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# FLAMES AND PROTECTION

## *Atara's Story*

**I** was home alone and fast asleep when a fire broke out in the attic of our house.

*Pound, pound, pound.*

Groggily, I rubbed my eyes. Who was knocking on our front door, and why were they banging so loudly? I was sick and had stayed home from school. My father was at work and my mother was at an appointment in the city. I turned over in bed. Whoever was knocking could come back later.

*Pound, pound, pound.*

The knocking became louder and more frantic. I sighed as I sat up. Who could it be? I stumbled down the hallway to the intercom when I smelled it. Smoke. There was definitely smoke in my house. I glanced around frantically. I didn't see any fire. But the stench was getting worse by the second.

*I have to call for help.* I grabbed the phone from my night table, and noticed that the cord was hot and melting. *I have to get out of here. NOW!*

*Pound, pound, pound.* "Is anyone in the house?" someone shouted.

"I am! I'm coming out!" I called out.

I was in my nightgown. I glanced at my closet, wondering what was the quickest outfit to throw on.

"Come NOW!" the man at the door shouted.

Every second counted. Running down the hallway, I passed

my brother's room and grabbed his navy bathrobe. Shoes! I needed shoes! But there was no time. I was starting to cough from the intensity of the smoke filling the hallways. I saw my sister's Crocs in the hallway and slipped into them as I ran out the front door.

*Baruch Hashem*, I made it safely out of my house. I glanced down at myself: I looked pitiful. My hair was a mess. I was wearing a nightgown, with an oversized bathrobe and a pair of too-small hot pink Crocs to top off the look.

*I hope no one sees me!* I thought. But no such luck. Half the block was milling around outside our Brooklyn home. In fact, it had been one of the neighbors who had seen the smoke pouring from the attic window. For some reason our smoke detectors malfunctioned that day, and my neighbor's pounding on the front door had woken me and saved me. The fire department had already been called, and I heard the wailing of the fire trucks.

"Go away from the house!" someone screamed at me.

I hesitated to come out in public, but I had no choice.

The fire truck pulled up and several firefighters charged into the house. One of them approached me. "Is anyone else in the house?"

"I don't think so..." I said. My siblings were still in school. My parents were not home. As soon as they heard about the fire, they began rushing home.

"Wait! Where's my little sister?" I suddenly shrieked. "What time is it?"

"It's 4:32," the firefighter replied.

"My younger sister's bus gets here at about 4:20. It's possible that she came home and went inside the house..."

There were a few frightening minutes as we wondered where my eleven-year-old sister was. Children can become frightened from flames and hide when they see fire.

"We need to call the school and find out where the bus is!" I cried.

Hashem was very good to us. My mother, who was driving

home from an appointment, frantically called the school. The secretary informed her that my sister “happened” to have missed the bus that day. Incredibly, she was spared from the traumatic scene of the fire. One of her teachers drove her straight to our grandmother’s house.

Once we knew that everyone was safe, the enormity of the fire struck me. “What’s going to be with our house? Where are we going to live? All of our stuff is ruined!” I was crying hysterically.

My next-door neighbor put her arm around me as she tried to comfort me. “Everything will be okay. *Baruch Hashem*, no one was hurt...”

Still, what would be with my house, my clothing, my bedroom, and a lifetime of memories?

Thankfully, the firefighters were able to put out the flames before they reached the ground floor. At last, they declared the situation to be stable. The flames were out.

“Can I go inside to grab something to wear?” I asked desperately. By this time the school down the block had been dismissed and it seemed like the entire Brooklyn was watching me stand around in my nightgown.

The firefighters said I could go in for a minute to grab a few things.

I walked into my house and felt disoriented. My house! It was in shambles! Everything was damaged from the water and the smoke. My bedroom was unrecognizable. My clothing — years’ worth of precious possessions — was completely ruined! Traumatized, I ran out of my house empty-handed.

By this time my mother and grandmother had arrived at the scene and they too were crying. It was a very difficult day. My cousin brought me an outfit and I went to my neighbor’s house to change. We then settled in at my grandmother’s house. She was amazing and tried to make us feel at home, but still, it wasn’t *my home*. Sitting at the supper table it hit me: *I’m homeless*. My bed was water-logged. My linen was ruined. There had been many times when I claimed that I had nothing to wear.

But now it was true. I loved shopping and I was a huge hoarder; now, my beautiful wardrobe was gone.

Throughout the days following the fire, we saw Hashem's constant *chessed*. I tried to focus on the big picture. Everyone was okay. Relatives and friends showered us with everything we needed — from toiletries to clothing, shoes, and linen. My grandmother took good care of us.

The night of the fire was my counselor's wedding and I didn't want to miss it. Before I even worried about what I would wear, my friend knocked on my grandmother's front door with a bag bulging with clothing. I bit my lip; it was hard to control my tears. "Thanks, you're a doll," I said to her. "But I really don't want to wear someone else's clothing. I want my *own* stuff!"

"Atara! This isn't someone else's clothing!" she smiled. "Open the bag!"

I slowly opened the bag. My favorite wedding dress slipped out. There were also several other of my outfits. I had always been generous about lending clothing to my friends, and now Hashem was rewarding me.

"Wow! I can't believe it!" I said. "I have something to wear tonight! My favorite dress! It's perfect!"

It felt like it was a hug from Hashem. It would be okay.

Over the next few weeks, things began falling into place. Our clothing was sent to a special dry cleaners that specialized in smoke-damaged items; thankfully, a lot was salvaged. Most of our kitchenware was saved. When my parents realized how long it would take to rebuild our house, they began looking for a rental. They found a rental home nearby and my mother made it as nice and homey as possible. Then when we had to move into a second rental (because the one we were in was sold), she did it all over again. My parents remained positive and upbeat. I can't remember my mother complaining even once.

Eleven months later we moved back into our home. My bedroom looked different. I yearned for the comfortable, old look. I missed the clothing, shoes, and linen that had been destroyed.

I longed for my books, papers, and the paraphernalia — the school papers, reports, pictures, booklets, certificates, and projects — that were damaged in the fire. A lot was lost in the fire.

But a lot remained.

I was okay. My family was okay. We had a house to live in. We had the important things in life.

There were so many “what ifs.”

What if my neighbor hadn't noticed the smoke in the attic? What if he hadn't pounded on my front door? What if I had slept for just a few more minutes on that fateful day?

Indeed, Hashem showered us with so many wondrous miracles!