



After the FLAMES — Gratitude

A talk with
Mrs. Chaya Malka Abramson

BY RHONA LEWIS

In her book Who by Fire (coauthored with Esther Tscholkowsky), Chaya Malka Abramson writes that people were shocked by her appearance because it was so much better than what they expected after hearing that she had suffered burns in a conflagration. She writes, “I explained to them that my love of Hashem, His Torah, and my family kept me from sorrow and despair, and that also helps improve one’s appearance.” Years later, when Mrs. Abramson started lecturing, she was doubly thankful that Hashem had saved her face. “Burns can remain very ugly,” she says. “It would have been difficult for an audience to hear the message of my talks if my face was badly scarred.”

On December 2, 1981, the night that her husband, Simcha, left with the Diaspora Yeshivah Band to tour the States, Malka Abramson was awakened by her visiting grandmother, who smelled gas in the apartment on Ararat Street in Jerusalem's Old City. Mrs. Abramson, a mother of three children, opened the windows and then heard an explosion as the gas ignited. She was in the middle of the inferno.

Running through the flames, she reached her bed and rolled back and forth until the flames were extinguished. Then she grabbed her two-year-old son and ran out of the building. She thrust her son into the arms of one of the neighbors who had been awakened by the explosion. Then she went back for her four-year-old and her baby.

After she had raced out of the building once again, she noticed that her seventy-eight-year-old grandmother



The Diaspora Yeshiva on Har Zion.



hadn't managed to leave the apartment. A man in an army jacket was standing outside the blazing apartment. Mrs. Abramson begged him to go inside and save her grandmother, but he shook his head. So Mrs. Abramson did what very few other people would have done — she went back in herself.

In the dark, no one realized how badly Mrs. Abramson was burned. Unbelievably, she and her grandmother walked to the Churvah Square, where

an ambulance was waiting. At the burns unit in Hadassah-Ein Kerem hospital, the doctors determined that Mrs. Abramson had burns on 85 percent of her body.

The skin helps to regulate body temperature, retains vital fluids, and keeps out harmful bacteria. With only fifteen percent of her skin undamaged, her body's protective covering was gone. Given that no patient with burns on more than 50 percent of his body had ever survived, the doctors gave Mrs. Abramson a 10-percent chance of survival.

The Spirit Survives

After the fire, Rabbi Mordechai Goldstein, *Rosh Yeshivah* of the Diaspora Yeshivah, where Simcha Abramson was learning, invited the Abramsons to move into a simple apartment on the grounds of the yeshivah on Mount Zion, a two-minute walk from Dovid Hamelech's burial place. The grounds overlook the Ben Hinnom Valley; they are shaded by fragrant bay-leaf trees and tall pines, calm and quiet in contrast to the bustle that characterizes the Old City.

"While in the emergency room, I realized that this was



The Chaya Malka Burn Foundation

The Chaya Malka Burn Foundation helps burn patients mainly by contributing to the cost of medicinal creams and pressure suits, which can cost up to \$2,000 each and aren't fully covered by medical insurance. Children, who are growing, may need more than one suit a year, and since the suits are worn continually, laundering and drying them becomes a challenge if the burn victim owns only one. One-year-old Meir, who



burned his hand and leg in January 2012, will be wearing a pressure suit until he is six. Since the suit needs to be refitted every three months to accommodate his growing size, the family is particularly grateful to the foundation. "A burn happens in minutes but takes years to heal if it is third-degree. If you've never had a burn like this, you'll never understand what the treatment entails," says Mrs. Abramson.

serious and that I would either live or die,” says Mrs. Abramson. In fact, the name Chaya was added to her name when the entire yeshivah recited *Tehillim* at Kever Dovid shortly after the fire.

“I had to decide what I wanted to live for. My priorities became clear. I had once dreamt of being a famous fashion designer. Those dreams no longer mattered. My answer was as clear as if I had seen it on an enormous billboard; all I wanted was to be a wife and mother.”

She pauses and then adds, “And I knew that like Moshe Rabbeinu, who had begged to enter Eretz Yisrael, I had to be my own advocate. I couldn’t depend on anyone else.”

Mrs. Abramson still recalls with admiration and appreciation the composure of her brother-in-law, David, when he

came into the emergency room. He didn’t gasp at her appearance. When Mrs. Abramson asked if he still recognized her, he replied, “Yeah, you look like you have a bad sunburn.”

Mrs. Abramson says, “Much later, a friend told me that my face had looked like a pizza. Since I had been burnt once before when I had fallen asleep under a sun lamp, David’s reaction made me feel that the results of the fire were something I could live with.”

During one of the first of the nine operations that Mrs. Abramson underwent, she had a near-death experience. “I was in a tunnel, surrounded by warmth, light, and a strong sense of Hashem’s Presence,” she recalls. “I felt so connected that I began to sing, ‘I love you, Hashem.’”

When she emerged from the anesthesia, she felt embarrassed by the

thought that she had exposed her innermost self. “I was sure that the operating team had heard my loud singing, but no one had,” she recalls.

Friends suggested that Mrs. Abramson’s cast-iron *emunah*, which accompanied her throughout her challenges, was rooted in this experience, but she isn’t sure. Instead, she explains that her commitment to Torah gave her the strength to cope — a commitment that was well in place before the fire.

“I had spent a few years searching for the truth before I joined the women’s division of the Diaspora Yeshivah. Once I had found truth, I clung to it. Part of clinging to the truth meant not fighting what Hashem sent my way.” This included accepting the burned and blackened skin that sometimes turned green from infection, hands that were



Treating Minor Burns at Home

1

Heat from a burn can damage underlying layers of the skin, increasing the degree of the burn in a short time. Make sure to cool the burn by submerging it in water for up to five hours if you have the patience. As long as the burn is minor and has not broken the skin, it will probably disappear.



2

Keep coffee grinds next to the stove for burned fingers. Plunge the burned finger into the grinds, and in a minute or so the burn will be totally healed.



purple and swollen to two or three times their normal size, with some of the bones fused together, and the excruciating pain of the burn treatment.

The Body Survives

Professor Menachem Ron Wexler, head of Hadassah's Department of Plastic and Maxillofacial Surgery, explained to the family that many burn patients often die of shock; if they survive the shock, they often die of infection. However, he assured them, new procedures, "super-aggressive treatment" that included excising dead tissue and using skin grafts, were giving burn patients a chance to survive. He didn't describe the suffering that went with the new treatment.

After a week in the intensive care unit, Mrs. Abramson was moved to the

burn unit, where she was to spend the next four months. Every inch of every limb was covered in sterile white bandages. Twice a day, Mrs. Abramson was lowered into a bath and the bandages were removed. The valium that she was given provided so little relief that she chose to forgo it.

In her book, she describes the procedure: "The feeling of having these bandages removed was like having my skin ripped off. Sometimes after the bandages had been taken off, the nurses would scrub my raw flesh." Her husband described her screams as "bloodcurdling ... like someone being murdered."

After the baths, Mrs. Abramson would shiver for hours. "Although that wasn't painful, it was exhausting," she says.

When I ask Mrs. Abramson how she

endured the pain, she replies simply, "I'm not sure... Years later, I learned that Hashem gives us enough to get through each day. With that in mind, I think I faced one day at a time and tried not to dwell on how things could turn out."

She pauses for a moment and adds, almost as an afterthought, "I didn't complain once when I was in the hospital."

Choosing Gratitude

Mrs. Abramson's spiritual fortitude enabled her to accept the decree, but how is it possible that she never complained about her pain?

She smiles and shares an insight she had one day when her room was being cleaned for Pesach and she was wheeled to a different ward. "I saw an old woman whose arm was swollen to double its normal size. As I lay there



Immediately wrap the burn in Saran wrap, making sure to squeeze out the air bubbles. Change the wrap every ten minutes to draw out the heat and reduce pain.

3

4



Immediately apply honey to heal the burn and prevent infection. Saran wrap will keep the honey from dripping and work its magic too. (Make sure you're not allergic to honey.)

Keep an aloe vera plant growing in your yard or in a pot inside your home. Wash the leaf and split it down the middle. Squeeze the leaf slightly so that the thick gel inside touches the burn.

5



looking at her, I suddenly realized that this wasn't the end of my suffering," Mrs. Abramson says.

"Later, when I broke my leg and fractured another bone, when I cut my finger or experienced any other tiny suffering, I'd remind myself that it was all part of the same decree — just distributed over time."

Then she reveals her secret. "You can't be grateful and complain at the same time. I chose to be grateful. Hashem allowed me to resume my role as a wife and mother. Whenever I felt myself slipping, I'd count my blessings."

It was this trait of gratitude that saw her through the next two years, during which she underwent grueling physiotherapy sessions and lived in a pressure suit. This tight-fitting elastic pressure suit, measured to fit to the millimeter, prevents burn scars from becoming elevated and minimizes disfigurement. The suit covers the entire body from head to toe, with openings for the eyes and mouth.

"The healing skin itches so much that burn victims have been known to go crazy from it," explains Mrs. Abramson. "Science can put a man on the moon

but can't stop the itching."

Shortly after the fire, the Lebanon War of 1982 broke out. Mrs. Abramson and her husband visited maimed young soldiers who were also burn victims. "Yes, I had been through a lot," she says of that experience, "and still had a long way ahead of me, but at least I had all my limbs."

A Special Baby

Eleven years after the fire, Mrs. Abramson gave birth to Chassya, a baby with Down syndrome. It was a difficult challenge to accept.

"Chassya was only two years old when we noticed how she used her

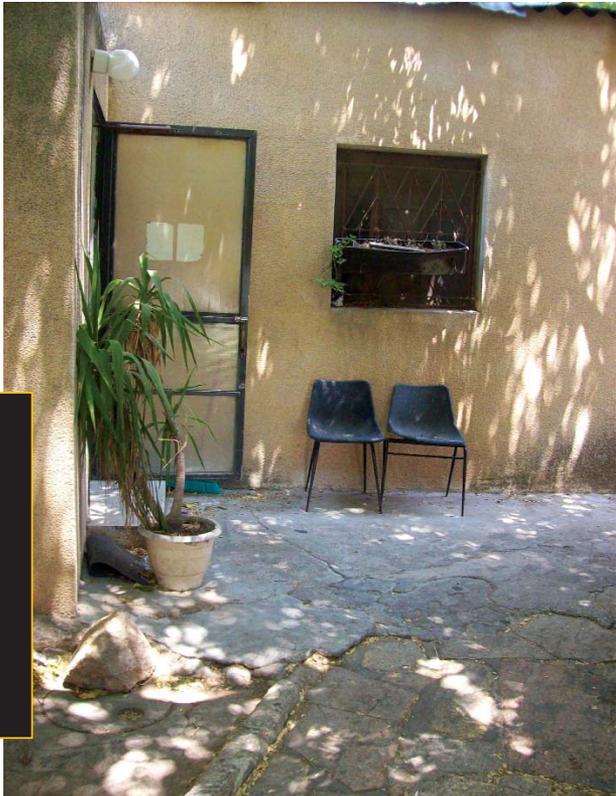
special 'antennae' to uplift any sibling who looked sad," she says. "Without a word, she'd show her love by putting an arm around them, patting them and sitting by them."

Chassya taught Mrs. Abramson not to play the blame game. "When a child is crying, I no longer ask, 'Who did it?' Instead, I focus on the child, who needs my support," she says.

Establishing a Burn Foundation

"For a while after the fire, every time I was asked to help someone, I'd say yes because I felt obligated to be part of the chessed circle. Eventually I learned to find a balance," says Mrs. Abramson.

Entrance to the Abramsons' apartment on Har Zion.



If You Smell Gas

- Alert others and leave immediately.
- Leave doors open for ventilation, but don't stop to open windows.
- Don't operate any electrical equipment, including telephones and flashlights. Remember, any spark can ignite gas if concentrations are high.
- Call your gas company from a telephone outside the area.



Burn Prevention Tips

- Teach children that matches and lighters are “tools” and should only be used by adults.
- Keep hot liquids like coffee and soup out of the reach of children who are sitting on your lap.

In the kitchen:

- Make sure pot handles face the back of the stove so children can't grab them.
- Make sure coffee urns, Crock-Pots, kettles and their cords are out of the reach of children.
- If grease catches fire, carefully slide a lid over the pan and smother the flames, then turn off the burner.

Protective appliances:

- Install a smoke detector on every level of your house.
- Keep portable and space heaters at least three feet away from anything that may burn. Never leave heaters on when you leave home or go to sleep.
- If an appliance smokes or has an unusual smell, unplug it immediately and have it repaired.
- Don't overload extension cords.
- Buy a fire extinguisher and read the instructions.



Her decision to visit burn victims came from a strong desire to give back after having received so much. Eventually, she realized that by creating a burn foundation, she could educate people about how to protect themselves from serious burns and help burn victims get the financial aid they need to cover the cost of treatment, which includes medicinal creams and pressure suits.

Rabbi Shlomo Goldstein, son of *Rosh Yeshivah* Rabbi Mordechai Goldstein, encouraged Mrs. Abramson by reassuring her that since she was doing the will of Hashem by helping others in this unique way, she would have *siyatta diShmaya*. And she did.

In 1995, Mrs. Abramson gave her first talk to Parents of North American Israelis (PNAI), who had helped raise money for her foundation. Although the president of PNAI introduced Mrs. Abramson by saying exactly what she herself had been planning to say, she managed to restructure her entire speech in one minute.

“I cried my way through the speech,” she recalls. “Afterward, a woman came up to me and asked, ‘How can you be so emotional after all these years?’ I wondered how I was supposed to avoid being emotional; Hashem had saved my life!”

Less than a year later, Mrs. Abramson stood before a crowd of thousands of women in Boro Park at a function held by the Zichron Shloime Refuah Fund. “A friend in Israel had written my speech, but I was daunted by the number of pages. The evening before, I rewrote the speech in my own words and managed to pull it off — even though I was probably the only woman in the hall who wasn't wearing black, which was already in style then,” Mrs. Abramson says with a laugh.

“I give people hope,” she concludes. “When people hear about what I've been through and see how I managed to survive, they become hopeful about their own difficult situations. They begin to believe that they too can make it.” ■