

# The Meron tragedy

The first many of us knew about the tragedy in Meron were frantic phone calls in the middle of the night from fathers and sons desperate to get through to their families to let them know that they were alive. That they were able to do so was alone a miracle since the mobile phone system had collapsed due to overload.

Shortly afterwards, as we arrived in shul for davening we learnt that there had been a major disaster in Meron. The cause wasn't clear: a bridge had collapsed or something similar. No-one knew for certain. There were forty dead, or more. We poured out our hearts in Tehillim.

As the day progressed, the devastating news came through that the death toll had risen to forty-five, with countless injured. Then the names of the *niftarim* came out. The devastation continued as we heard of friends and *talmidim* who had lost their lives. Then began the *levayos* – attended by anyone who had a connection with the *niftar* or who just wanted to show solidarity. A feeling of tragedy descended upon the nation.

One soon began to hear accounts of *hashgacha protis*, of who had been there, or of those who had for some reason just missed being there. We also began to hear about the *niftarim*, most of whom were young. There were pictures of them; we saw their



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purity, their qualities, the sheer goodness in their *neshomas*. It became clear that each one had been carefully selected, a blemish-free *korban tzibbur* on behalf of the people.

In the days since the tragedy, countless *hespedim* have been said, and gatherings of *hisorerus* held. One speaker gave the following *moshol*: One who walks down the road speaking on his mobile phone may cause some inconvenience to others but won't actually be charged a penalty for doing so. However, one who speaks on his mobile phone whilst driving is endangering those around him and deserves to pay the penalty. One, even worse, who is driving a bus whilst speaking on his phone, he really deserves his punishment. What about us, the speaker said, *Shomrei Torah u'Mitzvos* and *Lomdei Torah*, do we realise how precious we are and how important we are to Hashem? Is our conduct commensurate with our station? Of course, we must restore *simcha* to our lives, he said. But we have to be a different person. We cannot go back to the same person and the same nation we were before.

Since the tragedy, the hearts of Israel have also opened financially, funds immediately established for the orphans, widows, and for the injured. Donations have been flowing in from around the world. *Ashrechah, Yisrael, mi chamochah*.

# US journey to Palestine

186-year-old letter detailing early American diplomatic visit to Holy Land surfaces in Jerusalem auction

Asaf Shalev (JTA)

A detailed account of one of the earliest American diplomatic voyages to Palestine has surfaced as part of an upcoming auction in Jerusalem.

The account appears in a handwritten letter from one of the passengers of the USS Delaware, a U.S. Navy ship that visited the Mediterranean Sea in 1834 and made a stop at the port town of Jaffa, then under the rule of the Ottoman Empire.

Sent from the Spanish island of Menorca and addressed to Circleville, Ohio, the four-page letter describes several historically significant moments in the sailing ship's journey, including a stop in Palestine and a visit with the first American diplomat stationed in the region.

According to Kedem Auction House, the letter's existence was entirely unknown to scholars who study the history of the Holy Land and U.S. diplomacy in Palestine. The anonymous collector who spotted the letter and realised its importance usually focuses on the history of the Israeli postal service. That person bought the item from another collector who had been holding it as an artifact of relevance for U.S maritime and postal history.

"This letter is of great importance to both the history of American Jewry as well as to the history

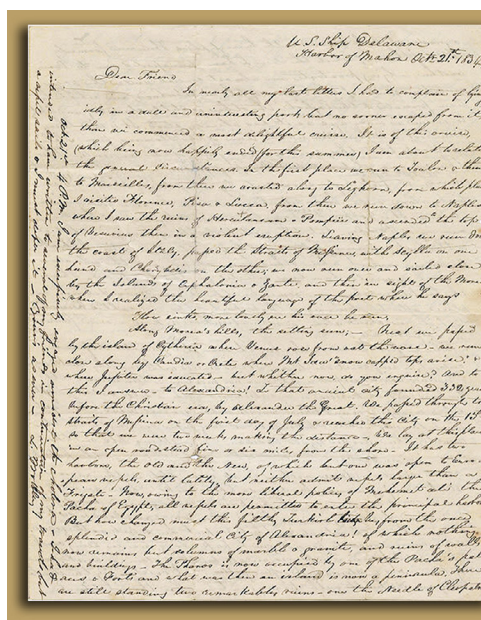
of the State of Israel," Kedem Auction House CEO Meron Eren said in a statement. "It's amazing to read, if only to learn about relations between the United States and Palestine at the time."

The passenger who authored the letter, Lewis Woolley, describes traversing much of the Mediterranean on an eastbound route along the coasts of France, Italy and Greece with stops at various islands. Eventually, the sailing ship reached the port of Alexandria in Egypt. Well-versed in the geography of antiquity, Woolley is thrilled at the sight of various ruins, noting locations mentioned in ancient folklore.

An extended stop in Egypt allowed Woolley and other passengers of the USS Delaware to venture inland where they had an encounter with the local ruler, Mohammad Ali. Known today as the founder of Egypt, Ali was busy fashioning a modern nation out of the ancient kingdom when this audience of Western visitors arrived.

"We rowed once the bay to his palace, where we were received by him seated on his divan in one corner of the room," Woolley wrote. "He did not rise to meet us, but kept his crossed-legged position reclining his head and motioning us to be seated. Coffee was handed us in fine china goblets resting on golden stands."

During the conversation, the "good-natured"



Pasha, as Woolley refers to him, displayed a charisma that apparently won over his visitors.

"The Pasha is one of the most interesting men, in many respects, of the age," Woolley writes. "The changes that he has introduced among his subjects, the improvements that he has made and is still

carrying on in Egypt are immense."

From Egypt, the ship sailed northeast along the coast until reaching the shores of the Holy Land. This is how excited Woolley was on the morning of arrival, according to the letter: "The Holy Land! Palestine! The feelings, the reflections, the ecstasies, you may more readily imagine than I describe."

An American diplomat stationed in Palestine, David Darmon, boarded the ship and briefed the visitors on what conditions to expect when they disembark. Darmon was a French Jew who served as a consular agent, the first American representative in the area. Little is known about him, which makes the discovery of the letter significant.

Woolley was excited to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, but Darmon delivered some news that seemed to quash that possibility. Palestine was in an "unsettled state." Darmon shared news of bad roads, bandits, and a dangerous plague gripping the area.

"What a pity!" Woolley writes. "After having come so far and being so near to it – Like Moses, we are only to be permitted to see the Promised Land but not to enter it."

Kedem Auction House expects the letter to fetch a price of between \$2,000 and \$4,000, with the proceeds going to an anonymous seller.