

Presenter: Simha Goldin, Tel Aviv University

Title: **“Donin’s Shadow’: The Role of Apostates in the Attack against the Jewish Faith”**

Panel: Medieval History

In 1240, the Christians in Paris confiscated all manuscripts of the Talmud from the Jews of the city. The theological department of the University of Paris subjected the Talmud to an inquisitorial investigation which resulted in the burning – most probably in 1242 – of 24 wagonloads of manuscripts. That is to say, the entire Jewish library of the largest, most important center of Jewish learning of the first half of the Middle Ages. This entire collection went up in smoke, leaving behind no trace beyond the reproductions from the latter half of the thirteenth century.

This horrific act was the result of an idea propagated by a Jewish apostate by the name of Donin, who wrote a letter to the pope – or perhaps even met with him – in order to detail his brilliant concept. In his opinion, Jews did not accept the Christian faith because a book composed by Jewish scholars was controlling and distorting their perceptions of the Old Testament. This corruptive book, called the Talmud, was the lens through which the Jews understood all of their older writings. “Take this book from them, in which appear horrendous slanders against Jesus and Christianity, and they will immediately see the true light,” claimed Donin. The result was the incineration of the entire collection of Talmudic literature in Paris.

Since Donin and up to the current day, there have been Jews who sought to destroy Judaism in its traditional sense, and all have been certain that they possessed the secret of how to do so. All were confident that they had discovered the Archimedean point of the Jewish faith and had the power to change it and demolish Judaism as it existed, bringing the Jews to – in their view – the proper faith.

These people, former Jews, have, throughout history, attempted – and sometimes succeeded – to inflict critical blows to Jews and Judaism.