

Although R' Yechiel and his colleagues displayed great scholarship, courage, and dignity in

their defense of the Talmud, the official verdict against them was a foregone conclusion. The Talmud would have been immediately consigned to the flames if not for the lone staunch ally the Jews had amongst the churchmen, the bishop of Sens (Shantz), whose arguments and pleas averted any evil decree for one year. At the year's end, while the good bishop was standing in the presence of King Louis, he suddenly convulsed and died in a most grotesque fashion. The anti-Semitic priests convinced the gullible king that this was actually an act of Divine retribution against the bishop for his heresy in defending the blasphemous Talmud. A tribunal of church elders condemned the Talmud to be burnt. Their agents eagerly searched and confiscated over 1200 manuscripts of the Talmud and commentaries. We must bear in mind that this occurred two centuries before the invention of the printing press. Each one of these volumes was a handwritten manuscript which took months, even years to write, at tremendous effort and expense. Moreover, many of the more recent works such as novellae by the Tosafists of France and their correspondence and halachic decisions were transcribed only in a limited number of copies and would be lost forever.

R' Yechiel recognized that this tragedy threatened the very survival of the French Jewish community. He therefore recorded the proceedings of his disputation in a work called simply *ריסוּב*, [Vikuach] Debate. In his introduction, paraphrasing the words of Jeremiah (Eichah 4:9), he states, *פִּי נִתְּנָה לְמָוֶת וְלָקְחָהּ בְּיָדָהּ הַחֶרֶב מִפְּנֵי שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר וְנִתְּנָה לְמָוֶת בְּלִי תוֹרָה. For those put to death by the sword were better off than those who sat in desolation without Torah.*

In 1242, on Friday, the day before the Shabbos when *Parashas Chukas* would be read, twenty-four wagonloads of holy *sefarim* were burnt.

R' Tzidklyah ben Avrohom HaRofeh, who lived at that time, writes:

From Torah scholars who were involved, we heard that the Rabbis inquired of heaven by means of a dream (שָׂנְאֵי וְלֵלֵם), to discover whether this terrible event had been so decreed by the Almighty. The heavenly reply was given in three words: *זֶה הוּא דְּבַר הַתּוֹרָה*. This is the decree of the Torah, the Aramaic version of the opening words of that week's Torah reading — *וְזֶה דְּבַר הַתּוֹרָה*. R' Tzidklyah further notes that, in commemoration of this tragic event, some pious people customarily fast on Erev Shabbos of *Parashas Chukas* every year (*Shibbolei HaLeket* 263).

#### The Ashes of the Rambam's Works

R' Hillel of Verona, Italy was an eyewitness to

these tragic events in Paris. He considered the burning of the Talmud as a clear sign of Divine anger and retribution for the destruction of the works of R' Moshe ben Maimon, known as the *Rambam* (Maimonides).

There were many great scholars, especially in southern France, who did not agree with many of *Rambam's* opinions in his *Moreh Nevuchim* (*Guide for the Perplexed*) and his philosophical observations in the first book of his *Yad HaChazakah* (*Sefer HaMada*). Some went so far as to place a ban on studying or even owning these works. A tremendous controversy erupted and the situation got out of control. The hysteria reached its terrible climax when members of the anti-Rambam camp submitted copies of his philosophical writings to the monks of the Dominican Order for the sake of determining whether these works contained heretical ideas.

The Dominicans, of course, swiftly concluded that the *Rambam's* writings were blasphemous and false. They publicly burned all copies of *Moreh Nevuchim* and *Sefer HaMada* that they could lay their hands on. This was done in Montpellier France in 1234. In the year 1242, fanatical churchmen once again burnt the *Rambam's* works in the streets of Paris.

In a letter recording these events, R' Hillel of Verona makes the following observations:

God looked down from heaven and avenged the honor of our holy master, *Rambam*, and his works. He poured His wrath upon the Jewish communities of France. You should not ask in wonderment, 'How did God disregard twelve hundred manuscripts of Talmud and Aggadah and allow them to be burnt as retribution for the *Moreh Nevuchim* and *Sefer HaMada*? Rather, you must bear in mind that R' Moshe ben Maimon was almost second in his generation to Moshe Rabbeinu, and the righteousness of the entire generation depended upon him... If you ask, 'Who can be sure that the Talmud was burned because of the burning of the *Rambam's* works?' I will answer you. This is the sign and proof. Take note of this: Not even forty days passed between the conflagration of the works of our master and the burning of the Talmud. On the very spot where the *Rambam's* works were destroyed, the Talmud was later burnt! The ashes of the burnt Talmud mingled with the ashes of the *Rambam's* volumes, for those ashes still remained in that very place. This served as a clear lesson to one and all, Jew and gentile alike.

The destruction of the Talmud was a crushing blow to the venerable and ancient Jewish community of France. It marked the beginning of its very rapid decline and eventual disintegration.

With the conditions of the Jews in France steadily worsening, R' Yechiel emigrated to Eretz Yisrael in 1260 together with a large group of French Talmudists. He settled in Acre, where he established the Talmudic academy *Midrash HaGadol d' Paris*. He is believed to have died in 1267.

One of the participants in the great Talmudic debate in Paris, R' Shmuel of Falaise summed up the enormity of the tragedy in the following elegy:

My spirit is gone, my strength is sapped, the light of my eyes has dimmed, because of the tyrant whose hand weighed very heavily upon us, when he seized the core of our soul and the delight of our eyes. Now we have no holy book in which to study and meditate. May the Almighty God avenge His people and may He say to our misery, 'It is enough!' (quoted in *Teshuvos Maharam MiRottenburg* 250).

In 1306, the glorious chapter of Jewish history in medieval France came an abrupt close, when King Philip IV (the Fair) expelled the Jews from all of France. French Jewry, which had enriched our eternal Torah legacy with the magnificent Talmudic commentaries of *Rashi* and *Tosafos*, was no longer.



CECIL ROTH – A SHORT HISTORY  
OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE

The turn in the tide came with the middle of the sixteenth century, when Cardinal Caraffa, in whom the most fanatical aspects of the Counter-Reformation were personified, became all-powerful at the Papal court. A couple of the inevitable apostates (one of them, Vittorio Eliano, was a grandson of no less a scholar than Elias Levita) followed precedent by denouncing the Talmud as pernicious and blasphemous. After a very summary enquiry, the work was condemned; and, in spite of the fact that it had been published under the patronage of so recent a pontiff as Leo X, it was consigned to the flames. In the autumn of 1553, on the Jewish New Year, all copies discoverable were burned publicly in the Campo dei Fiori in Rome. The example was followed all over Italy with a ridiculous lack of discrimination, no exception sometimes being made in favour even of Hebrew texts of the Bible itself. Ultimately, greater moderation began to be shewn, but only after the institution of a fantastically rigorous censorship.

The last auto-da-fé of the Talmud took place in Poland, in Kamenets-Podolski in the fall of 1757, following the spread of the \*Frankist movement in Podolia. Bishop Nicholas Dembowski intervened in the controversy between the Frankists and Jewish leaders and ordered a disputation to be held between them. He subsequently condemned all copies of the Talmud found in his diocese to be seized and burned after they had been dragged through the streets in mockery. A search was made with the aid of the clergy, the police, and the Frankists for the Talmud and other rabbinical writings. Nearly 1,000 copies of the Talmud were thrown into a pit at Kamenets and burned by the hangman.

THE HOLOCAUST –  
MARTIN GILBERT

'the first and third fire brigades prevented the flames from spreading to adjoining buildings'.<sup>9</sup> The destruction of the books in the Talmudic Academy in Lublin gave so much pleasure to the conquerors that it was recalled with glee more than a year later. 'For us', a German eye-witness later reported, 'it was a matter of special pride to destroy the Talmudic Academy, which was known as the greatest in Poland', and he went on to describe how:

We threw the huge Talmudic library out of the building and carried the books to the market place, where we set fire to them. The fire lasted twenty hours. The Lublin Jews assembled around and wept bitterly, almost silencing us with their cries. We summoned the military band, and with joyful shouts the soldiers drowned out the sounds of the Jewish cries.<sup>10</sup>



השומע ברפת השם, ואפלו ברפת הכנוי (רמב"ם פ"ב מהלכות עבודת כוכבים ד"י) אפלו אמרו בלשון לעז הוי ככנוי (נ"י פרק ארבע מיתות), חיב לקרע, והוא שישמענה מישראל. ויש אומרים דבזמן הזה מומר דינו כעובד כוכבים (ג"ז שם). ואפלו השומע מהעדים היאך ברך פלוני, חיב לקרע. והעדים אינם צריכים לקרע פעם אחרת. הרואה ספר תורה שנשרף, או תפלין, או אפלו מגלה אחת מהנביאים או מהפתובים, קורע שתי קריעות. ודוקא ששורפין אותה בזרוע, וכמעשה שהיה.

TALMUD Avodah Zarah 18a

אמרו: לא היו ימים מועטים עד שנפטר רבי יוסי בן קיסמא. והלכו כל גדולי רומי לקברו והספידוהו הספר גדול. ובחזרתו מצאוהו לרבי תננא בן תרדיון שהיה יושב ועוסק בתורה ויטקהיל קהילות ברבים וספר תורה טופת לו בחיקו.

הביאוהו וכרכוהו בספר תורה, והקיפוהו בדבילי ומורות והציתו בהן את האור. והביאו ספוגין של צמר ושראום במים והניחום על לבו. כדי שלא תצא נשמתו מהרה. אמרה לו בתו: אבא. אראך בכך? אמר לה: אילמלי אני נשרפתי לבדי, היה הדבר קשה לי. עכשיו שאני נשרף וספר תורה עמי, מי שסבבש עלבונה של ספר תורה הוא יבקש עלבוני.

אמרו לו תלמידיו: רבי, מה אתה רואה? אמר להן: גליון נשרפין ואותיות פורחות. אף אתה פתח פיך ותבגס בך האש! אמר להן מיטב שישלנה מי שנתנה ואל יחבל הוא בעצמו.

The Sages said: Not even a few days passed before Rabbi Yosei ben Kisma died of his illness, and all of the Roman notables went to bury him, and they eulogized him with a great eulogy. And upon their return, they found Rabbi Hanina ben Teradyon, who was sitting and engaging in Torah study and convening assemblies in public, with a Torah scroll placed in his lap.

They brought him to be sentenced, and wrapped him in the Torah scroll, and encircled him with bundles of branches, and they set fire to it. And they brought tufts of wool and soaked them in water, and placed them on his heart, so that his soul should not leave his body quickly, but he would die slowly and painfully. His daughter said to him: Father, must I see you like this? Rabbi Hanina ben Teradyon said to her: If I alone were being burned, it would be difficult for me, but now that I am burning along with a Torah scroll, He who will seek retribution for the insult accorded to the Torah scroll will also seek retribution for the insult accorded to me.

His students said to him: Our teacher, what do you see? Rabbi Hanina ben Teradyon said to them: I see the parchment burning, but its letters are flying to the heavens.<sup>n</sup> They said to him: You too should open your mouth and the fire will enter you, and you will die quickly. Rabbi Hanina ben Teradyon said to them: It is preferable that He who gave me my soul should take it away, and one should not harm oneself to speed his death.