Torah Consumed By Fire
By Yisroel Shtern (1938)
Translated by Miriam Leberstein (2006)

After the lament "O Torah by Fire Consumed" *by the Maharam of Rothenburg, Rabbi Meir ben Baruch.(see endnote)*

Torah scroll, consumed by fire-- ask how it goes
for those who survive you, on ash-covered roads,
whose eyes were prised open by pain, in amazement
before the blaze of your burning parchment.

Who mourn and who wonder if God will ordain
that a new dawn shall come for you and for them;
who struggle and wander, lost in confusion,
with no home on earth for them -- ask how it goes for them.

And what of the poet, whose heart is broken
as he bewails in his song your terrible torment --
who is black as a crow, and howls like a jackal
at the disastrous fate that befell you?

Oh, Torah -- inscribed with fire upon fire --
can it be that you have crumbled into cinders –
transformed by earthly flames to red-hot embers --
while the hand of your foe remained unsinged?

How long will you live on in luxury, you "people of quality",
and imprison our flowers amid thorns?
How long will you in your arrogance
sit in judgment on God's children,
tossing to the flames eternal law?
Blessed is he who wreaks vengeance upon you.

Were you given to us through lightning, Torah,
that your life might end in smoke upon a pyre?
Was it for this God came to find you, Sinai,
in his flight from the highest mounts?
Let it serve as a portent: After ages and ages --

just like a person grown old –
your stature will wither, turn twisted and shrunken
What a painful lesson for us to behold!

At the birth of his son, a king holds a ball.
Candles are blazing, joy livens the hall.
There's singing and drinking, but the monarch himself
sits sunken in silence -- till he lets out a wail.
No one else knows or even suspects:
Only the king has foreseen his son's death.

Sinai, you widow, put on sackcloth and mourn.
And I will pour out tears. Let the tears form a river
and let the river flow to your lords, Moses and Aaron,
and there, by their graves, let it ask them this question:
Blessed ministers, when the Torah was destroyed by fire
was a new one entrusted to your hands?

In the third month, the Torah was given; in the fourth,
its greatness and genius destroyed.
The first time, the tablets were shattered to pieces;
the second, our faith ground to powder and burnt.
Could it be such a price was exacted twice over?

I wonder that I can taste anything at all
after seeing God's whole estate heaped in the street
and sent up in flames by an unclean hand
like a city being punished for the sin of idolatry.

I cannot find your door, your gate.
Your paths are strewn with sorrow.
A tear, not honey, sweetens my drink.
My feet are soothed by your shackles.
My eye wants to gather all the tears
shed everywhere, that anyone has wept for you
But the moment they fall, they dry upon my cheek,
in the fiery heat of my pity.

My searing sorrow goes out to your great spouse
as he stumbles and gropes his way about the world.

He took up his pack, headed into the distance;
and your shadows follow and go with him.
And having lost both of you, I am left as forlorn
as a ship run aground on the top of a mountain.

Joyful voices are no longer heard;
the violin's shattered, and the flute and the drum.
I will curl myself up, and lie here and mourn
your martyrs, as countless as sand on the shore.

How is it that the sun warms and brightens the world,
yet leaves me untouched, in darkness and cold?
To your friend God, I bitterly lament your fate;
perhaps he will remember your bygone golden days.

Go now, make from yourself new garments
to replace what the flames consume.
Know that only as long as you suffer so greatly
will God build a home for the children of Israel.
Your arms sparkling with gold, your eyes shining with sun,
dancing you'll come to the beat of the drum.
And my heart will be proud that your light has returned,
and with joy the great stars will embellish your night.

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ENDNOTE: (Ed.):
The great Rabbi of Rothenburg Meir ben Baruch (1220 – 1293), who is known as the Maharam, a major author of the Tosafot on Rashi's commentary on the Talmud, is said to have witnessed the public burning in Paris in 1244, of twenty-four cartloads of Talmudic manuscripts. History records that this followed inexorably from the first public disputation between Jews and Christians (which itself was a result of the charge against the Talmud brought by Nicholas Donin, a convert to Christianity). However contemporary followers of Maimonides regarded it differently: as a divine punishment of French Jewry for their sin, in having denounced Maimonides as a heretic to the Dominicans. The Dominicans had duly burned his writings, first in Montpellier in 1234 and for the second time in Paris – just a month before *this* public burning, which took place at the same site.

The Maharam's poetic lament of the Torah burning *Shaali serufah* is one of the Kinot recited on Tisha B'Av. (no.41, p.360 in the Artscroll Edition, which provides a detailed historical context as well as an analysis of the poem) One trope in particular suggests that he (a German Jew) may have been with the Maimonides faction on this: his comparison of the Torah burning with Deuteronomy 13:17. The Torah's injunction, once a Jewish city is confirmed to have strayed into idolatry, is to "gather all the goods in the central square and burn the city along with its goods like a sacrifice to God your Lord."

It is this that may have particularly resonated for Shtern. In his poem (on this site) of the same period “When the surgery is over” Shtern expresses his fear of God’s wrath at the idolatrous behaviour of contemporary Jewry.

Shtern’s lament of 1938 may have been written after Tisha B’Av that year, which fell on August 6, for Nazi Germany had provided sufficient inspiration even before the bookburnings of Kristallnacht. On June 9 Munich’s main synagogue had been burned down, and four days after Tisha B’av this was repeated in Nuremberg. However Kristallnacht, November 9, may well have been the prompt. As Martin Gilbert describes in “The Holocaust – the Jewish Tragedy” (p.69) “Bonfires were lit in every neighbourhood where Jews lived. On them were thrown prayer books, Torah scrolls, and countless volumes of philosophy, history and poetry.” On that one night 191 synagogues were thoroughly destroyed, mostly by fire.

Shtern’s poem is a free translation of the Hebrew. There are interesting differences, when the two poems are compared (have an Artscroll Kinnos at hand if possible!):
Shtern omits the Maharam’s longing for “the dust of the Holy Land”; this is consistent with the absence of any expression of Zionism in his oeuvre.
That the Torah was written as black fire on white fire is an ancient idea. Shtern insinuates that the Torah *chose* to be destroyed, through his coinage of a reflexive, *zikh tseribn,* from the transitive verb “to crush”, thus implying “could it be that you chose to crumble”.
In the next verse, Shtern transforms the “pampered gentile nations” into the comfortable classes in general, and brings a curse upon *their* heads, implying they were responsible for the Torah burning.
In the next verse Shtern remains close to the Maharam’s suggestion that Mt Sinai was chosen for the giving of the Torah rather than a very high mountain, as a portent that in time to come the Law would be belittled. Then characteristically Shtern omits the explanatory conjunction “I will illustrate with parables” and launches at once into the story of the king’s banquet.
The Maharam wrote “I will ask Moses and Aaron if perhaps there is a new Torah, therefore your scrolls have been burnt!”… Shtern as usual is less straightforward.

In the last verse Shtern diverges somewhat. As earlier in the poem, when the Torah chose destruction, it is once again given agency, now to make new garments from itself. And in what may be an expression of Breslav Hasidism, Shtern states that a home for the children of Yeshurun (Israel) will be provided only so long as the Torah suffers greatly. In contrast, the Maharam’s poem ends simply with sadness.
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