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Posted September 13, 2010, by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

BH

BOOK BURNING IN THE YERUSHALMI

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As you might imagine, it's a bit difficult to find material on book burning in the Yerushalmi. (There weren't so many books around in those days in the first place.) You can find lots of material about selling Torah scrolls but burning them or defacing them? The information is somewhat sparser. However, we do have this story from tractate Shekalim. (There's no Bavli on Shekalim, so you might not have studied this tractate before.) Here we have two men of conviction arguing to the point of ripping a Torah scroll.

Rav Ammi and Rav Assi started a discussion before Rabbi Yochanan. They said to him: Rabbi this is the story of what happened in the synagogue of the Tarsians, concerning a debate on a door bolt, concerning a debate on a door bolt which has on its top a movable fastener [that can be taken out and used as a pestle]. In this matter Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yose argued, in their anger, they tore a scroll of the Torah.

They actually tore a scroll of the Torah?

Rather: a scroll of the Torah was torn.

Now there was present a certain elder, Rabbi Yose bar Kisma, who said: I shall be surprised if this synagogue is not turned into a Temple for idolatry. (Y. Shekalim 2:5)

Discussion Questions:

First, if you'd like to know about the Jews of Tarsus, here's a link: <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=74&letter=T>. Perhaps some Jews left Tarsus and settled in Israel, perhaps maintaining their customs of prayer, a pattern we see to the present day.

Obviously, even in the Yerushalmi itself, there's an attempt to rework this shocking tale into something that's less offensive but one is left with the distinct impression that the first version is the more accurate one: they ripped a Torah scroll in their anger.

Such door bolts were a source of frequent controversy. For example Beruriah, one of the most famous women in the Talmud makes a ruling about such a device which the sages accepted (T. Keilim Baba Metsia 1:6).

1. Our story shows that people of strong conviction can destroy the very object of their conviction. Do you see this today, not only in the recent threat to burn the Koran, but in zealots in any religion? Tell what you see.

2. The more important question is, "How do we bring such people back to their senses before they destroy that which they proclaim to love so much?"

Obviously, I'm deeply saddened by the idea that there would be book burning here in the United States. We live in a time when the burning of our holy books by the Nazis is still in living memory. I had thought somehow we were over this sort of behavior. Your thoughts will be greatly appreciated so we can prevent such ideas from occurring in the first place.

Gmar tov!