

17 Killed in NYC Fire

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Smoke spread quickly into the hallway and then into the building's internal stairwells, the main means for residents to evacuate. Nigro said that another door was also left open to the stairwell on the 15th floor, pulling "dangerous" fumes up through the building. He noted that the 15th floor in particular "became quite untenable."

Fire alarms in the building went off immediately, but false alarms were routine, and many residents said they had become accustomed to ignoring them. In the end, the commissioner said, people would have been safest if they had stayed in their apartments themselves, rather than seeking to evacuate.

City officials have not yet said where residents died in the building, but residents and their family members suggested in interviews that the stairwells had proved particularly lethal.

"There were people that I understand, from talking with my neighbors, they were trying to go down the stairs, and they were tripping over bodies," said Renee Howard, 68, who was sheltering Monday afternoon at nearby Monroe College in the Bronx after evacuating her home of 30 years.

One family of five appeared to have left their apartment on the top floor in an effort to flee to safety, only to be overcome by smoke, officials told the family's relatives. The family, the Dukurays, had three children between ages 5 to 12, and the relatives said they now believed all five were dead.

"I wish I could do anything to tell them not to come out from the house," one of the relatives, Hawa Dukuray, said. "I think they maybe tried to escape."

She said she was told that by the time they reached "the middle," they could not see through the smoke.

Problems with the self-closing doors do not appear to have been an

entirely new issue for the building. Between 2014 and 2019, the city housing department had issued violations for problems with self-closing doors to four different apartments and one stairway. Records show another complaint about a problem with a self-closing door to an apartment in 2021. All had been resolved.

There had been complaints over a lack of adequate heating, including three in 2021. Those were also resolved, according to city records, and Adams said that there had been no outstanding complaints about heating.

The building has been owned since early 2020 by a trio of investors: LIHC Investment Group, Belveron Partners and Camber Property Group. One of Camber's executives, Rick Gropper, served as a housing adviser to Adams and contributed \$400 to his mayoral campaign, the maximum amount allowed for those doing business with the city. He and other business associates have donated to other Democrats as well.

Judith Goldiner, attorney in charge of the civil law reform unit at the Legal Aid Society, a nonprofit that is helping some tenants of the building find new homes, said that deadly fires in New York City have generally occurred in older buildings with many problems, such as a lack of smoke detectors or blocked fire exits.

But whereas most of the city's housing stock was built before World War II, the Bronx high-rise was only built in the early 1970s and was said to be in a state of relatively good repair.

"That's why it's so surprising that this happened," she said. "That makes you think there's something that happened here that you would not have expected."

Goldiner said there may have been other problems identified in state and federal inspections of the building, which have not been made public.

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Legal Holiday Inspirational Programs at Agra D'Pirka

BY RABBI
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On Friday, December 31, Agra D'Pirka of Flatbush sponsored a morning of *shiurim*, featuring a series of speakers. In addition to the crowd that participated live at Knesses Bais Avigdor, many participated via teleconference and TorahAnytime.com.

Agra D'Pirka, dubbed The Morning Kollel, is a movement of Torah study with daily *shiurim* in close to a dozen Jewish communities, well-attended by people who seek to upgrade their *ruchniyus* and learning. The *magidei shiur* are renowned *talmidei chachomim* who offer profound insights and draw sizeable crowds on a regular basis.

The opening message was delivered by Rav Shaya Cohen, *rosh yeshiva* of *Yeshivas Zichron Aryeh*, on the subject, "An Upside-Down World Presents Unique Opportunity." He focused on the Jews in *Mitzrayim* not being able to accept Moshe Rabbeinu's message of redemption. The *Ramban* points out that it was not a lack of *bitachon* in Hashem or in Moshe, but rather the suffering they endured, which prevented them from focusing on Moshe Rabbeinu's words.

This is a message tailored to our times. Fear should never overwhelm us to the point that it creates confusion.

The second *shiur* was given by Rav Ben Zion Gips, *maggid shiur* in Agra D'Pirka of Flatbush and Boro Park, on the topic, "Shabbos is Beautiful — Why the Rush?" He cited the *midrash* which relates that the Jews in *Mitzrayim* would observe *Shabbos* by getting

together and reading *megillos*. *Tosafos* points out that the pre-*matan Torah* version of *Shabbos* was different than the current one — there were no 39 *melachos* or *gezeiros*. The *Ramban* and *Rambam* indicate that there is a *mitzvah* to rest on *Shabbos*, independent of the *melachos*, and the *zachor* aspect of *Shabbos* expresses itself largely in the attitude toward the day's preparations. The greater the effort exerted in anticipating and honoring *Shabbos*, the more meaningful it will be.

The final *shiur* was given by Rav Aharon Kahn, *mara d'asra* of Knesses Bais Avigdor, on the topic, "The Writing and Reading of *Megillas Esther* — A *Daf Yomi* Discussion." The *Gemara* records a *machlokes* as to where the reading of the *megillah* must begin and superimposed on that dispute is a *machlokes* as to the source for each opinion — whether it is



from the *posuk* of "Vatichtov Esther HaMalkah uMordechai HaYehudi es kol tokef" or the *posuk* "Ma ro'u al kacha uma higia aleihem."

There is a seemingly unrelated dispute as to the reason the *megillah* must be read at night and during the daytime. One opinion is that the source is the *posuk* "Lemaan yezamercha kavod velo yidom, Hashem Eloka' le'olam odeka," while another opinion is that it's based on the *posuk* "Elokai ekra yomam velo saaneh, velayla velo dumia li." The former emphasizes the praise over the miracle, while the latter highlights the *tefillah* which brought it about. Rav Kahn proceeded to show that the two discussions may, in fact, be related.

Agra D'Pirka's inspiring legal holiday program can be viewed on TorahAnytime.com. For more information about the program and its locations, call 212-661-9400 or visit www.agraDpirka.org.

BIG APPLE NEWS

Using the Carrot, Not the Stick

Gov. Kathy Hochul promised that state officials will pay for dozens of new social workers to encourage homeless New Yorkers off subway trains and into shelters.

The governor made the announcement alongside Mayor Eric Adams, who pledged that the New York Police Department will "beef up" its patrols to boost straphanger confidence. Hochul did not provide details about when they would begin hiring.

"For the first time, we're going to create teams of trained professionals, who will be embedded here, build relationships, develop trust," Hochul said at the Fulton Street station in Manhattan. "We're going to get them the support they need, get them into shelter and ultimately into housing."

Control Yourselves, or Else

In a newly surfaced video, Mayor Eric Adams is seen warning police officers not to be too abusive or else they will be fired on the spot.

While visiting a precinct with new NYPD Commissioner Keechant Sewell in Jamaica,

Queens, on New Year's, Adams assured cops that he will support the good ones, but issued a tough warning to those who step out of line.

In the video, Adams is seen telling officers, "We have the finest among us and sometimes unfortunately we have a small number of the worst among us. My covenant to you is you protect my community, I'm going to protect you. I'm going to have your backs. But if you are abusive to my community, I'm going to make sure you don't serve in my department and you don't hurt your fellow officers."

The meeting took place on Adams' first day in office, but reporters were not allowed in. Many claim that Adams, himself a former cop, will show support for police officers because he knows what it's like.

End of the Free Ride

Two top NYPD executives who had been quietly pulling in a hefty pension and a nearly quarter-million-dollar salary under the title of deputy commissioner were fired.

Internal Affairs boss Joseph Reznick and the head of the department's employee relations Robert Ganley were asked to leave, as

new Police Commissioner Keechant Sewell and her administration slowly start to clean house.

News of the firing comes weeks after Ganley was ferried from New York City to Philadelphia for a fundraising gala in a police chopper, with taxpayers footing the bill. Ganley, 67, was filling in for former Police Commissioner Dermot Shea at the Annual Army-Navy Gala on Dec. 10 when he took the flight that cost a small fortune.

Throwing Good Money After Bad

After closing for six months during the pandemic and laying off 60% of its staff, the struggling 9/11 Memorial and Museum gave \$1,000 bonuses to each of its 12 highest paid execs.

The bonus brought the total compensation in 2020 for CEO Alice Greenwald, who recently announced she is stepping down, to \$564,500.

Built to remember the terror attacks on September 11, 2001, and to honor the 2,958 people murdered, the memorial and museum took a big financial hit during the pandemic and is still struggling to recover.

The bonuses were funded by an anonymous donor and restricted to that purpose, said spokeswoman Lee Cochran.

"The donation was intended to recognize the exceptional dedication of a very hard-working staff" who ran the organization after Covid-19 forced a shutdown in March 2020 and produced virtual education programs during the closure, Cochran explained.

Crime Doesn't Pay

One of the five Long Island Rail Road workers charged in a conspiracy to defraud the MTA through an overtime scheme was sentenced to three months in prison.

At the Manhattan federal court sentencing, Joseph Balestra apologized to his family and said he took full responsibility for his role in the scheme, in which he pocketed over \$5,000 in overtime pay. Balestra will have to serve three years of supervised release, three months of which will be served under home confinement.

In 2018, Balestra earned \$348,000 from the LIRR, including \$241,000 in OT after submitting nearly 3,000 overtime hours for the year.