*Hemda Genuza*

[Letter from R. Hillel of Verona, 13th century]

One group found a pretext to assail another, calling them heretics and [accusing them] of dealing in books of heresy. They took a number of copies of *Sefer ha-Mada* [The Book of Knowledge] and *Moreh* [*Nevukhim,* the Guide for the Perplexed], went to France, and denounced the other group before the sages of France on the grounds of heresy and apostasy, saying that they deal in various writings that are largely composed of words of heresy. They presented them and read them to these sages and interpreted them as damningly and contemptuously as they wished. These emissary-rabbis did not examine the books carefully; they heeded those who spoke. They decided that *Sefer ha-Mada* and *Moreh* *[Nevukhim]* should be burnt wherever found, that any person who studies them should be excommunicated, and that he and all his property should be banished from the congregation in exile. Nor was this enough for them: they had all these books consumed by fire in broad daylight. Nor was the blaze enough for them; they kindled the fire that consumed them from the great lamp that burned in the great cathedral of Paris before the altar. The priests stirred the fire and brought it to them and set [the books ablaze with it], and the books were burnt in the streets of Paris before an onlooking crowd.

I now return to what happened in the city of Paris, what they got and what befell them for doing this. God observed from Heaven and, in His zeal for the honor of our holy rabbi and the honor of his books, caused His rage and fury to descend upon the French [Jewish] community and showed no partiality to His Torah.

Therefore, my brother, do not find it wondrous that Blessed God punished the Torah of the [Jews] of France for the honor of our Rabbi Moses [Maimonides], showed no partiality to their volumes of Talmud, and gazed upon them in a pillar of fire and mist until He showered all the coals upon them. It was then that the great decrees against the communities resumed, killing more than 3,000 and dooming all of their volumes of Talmud to be burnt and consumed by fire. It was decreed then that the Talmud may no longer be learned openly to this very day. And if you ask me who knows that these decrees were [imposed] for the transgression of burning *Sefer ha-Mada* and *Moreh* [*Nevukhim*], I will answer you. The sign and the portent is this: Not even forty days lapsed between the burning of our rabbi’s books and the burning of the Talmud, and all the books and commentaries in Paris were burnt in the very same place, and the ashes of the Talmud mingled with those of *Sefer ha-Mada* and *Moreh* [*Nevukhim*] because the ashes were still there. It is the plain truth. All the peoples, Jewish and Gentile, immediately knew that it was the judgment of Heaven and that [God] had sent His flame from Heaven against those who had reached out to harm the holy book.

*Shibolei ha-Leqet,* p. 263

Because we are busy with the laws of fasting and the matter of the burning of the Torah, we wrote this in memory of what happened in our times due to our multitude of sins. Our Lord’s Torah was burnt in the year 5004 since the Creation [1244], on the sixth day of [the weekly portion] *Zot Huqqat haTorah.* Some twenty-four cartloads of Talmud and halakha and haggadot were burnt in France. When we heard of this, and also heard from the rabbis who were there that they performed a *she’elat halom* [reflected on the matter until falling asleep in the hope of receiving an answer in a dream] in order to know whether the decree came from God, they were given the answer: It is definitely the decree of the Torah, and its meaning on the sixth day of *Zot Huqqat haTorah* is the decree. From that day on, individuals undertook to fast on that day each and every year, on the sixth day of *Zot Huqqat haTorah,* but did not establish it for the days of the month. May its ashes atone for us [as would a food offering] [as would a burnt offering] on the pyre.