

Rabbi Jonathan
Shabbat Sermon
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110 Years Later - The Fight Continues

- For More Information on [Triangle ShirtWaist Fire](#)
- For More Information on Labor and Judaism - See chapter by Rabbi Jill Jacobs in [There Shall be No Needy](#)

23 Washington Place is just around the corner from the Hebrew Union College in New York City where most of the Beth Am Clergy attended seminary. Today, it's a rather nondescript building in Greenwich Village a block from Washington Square Park, owned in part by NYU and in the heart of its urban campus. It is also one of the most significant locations of American Jewish History.

110 years ago this week - March 25th, 1911 - fire tore through the upper floors of the Asch Building, which was home to hundreds of garment workers who worked for the Triangle Waist Factory. These workers, almost all Jewish and Italian immigrant women, worked long hours and sewing the "shirtwaist", a style of blouse popular in the early 1900s. (SLIDE 1)

Late in the afternoon on Saturday, March 25th, the fire, thought to be started by an errant match or cigarette put into a scrap bin, broke out on the top floors of the Asch Building in the Triangle Waist Factory. (SLIDE 2)

The blaze spread quickly while panicked garment workers found fire escape doors locked - a policy to prevent theft - and inadequate and unreliable elevators in the building. Being a relatively new building the Fire Departments ladders didn't reach the top floors of the building and many women jumped out of the windows. 146 workers died in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory - some as young as 14. It was the deadliest workplace disaster in New York until September 11th, 2001.

The New York Times the next day wrote... (SLIDE 3)

“The fire was practically all over in half an hour. It was confined to three floors, the eighth, ninth, and tenth of the building. But it was the most murderous fire that New York had seen in many years.

The victims who are now lying at the Morgue waiting for someone to identify them by a tooth or the remains of a burned shoe were mostly girls from 16 to 23 years of age. They were employed at making shirtwaist by the Triangle Waist Company, the principal owners of which are Isaac Harris and Max Blanck. Most of them could barely speak English. Many of them came from Brooklyn. Almost all were the main support of their hard-working families.”

The Forverts, now known as the Jewish Daily Forward, wrote in Yiddish (SLIDE 4)

“In dark tenement rooms fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, grooms, brides, loved ones with eyes bugging out of their heads from searching, waiting for their children, sisters, brothers, loved ones; waiting for them to arrive from the shop, where they labored all week long, waiting for them to arrive bringing their paltry wages and resting from the week’s toil; but instead of them, the blackest news is delivered: they are no longer among the living, their bodies lie seared, a burnt-offering on the altar of capital!”

To add to the pain of the tragedy, many of the new immigrant women, likely would have resented being forced to work on Shabbat - yet the owners of the Triangle Waist Factory - both Jews - refused to recognize the employees union - the local branch of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union which might have allowed for a day off to honor the sabbath.

Across Greenwich Village that afternoon, a young Social worker named Francis Perkins was having tea. After hearing the commotion, Perkins raced to the foot of the Asch building: She recalled: “I shall never forget the frozen horror that came across as we stood with our hands on our throats watching that horrible sight, knowing that there was no help.” A few decades later, Perkins would be the first woman to serve in the United States Cabinet as Secretary of Labor. (SLIDE 5)

“During her 12-year tenure, she directed the formulation and implementation of the Social Security Act, one of the most important pieces of social legislation in our history. Among other extraordinary accomplishments, she helped create unemployment insurance, the minimum wage, and the legislation that guarantees the right of workers to organize and bargain collectively. She also established the department’s Labor Standards Bureau, a precursor to what is now the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA).”

Judaism has a lot to say about how we treat our workers - a connection that goes way deeper than our connection to this nation’s labor unions and fight for fair wages and working conditions. As we approach Passover, we retell the story of our own slavery - which focuses on the difficult physical labor that Egyptians put upon the Israelites. The forced building of the supply cities of Pithom and Raamses.

And according to Rabbi Jill Jacobs, While the biblical account of the Israelites' slavery in Egypt focuses on the difficulty of the imposed physical labor, midrash and other rabbinic commentaries understand the difficulties of slavery to arise primarily from spiritual, rather than physical, oppression. In rabbinic expansions of the slavery narrative, the Egyptians prevent Israelite husbands and wives from seeing one another, and view the Israelites as "thorns," rather than as human beings. (Sh'mot Rabbah 1:12, 1:11)

In the book of Leviticus, which we begin this Shabbat, we are instructed: “Do not oppress your neighbor and do not rob him. Do not keep the wages of the worker with you until morning. (Leviticus 19:13) Deuteronomy is equally direct: “Do not oppress the hired laborer who is poor and needy, whether he is one of your people or one of the sojourners in your land within your gates. Give him his wages in the daytime, and do not let the sun set on them, for he is poor, and his life depends on them, lest he cry out to God about you, for this will be counted as a sin for you.” (Deuteronomy 24:14-15)

How we treat our workers. How we uphold the dignity of work. How we support and allow workers the opportunity to better themselves is core to the Jewish narrative. Our tradition expands on a variety of different labor laws and regulations ranging from a prescribed day off to sanitary working conditions to the right to collectively organize. Judaism also emphasizes the value of work -

work is considered part of communal responsibility. In the words of Chaim David haLevy (1924-1998), the Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv from 1973 until his death, “In the Jewish worldview, work is sacred—it is building and creating and is a partnership with God in the work of creation.”

Certainly, the importance of work and strong labor laws remain timely today. It also remains part of the Jewish American narrative 110 years after the Triangle Fire. When we think of our grand-parents and great grandparents, new immigrants to this country who worked in New York factories and earned between 7 and 12 dollars a week (the wage for a worker at the Triangle Waist Factory) how do we not think about immigrants today who need to subsist on a 7.25 federal minimum wage? When the federal minimum wage was instituted, as part of the 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act, Congress identified this legislation as an attempt to stem “labor conditions detrimental to the maintenance of the minimum standard of living necessary for health, efficiency, and general well-being of workers.” That remains true to today - and we should have no hesitancy in supporting a 15 dollar minimum wage.

And, as we commemorate the devastating fire in New York, we know that - Even today, sweatshops have not disappeared in the United States. They keep attracting workers in desperate need of employment and undocumented immigrants, who may be anxious to avoid involvement with governmental agencies. Recent studies conducted by the U.S. Department of Labor found that 67% of Los Angeles garment factories and 63% of New York garment factories violate minimum wage and overtime laws. Ninety-eight percent of Los Angeles garment factories have workplace health and safety problems serious enough to lead to severe injuries or death.

(<http://trianglefire.ilr.cornell.edu/story/introduction.html>)

A few weeks ago Beth Am hosted a conversation with Maria Marroquin from the Mountain View Day Workers Center. She talked about the impact of COVID on domestic workers close to home - loss of jobs, declining wages, food shortages. One way for us to support workers in our communities is to use agencies like the Day Workers Center which guarantee wages and safety protocols for low wage immigrant workers in our communities. Next time you need a painter or house cleaner I encourage you to reach out to the Day Workers Center.

And, while many Jews continue to be active in the labor movement and have deep historical connection to unions like the International Ladies Garment Workers Union - today we are underrepresented in union rank and file who are more apt to be blue collar workers like hotel cleaners or factory workers. As Rabbi Jacobs asks: “The question for the Jewish community now is—given that more of us find ourselves hiring low wage workers than being low-wage workers, how will we translate our historical connection to the labor movement into our new roles as owners and managers?”

And, while I’m more willing to acknowledge some of the corruption, antagonism and cronyism of certain Unions than I was when I worked in politics in my early 20s - I still believe that the right to organize is crucial to gaining worker protections. And, I’m confident in my belief that it’s good to be on the side of working people in their quest for better wages and safer working conditions. As Jews, we should be supportive of union campaigns - be they an Amazon warehouse in Bessemer, Alabama or workers at Stanford, Google and other area employers. One way we can be supportive is to encourage our companies to hire union workers.

The Triangle Fire continues to endure in our memory. It speaks to large ideals in American history - the immigrant narrative, the women’s movement, workers justice, the Jewish story. As we turn toward Passover and we fulfill the commandment to remember our own slavery in Egypt - That deadly day 110 years ago remains a part of us. We are a community that uses our past experiences to shape our current reality. 110 years ago, 146 victims. Let us use, as we always have, our collective anguish to create the world we want to live in.