

Wildfires in Jewish History

Category: Bereishis, Vayechi

When the Tzemach Tzedek's home burnt to the ground, he was disappointed that the chassidim hadn't stolen his manuscripts. But isn't stealing forbidden?

The California fires

This week, we all saw the devastating images coming out of California—wildfires tearing through Los Angeles, destroying thousands of homes and buildings. These days, it's shocking to see fires like that inside a city. Usually, when we think of wildfires, they're out in forests or open wilderness. But something this massive, right in the middle of a city? It's almost unbelievable.

However, if we go back 100 or 200 years, fires were a regular challenge in towns and cities. Imagine the situation back then: most homes in Europe were built entirely out of wood. Running water wasn't even a concept—if someone needed water, they had to fetch it from a well. At the same time, every household relied on wood-burning stoves to keep warm during the freezing winters. If, God forbid, a stray ember from the stove landed on a piece of wood and no one noticed, the entire house would go up in flames. And in small towns, where houses were packed closely together, it wouldn't take long for the entire town to be engulfed.

Back then, there were no firefighters, no trucks, and definitely no water-dropping helicopters or planes. By the time someone managed to fetch a few buckets of water from the well, it was usually too late. That's why, when a fire broke out, people didn't focus on saving buildings—they focused on saving lives, getting as many people as they could out of the burning houses.

Afterwards, rebuilding the city was always a challenge, and you needed to hope that your city had good leadership to make it happen. One good example was the town of Brody, in western Ukraine which had a large, prominent Jewish community in the 18th century. At the time, the city belonged to a wealthy family named Pototzki. In 1742 and again in 1748, massive fires swept through the city, leaving even the wealthiest residents destitute and without a penny to their name.

Pototzki was smart. He called together ten of the city's wealthiest men, gave them

large sums of money, and exempted them from taxes. In no time, these men rebuilt the city, reopened businesses, and created jobs for everyone. (This story is mentioned in “Ner Tamid: Yizkor for Brody.”)

The Fire In Lubavitch

There’s a well-known Chabad story about a devastating fire in the village of Lubavitch.

As you may know, the Chabad movement is also called “Lubavitch,” named after the town where its leaders, the Chabad Rebbes, lived. In 1851, the Tzemach Tzedek, the third Lubavitcher Rebbe, and his sons lived in Lubavitch. On the 3rd of Tammuz that year, a terrible fire swept through the town, destroying the Rebbe’s home along with the homes of his sons. Everything was lost—their clothing, furniture, and personal belongings. (*Kerem Chabad*, vol. 2, p. 66.)

What weighed most heavily on the Rebbe was the loss of his library, a collection of holy books that he had studied from and cherished deeply. These books were an essential part of his life.

But the greatest tragedy was the destruction of his personal manuscripts—his own Torah writings, painstakingly written on thousands of pages. These manuscripts included interpretations of the Talmud, halachic rulings, insights into Kabbalah and Chassidus, and more. The Rebbe was an incredibly prolific writer, and all of it was consumed in the flames. Of course, in those days, there were no photocopiers or computers to store backups.

The Rebbe had always been aware of the risks. Fires were a constant danger in the small wooden towns of that era. To protect his manuscripts, he had divided them and stored them in multiple locations. One large chest of his writings was entrusted to the town’s rabbi, with specific instructions to ensure its safety in the event of a fire.

Tragically, when the fire reached the rabbi’s home, he forgot about the chest and chose to save a box of honey instead. The Tzemach Tzedek was deeply disappointed by this oversight.

Stolen Goods

After the fire, the Rebbe called his Chassidim together and asked them to return the manuscripts they had “stolen” from him. Confused, they replied, “Rebbe, you warned us in the strongest terms never to touch even a single page of your writings!” The Rebbe then asked, “But where was your *mesiras nefesh*—your self-sacrifice?” (*Yechidus with the Rebbe of Ger, 24 Iyar 5737*).

Among Chassidim, there’s a fascinating concept known as “Chassidic theft.” It reflects their insatiable thirst for anything connected to their Rebbe, a thirst so strong they’re willing to go to great lengths—sometimes even bending the rules—to obtain it. This is especially true when it comes to the Rebbe’s Torah teachings. The Tzemach Tzedek, therefore, was disappointed that his Chassidim hadn’t “stolen” his manuscripts.

What’s behind this insatiable thirst? After all, the Rebbe taught and published many Torah insights that were widely available. Anyone could satisfy their spiritual hunger by studying those teachings. Why, then, did the Chassidim pour so much effort and resources into obtaining the Rebbe’s unpublished writings? Why did they celebrate these rare manuscripts as if they were priceless treasures?

The answer lies in a timeless insight from King Solomon in Proverbs: “Stolen waters are sweeter” (Proverbs 9:17). Water, on its own, is tasteless. But when it’s stolen, the thrill of acquiring it makes it sweet. The same principle applies to Torah teachings. When something is easily accessible, it doesn’t ignite the same passion. But a teaching that’s rare, something no one else has? A Chassid will give anything—wealth, time, and even take risks—to acquire something uniquely theirs.

The Tzemach Tzedek was convinced that, despite his strict prohibition against touching his manuscripts, some Chassidim would take the risk and go to extraordinary lengths—even self-sacrifice—to gain deeper knowledge from him. That’s why he gathered them and asked for the return of his writings. To his disappointment, he realized that they had lacked the necessary *mesiras nefesh* (self-sacrifice).

The Rebbe once shared a similar story about the Alter Rebbe:

When the Alter Rebbe studied under the Maggid of Mezritch, the Maggid paired him with his son, Reb Avraham “the Angel.” Their arrangement was that the Alter Rebbe would teach Reb Avraham Talmud, while Reb Avraham would teach the Alter Rebbe Kabbalah and Chassidus.

The Alter Rebbe treasured the hours learning from Reb Avraham, so during the Kabbalah sessions, the Alter Rebbe would secretly turn the clock hands back—without Reb Avraham noticing—so their sessions could last longer.

The Alter Rebbe justified this by citing a teaching from the Zohar:

“Thou shalt not steal” is one of the most well-known commandments. Yet, as with all rules, there are exceptions. The Zohar on Parshas Yisro interprets the verse in a nuanced way: “*Lo tignov, paskah taima*”—based on the Torah’s cantillation notes, the words “do not” and “steal” are read separately, almost as if it says, “do not. Steal.” This suggests that in certain cases, “stealing” is allowed. The Zohar identifies this exception as “stealing time to learn more Torah from your teacher.”

The Alter Rebbe later remarked that these stolen moments of study were particularly precious to him, embodying the verse: “Stolen waters are sweet” (*Toras Menachem*, Vol. 7, p. 216).

Steal the Opportunity

In this week’s Torah portion, we read about the passing of Yaakov Avinu. Before his death, Yaakov gathers his sons to bless them, and interestingly, he compares several of the tribes to animals.

For example, Yehuda is likened to a lion, symbolizing strength and leadership. Just as the lion is the king of the beasts, Yehuda will hold the monarchy in Israel. The royal dynasty of King David—and ultimately Moshiach—descends from Yehuda.

Yissachar is compared to a donkey, representing their dedication to bearing the “burden” of Torah study. The tribe of Yissachar devoted themselves to learning and teaching Torah to the Jewish people. Dan is likened to a snake, and Naftali to a swift gazelle, a reflection of how, during the Biblical era, the tribe of Naftali acted with speed and determination to protect Israel.

What about the youngest, Binyamin? Yaakov compares Binyamin to a wolf: “Binyamin is a ravenous wolf.”

What does this mean?

A wolf captures something profound about the Jewish spirit: A wolf doesn't wait for an invitation to eat—it goes out and seizes its meal. A Jew too—he always has the desire to pursue and cherish specifically that which isn't readily available. If we can't have it, we want it.

This is even true within Jewish tradition. For example, the Torah commands us three times to rejoice during the festival of Sukkot. No other holiday has so many commandments of joy. Yet ask any child which is more joyful: Sukkot or Simchas Torah? The answer will be obvious. The most joyous Jewish holiday is Simchas Torah—a celebration not explicitly commanded in the Torah at all.

It's a paradox. Sukkot's joy is mandated, while Simchas Torah is a custom. Yet the uncommanded celebration inspires so much more enthusiasm. Why?

Because “stolen waters are sweet.” Because we are compared to the wolf—we want to get our spiritual sustenance ourselves. We want to be in control of our spiritual destiny.

This is an incredibly important trait, and we need to remember to preserve it and to develop it. When a mitzvah comes your way, don't hesitate. Seize the opportunity. Don't wait for a formal invitation—embrace every opportunity to become closer to G-d with energy, excitement, and self-sacrifice.

Steal every opportunity you can get.