

Words on Fire: The *Kinah* over the Burning of the Talmud
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Rembrandt van Rijn, "Jeremiah Lamenting the Destruction of Jerusalem," 1630, (58 cm by 46 cm) Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

“Sha’ali Serufa B’aish” by Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg (c.1215-1293)

O that which has been consumed by fire, seek the welfare of those who mourn you, of those who yearn to dwell in the court of your habitation. Of those who gasp in the dust of the earth, who grieve and are bewildered over the conflagration of your parchments. They grope in the dark, bereft of light...

How was it that given by the Consuming Fire, you should be consumed by the fire of mortals, and that the heathens were not singed through your burning coals?...You sit in arrant haughtiness to judge the sons of God in every cause, and to bring (us) before your tribunal. Moreover, you (O law) even decreed the burning of the edicts and the statues with fire, therefore, blessed be he who shall requite you. O was it for this that my Creator delivered you with lightening and fire, that at the end fire should blaze upon your skirt?...O Sinai, instead of putting on a mantle, cover yourself with sackcloth, change your garments, put on a widow’s clothes! I will shed tears until they swell as a stream, and reach the graves of your two noble chiefs. And I will inquire of Moses and Aaron on Mount Hor: “Is there then a new law; is that why they burnt your columns?”

How can ever again food be sweet to my palate after my beholding what your plunderers have gathered? Men whom you have rejected from entering your assembly, burnt the spoil of the Most High in the midst of the market-square, like a condemned city.

You will again adorn yourself with ornaments of scarlet; you will take up timbrel and lead the circling dance, and rejoice in your revels. Then shall my heart be uplifted at that time when your Creator will afford you light, will brighten your darkness and illuminate your gloom.

Commentary from *The Koren Mesorat Harav Kinot*

They grope in the dark, bereft of light: “Metaphorically, the Jews are in darkness. They no longer have the resources to ascertain the halakhot because all the books have been burned. Take the Gemara away from the Jew, and he does not know what to do”

The Consuming Fire: “The phrase consuming fire is an allusion to the verse in Deuteronomy, ‘For the Lord your God is a devouring fire (4:24) The paytan asks, ‘How is it possible that the Torah which was given by the fire of God can be consumed by the fire ignited by a human being?’”

In the market-place: “They assembled all of the books in the center of town like the contents of an *ir hanidahat*, a city of apostates. The mitzvah concerning *ir hanidahat* is that all of the booty is to be assembled in the center of the city and burned (Deuteronomy 13:17)”

Jeremiah 36

Get a scroll and write upon it all the words that I have spoken to you – concerning Israel and Judah and all the nations – from the time I first spoke to you in the days of Josiah to this day. Perhaps when the House of Judah hear of all the disasters I intend to bring upon them, they will turn back from their wicked ways, and I will pardon their iniquity and their sin. So Jeremiah called Baruch the son of Neriah; and Baruch wrote down in the scroll, at Jeremiah’s dictation, all the words which the Lord had spoken to him. Jeremiah instructed Baruch, “I am in hiding; I cannot go to the House of the Lord. But you go and read aloud the words of the Lord from the scroll which you wrote at my dictation, to all the people in the house of the Lord on a fast day... (2-6)

And Baruch read it to them. When they heard all these words they turned to each other in fear... (15)

And every time Jehudi read three or four columns [the king] would cut it up with a scribe’s knife and throw it into the fire in the brazier until the entire scroll was consumed by fire in the brazier. Yet the king and all his courtiers who heard all these words showed no fear and did not tear their garments... (23-24)

The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah after the king had burned the scroll containing the words that Baruch had written at the king’s dictation. Get yourself another scroll, and write upon it the same words that were in the first scroll that was burned by King Jehoiakim of Judah (27-28).

So Jeremiah got another scroll and gave it to the scribe Baruch son of Neriah. And at Jeremiah’s dictation, he wrote in it the whole text of the scroll that King Jehoiakim of Judah had burned; and more of the like was added (32).

Burning Puts the Words on Fire

- "Where they burn books, they will ultimately also burn people." Heinrich Heine

- “Manuscripts don't burn.” Mikhail Bulgakov
- "It hardly matters why a library is destroyed: every banning, curtailment, shredding, plunder or loot gives rise (at least as a ghostly presence) to a louder, clearer, more durable library of the banned, looted, plundered, shredded or curtailed." Alberto Manguel
- "Every burned book enlightens the world." Ralph Waldo Emerson