

## Speaking with the Fire Marshal on Safety and Halacha

By Oren Oppenheim

The tragic fire in Brooklyn that killed seven children in the Sassoon family and left one child and their mother in critical condition shocked all of us in the Jewish community. We grieved over the loss of so many young souls, and felt their father's pain at having to bury them before they had a chance at a future. Beyond that, we wondered if there was anything we could do in our own communities to prevent such an event from happening again. It made us all hesitate, particularly those of us in the Orthodox community, and wonder if any of the things we've been doing are actually unsafe practices that could be fire hazards. The fire was caused by a hotplate left on overnight—a seemingly innocuous device used by many to keep their food warm without violating laws against heating and cooking on Shabbat.

Jay (G'dalyah) Bender is the Fire Marshal at the Fair Lawn, New Jersey Fire Prevention Bureau, and part of his job is to investigate fires, find their causes, and educate people on how to prevent fires. He says that often he finds that fires are caused by careless mistakes, and that people are often unwise when it comes to fire prevention. After the fire in Brooklyn, he wanted to share some fire safety tips that particularly pertain to the Orthodox Jewish community, considering the likely things Jewish people may do that have a likelihood for creating a fire hazard.

- Leaving the oven on over Shabbat to keep food warm is *never* an option. To do so is crazy and insane, says Bender. There are two chief hazards in doing so. First off, an oven is not designed to be kept on for 24+ hours (the duration of Shabbat is 25 hours), and overstressing its limits could be dangerous. Everyone should understand that all combustion (e.g., oven, stove, water heater, furnace, clothes dryer) are a source of carbon monoxide. Leaving the oven door open for extended periods other than attending to cooking food likely will create a carbon monoxide hazard in the home. So obviously, using an oven, with the door open, to heat a home is an absolute NO-NO. Furthermore, Bender urges all homeowners to have a working carbon monoxide alarm on each level where there is a bedroom.
- *Blechs*, widely used, are also potentially problematic. (*Blechs* are pieces of metal placed over stovetop flames that are kept hot in order to keep food warm.) Leaving a flame going for 24+ hours *unattended* is not the way to go because it poses a serious fire risk. (The key part is unattended—if someone is watching the *blech*, and a fire happens, it can be dealt; if no one is there, a fire could get out of hand very quickly.)
- Candles—an integral part of Shabbat—should not be left unattended. The lighting of the Shabbat candles is one of the most beautiful and integral rituals of Shabbat. But,

Bender says, leaving them unattended and unwatched runs the risk of them causing something to catch fire and to burn the house. If the candles are going to be in a room where they will not be seen the entire duration of their burning, they should be placed instead in a sink; this way, if they tip over (or— a yartzheit candle glass breaks), the fire will theoretically stay contained in the sink (as a porcelain or metal sink won't ignite). Obviously, the ideal solution is to make sure the flames stay attended.

- **The hotplate dilemma...** This issue is the most complicated and painful of all, given that the Sasson fire was caused by a malfunctioning hotplate. It's astonishing to think that such a disaster could have been caused by something that seemed so commonplace in Jewish households, but now that it's happened, we need to discuss what to do in the future. Bender says that hotplates, unfortunately, are often cheap appliances that aren't designed to be left running unattended for 24+ hours. His rule of thumb is that with countertop appliances (e.g. can openers, toasters, etc.) the ideal thing to do *would be* to unplug it after using it for a little while. Of course, doing so violates Halacha and is untenable for Orthodox Jews, yet the solution that many use—timers—is also risky. Bender says that the timer could malfunction, or even if it works, it isn't truly turning the hotplate off and thus the hotplate is still causing a fire hazard. The key, Bender says, is to *not* use the cheaper hotplate in the first place. Despite the fact that you'll need to have cold chicken, it's still better than causing a fire risk with a cheap hotplate.
- **Make sure to have working smoke alarms.** Even though they don't prevent the fire, if a fire God forbid starts, alarms should cause you to pay attention and to take action before it's too late. One of the saddest parts of the Sassoon family's tragedy was that there were no working smoke alarms on the first floor of their home. It's impossible to say for sure if things would have been different had they been working, but everyone in the community should be sure to check that their alarms are always in working order—it could help prevent this sort of tragedy from happening again.

Understandably, much of these safety guidelines will be difficult for many in the Orthodox community to follow. For years and years, we've used hotplates and candles and the like to enhance our Shabbat, without giving them much of a second thought. But if there's anything we can learn from the terrible fire in Brooklyn, it's that we need to be more conscious about the actions we take that could cause fires and how we can prevent them. That way, we can stay safe while still enjoying our Shabbat as much as we can.

*For information on fire safety, contact Fire Marshal Jay Bender at [FireMarshal@FairLawn.org](mailto:FireMarshal@FairLawn.org) 201-794-5408*

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