

5. Carrying out Belongings in Case of Fire on Shabbat

דִּין אִם נִפְלָה דְּלִיקָה בְּשַׁבָּת

1. The laws regarding what may and may not be done in a fire were crafted by *Chazal* in order to balance three competing issues: 1) the loss of possessions faced by the homeowner, 2) the need to protect needless violation of Shabbat, even under the most trying of circumstances, and finally, 3) the fact that the pressure of the situation hinders the ability to think clearly. To that end, the *halachot* were formulated as follows:

Should a fire, God forbid, break out on Shabbat, *Chazal* were concerned that if the owners of the house and the members of their household would be focused exclusively on saving their belongings, and while in a state of alarm and confusion for fear of losing them in the fire, they might forget that it is Shabbat and would extinguish the fire. This was not acceptable, as while a person must violate Shabbat in order to save a life, he or she may not violate Shabbat in order to save material possessions.

Chazal, therefore, prohibited carrying any of the belongings out of the house, including things that are not *muktzeh*, even to a place where ordinarily it would be permissible to carry them, *even though carrying these things would be allowed under any other circumstance.*

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Chazal limited the items which may be carried out of the house to only the food and drink that would be required for the day, or that can be carried out at one time, and whatever utensils would be needed for the day. The owners may also ask others to do likewise.¹

2. You may only take the above items to where it is permissible to carry them out on Shabbat; you may not salvage anything to a place where it is forbidden to carry. However, the owners and family are permitted to put on as many clothes as they can wear, and carry them out even to a *reshut harabim*. They may then take them off and return to the house and put on other clothes and bring them out, and keep doing it repeatedly. The owners may also call upon others to come and salvage the clothing, and they can do it in the same manner.

3. The residents of nearby houses which are not on fire, who fear that the fire will spread to them, are allowed to salvage everything and to take it to where it is permissible to carry it out. Since they are not so

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1. **Salvaging Possessions from a Fire** There are two concerns involved in this situation. One is that the owner and the residents, in their confusion, may think that once they are permitted to save their material belongings, they are also permitted to desecrate Shabbat for that purpose. The other concern is that if they are permitted to take things out into a courtyard where there are many dwellings, they may think that it is permissible to take them out into a *reshut harabim* as well. An earlier authority, cited by *Shulchan Aruch* and *Chayei Adam*, maintains that the owners are permitted to save whatever is not *muktzeh*, if they can take them out to their own court or to a neighbor's house with whom they share an *eruv*. Others, such as neighbors, who are not members of the family and are not likely to be as alarmed, may salvage whatever is possible, even money, and carry it to where it is permissible to take it out. *Chayei Adam* favors this lenient view because people today, when alarmed at the prospect of losing their possessions in the fire and without a permissible way, will resort to forbidden means of saving their belongings and desecrate Shabbat. *Chayei Adam* cites another more lenient view that the owners of the house and members of their family may save whatever they can, even money and other things that are *muktzeh*, because if they would not be permitted to do so they might in their panic come to extinguish the fire, even when there is no possible danger to life. Moreover, since many authorities rule that today there is no true *reshut harabim* but only a *karmelit*, carrying items from the house to a *karmelit*, or in a courtyard without an *eruv chatzerot*, does not violate Torah law, and we may be lenient regarding rabbinic laws in in these extreme circumstances.

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alarmed, and there is no reason to fear they will lose their focus, there is no purpose in restricting their actions.

4. Some *poskim* even permit the saving of money and other valuables from a sudden great loss, such as a fire, a flood, or a robbery, by putting some food on top and carrying them out together. (In any other case you are not allowed to handle a *muktzeh* article in this way.) Some are more lenient, and permit carrying of money and valuables out by themselves, because in the case of a sudden great loss the prohibition of *muktzeh* is set aside,² provided you do not carry them to a place where it is forbidden to carry.

5. You should save all sacred books (*sifrei kodesh*),³ whether written or printed, from a fire, a flood, or a similar loss. You may bring them into a courtyard or an alley, even if it does not have an *eruv*, provided it is suitable for instituting *Eruvei Chatzerot* or *Shitufei Mevo'ot* (an *eruv* permitting the removal of objects on Shabbat to and from the house and the courtyard of the alley, respectively). You may also ask a non-Jew to save them, even if he has to carry them into a *reshut harabim*.⁴

6. You may save the case in which the *sefer* is kept together with the *sefer*, and the container in which the *tefillin* are kept together with the *tefillin*.

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2. **Picking up a Wallet Found in the Street** The *Shulchan Aruch* forbids a person who finds a wallet in *reshut harabim* to pick it up because it is *muktzeh*. In this instance, the factor of monetary loss does not allow for leniency, since it did not belong to the finder. However, some authorities are inclined to be permissive, and allow the finder to pick up the wallet or other article of value if he or she is afraid someone else may take it and the finder is unable to forgo the loss. Some advise moving it with your foot for short distances of less than four *amot* until it gets to a safe place.
 3. **Saving Sacred Books from a Fire** The *sifrei kodesh* that you must save from a fire include *Tanach*, Talmud (Mishnah, Gemara), and all other Torah books and writings, even those written in a language other than Hebrew. They may even be carried into a courtyard or alley that does not have an *eruv chatzerot*, provided it is adequately fenced.
 4. **Calling a Non-Jew to Extinguish a Fire** You may call a non-Jew to put out a fire that has broken out, even if only to save the *sefarim* and the *mezuzot* in the house.

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7. Rescuing a *Sefer Torah* takes precedence over rescuing other *sefarim*.⁵

8. All of the above is stated when there is no danger to human life. However, when there is any question of a possible danger to life,⁶ you are obligated to extinguish the fire.⁷ In such instances, you may only extinguish the fire, but are not allowed to desecrate Shabbat in order to save material possessions.⁸

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5. **Precedence in Rescuing from a Fire** Rescuing books of the Written Torah (*Tanach*) takes precedence over the rescue of books and writings of the Oral Torah (Talmud, etc.). Rescuing a dead body from a fire takes precedence over the rescue of sacred books. For the regulations regarding the removal of a dead body from a fire on Shabbat, see Part IV, Chapter 3, paragraph 10 and note 28. The rescue of a living human being, of course, takes precedence over all, and must be done quickly and without hesitation, superseding all Shabbat laws. Although most people will never put these *halachot* into practice, they do give us insight into Jewish values and priorities.
 6. **Extinguishing a Fire in Case of Danger** Permission, presently, to extinguish a fire anywhere is based on this ruling, since it is possible that someone may be in danger. *Mishnah Berurah* states that it is a *mitzvah* to proclaim publicly that it is permissible to put out a fire when there is even a remote possibility of danger to life. It is permitted to sound the alarm and to phone the fire department. See Part 11, *Melachah* 37, note 7.
 7. **Cutting the Power from a Live Electrical Wire** In the case of a live electrical wire that is exposed in the house, where it is not possible to vacate the house for Shabbat to prevent possible contact with it, you are permitted to cut the power or to call the electric company, because it presents a danger to life. The same applies if the electric wire falls in the yard or in the street and there is the danger that someone might come into contact with it and be electrocuted. Even where there is a legitimate and praiseworthy desire to minimize violating Shabbat, you should not take these matters into your own hands unless you are absolutely confident in your own electrical skills.
 8. **Causing a Fire to Be Extinguished Indirectly** It is permitted to cause a fire to be extinguished by indirect means, even where there is only a monetary loss involved. For example, if a candle or a spark from a flame falls on the tablecloth, you are permitted to quickly shake it off, although you may indirectly cause it to be extinguished. If it is feared that the tablecloth might catch on fire, you may take hold of the candle and remove it from the table.