



A Lesson in Flames

By Rav Paysach Krohn shlita (Shiur E16)

Shabbos observance, Hashgacha Pratis, and a tragic fire help us see Hashem's Hand.

The Facts of a Tragic Fire

History records that on Saturday, March 25th, 1911, there was a devastating fire that ravaged the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in Greenwich Village, New York. 146 workers, many of whom were young Jewish immigrant women (ages 14 to 39) lost their lives in the fire.

History further records that this fire was a watershed moment in the advancement of workers' rights and building safety in New York. Workers had initiated a great strike in 1909 to force reforms in workplace safety. Those efforts were aggressively rebuffed by the owners of the factories and the fire brought those reforms back to the table. History was left to ask who and what was blame for the terrible loss and to celebrate the progressive agenda which came in its wake.

That is as far as the history can take us, because history is written to describe natural cause and effect; it is not written to describe *השגחה*; the Hand of the *בורא עולם* in our lives. For that, we need a different lens.

Parshas HaShavua

The Jewish calendar shows us some more of the story. First, we note, of course, that it was *שבת*

שבת מברכים ניסן, פרשת החודש קודש and the *פרשיות השבוע* were *ויקהל-פקודי*. In *פרשת ויקהל* we read *לֹא תִבְעֲרוּ אֵשׁ בְּכֹל מִשְׁבְּתֵיכֶם בְּיוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת וַיִּקְהַל*.¹ The *תורה הק'* singles out the prohibition against lighting a fire among all the *מלאכות* of *שבת*. As the *Gemara*² teaches אין הדליקה מצויה אלא במקום *שיש חילול שבת*. In *פרשת חנוכה* throughout the world the words *לֹא תִבְעֲרוּ אֵשׁ בְּכֹל מִשְׁבְּתֵיכֶם בְּיוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת* rang out. *שבת קודש* protects us from the fire that would consume us and *שבת חילול* invites that fire *ר"ל*.

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So far, the 'big picture' of the *השגחה* *השם*. A lesson which is meant to make us sit up and take notice. But behind every 'big picture' of *השגחה*, there are also countless 'small pictures' of the *ה' ה'.* To see those small stories, we must grab the magnifying glass.

A Family Moves to Monticello

In 1906, R' Hillel Berkowsky, of Varanava, Lithuania (a town near Vilna), needed *פרנסה* and saw that the future for his family was in the US. He went ahead of the family to try to earn the means to bring them over, as well.

R' Hillel found employment as the 'everything' person for the Landfield Avenue Shul in Monticello, NY. He was the *חזן*, the *שמש*, the *שוחט*, the *מוהל*, in a word, the 'everything.' He worked nonstop and *בס"ד* by 1908 he was able to

¹ שמות לה: ג.

² שבת קיט:



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bring his wife, Hinda, and their six young children to the US to join him.

What to do with Chaya Elka?

Monticello was not known as a center of Torah life. It would be hard to provide proper Chinuch for the children while living there, but there was no choice; they would be מחנך their children as best as they could in Monticello. However, for their 16-year-old daughter, Chaya Elka, staying in Monticello was not an option. She needed an education, she needed a job, and she needed to find a husband with whom she could build a proper Jewish home. She would have to go to New York City, the center of Jewish life at the time. So, Chaya Elka, known as Ida, took up residence with her Uncle and Aunt, the Shultz family, in NYC. She worked by day, attended school at night and tried to lay the groundwork for her future life.

The challenge of שמירת שבת

Young people today cannot fathom the challenge of שמירת שבת that existed during that time. Tragically, Jews who came and struggled to earn a livelihood in an earlier wave of immigration to New York became the owners of factories which employed the next wave of Jewish immigrants. But their employment came with a price. They had to work on שבת קודש. Many Jews were not able to withstand the test of poverty on one hand and שמירת שבת on the other. They took employment which included working on שבת קודש. Ida was offered just such a job, at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory.

Her newfound friends had already taken jobs there. There were hundreds of Jewish girls working there. It was the place to be, the thing to do. And now Ida was being offered a chance to join them.

Ida's choice

It was an overwhelming choice to put on the shoulders of a 19-year-old aspiring young girl. With great סייעתא דשמיא, Ida was able to lock in on the devoted חינוך that she was blessed with growing up and she mustered up the courage to turn the job down. She voted in favor of שבת. That decision was taken in the third week of March 1911. That Shabbos was that fateful Saturday, March 25th, 1911.

Generations stand up for her choice

I have had the privilege of meeting the children, grandchildren and even the great-grandchildren of Chaya Elka/Ida. Each one is living testimony to that decision. The choice may seem related to a distant time and place, but the generations that followed know that 'if she had (made a different choice and) been there, we would not be here.'

A comment about לא תבערו אש ביום השבת

We have spoken about the relationship between שמירת שבת and physical fire. But there is also a relationship between שבת and the internal fire called anger. The משנה in שבת teaches³ that there are three things which one must say in his home as שבת is about to begin. The Gemara⁴ adds that צריך למימרינהו בניחותא – they must be said gently.

³ שבת ב:ז

⁴ שבת לד.



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Keep the flame down

The תפארת ישראל infers this instruction from the words of the משנה itself. The Mishna teaches that these three things should be said בתוך ביתו – in one's house. That implies that they are not heard

in another house. Keeping the flame down is often associated with keeping the volume down. We must remember that שמירת שבת does not only involve staying away from מלאכת הבערה, it also means keeping the spirit of true שבת, as well.

Takeaway: I will try to keep in mind that every decision regarding Shabbos has eternal implications.