

Glueckel and Abramoff

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Unbelievably, there are still males who think they are the superior sex. The only superiority I can see is in their propensity for greater monkey business.

One of my series of lectures is about outstanding Jewish women who succeeded in doing as good a job if not better than their male contemporaries.

Amongst them was Donna Gracia Mendez Nasi, A.K.A. Beatrice Di Luna, who was born in Portugal into a family forced to convert to Catholicism. She had to hide her Jewishness while she ran one of the biggest banks in sixteenth century Europe (after her husband and brother-in-law died). She fled Antwerp from the attentions of the Emperor Charles, was betrayed in Venice, rescued by the Duke of Ferrara, where she was able to publicly profess her Judaism. She ended up in Constantinople, famed as a rescuer of beleaguered Jews and a great benefactress of charities and learning throughout the Jewish world.

Another favorite is Bertha Pappenheim who got an awful press as a neurotic Viennese woman from Breuer and Freud, and from anti-religious feminists who blamed her religion for her difficulties. She was rescued from their prejudices by Professor Daniel Boyarin of Berkeley. She was a poet and dramatist. She fought for women's rights and translated Mary Wollstonecraft into German. She campaigned for poor Jewish women often sold into prostitution and was a trustee of various Jewish educational institutions including the Bais Yaakov girls' school network.

Her heroine was Glueckel of Hamelin (1646-1724), from whom she was descended. She is known to us because of her diaries which have recently been reissued. She spent most her life in Hamburg. It was her husband who came from Hamelin. Her description of the difficulties, insecurities and dangers the small Jewish communities of Germany had to endure makes riveting, if sad, reading. Even then Denmark proved a more hospitable place for Jews than Germany. When her husband died she took over the business and succeeded in providing for her children. She did very well indeed. It was only when the males pressurized her to remarry for all the wrong reasons that she did and her new husband promptly lost her capital. But what really strikes me about her diary is how little certain features of Jewish life have changed.

Her introduction begins:

This dear children is no book of morals. Our great rabbis have already done this. We have our holy Torah in which you can find and learn all that you need to guide us on our journey through this stormy world to the world to come. The essence of the Torah is 'You Shall Love Your Neighbor as you.' But in our days you seldom find it so. And few are those who love their fellow men with all their

heart. On the contrary if a man can contrive to ruin his neighbor, nothing pleases him more.

And I was reminded of so many examples I have come across in London, Antwerp, and New York of even outwardly religious Jews who seem determined not just to make as much money as possible—in itself no crime, of course, but to do so by cheating, swindling and even destroying colleagues, relatives and associates with such enthusiasm that one can only wonder what genetic distortions have done their work. Throughout Medieval Europe, despite the depredations and difficulties, the rabbis were constantly reiterating the importance of ethical behavior, of respecting non-Jew and Jew alike, not to cheat or give negative impressions, to avoid Chillul Hashem (desecrating God's Name or to behave in such a way as to reflect badly on Judaism).

It is embarrassing now in the USA to read and hear about the lobbyist Jack Abramoff. Here is Jeff Jacoby, himself an Orthodox Jew, writing in the Boston Globe on January 8, 2006.

Abramoff defrauded his clients of millions of dollars, bribed public officials, cheated on his tax returns, and deceived lenders to qualify for a loan.

His e-mails to cronies, with messages like, "Can you smell money?!?!?!" and, "I'd love us to get our mitts on that moolah!" oozed greed and boorishness. Behind their backs, he crudely mocked those who hired him, calling them "morons", "monkeys", "troglodytes", and "the stupidest idiots in the land". He played fast and loose with what were supposed to be charitable funds. The worst is that Abramoff is an Orthodox Jew – someone who claims to be committed to strictly observing Jewish law and faithfully adhering to the Torah's ethical standards. But instead of upholding those ethical standards Abramoff trampled on them, and a "religious" Jew who behaves so corruptly disgraces not only himself but all religious Jews. He brings his faith into contempt.

To me it is equally sad the way so many religious leaders have remained silent instead of having the guts to dissociate themselves. Sadly, wherever one looks throughout the Jewish world one sees other examples both of the crimes and of the silence. If only we listened and acted in accordance with what our religion has to say. Here is Glueckel again:

The best thing you can do is to serve your God from your heart without falsehood or pretence, not pretending to others that you are one thing while in your heart, God forbid, you are another. Say your prayers with awe and devotion. Do not talk and stand idly during services. It is a great sin to engage with other men to talk about business. Shall you keep the Almighty waiting while you finish your affairs? Always set a fixed time to study the Torah to the best of your ability. Then go about your business to earn an

honest livelihood to support your children.

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