

Dozens killed in crush at Israeli religious festival

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At least 45 people have died and 150 were injured, 40 in a critical condition, in a crush Friday at a religious celebration on Mount Meron in northern Israel. It is one of Israel's worst civilian disasters.

The Lag B'Omer festivities at Meron, where a second-century Jewish sage Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai was buried, usually attracts hundreds of thousands of people who dance, sing, and make bonfires around his tomb. Attendance this year is estimated at 100,000.

While the cause is not yet entirely clear, it appears that the crush was precipitated at about 1.00am Friday morning after some celebrants slipped on steps, causing dozens of people to fall over and the many hundreds behind to fall on top of them in a "human avalanche."

Photographs later in the morning show the scene covered with thousands of blue plastic bottles, crushed by the crowds that had stepped on them, that may have caused the crowd to slip and fall.

Witnesses described scenes of total confusion and chaos, with Eliyahu, who was injured in the crush, telling *Ha'aretz*, "We tried to leave, but the police had closed all kinds of areas and weren't letting us leave." "We begged them to open the gates to get out, but the police for some reason didn't let people leave and everyone was pushed, and people were simply trampled to death. I didn't understand what was happening and fainted," he added.

Two other witnesses told *Ha'aretz* that a police barricade had prevented people from leaving, contributing to the overcrowding. Rabbi Aharon Boimel said he avoided the compound the entire evening fearing disaster, saying, "We've warned of overcrowding there in the past—and what we feared most happened. If police had not positioned barricades at the compound the disaster would have been greater."

According to TV news *Channel 12*, it was the bottleneck where the disaster started rather than the number of total worshipers at the site that drove the

tragedy. The entire site has only one entrance through one access road that meant that the police—5,000 had apparently been deployed to steward the event—should have been able to control the number of people entering the site. Film showed police officers trying to stop people from fleeing the scene, either because they did not appreciate the extent of the danger or because they were trying to prevent a stampede from spilling out into other areas of the site. Television images showed a side door in the passageway that had been locked shut.

According to the police, while the site had the same capacity as usual, bonfire areas had been cordoned off as a Covid-19 precaution—they had been banned last year—possibly creating unexpected chokepoints for the participants.

Hours after the crush, the families of those who had lost their lives had yet to be notified amid a complicated effort to identify the victims.

Attendance at the event was higher than last year when restrictions were in place to halt the spread of the virus, but very much lower than usual because there were few overseas visitors and non-Hasidic Israelis.

Despite warnings from Israeli health officials that the mass celebrations could become a super spreader event, the authorities, having lifted restrictions on social gatherings after the third lockdown, allowed the event to go ahead. It was the largest gathering since the start of the pandemic.

The police have started an investigation, while the Attorney General said that an inquiry had started into the policing of the event, with the Department for Internal Investigations already at the scene to determine whether there was any criminal culpability on the part of the police. Major General Shimon Lavi, the Northern District police chief, declared that he bore full responsibility for the deadly event. However, a senior police official pinned responsibility for the tragedy on the government and

public officials for allowing unrestricted access to the celebrations, resulting in overcrowding and the tragic stampede.

He said, “This narrow passageway was approved by engineers,” pointing to the location of the crush, adding, “The Northern District of the police was prepared for any eventuality ahead of the Thursday holiday celebrations. Major General Lavi toured the site in advance and told organizers he was worried that barriers put in place were dangerous for children. He also met with religious leaders on the scene who demanded a larger participation be allowed but he resisted. Imagine how much worse things could have been.” He said, “It is the responsibility of the state.”

A police spokesperson Commander Eli Levi, told *Ynet* that all relevant government authorities had approved the passageway where the crush occurred and “Everyone understood that after festivities were banned last year because of the coronavirus pandemic, there would be large crowds at Mount Meron this year.” Indeed, officials had said prior to the event that hundreds of thousands would be allowed to participate.

There were chaotic scenes as people tried to leave the scene of the disaster, with masses of people, including small children waiting for hours for transport. A massive bussing operation was being rolled out in a haphazard and ill-directed way, causing people to stop passing buses to ask their destinations and adding to the already enormous traffic jams and confusion in the narrow lanes around Mount Meron.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who toured the site on Friday morning with Public Security Minister Amir Ohana and police, described the tragedy as a “heavy disaster.” According to reports in the Hebrew media, some of the worshipers who remained at the site booed and heckled the prime minister and chanted slogans against him.

Israel, a member of the OECD, the club of the world’s richest nations, is famous for its high-tech inventions, has the most powerful air force in the region and a huge arsenal of nuclear bombs, and has long threatened to bomb Iran, a thousand miles away. Yet it could not manage the mass gathering safely.

It follows the entirely avoidable deaths during the pandemic of nearly 6,500 people in Israel and 3,231 Palestinians living in the territories illegally occupied by Israel since 1967, and the untold suffering of hundreds of thousands more as Netanyahu, like his counterparts across the globe, put profits before lives.

The ultra-orthodox communities had been particularly badly hit. Already among the poorest members of Israeli society, living in overcrowded conditions, they were always going to be vulnerable to the coronavirus. Their unemployment rate—they are largely employed in low skilled, low wage sectors if they work at all and most do not—rose twice as much as the rest of the population due to the lockdowns, while their infection rate was nearly five times higher.

The ultra-orthodox or Haredim, by no means a monolithic bloc, are made up of numerous sects and leaders, each with their own customs and traditions. While the religious parties have been instrumental in keeping Netanyahu in power, the Haredim are enormously distrustful of the government and secular, public authorities.

Netanyahu, in return for their support, has made numerous dispensations, including allowing them to keep their schools open, which do not teach a core curriculum of math, science, and English but focus on religious studies, and granting de facto exemptions from social distancing and lockdown restrictions, as well as exemption from military service.

This has served to heighten tensions between religious and secular Israelis, which Netanyahu and the ruling elite have encouraged as a means of dividing opposition to economic and social policies that have created one of the most unequal countries within the OECD.

The latest tragedy demonstrates once again that the “existential threat” to Israeli working people lies not with Palestinians or its neighbours in the region. Israel’s Palestinian citizens in nearby towns and villages set up stalls, handing out free food and drink for the thousands of Jewish worshipers trying to make their way out of the area in the wake of the tragedy.

The threat lies with the readiness of Israel’s financial oligarchy to sacrifice the lives and welfare of Israeli workers and their families for its own selfish interests.



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