

The Ballad of Clara Lemlich

Al Hanisim,

This is for the miracles,
for the redemption, for the mighty deeds,
for the saving acts and
for the resistance of our ancestors
in days of old, at this very time...

First night of Hanukkah 1909 and
the worst snowstorm in twenty years
was slowly gathering
the wind ripping holes
through the lines of strikers
huddling against the piercing cold.

Among them was young Clara Lemlich
the same one who just two weeks earlier
stood impatiently in Cooper Union
hour after hour
listening to the union men drone on
until fed up, she grabbed the podium and sent
Yiddish words flying, inciting
sparking, then finally
igniting:

*I am a working girl
one of those who are on strike
against intolerable conditions.
I am tired of listening to speakers
who talk in general terms.
What we are here for
is to decide whether we shall strike
or shall not strike.
I offer a resolution
that a general strike
be declared now.*

Thus exploded the Uprising of the Twenty Thousand.

After the smoke had cleared
the ILGW won union contracts at every shop
save one: the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory
who said no to new changes, no to fair wages
no to any union in our shop.

One year later the Triangle burst into flame,
sending working women plummeting to their deaths
like sparks flying, sputtering and disappearing
on a cold winter's night.

That's how it is with miracles:
we rededicate the Temple
but in due time it will fall.
The miracle isn't the fire that lasts, no
the miracle is where we find
the strength to rise up
and relight the fire
once again.

Post Script:

Clara Lemlich died at the age of 96
at the Los Angeles Jewish Home for the Aged,
after organizing their workers
and agitating their management
to honor the boycott of the United Farm Workers
(which they did).

(Rabbi Brant Rosen)