

Erev Shabbos Parshas Chukas: Fasting for Burning Shas in Paris 1242 – Henry Ehreich

ז' תמוז תשע"ז – 1st July 2017 – שבת פ' חקת

Some segments of the Ashkenazic Jewry in the Middle Ages observed a fast day on Erev Shabbos Parshas Chukas. This fast commemorated the public burning of twenty-four carriage-loads of the Talmud in Paris in 1242. Special Selichos are still recited in some communities.

The Magen Avraham and Sefer Eliyahu Rabbah (Orach Chaim 580) mention this custom. The fast is observed on Erev Shabbos Parshas Chukas, not on a specific day of the month of Tammuz (like the 9th of Tammuz when it occurred), because it was determined after consultation with Gedolim at the time, that Parshas Chukas was foretold as the time when a decree against the Torah would occur. Targum Onkelos on Parshas Chukas makes a hidden allusion, a remez, to some decree against the Torah in history by translating "Zos Chukas HaTorah" as "V'da Gezeras Orayso", meaning, on day "vav", the sixth day of the week, "Da Gezeras Orayso" this is the decree, Gezera, against the Torah (Shibalei Haleket 263 adds the reading of "Da" with a "vav" as a connective is not in our versions of Onkelos). The Magen Avraham adds that two major Jewish communities were destroyed on that same day, Erev Shabbos Parshas Chukas, during the devastating riots of Tach V'tat, the Chmelnitzki uprising.

Rabbi Hillel Ben Rabbenu Eliezer of Verona, a student of Rabbenu Yonah, wrote that he believed that the public burning of the Talmud was a direct punishment for the burning of some works of the Rambam, which happened forty days earlier with the encouragement of leading Rabbis in Europe. Some Rabbis rejected some of the ideas found in the Rambam's Moreh Nevuchim - Guide for the Perplexed and Sefer haMada. Rabbenu Yonah led the campaign to ban these books. His student describes the deep sense of regret felt by Rabbenu Yonah after the Talmud burning. Thereafter, whenever he would teach halacha he would mention the opinion of the Rambam and not dispute the ruling. It is said that Rabbenu Yonah wrote Sha'arei Teshuva, his classic work on the laws and methods of repentance, to atone for this incident. R. Hillel of Verona writes that after the Talmud burning there was deep regret in the Jewish community for burning the Rambam's books. After the Talmud burning the controversy over the Rambam waned.

The Talmud burning has some additional historical background of interest. In the year 1240, the apostate Nicholas Donin laid a charge before the Pope Gregory IX that the Talmud contained blasphemies against J C as well as 34 other charges. The Jews were compelled to surrender their copies of the Talmud pending clarification of the charge; this took the form of the Disputation of Paris, where Rabbi Yechiel of Paris was the Jewish spokesman, at the end of which Louis IX ordered that all copies of the Talmud be confiscated and burned. Twenty-four cartloads were consigned to the flames in 1242. The occasion was commemorated in R. Me'ir ben Barukh of Rothenburg's Kinah "Sha'ali Serufah Bo'ish". The precedent of 1242 was followed in later centuries; instances of Talmud burning are recorded in Italy, Poland, and elsewhere. In general, although censored, the Talmud was not burned on a large scale until a renewed order in 1552 by Pope Julius III led to a big bonfire in Rome (commemorated thereafter by an annual fast among the Jews of Rome), followed by many others in Italy under the instructions of the Inquisition. It was reported that in Venice over a thousand copies of the Talmud and other Sefarim were burned. The last such public burning was held in Kamieniec-Podolski in Poland in 1757, when a thousand copies were put into a pit and burned following a disputation between the Jews and the Frankists who played a leading role in hunting down copies of the Talmud for incineration. Our tefillah can be the same as that of the Shibalei Haleket (263) regarding the Talmud burning in Paris: *May its ashes serve as atonement for us like a burnt-offering on the Mizbeach, and it should be pleasant like a meal-offering properly sacrificed. May all of the consolations of the prophets for Israel come true with the ingathering of our exiles.*