





# When the Talmud was Burned

Unfortunately, many of our worst enemies have come from within

How was it that you, O Law, given by G-d, the Consuming Fire,  
Should be consumed by the fire of mortals,  
And that the heathens weren't singed by your burning coals?  
How can food ever again be sweet to my palate  
After beholding what your plunderers have gathered?  
Men whom you rejected from entering your assembly  
Burned the spoil of the Most High in the midst of the market square,

Like the possessions of a condemned city.  
(Adapted from a translation by A. Rosenfeld)

With these poignant words from the *kinah* “*Sha’ali Serufah Va’eish*,” recited by *Ashkenazim* each year on Tishah B’Av, Rav Meir of Rothenberg (1215-1293) mourned the burning of the Talmud in Paris that he had witnessed in June of 1242. He writes that he himself saw 24 wagon loads of Talmudic volumes destroyed. This horrible anti-Semitic act had enormous consequences for the study of the Gemara in *Ashkenaz* (France and Germany) in the Middle Ages. In fact, we have only one complete manuscript of the *Talmud Bavli*, the Munich manuscript, an *Ashkenazic* copy from 1342.

But the burning of the Talmud in Paris was not a sudden, isolated event. Rather, it capped a long history of anti-Semitic accusations.

While the European Jewish communities had their origins in the Roman period, it wasn't until the Middle Ages that they emerged as major centers of Jewish life. By the time these communities attained developed status, during the 10th-11th centuries, the text of the Gemara had reached a more or less fixed form, even if it circulated in varying manuscript traditions. The authority of the *Bavli* over the *Yerushalmi* had been accepted already under the *Geonim* (7th to 11th centuries). But it would not be long before it,

like the community that lived according to its principles, would come under attack from anti-Semites.

In 1095 Pope Urban II called for the First Crusade. While the pope did not mention Jews in his call to arms, he clearly touched off the spontaneous attacks on Jews that eventuated in the Rhineland massacres, commemorated by *Ashkenazim* in the *kinah* “*Mi Yitein Rosh Mayim*” by Kalonymus ben Yehudah (11th century). This was the time of Rashi (1040-1105), and the communities destroyed, most notably Speyer, Worms (where Rashi studied) and Mainz (the home of Rabbeinu Gershom, 960-1040) were part of the heartland of Talmudic study.

The earliest person to directly polemicize against the Talmud was probably Petrus Alphonsi, a Jewish physician and scholar who converted to Christianity in 1106 and was formerly known as Moses Sephardi. Leaving Spain, he eventually lived in England and then France. The first sections of his *Dialogue Against the Jews* attacks Judaism to a great extent by challenging the Gemara and *Chazal*. Whereas previous claims had been that the Jews continued to practice biblical law, refusing to accept Christianity, Petrus now claimed that the Jews were following what he said was a new and false law—that of the Talmud.

Somewhat different was Peter the Venerable, the Benedictine Abbot of Cluny (c. 1092-1156). Himself hostile to Jews and Judaism, he also wanted to see Jews spared from violence. He wanted the Jews to be despised and hated for their rejection of Christianity and strongly called for hatred of the Jews while deploring violence against them. Peter composed a lengthy polemic against the Jews that included an attack on the Talmud. Peter is effectively the first major example of an attack of this nature, although those who followed him had much more thorough familiarity with the Gemara.

What is new here in European anti-Jewish polemic is the use of the Talmud to argue their case. This takes place in an atmosphere



in the 12th century when European Christendom was crystalizing a new spirited opposition to Jews and Judaism. Yet this was the same time in which the scholarship of the *Baalei Hatosafos*, Rashi's students and grandsons, was developing throughout Northern Europe. Often, these attacks called attention to the blatant attacks in the Talmud on Christianity and its leader. These passages were censored by Christians from printed copies of the Gemara and are still omitted from almost all the editions and translations used today.

By the 13th century, Jewish converts to Christianity began to provide much more Talmudic learning to increasingly anti-Talmudic Christian authorities. The first of these was Nicholas Donin (first half of the 13th century). He argued that the Talmud was intolerable to Christians and that Christian society should destroy it. He set in motion the process that would lead to the burning of the Talmud in France in the 1240s. We can learn of his accusations against the Talmud from the letters sent by Pope Gregory IX (c. 1170-1241) to monarchs and ecclesiastical leaders in Western Europe in the lead-up to the burning of the Talmud, and from a set of 35 accusations, probably composed by Donin himself. Essentially, Donin understood the central theological and halachic role of the Gemara in Jewish life but claimed that it was antithetical to Christianity and was preventing the conversion of Jews—by then a stated goal of the medieval church.

Sadly, his accusations led to papal action. The Pope asked the political leaders to collect the Talmudic texts and give them to churchmen to inspect. Those texts containing unacceptable "errors" were to be burned at the stake. These orders were carried out only in northern France by King Louis IX and by the theologians of the University of Paris. Indeed, a trial took place ("*Vikuach Rabbi Yechiel mi'Paris*") for which we have considerable Jewish and Christian evidence. Despite the valiant efforts of Rabbi Yechiel (d. 1286) at this disputation, the Talmud was convicted

and then burned in several episodes in Paris in the 1240s.

But our story was not yet over: In 1247, the new pope, Innocent IV, was approached by the rabbis of France and became convinced by their argument that because of the central role of the Talmud in Judaism, confiscation and destruction of its manuscripts violated the Catholic doctrine of tolerance of the Jews and Judaism. This doctrine required that the Jews be allowed to continue to practice their faith freely so that their downtrodden and persecuted status would somehow testify to the "truth" of Christianity. The authorities were instructed to return to the Jews those books that were not destroyed, but only after censoring out objectionable material. The Paris church leaders refused to obey. However, in the rest of Europe, censorship became the norm rather than destruction. Indeed, numerous medieval Hebrew manuscripts that survive from the Middle Ages bear testimony to Christian censorship.

Still, Christian opposition to the Talmud would continue to remain a major part of anti-Jewish polemic. In contrast to Donin, Pablo Christiani (d. 1274), a Spanish apostate who became a Dominican Friar, used his knowledge of the Talmud and Jewish literature to argue the "truth" of Christianity. He falsely argued that numerous *aggados* found in the Gemara actually supported Christian beliefs. He even had a disputation with the Ramban (*Vikuach haRamban*) in Barcelona in 1263. Much of the debate revolved around how literally *aggados* should be taken. The Ramban succeeded in exposing the weakness of Pablo's arguments, and in this way prevented defections to Christianity by weaker elements of the Jewish community.

By the mid-13th century, Christian scholarship in Jewish texts was flourishing—in order to support polemics and proselytizing efforts, as well as, apparently, for its own sake as part of the rising tradition of medieval scholarship. Among the Christian Hebraists was the strongly anti-Semitic Dominican Friar Raymond Martini (c. 1220-1284). His *Pugio Fidei* (*Dagger of Faith*) shows



# When the Talmud was Burned

enormous knowledge of rabbinic sources, even some that are lost to us today but that scholarship has proven to be authentic. He defined his book as “the dagger of Christians [to be used] for slaying the perfidy of the impious and especially the Jews” and tried to prove at excruciating length that Talmudic sources support the beliefs of Christianity.

While these polemics, trials and burnings of the Talmud were going on, the context of Jewish life in medieval Western Europe was deteriorating. Jewish banking and lending contributed greatly to the negative image of the Jews of medieval Europe. Furthermore, popular Christian fear turned to irrational beliefs, such as the specious claim that Jews sought to kill Christians, often in the form of ritual murder—the infamous blood libel. Often connected to Passover and the baking of matzah, this belief persists even today in some circles. Jews were also blamed for bubonic plague and accused of poisoning the wells.

Eventually, the Jews were almost systematically expelled from Western Europe, starting with England in 1290, France repeatedly until the final expulsion in 1394, and later from numerous parts of Germany, Italy and the Balkans. Then, of course, came the expulsion from Spain in 1492 and from Portugal in 1497.

Sadly, today's accusations made by anti-Semites are very similar to those that circulated in the Middle Ages. They continue to be made against the Talmud and, on its basis, against the Jewish

people. As Rav Meir of Rothenberg watched the tragic conflagration brought about by those who thought that they could extinguish the Jewish people by destroying their books, he concluded his elegy with the following comforting words:

May the Creator comfort you according to the days of your affliction,

And may He restore the captivity of the tribes of Yeshurun  
And raise your meek ones from their lowliness.

You will again adorn yourself with ornaments of scarlet;

You will take up the timbrel and lead the circling dance and rejoice in your revels.

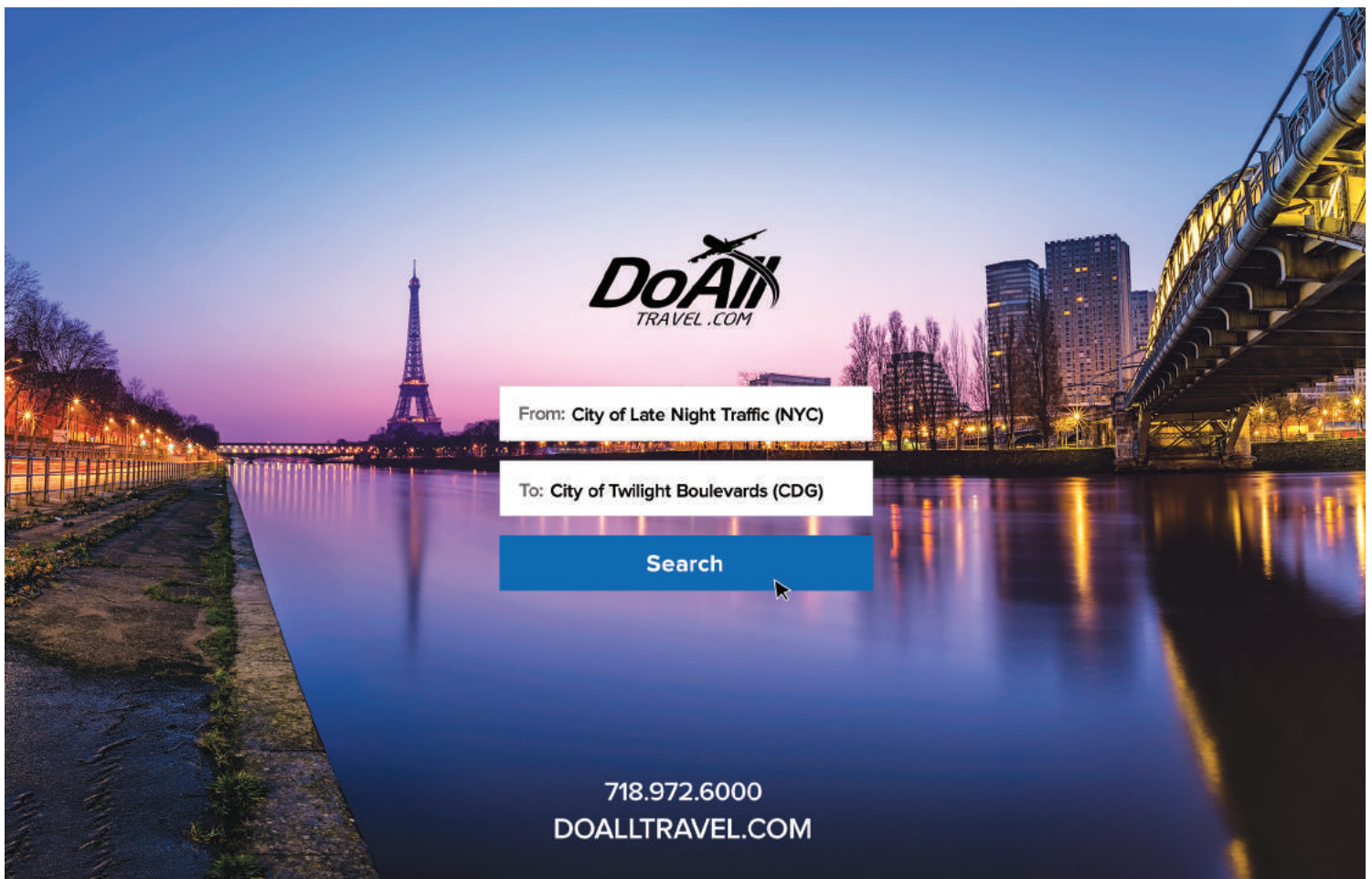
Then shall my heart be uplifted when your Creator will afford you light,

Brighten your darkness and illuminate your sorrowing gloom.

*(Adapted from a translation by A. Rosenfeld)*

As we remember the destruction of these communities and their manuscripts, and the destruction only so recently of European Jewry, their *yeshivos*, and many of their *sefarim*, let us redouble our efforts to make Rav Meir's words a reality. ●

*Lawrence H. Schiffman is Judge Abraham Lieberman Professor of Hebrew and Judaic Studies and Director of the Global Network for Advanced Research in Jewish Studies at New York University.*



**DoAll**  
TRAVEL.COM

From: City of Late Night Traffic (NYC)

To: City of Twilight Boulevards (CDG)

**Search**

718.972.6000  
DOALLTRAVEL.COM