The Triangle Shirt Waist Fire

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Is there such a thing as a Jewish fire?

Last week we read about the fire that was kept constantly burning on the altar of the Sanctuary. This week we read about the fire offered in the sanctuary at the time the children of Aaron became consecrated and assumed their role and responsibility as priests for the first time. We also read today about the alien fire brought by Nadav and Avihu which resulted in their deaths. All three of these are what could be called "Jewish fires."

But when I think of a Jewish fire I think of a fire that occurred exactly 100 years ago yesterday in New York City. I first heard about it in a Jewish studies or Jewish history class I took as an undergraduate student in college, and discussed it with my late grandmother who had come to this country as an immigrant a few years before the tragedy. She had vivid recollections of the mass coverage of what happened.

In 1911 the Lower East Side of New York was teeming with Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe during a massive population displacement that uprooted several million Jews from places where they had lived for centuries and brought them to this country. At the time the Lower East Side was the most densely populated area on earth, and the majority of the Jews were employed in sweatshops in the garment industry. A number of the factory owners had come here just a few years earlier themselves and had managed to work their way up, and so the industry was recognized as primarily a Jewish one.

On March 25 of 1911 a fire broke out in the Triangle Shirt Waist Company, a fire that was to forever change America.

It came just a year after negotiated labor agreements put an end to massive labor strikes in the garment industry. Louis Brandeis, not yet a Supreme Court justice, but a noted industrial reformer and lawyer helped settle the labor dispute, of 1910 when 60,000 garment workers walked off their jobs. He negotiated what was called the "Protocols of Peace." Richard Greenwald wrote about the settlement, "At the negotiations, many newspapers noted that it was impossible to tell the owners from the union representatives and those from the negotiators, as they were all Jewish men who conducted the negotiations mostly in Yiddish."

A little more than a year later, on Saturday, March 25, 1911, shortly before the end of a long work week a fire started in a waste basket on the eighth floor of the building housing the Triangle shirt factory. It soon spread and engulfed the ninth and tenth floors as well.

While the majority of the workers managed to escape, 146 died, most of them were young, primarily Jewish, along with Italian immigrants, 120 of them, women.

In the panic, as people tried desperately to escape they found fire hoses did not work, sprinklers not installed, and worst of all, fire escape doors were locked since the owners were concerned about pilferage. Feeling they had no alternative, about 50 of the people who died jumped to their deaths to escape the inferno. Many of the girls who died were teenagers, as young as 15 and 16 years old.

The story was prominently featured and was the main news story the next day and for sometime after. The impact of the fire was so devastating that nearly 400,000 people lined the streets of New York to attend public mourning ceremonies for the victims. Until September 11 of 2001 it was the worst fire in New York City.

One of the primary sources of information and editorials was the *Forverts*, the Yiddish daily paper in New York that had a socialist orientation and at the time was the most widely circulated and read paper in the country. It deplored the inhumane working conditions to which industrial workers were subjected and said its horrors epitomized the extremes of industrialism.

The *Forverts* editor Abe Cahan wrote in his lead editorial, "The entire neighborhood is sitting shiva. Every heart is torn in mourning. The human heart is drowning in tears. What a catastrophe! What a dark misfortune!... There is no room in the heart for anything but sadness." He goes on to condemn the entire capitalist enterprise as guilty and blames greed and the unbridled quest for profit as the primary cause of what happened.

Listen to his column, "There should be no doubt that the capitalist leaders are generally guilty for this, who do all in their power to extract as much profit as possible from their capital even if it costs thousands of lives. On the altar of capitalism, that bloodthirsty idol, which is never quenched with human blood, burned these 149 young lives!"

"The blood of our victims screams out at all of us. The souls of our burned ones demand we must compel our cloistered government (which worships Wall Street) to fulfill its duty."

Makes Keith Olberman sound reasonable and calm.

The fire was a galvanizing event for the Jewish immigrants of New York who united to exercise their rights and power to demand better laws to protect the workers and clamored for reforms of safety conditions. It helped to spur the growth and expanded the role of labor unions. The tragedy became a symbol of the dangers of unregulated workplaces and exploited workers. No longer was the problem seen just as an internal Jewish issue that did not matter to the rest of Americans, as was the case until then, since most of the workers and factory owners were Jewish. Shock and outrage from all strata of society quickly

brought demands for better working conditions. The issues were of fire safety, minimum wage, collective bargaining. The activism and response in the aftermath also helped to make Jews less marginalized and bring them into the mainstream of American society as they became forceful advocates for change and learned how to effectively use the political system.

As a result of the fire people began to ask about the moral responsibility of a society to protect working men and women. The gauntlet was raised by the labor movement, which was predominantly Jewish, the United Hebrew Trades and the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union. 36 new laws were passed in the aftermath that regulated the industry, improved working conditions for all workers. Although labor activists Clara Lemlich and Rose Schneiderman often addressed their audiences in Yiddish the Jewish labor leaders enlisted non-Jewish workers to join with them and to take up their cause as well. Knowing that many of the factory owners were themselves Jewish, they exhorted the owners to reform their ways by citing Biblical passages calling for justice for workers. They said that the employers owed it to their workers, fellow Jews to be treated fairly and with dignity and to be guided by the principles of the Torah.

On this the hundredth anniversary of the fire we recall those Jewish immigrants and the Jewish values they extolled that ultimately helped to improve the lot of all workers in this country.

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