

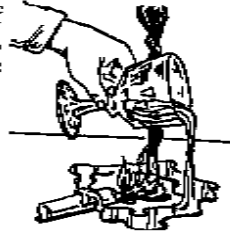
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demnable in cases of Pikuach Nefesh. (Regarding the guidelines for Pikuach Nefesh circumstances, see F below.)

c-1) Soaking burning cloth

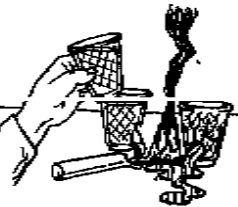
One is permitted to drench the unburnt areas of cloth with wine, soda, tea, or similar colored (or dirty) liquids in order to inhibit the spread of the flames.²⁸ Under these urgent circumstances, indirect Mechabeh is permitted.²⁹

Use of water or clear liquids should be avoided (unless other fluids are unavailable) because soaking the fabric in water may be the Melocho of Melabain (Scouring).³⁰ However, if paper caught fire, wetting it with water is allowed because paper is not subject to Melabain (see Melabain, Chapter II; A/b).³¹



c-2) Placing containers of water near the flames

One may also set pitchers or glasses filled with water adjacent to the flame so that they will burst as the heat of the fire draws closer, and douse the flames.³² Paper cups or plastic bags filled with liquid may also be brought near the fire and allowed to collapse and spill their contents for the same purpose.³³



c-3) Removing the burning cloth

If the burning cloth can be moved safely, some suggest that it may be brought to an empty (metal) bathtub where it can be contained and allowed to harmlessly burn itself out.³⁴ Also, as mentioned above (c-1), colored liquids, e.g. soda, drinks, wine, tea, etc. can be poured on the cloth near (but not on) the flames to help contain the fire. (See also G/b; i below)

NOTE: This is only a Halachic suggestion; The idea of transporting a burning tablecloth to a bathtub (or other fire-resistant area) may not concur with the advice of fire professionals. In any case, it should not be attempted unless the fire is still *very small* and the destination is close by. One must also be certain that nothing else (e.g. curtains, furniture, etc.) will catch fire while the tablecloth is being moved.

38. Mechabeh/Extinguishing

It should be emphasized that in a Halachic context, resorting to this procedure is only necessary in rare cases where a house fire would not be a Pikuach Nefesh situation. (See F/a and F/b-1 below)

The "leichter" (candelabrum) and any other Muktza objects may be taken from the table in order to facilitate removal of the burning tablecloth.^{34a}

F) Fire Emergencies

a) Threat to life (Pikuach Nefesh)

In times of emergency, when there is Pikuach Nefesh (threat to life), performing any and every Melocho is not only permitted but is even a sacred obligation and a great Mitzvah. This is true even where there is only a remote possibility of Pikuach Nefesh. The prohibitions of Shabbos and Yom Tov do not take precedence over preservation of life.³⁵ In fact, any hesitancy in the face of mortal danger (Pikuach Nefesh) is a serious transgression and is equated with the taking of an innocent life.³⁶ Consequently, the swifter the action, the greater the Mitzvah.

Note: One who violates the Shabbos to save a life, fulfills a great Mitzvah, and is to be praised:

- Even if others arrived at the scene before him.³⁷
- Even if it is later revealed that there was never a danger.³⁸
- Even if the effort was unsuccessful.³⁹

There is general agreement among Poskim that one may assume that a house fire poses a threat to life, unless one *knows for a fact* that there is no danger to life (e.g. there is no one left in the house).⁴⁰

This means that if a house is on fire ל"מ:

- Children may immediately be carried outdoors even where there is no "Eruv".⁴¹
- The phone may be used to call the fire department, doctor, ambulance.⁴² (Also see Mevler, Chapter II, B/b and C).
- Flames may be extinguished directly if necessary to save human life (even if the danger is remote; see also G-I further).⁴³
- Medicines may be obtained and administered.⁴⁴

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These activities should *not* be performed by a child or non-Jew, unless it is certain that this will cause no delay. If it is absolutely certain that the same thing could be just as quickly and efficiently accomplished with a child or non-Jew, they should be asked instead.^{44a} (Regarding fire emergencies in public areas, see H/e).

b) Fires that are definitely not life-threatening

b-1) Extinguishing the blaze

As a general rule, one may not directly extinguish a fire if it poses *absolutely no threat to life* even if he stands to lose his entire fortune.⁴⁵

> Example:

If one knows for a fact that his burning house or building was completely evacuated and can see no *Pikuach Nefesh* threat to any other dwellings, he may not pour water on the fire, or spray it with a fire extinguisher or garden hose.

1: Most house fires are *Pikuach Nefesh* and may be put out on *Shabbos*

It should be emphasized, however, that *most home fire-emergencies are Pikuach Nefesh situations*. This means that it is usually permitted to put out a sudden fire *immediately and directly*.

Most house fires are *Pikuach Nefesh* because it is rare that one can be immediately certain that a home or building threatened by fire can be quickly and safely evacuated without any dangerous ramifications. This is especially true in large cities because:^{45a}

- 1: City residents are housed in large apartment buildings and multiple-dwellings that are difficult or impossible to safely evacuate.
- 2: Buildings and structures are close to each other, thereby speeding the spread of fire and increasing its danger.
- 3: Once a city or any part of it is ablaze, it is inevitable that at least some individuals will be caught in the flames and unable to escape.

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2: Suburban and rural areas, secluded bungalows, sheds, warehouses, etc.

However, in some suburban and rural communities, these dangers are not as apparent. There are fewer multiple dwellings, and the homes and buildings are set far apart. Even so, a house fire in these communities is often permitted to be put out directly on *Shabbos* because *Pikuach Nefesh* situations commonly exist when there is a fire, even in these sparsely populated areas. This is particularly true if:

- 1) The home is a multiple-family unit (two or more families), because one cannot account for every resident or visitor who may be in the building.^{43b}
- 2) There are small children in the house who might not be evacuated safely.^{43c}
- 3) There are elderly, infirm, or ill persons in the house who might not be evacuated quickly and safely.^{43d}
- 4) The weather is inclement (e.g. cold, wet) and persons escaping the fire will be unable to dress properly and may succumb (in the short or long-term) to the elements.^{43e}

However, if one knows for a fact that there is no danger to human life if the house goes ablaze (e.g. there are only adults present who can safely leave their rural or suburban, single family home that is very distantly spaced from other homes), he may not put out the fire directly. Similarly, a fire in a secluded country home, bungalow, shed, warehouse, etc. where there is clearly no reason to fear, that it will spread dangerously out of control may not be put out directly if everyone was evacuated. One may also not call the fire department in this case, nor may he explicitly instruct a non-Jew to extinguish the blaze.⁴⁶

However, he may notify a non-Jewish neighbor of the fire, and may even indicate, indirectly, that the non-Jew will be rewarded for calling for help or extinguishing the flames (e.g., by saying "Whoever calls the fire department will not be unrewarded").^{46a}

> Note:

Some Rabbonim permit putting out an uncontrolled fire in any city or suburban neighborhood (but not secluded bungalows, sheds, etc. in rural areas) because of the possibility that the fire may spread to

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neighboring homes and result in a Pikuach Nefesh situation. Similarly, one is permitted to telephone the fire department according to this view.

Some prominent Rabbonim in the Monsey community (Rockland County, NY) have ruled that one may put out any uncontrolled fire in one's home in that district.⁴⁷ (It should be noted that fire professionals have stated that a house fire in almost any neighborhood in that area could possibly spread to other homes (e.g. shooting sparks, debris, etc.), depending on prevailing wind and weather conditions, and other factors that are difficult to predict.

When using the telephone to report a fire in such cases, the receiver should be removed with a Shinui, (e.g. knocked off the hook) and dialed with a Shinui (e.g. buttons pressed with bent finger joint), or a child may be told to make the call. If there is no time, the call should be made in the normal fashion.

(Homeowners should consult the Rabbonim in their community for Halachic rulings relevant to their particular neighborhood.)



b-2) If there are Seforim and Mezuzos that may burn

One may not put out a fire directly (in cases that are clearly not Pikuach Nefesh) even to save Seforim (Torah scrolls or books) and Mezuzos. However one is permitted to tell a non-Jew to put out the fire.^{47a}

Based upon this principle, it is the accepted custom to instruct a non-Jew directly to put out any fire, since almost every home has Seforim that are too numerous to remove safely and are consequently in danger of being destroyed in a fire.^{47b}

➤ Example:

One may run to a non-Jewish neighbor and tell him to put out the fire in his unoccupied rural home, or ask him to call the fire department.

One should not call the fire department himself to save the Seforim if there is no question of Pikuach Nefesh. (However, see Note in b-1 above)

In all instances, once the fire department arrives, they may be allowed to put out the fire and save any possessions.⁴⁸

38. Mechabeh/Extinguishing

b-3) Saving possessions (in the case of a fire that is not life-threatening)

The Sages, in their profound wisdom and understanding of human nature, recognized that people often panic in sudden emergencies, and act rashly.

This is especially true with respect to a person's worldly possessions. In the panic and confusion of the moment, one is liable to forget himself, and transgress a Melocho M'deoraisa if not emotionally restrained.⁴⁹ It is likely that one's total engrossment with saving his possessions will cause him to forget completely that it is Shabbos, and in a panic, he will douse the flames or do other forbidden acts.⁵⁰ To protect the sanctity of Shabbos in such emergencies, the Sages imposed severe limitations, forbidding one from saving his possessions in a fire.⁵¹ Therefore:

1: One may not take possessions from the house or building to the street (even if there is a city-wide Eruv), but he may bring them to his fenced-in backyard.⁵²

2: One may not save all of his food, but only what he needs for the remaining Shabbos meals.⁵³ (However, others may save any unlimited amount, see below.)⁵⁴

3: One may save clothes by wearing them two or three at a time⁵⁵ (even where there is no Eruv).⁵⁶ He may repeat this by returning many times.⁵⁷

These restrictions apply only to the owner and his family. However, friends and neighbors may save any possessions without restriction, although the owner may not ask them to do so on his behalf.⁵⁸ In fact, whatever the neighbors save, technically belongs to them.⁵⁹ However, one who refuses to return the items is not praiseworthy.⁶⁰

b-4) Saving a Sefer Torah, Tefillin, Siddurim etc.

Although saving one's ordinary possessions is prohibited, he may save his Sefer Torah, Tefillin and Seforim⁶¹ and bring them out to his enclosed yard or property.⁶² If there is no Eruv, he may ask a non-Jew to take it out, or to put out the fire to save these holy items from destruction.⁶³

d) If a candle is leaning and about to fall

Even if a Shabbos candle is leaning precariously and there is fear that it will fall upon the table or floor and possibly cause a fire, one may bring a metal tray (which is not Muktzah) to catch the burning candle.¹¹¹ If this is not adequate, one may instruct a child to bring a plate of water near the base of the candle stick to catch and extinguish the candle as it falls¹¹² (see also Sossair E/b-2).

➤ Example:

One who has Lucite (acrylic) candlesticks, and forgot to use metal holders for the candles, may remove the candlesticks if it is clear that they will melt and possibly cause a fire. (Obviously, one must take precautions before Shabbos to prevent this occurrence.)

If none of the above options are available, one may remove the candle and bring it to a safe place.^{112a} (Regarding the removing of a lit Menorah away from curtains etc. see Maviv Chapter VI, D/b).

e) Fire emergencies in an apartment building, Shul, etc.

It must be emphasized that any Halachic delays and precautions that one might take in fire emergencies should *never* be attempted where there is any threat to life. This is particularly true when a fire suddenly breaks out in a crowded public area, such as a Shul (synagogue), Yeshiva, or apartment building. In such cases, a moment of hesitation can result in senseless tragedy, because it is impossible to ascertain (beforehand) that these buildings can be thoroughly and safely evacuated.

For example, a fire in an apartment of a large building may be put out right away because it is possible that not all of the residents will be able to leave the building quickly and safely in the event of a fire (e.g. small children, the elderly, the infirm, etc.).¹¹³

Moreover, even if everyone could be evacuated quickly (e.g. single family home in rural area), it may still be permitted to extinguish a fire in some instances. For example, if the fire occurs in the winter, one may extinguish the fire if there are small children or elderly people, because they may suffer ill effects from exposure to the outdoors that could ultimately be fire-threatening.¹¹⁴ Swift action

is therefore commendable in these life threatening situations, while delaying with Halachic precautions is reprehensible.¹¹⁵

➤ Example:

In some congregations it is customary to place lit candles on the Amud (lectern). In a certain shul it happened that one of the candles fell during the Friday evening Davening. The shul, which was in a basement, was crowded, and the candle fell onto a carpeted floor which began to burn.

In this case, it was permitted to immediately do anything to remove the hazard, including picking up the candle to put it in a safe place and/or extinguishing the smoldering carpet.¹¹⁶

If a fire breaks out in a Yeshiva building or dormitory, one is required to do whatever is necessary to prevent any threat to life.

➤ Example:

It once happened that a small desk fan in a Yeshiva dormitory room began to emit smoke on Friday night. Someone quickly pulled out the plug to prevent a fire, but was reprimanded by his friends.

However, his quick thinking was praised by the Rabbim as a Minyan worthy of emulation. It was later discovered that leaving the fan on could have caused a serious electrical fire.¹¹⁷

As stated earlier, if a fire suddenly breaks out in a public building, such as a Yeshiva or dormitory building, one must do whatever is necessary to avert the danger. This includes extinguishing the flame directly (when it is safe to do so) or calling the fire department quickly (by pulling the fire alarm or calling by phone).¹¹⁸ One must act quickly, because it is impossible to ascertain (beforehand) that these buildings can be thoroughly and safely evacuated.

However, if one knows *absolutely for certain* that the fire poses no danger to life, putting out the fire is not permitted.¹¹⁹

➤ Example:

A middle-aged couple with grown children living in a detached home in a rural or very sparsely settled suburban community (e.g. houses are