

Lag Ba'Omer Tragedy at Har Meron

April 30, 2021

At least 45 Israelis were killed overnight in Israel's worst-ever peace time tragedy, following a stampede during a religious celebration at Har Meron in the Galilee. This coming Sunday has been declared a day of national mourning.

Background: Lag Ba'Omer at Har Meron

- Har Meron is a religious site in Israel, where the tomb of the Second Century Jewish sage, Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai (known as The Rashbi), is located.
- By tradition, hundreds of thousands traditionally visit the tomb on the festival of Lag Ba'Omer, where bonfires are lit and prayers, dancing and celebrations take place.
- Last year, due to COVID, the celebrations were cancelled for the first time. This year, the Israel Police limited attendance to 90,000 people and these visitors were divided into three separate areas each holding 30,000 people. More than 4,000 police were on hand to ensure order.
- The Har Meron site itself has always been problematic for large crowds due to small buildings at the site, narrow roads in the area, and a general lack of facilities for mass crowds. It is owned and managed by a number of different private entities, unlike most national parks and monuments. Nonetheless, the police have typically worked hard to control the event, limiting arrivals to buses, constructing temporary barriers and more.
- The site is a well-visited tourist venue year-round, and on Lag Ba'Omer, it is particularly popular with ultra-Orthodox pilgrims. Thousands of buses bring visitors from across the country over a 36-hour period, with the most popular time occurring during the traditional evening bonfires.
- Each year complex negotiations take place with police prior to the event, which sees authorities allocating certain areas around the tomb to various Hassidic sects.

Tragedy

- It is still unclear what took place and what went wrong. The disaster unfolded shortly after midnight on Thursday night at Meron, and police are just beginning their investigations.
- Already at this early stage, major investigations of the incident have been announced.
- What is known is that one enclosed area near the tomb became overcrowded. The area in question had a sloped, metal floor that had become quite slippery, causing a number of people to fall. Somehow this led to a stampede with crowds trying to escape the narrow area, and many people being squashed into fences or falling to the ground, one on top of the other.
- By the time police removed safety fences to let the crowd get out, at least 45 people had been killed, including a number of children and more than 100 injured.

- Enormous rescue forces descended on the area, including IDF troops, dozens of ambulances, and at least six IDF helicopters. A field hospital was set up onsite while many were transferred to the closest hospitals in Tzfat (Safed), Tiberias, Nahariya and Haifa.
- It is understood that most of the dead and injured came from the Toldot Aharon Hassidic sect.

Aftermath

- The initial post-disaster period was particularly harrowing with many children separated from their parents and thousands unable to locate their loved ones. Due to the massive numbers of people, cell phone service in the relatively remote area was largely unavailable for hours.
- The police initially struggled to clear the crowds from the scene to allow access to ambulances. Loudspeakers called in Yiddish and Hebrew for people to make way and let rescuers come through.
- The entire area was subsequently shut down with police working throughout the night to evacuate all the participants. Roadblocks were set up to prevent people from arriving at the scene.
- In one early sign of national unity, residents of local Arab villages near the tomb were offering food and drinks to evacuees.
- By midday on Friday, families were still searching for missing relatives, and in some cases identifying the bodies of loved ones. Despite these challenges, according to the Jewish tradition of burying the dead as soon as possible (strictly adhered to by many Hassidim), it is thought that most of the funerals will take place in the coming hours before the onset of Shabbat in Israel.
- Several cities were home to many of the victims and social services are being bolstered to help with trauma care and funeral arrangements.
- Authorities have begun releasing the names of victims, and they include Shragi Gestetner, a Montreal native and well-known Haredi singer.
- Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visited the site this morning and declared Sunday to be a national day of mourning.
- Across the country, a somber mood has set in, with radio stations playing only appropriate and sensitive music.

Jewish Federations

- The Jewish Agency's MASA program had eight organized groups visiting Meron at the time of the disaster, in addition to individual MASA participants who were attending on their own. All of the organized groups are safe and their families have been notified.
- MASA is still following up on one participant who is missing. His family, the police and all the relevant bodies have been notified and they are trying to clarify his situation.
- Jewish Federation's partner, the Israel Trauma Coalition (ITC), will begin providing trauma services to first responders, police, and other professionals who witnessed the tragedy. In addition, ITC are reaching out to a number of municipalities where most of the victims originated, to provide assistance with the burial of all 45 victims today.
- The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) has received a request from the Israeli rescue organization ZAKA for "mourning packages" that provide "shiva" materials and equipment for those households who have lost a family member. In addition, JDC may be called upon to organize trauma relief for children in a number of ultra-Orthodox schools.

- Mashabeam – the new Trauma resilience center in the north of Israel, has opened a hotline in various languages for the wider population and will also be providing services to MASA students. All North American MASA participants have received information on the hotline in English.

The Jewish Federations of North America issued a statement earlier that read, “We were shocked and saddened to learn about the horrible disaster that took place in Israel today which left dozens dead and injured. On this day, Lag BaOmer, when we honor the Jewish spirit, we send a special prayer to those who have been affected by this tragedy.”

JFNA’s Israel office is in close touch with our partners on the ground, and will keep you apprised of developments.

For more information, please contact JFNA’s [Dani Wassner](#), Director of Israeli Government Relations.

Sources: Ynet, N12 Israel News, The Times of Israel, Galei Tzahal Radio, The Jerusalem Post, Walla! News, IDF Spokesperson.