

# A Fiery Beginning

Category: Devarim, Vayelech

*How do we ensure that our Torah scrolls remain safe?*

## The Disastrous Fire

Good Shabbos!

In September 2018, the country of Brazil was plunged into deep shock on the heels of a massive inferno that all but destroyed its National Museum in the city of Rio de Janeiro. The fire erased artifacts, including many rare and valuable items, in the museum's collection—the largest of its kind in South America.

The building which housed the museum was originally built in 1818. It first served as the residence of Brazil's royal family, which was primarily of Portuguese origin.

While some 20 million artifacts that had been in the collection were destroyed, it later emerged that an ancient Torah scroll had been miraculously saved. That scroll, which had been written in Yemen in the 13th Century, had actually been transferred two weeks earlier to the university library next to the museum building for preservation purposes.

How did a Torah scroll get to the museum? This ancient Torah scroll was purchased by Emperor Dom Pedro II, the second and final ruler of the kingdom. Dom Pedro was known as a passionate supporter of knowledge, culture and science. He loved learning new languages, and Hebrew was among the 14 that he had mastered.

Dom Pedro's personal life story is almost Biblically epic. He became Emperor at the tender age of five (not unlike King Yehoash of the Book of Melachim, who became king at seven). But it was only at age 15, in 1841, that he was crowned as ruler of the Brazilian Empire, assuming power in a well-attended ceremony. Emperor Dom Pedro the Second actively ruled Brazil for 49 years and was known as the one most responsible for opening and developing his country. He introduced the railroad, the telegraph, the telephone and all the other major

technological innovations of the time.

In his time, slavery initially existed in Brazil, and he began the process that ultimately led to its abolition and to the liberation of all the slaves. In the United States, that breakthrough was achieved by the legendary Abraham Lincoln, whom the Rebbe described as “of the righteous of the nations” for doing so (Sichos Kodesh 5740, Vol. III, pg. 395). In Brazil, however, it was Emperor Dom Pedro II who accomplished that.

As mentioned, he loved language and boasted fluency in 14, including Hebrew—to the point that Dom Pedro wrote a book of Jewish songs that he had translated from Hebrew to French! In its introduction, he writes how he learned Hebrew from two Jews he had met in France. It was this king who purchased an ancient Torah scroll from Yemen, and it was that very scroll that was saved from the fire.

## **“Place it in their Mouths”**

Now, in Jewish history, fires are unfortunately nothing new. But from the burning of the Beis Hamikdash to the mass incineration of the Talmud in Paris in 1244 (which drove all French yeshivos of the time to move to other countries), fires ultimately never stopped the continuity and the development of the Jewish Nation.

And that takes us right to this week’s Torah portion.

In this week’s Parshah of Vayeilech, we read how Moshe Rabbeinu charges the Jewish Nation with the final mitzvah contained in the text of the Torah: “And now, write for yourselves this song...”—an obligation for every Jew to write a Torah scroll. But the Talmud (Tractate Sanhedrin 21b) adds, “Even if one father’s bequeathed him a Torah scroll, it remains a mitzvah for him to write his own.”

But Moshe Rabbeinu added something else: “...and teach it to the Children of Israel; place it in their mouths.” And on the words, “place it in their mouths,” the Rebbe says that the Sages learn that teachers must teach students such that they understand the words well. As the Rebbe put it, “Teaching students needs to be in such a way that it’s not enough that they study the subject matter once or twice and if they don’t succeed, the teacher leaves the students be, but rather... to effect in them through effort that they understand well. As we find in the Talmud,

Rabbi Preida had a student with whom he reviewed the material 400 times... and that's the lesson for us—that actual teaching needs to be of “place in their mouth mode”—that the teacher must exert whatever effort necessary, even repeating it 400 times. (Toras Menachem 35, pg. 97.)

So when we teach students in “place it in their mouth mode,” so that the material penetrates them and they know it fluently, then fires are nothing to fear—because while a fire can destroy parchment, its letter and words remain. Once a Jewish child has internalized them and knows them, they can never be taken from him.

But the truth is that there is something much deeper here.

## **A New Dynasty**

Chasidim tell the story that when the Mezritcher Maggid was but a lad of five, a fire broke out in his family's home, destroying everything. Young Dov Ber saw his mother sitting and weeping bitterly, and he asked her why she was in so much pain over what really was nothing more than the loss of a simple structure.

“I'm not lamenting the house,” his mother answered, “but rather, the loss of our personal family history scroll. It went all the way back to Rabbi Yochanan HaSandlar, a noted Sage of the Talmud!”

“If so,” said the boy, “I will start a new dynasty for you.” (Sipurei Chasidim Torah, Zevin, pg. 155.)

This story introduces us to the Maggid of Mezritch when he was only five. In the story, the little boy symbolizes innovation and freshness while his parents symbolize the traditional and the old.

And the fire in his parents' home symbolizes the loss of pedigree.

So the little boy sees his mother weeping bitterly and things that she's weeping over the burnt house, over sticks and stones. But he doesn't understand what the big deal is. His mind is not on the ancestry scroll—he's just a boy, and a boy lives the life of youth, of innovation, not the life of the past. Well, his mother explains that her mind is not only the burnt house but on the destroyed scroll that traced her family and thus her son, too, back to the great Rabbi Yochanan.

But when the lad hears that, he offers his mother to start a new dynasty that will begin with him.

Now, the Maggid's words to his mother represent a process that is far deeper and farther than that which was present in his now-burnt childhood house. And that process essentially was the movement of Chasidism, a movement that burst forth via the energy of youth into a world of rank and file, into a world of pedigree in which the traditions of the past are of the utmost importance. Into this world exploded the Chasidic movement to establish a new movement—a movement completely influenced by the spirit of youth, by spiritual agitation, a movement that was supposed to turn a new page in the service of G-d.

So what a young future Rabbi Dov Ber of Mezritch, the Mezritcher Maggid, was saying to his own mother was that a new dynasty would begin with him. He sensed a spirit beating within him, and out of a deep sense of self-awareness, he offered her his own dynasty, his own innovation.

And if history is any teacher, the Maggid of Mezritch kept his promise.

He merited to establish the flourishing dynasty of Chasidic leadership, a dynasty that began from where he stood and to a certain extent, did not depend on the heritage that came before it.

The lesson, my friends, is that when Jews in general and Chasidic Jews in particular are not controlled by setback. In fact, on the contrary—it gives them energy to start everything anew.

Good Shabbos!