A Disaster Strikes
Parashat Emor
May 1, 2021
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A Jewish woman by the name of Gluckel was born in the city of Hamburg, Germany, in 1646.

Ordinarily, we wouldn't know very much about one particular person living in medieval Europe, much less a Jewish person, much less a woman, but we know a lot about Gluckel, for the simple reason that she wrote a memoir for her children, and that memoir has survived.

She started writing in 1690, and continued writing until 1719. She died, five years later, in 1724, at the age of 78. It's a fascinating document, well worth reading.

I want to share with you a short excerpt from the very end of the memoir.

After a lifetime of moving around from place to place, raising a family of thirteen children, handling the complex business affairs of her family during, and after the death of her husband, Gluckel settled in the town of Metz, in northeastern France.

In the very last section of her memoir, she describes something very disturbing that happened on Shavuot in May of 1715.

*The shul was full--with men, women and children. The great Cantor Jokel of Rzeszow in Poland had begun to chant the shaharit (morning) service. He had already sung, "*He-el b'taatzumot uzechah," *and hadn't yet reached the words, "*Baruch … Yotzer Hameorot," *when people heard a noise as though something were breaking overhead.*

There were women in the upper balcony who thought that the ceiling was about to fall, …

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A mighty fear came upon them and they scrambled to leave the building. Each one thought of nothing but to save her own life.

They poured in a rush down the stairs, and those that fell were trodden beneath the heels of the others. In less than a few minutes six women perished and more than thirty were wounded, some of them nigh unto death, so that they lay for months in the hands of [doctors].

If they had made their escape in good order, no one would have been hurt.

…

The survivors came running out into the street, for the most part, alas, with hair uncovered and with their clothing nigh torn from their bodies.

A few of them told me afterwards that they wanted to escape but found no means, so they had returned to their places and said, «If we must die, better in the synagogue than squeezed to death on the stairs» For more than fifty women lay knitted and writing together on the steps, glued to one another as with pitch, living and dead in one mass.

…

You can imagine the desolation everywhere -- six women dead, six young women who a moment before were in the fullness of their vigor and health. God have mercy on us, and withdraw His wrath from us and from all Israel!"[1]

And so, a day that everyone expected to be a holiday turned into a day of mourning.

* * * * *

As in 1715, this year, Jews are not returning from their religious celebration in high spirits. There was a disaster at Har Meron. The dozens who were killed; the scores who were injured; the chaos -- all this assures that this calamity will long be remembered as a somber and sober disaster.

Almost as soon as I had heard about it, I received a number of inquiries from people: **"How could this happen?"**

The folks who were writing to me were not asking how and why the operational failures occurred that permitted that catastrophe to take place.

Obviously, these were serious. This site, Mount Meron, on this particular one day of the year, Lag B'Omer, has long been understood to be very dangerous. (See,

[1] *The Memoirs of Glückel of Hameln,* translated with notes by M. Lowenthal.

e.g., https://www.jta.org/2021/04/30/israel/long-before-lag-bomer-stampede-mount-merons-history-has-been-a-mix-of-tragedy-and-euphoria?utm_source=JTA_Maropost&utm_campaign=JTA_DB&utm_medium=email&mpweb=1161-29764-28508 .) Reports have been issued, recommendations have been offered, and unfortunately, they have been ignored. Politics; the distrust and even contempt that local religious authorities feel toward the government; all that plays a role.

A lot of soul searching is already underway. Good, important soul searching.

Those will be investigated, and reports will undoubtedly be issued, and the appropriate authorities in Israel will have to wrestle with the difficult issues of responsibility and accountability.

But those who were asking me that question were not asking about that.

They were asking a theological question: **How is it that we live in a world in which God allows these things to happen?**

My response was two-fold: First, it is far too early to be blaming God or human beings for the catastrophe. Not all of the dead have been identified, or buried. The wounded are still being treated. Many are in critical condition.

There will be plenty of time to analyze what happened; what went wrong; what could have been done to prevent the disaster.

But, as we've seen from Gluckel's memoir, disasters have always happened, and they will continue to happen.

Not only disasters in general but this kind of disaster in particular. Stampedes at crowded places are unfortunately fairly common. Not only at religious gatherings, but at secular ones, too. Not only in Saudi Arabia, during the Haj, as in 2015 (see: *Death Toll From Hajj Stampede Reaches 2,411 in New Estimate (Published 2015)*), but also at a secular events as well. (Soccer stadiums are notorious for such catastrophes. See, e.g., https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_soccer_stampede_disasters).

Engineers and scientists have studied stampedes. There are rational explanations for them.

The theological question is not as easily addressed: So a Jewish woman can go to synagogue on Shavuot in 1715 and die on the stairway from the balcony???? Or revelers can go to Har Meron on Lag B'Omer and instead of celebrating all night, end up in the morgue????

Doesn't that seem contrary to what we expect from religious behavior?

That's the question. And whenever the question is asked, I feel it necessary to respond, because I think it's the question that is most important to address, because misunderstanding regarding it is incredibly destructive to religiosity.

Unfortunately, many religious traditions, Judaism included, convey the impression that religious behavior makes one immune from harm. We all know this. We all, deep down inside, on some level, find such a belief appealing. How many of us have given someone travelling to Israel a couple of dollars to give as tzedakah there, because of the Jewish idea that a *shaliach*, an emissary, in performing a mitzvah is protected?

For many of us, religious behavior is like paying the premium on some kind of insurance policy. We know it may not protect us from disaster, but it sure should lessen the pain if something does happen.

In fact, the question, "Why?" has been asked for thousands of years. And there is no satisfactory answer to the question.

True religiosity requires that one make peace with that very troubling truth, that even the righteous suffer. And even no-goodniks may be spared harm.

True religiosity requires that one accept and live with that truth.

This is the way of the world. The Biblical author of the book of Job knew this. The rabbis in the Talmud knew this. The Jews who suffered at the hands of the Crusaders knew this.

Even Gluckel of Hameln, pious woman though she was, knew this.

After telling us of that disaster that befell her community in 1715, she writes,

"Later, the women's section of the building was carefully gone over, but nothing was found amiss. And to this day, we do not know the reason for the terrible rumbling noise" -- the noise that led to that stampede.

Now, she doesn't end there. She continues by saying, "We must presume it was sent for our sins" -- because that's the Jewish way of responding to misfortune. We look for things we could have done *differently*, in a better way, to avoid it.

Now, there's something good about that: we learn the importance of looking into ourselves, of not trying to blame others.

But the danger is that such an approach can distract us from the theological truth staring us in the face, namely, that righteous behavior doesn't necessarily spare us from harm.

Each of us should try to adopt Gluckel's approach. We should acknowledge that "We don't know." And we should accept the fact that "We don't know" is an acceptable religious answer.

We shouldn't stop trying to be better people, but we should acknowledge that even the best of us can suffer. Good behavior is its own reward, and we should seek to attain that reward -- understanding that no other one may materialize.

Shabbat shalom.