

**Triangle:
A Rabbi's Reflections on
a Fire that Changed the Country Forever**

***Parashat Sh'mini;*
March 25, 2011**

A number of years ago, I am told, a debate broke out in the New York State Penitentiary System. The question was this: should the *sch'itah*, the slaughtering system used to provide food to Orthodox inmates be according to the rules and rituals of the Chabad Lubavitcher Chasidim, or the very slightly different procedures of the Satmar Chasidim? Arguments went back and forth, but I have a different kind of question altogether, regarding the intended recipients of these meticulously prepared special meals. My question is: if they are all so religious, what are they doing in jail? They can't all have had bad lawyers!

As we come upon the first detailed description of the laws of kashrut in this week's Torah portion, to be beautifully chanted and explicated for us by Gabby and Rachel tomorrow morning, I am reminded that our tradition rests on two pillars, ritual and ethics... ethics and ritual. Action and identity. Both are important. And while I believe that the early Reform movement was wrong to denigrate ritual too much at the expense of ethics, the very existence of Orthodox inmates is testimony of its own, that there are individuals among us who would do the exact opposite, who would live ritually punctilious lives and utterly ignore the ethical teachings of our tradition.

Besides, the separation of ritual and ethics is ultimately an arbitrary or artificial one. Sometimes the issue come up wound together, and at the same time. Some rituals themselves raise ethical issues. And some in the ritual business... behave unethically.

Over the past several years, as many of you know, Federal and State attention has focused on a particular plant in Postville, Iowa. There, an ostensibly ritually observant slaughterhouse and meat-packing plant called Agriprocessors has been accused and found guilty of sustained systemic violations of all kinds, from animal abuse to environmental degradation – illegally releasing untreated sewage – to major violations of worker’s rights, from immigration fraud to intimidation to unsafe working conditions. Personally, I have not bought any meat packaged under the label Rubashkin’s or Aaron’s Best ever since the news of these violations broke.

Largely in reaction to reports from this one plant, a Conservative Rabbi in Minnesota conceived of a response that is burgeoning into a movement, a new standard of approval called “*Heksher Tzedek*, Certification of Justice,” a stamp which would serve as a validation not only of the ritual procedures, but also of the ethical practices of any business to carry such a label. A similar movement among some liberal, modern Orthodox Jews, called “*Uri Tzedek*, the light of justice,” would serve a similar purpose.

Both of these approaches are reminders that the very word “kosher,” which many take as solely a ritual term, in common usage and in original implication alike actually implies the concept of “fit,” or “appropriate,” a sense of that which is “standard,” or “expected.” We use the word in ways which go far beyond a final product. To say something is “not kosher” doesn’t refer only to little pieces of pork floating unseen in a crust, but to something morally askew, something not right, something rotten in the state of business.

And it is here, indeed, that tonight’s tale begins.

One hundred years ago, on this very day... March 25, 1911, something rotten happened in the American business world, an almost unbelievable tragedy, an unkosher act which had an impact on both American Jewish history and the entire labor movement in this country.

It was a Saturday afternoon a century ago, and it was a sunny day. You can see the building still. Today it is called the Brown Building, on the corner of Green Street and Washington Place, in the Village off of Washington Square Park. Sometimes we go by the building when we take the Tenth Grade class to New York, and if we do I point it out. Then it was called the Asch Building, and on the 8th, 9th and 10th floors was a factory, the Triangle Waist Company, an infamous sweat shop of 500 workers, mostly young female immigrants – mostly Jews -- which manufactured a type of women’s blouses called “shirtwaists.”

The owners of the factory, Max Blanck and Isaac Harris, were themselves Jewish. They had been the targets of labor unrest before – their factory was the site of a 1909 action by the International Ladies Garment Workers Union which drew 20,000 protestors and which had an impact on other businesses – but they remained a staunchly anti-union shop, firing anyone who had been involved in attempted organizing.

On that Saturday afternoon a hundred years ago today, as the workday was almost over, someone must have dropped a match or still smoldering cigarette into a bin full of fabric scraps, although it is possible that it was a spark from one of the machines. There was almost no chance of giving a warning. There were no alarms. A telephone call from the 8th floor to the 10th floor got many people safely onto the roof, and those on the 8th floor escaped via a stairway. But the 9th floor... the 9th floor was locked, and blocked. The fire itself prevented leaving via the stairs, and the only other doorway out...was locked to prevent theft, and to keep out union organizers. Apparently the foreman who had the key fled first and never looked back. The fire escape seems to have been broken before the fire began, and in any event bent further in the heat and under the weight of those who did crowd onto it. Heroic elevator operators saved many workers by travelling three times to the 9th floor, but eventually the elevator itself buckled under the heat. Firefighters arrived... and found that their ladders were not tall enough. With no other options, and in scenes heartbreakingly repeated 90 years later from other heights in a

Manhattan building in flames, at least 62 people... jumped. As one witness wrote, "life nets held by the firemen were torn by the impact of the falling bodies." Others... others waited inside, until overcome by smoke or flame.

The Triangle Shirwaist Factory Fire was the worst industrial accident in the history of the city of New York, and remains the fourth deadliest such disaster in the entire country. The death toll stands at 146, 129 women and 17 men. Interestingly, six victims remained unidentified until... last month, when modern techniques such as DNA testing finally put questions of their identities to rest.

Blanck and Harris, the owners, were brought to trial for manslaughter... and acquitted, after the defense attorney successfully attacked the prosecution witness for giving testimony that was, essentially, too accurate to be credible. In a subsequent civil suit, the owners eventually paid \$75 for each victim, after having offered compensation equivalent to a single week's wages. They relocated and reopened with the insurance money they received. Incredibly, in 1913 Blanck was arrested again, for again locking factory doors during working hours.

The Triangle Fire had an impact, I believe, in two major arenas... the first in terms of American Jewish history, and the other in terms of the labor movement and workplace regulations in the United States.

It is hard to convey, today, how much of an impact the tragedy had on the growing Jewish community in this country. Though an accident and not targeted or intentional, the scope of the loss brought back memory of the pogroms of Eastern Europe, tragedies the community thought it had fled and left behind. Relief funds sprang up to care for dependents not only in New York, but all over the Jewish world.

And grief and outrage were followed by action, activism, and progressive politics. The following account is taken from an online encyclopedia in the Jewish Women's Archive:

The first protest meeting, organized by the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL)—a traditionally important ally of ILGWU since the days of the 1909 strike—was attended by leaders of civic and labor organizations who demanded that a committee be appointed to study the tragedy and draft proposals for health and safety legislation. At a meeting of the Local 25, ILGWU, with a number of survivors in attendance, there were calls for drastic measures against those guilty of imposing intolerable work conditions. The largest meeting, organized by Anne Morgan of the WTUL, took place at the Metropolitan Opera House on April 2, 1911, and was attended by civic leaders, representatives from an array of institutions and progressive organizations, and union representatives. The meeting called for public pressure for legislation to ensure safety in the workplace. In her impassioned speech, however, Rose Schneiderman, the leader of the strike in the Triangle factory, railed against the civic leadership and their neglect, and called on all working people to organize and take action. The culminating event took place on April 5, the day designated for the funeral of seven unidentified victims. A huge march sponsored by Local 25, ILGWU, was a silent but powerful demonstration that drew a crowd of 500,000 mourners.

So what came, eventually, of a demonstration of a half a million people? What changes were possible, with a window of sympathy for the victims of this horrible tragedy? And as workers are maligned and hard-won rights called into question, will we now at least remember... why the unions were needed in the first place?

What followed the Triangle Shirwaist Factory Fire. Safety regulations, and state enforcement agencies. Child labor laws, overtime requirements, workman's compensation systems, equipment verification procedures, inspectors, fire safety standards. And... and... the right to organize. To form unions. For workers to stand up for themselves.

The centenary observance of this important event continues with two additional events in our community. First, this coming Sunday morning, our Temple Shalom book group comes together to reflect on *Triangle: The Fire That Changed America*, by David Von Drehle. Even if you have not had a chance to read the book, stop in anyway, for a spirited discussion. And finally, in April, Temple Shalom members are invited at a discount to the local performance of *Rags*, a musical production commemorating the 1911 Factory Fire, performed at The Theater Lab on 8th Street NW, directed by our Temple member Deb Gottesman. Flyers about this show are available in the foyer.

One final question I want to raise before turning this evening's discussion over to Nicole Berner-Kadish, a Temple member who works for the SEIU, and who will share with us her reflections on contemporary labor issues.

This is a story which involves Jews. But is it a Jewish issue? There are those who would say that we are delving into politics, that we should remain in the realms of the spiritual, that the economic arrangement of society is entirely separate from our religious tradition, beyond the legitimate reach of our spiritual concern.

Such an argument is deaf to the voice of the prophets, alien to the authentic impulse of Jewish tradition. Isaiah, Amos, Jeremiah, Micah and more:

“Woe to him, who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice; who makes his neighbors work for nothing, and does not give them their wages . . . (Jeremiah 22:13)

"Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?" Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. . . . But is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? (Isaiah 58)

“Let justice roll down like waters, righteousness like a mighty stream” (Amos 5: 24)

Again and again, the voices of our tradition demands compassion, justice righteous... within the context of fair treatment of workers, safe haven for those who are less fortunate, protection for those in need. We made ourselves deaf to these demands at great peril in days of old. That is a call to care, an injunction towards involvement that is no less urgent today, than it was long ago.

It is centuries now, since the prophets uttered words of fire; it is a century to the day, since a fire changed the face of the country. And there are lessons to learn... even now.

Being kosher, fit, proper... it's about behavior, as well as ingredients. About what comes out, as well as what goes in.

Shabbat Shalom.