**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**Halakha and Jewish History**

**Rav Aviad Tabory**

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**We mourn the sudden passing of our dear friend and supporter**

**Mr. Joshua Mermelstein z"l  
and extend our deepest sympathies to his mother,  
his wife Beth, and his children Avi, Jesse and Jonah.  
May the family know no more sorrow.**  
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**Shiur #17:**

**Khmelnytsky Massacres**

**Religious Response to Tragedy**

**(1648-1666)**

In the mid-17th century, two very different events occurred that shaped the Jewish world for years to come.

The first is the Khmelnytsky Massacre, whose terror and despair left the Jewish communities of Europe in shambles.

The second event, most definitely connected to the first one, is the rise and fall of a false messiah, who inspired the mistaken hope and belief of many Jews around the world that he was the *mashiach*, the messianic king of the final redemption.

In this *shiur* and the next, we will discuss these historical events in greater detail than we usually do, as they serve as an important background for the development of many religious and even nationalist movements within the Jewish world, up to World War II.

**Khmelnytsky Massacres**

During the mid-17th century, the Jewish communities of Eastern Europe suffered greatly from pogroms that swept through Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine. Tens of thousands of Jews were brutally murdered during the riots between the years 1648 and 1667.

These killings began in 1648 as part of the Cossack rebellion led by their hetman, [Bohdan Khmelnytsky](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bogdan_Khmelnitsky), a successful uprising against the [Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polish%E2%80%93Lithuanian_Commonwealth) (now part of [Ukraine](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ukraine)). Together with the [Russo-Polish War](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russo-Polish_War) (1654-1667) and the Russo-Swedish War (1656-1658), these conflicts destroyed many Jewish communities. Since these catastrophes began in the Jewish years 5408-5409, they are referred to as *Gezeirot Tach Ve-tat* (literally, the Decrees of 408 and 409).

Thousands were slaughtered or died of starvation and epidemics: many others fled, were sold into slavery or converted to another faith. The exact number of Jews killed during these terrible years is debated, as there are many varied sources.

One of the most important Posekim in Jewish history, Rav Shabbetai ben Meir Ha-Kohen (Shakh, 1621-1662) witnessed some of these horrors personally. In his writings, he estimates the number of fatalities to be 100,000, while others like Rav Natan Hanover calculate it at roughly 80,000. Shemuel Faivush ben Natan Feitel, an Austrian historiographer, wrote *Tit Ha-yavein* circa 1650, in which he lists 140 synagogues that were destroyed and claims that 670,000 Jews were killed.

Modern academics estimate the number to be much lower. Professor [Shaul Stampfer](javascript:;) of Hebrew University calculates that the real number is closer to 20,000.[[1]](#footnote-1) However, this does not change the fact that during these years the Jews of Ukraine and Poland suffered a devastating holocaust.

The Jewish community and its religious leaders responded to these events by composing new *Selichot,* the penitential poems recited before the High Holy Days and on fast days; and *Kinot,* dirges recited on the Fast of 9 Av. They also instituted fast days, such as 20 Sivan, which dated back to high medieval times but was revived at this time. This was in line with the traditional responses to such communal catastrophes. However, this time many rabbis and Torah scholars composed historical works as well (some of which we have already mentioned) to memorialize these traumatic times.[[2]](#footnote-2)

**Historical Chronicles**

One of the most well-known of these works is *Yevein Metzula,* written by Rav Natan Nata ben Moshe Hanover, who was a [kabbalist](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kabbalist). The book was published in Venice in the year 1653.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Amongst the many horrific descriptions, he recalls the murder of the Kabbalist Rabbi Shimshon of Ostropol, a nephew of the Maharal of Prague. He testifies to the greatness of this rabbi and claims that he was given a warning from heaven that a terrible decree was about to strike the Jewish people:

A number of times he preached in the synagogue, warning the people to repent and prevent the tragedy, and all the communities repented; but alas, it was to no avail, for the decree had already been sealed.

When the enemies came upon the town, this Kabbalist went into the synagogue together with three hundred members of the community, all of them great men, wrapped in shrouds, with prayer shawls over their heads. There they prayed until the enemies entered the city and murdered them all in the synagogue, on sacred ground, may the Lord avenge their blood. Hundreds of others were forced to convert, and hundreds of others were taken into captivity.

Rav Hanover describes the cruelty in great detail. He mentions the terrible killings which occurred in the towns of Pereyaslaw, Baryszowka, Piratyn, Boryspole, Lubin and Lachowce:

These persons died cruel and bitter deaths. Some were skinned alive and their flesh was thrown to the dogs; some had their hands and limbs chopped off, and their bodies thrown on the highway only to be trampled by wagons and crushed by horses; some had wounds inflicted upon them and were thrown on the street to die a slow death… They slashed the bellies of pregnant women, removed their infants and tossed them in their faces... Some children were pierced with spears, roasted on the fire and then brought to their mothers to be eaten. Many times, they used the bodies of Jewish children as improvised bridges upon which they later crossed.

He sums up:

There was no cruel device of murder in the whole world that was not perpetrated by the enemies.

The Shakh also composed a short historical account of these massacres. This book is an introduction to the *Selichot* which he wrote to be recited on 20 Sivan.

His book, titled *Megillat Eifa*, ends by stating that the year 1648 had been hoped to be a year of great salvation as the word *zot* (this) has the numerical value of 408. He backs up this idea by quoting *Vayikra* 16:3, “***Be-zot*** *yavo Aharon,”* referring to the entry of the high priest into the Holy of Holies. Similarly, the *Zohar* hints that this word has the potential for redemption by quoting the verse (ibid. 25:13) “*Bi-shnat ha-yovel* ***ha-zot*** *tashuvu ish el achuzato,*” “In this jubilee year, you shall return, each man to his holding.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

In his introductory to the *Selichot,* he mentions that “on the Friday,” referring to *Erev Shabbat Chukat,* “we were struck by a decree twice.” The first decree goes back to the burning of the Talmud in the 13th century, which we discussed in an earlier *shiur*; the second is the massacre of 1,500 Jews of the town Human in Russia. The Shakh describes the act *of kiddush ha-shem,* sanctifying God’s name, as follows:[[5]](#footnote-5)

The villains (after gathering them outside the town) spoke to the Jews with friendly and consoling words: “Why do you want to be killed, strangled and slaughtered like an offering to your God Who poured out His anger upon you without mercy? Would it not be better for you to worship our gods and our crosses, and we would form one people which would unite together? We then would return you all your wealth and you would be rich!”

But the holy and faithful people who so often allowed themselves to be murdered for the sake of the Lord, raised their voices to the Almighty in Heaven and cried: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Holy One and the King of the Universe, we have been murdered for your sake so often already. O Lord God of Israel, let us remain faithful to You.” They recited the confession of their sins and said: “We are guilty and thus recognize the Divine judgment.”

Both the Shakh and Rav Hanover mention the terrible massacre which occurred in Nemyriv on 20 Sivan.

The Shakh declares this day as a day of fasting and mourning. He explains that this date is also the same day terrible tragedies occurred during the Crusades and was already set then as a day of remembrance. Rav Chayim Mordekhai Margaliot ([1780](https://he.wikipedia.org/wiki/1780)- [1823](https://he.wikipedia.org/wiki/1823)) mentions in his laws of fasting that this was decreed by the *Va’ad Arba Aratzot* (Council of Four Lands) for men aged 18 and up and women from the age of 15.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Other historical works includeMeir ben Shemuel of Szczebrzeszyn’s *Tzuk Ha-itim,[[7]](#footnote-7)* Gavriel ben Yehoshua Schossburg’s *Petach Teshuva*[[8]](#footnote-8)andAvraham ben Shemuel Ashkenazi’s *Tza’ar Bat Rabim.*

***Agunot***

One of the most troubling and challenging questions throughout centuries of tragedies in Jewish history has been responding to *agunot* (women whose husbands’ whereabouts are unknown).

During the years of the Khmelnytsky Massacre, many questions about such cases were sent to the rabbis, who dedicated much time and great effort to finding leniencies to allow these women to remarry.

One of the most interesting incidents regarding *agunot* happened during these massacres. This story appears in the autobiography of Rav Ya’akov Emden (Ya'avetz, 1697–1776).[[9]](#footnote-9) This rabbi, one of the greatest German Posekim of the 18th century, was the son of the prominent Posek Rav Tzvi Hirsch Ashkenazi, known as the Chakham Tzvi (1656-1718).

The story describes how his grandfather, Rav Ya’akov, was one of thousands of Jews who was forced to flee his home. He was caught and ordered to kneel before the executioner, who laid the sword on his neck. At the last minute, he was spared and managed to hide amongst the dead.

Jewish bystanders who witnessed his supposed execution thought him dead; based on their testimony, a rabbi permitted his wife Nechama to remarry. However, as Rav Emden explains, his grandmother was not willing to accept the *pesak*.

Six months later her husband appeared alive and well! As a result, the rabbi who gave the original *pesak* refused to permit other *agunot* to remarry, arguing that during these tragic times it is impossible to be sure that the husbands are dead. Following their reunion, his father, the great Rabbi Tzvi Ashkenazi, was born.

A similar story is mentioned in the responsa of Rav Menachem Mendel Krochmal (c. 1600–1661).[[10]](#footnote-10) In this case, a man who escaped the massacre approached him and told him that he had received the message that his wife had converted to Christianity and therefore he wished to remarry.

Rav Krochmal refused to allow him. His argument was that there was no proof that this actually occurred. He also argued that perhaps the woman converted under duress, to save herself.

He then recalls how a letter reached him telling him that eventually the woman who had been taken captive was freed together with others and reached her husband. During her ordeal, she remained faithful to her religion.

Both these stories shed some light on the horrific consequences of these massacres.

In next week’s *shiur,* we will discuss the story of Shabbetai Tzvi and how this event affected the Jewish communities around the world.

1. Shaul Stampfer, “What Actually Happened to the Jews of Ukraine in 1648?” [*Jewish History*](https://link.springer.com/journal/10835) Vol. 17 (2003), pp. 207–227. For a list of the different estimates, see footnote 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Adam Teller, “Jewish Literary Responses to the Events of 1648-1649 and the Creation of a Polish-Jewish Consciousness,” in *Culture Front: Representing Jews in Eastern Europe,* eds. Benjamin Nathans and Gabriella Safran, University of Pennsylvania Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Available at: <https://hebrewbooks.org/3845>. The English edition, translated by Abraham Mesch, is called *The Abyss of Despair* (New Brunswick: 1983). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Vol. 1, 139. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Magen Avraham (OC* 580) mentions the custom until today to keep that Friday as a fast day because of this opinion of the Shakh. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Sha’arei Teshuva, OC* 580. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <https://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=24972&st=&pgnum=1>. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. <https://hebrewbooks.org/42262>. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In the introduction to *Megillat Sefer*. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Tzemach Tzedek* 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)