

# Gluckel of Hameln, Champion of Business Ethics

Most of us have heard of the Pied Piper of Hamelin, but how many know about a nice Jewish lady called Gluckel of Hamelin? She lived some 300 years ago, when Jews in Europe struggled to survive as outsiders and outcasts in an inhospitable “no man’s land”. They were at the mercy and whim of rival political and ecclesiastical powers, without formal recognition and subject to completely unpredictable commercial and political winds. Think of her near contemporary, “The Jew Suss”, Joseph Oppenheimer, rising from obscurity to become one of the major financiers of the European Courts and then falling to imprisonment and doom simply because of the political rivalry between German states.

Gluckel was born in 1645. She died in 1724. Her life, inevitably, had its tragedies and its failures. Unlike Oppenheimer, she was a learned and committed Jew and her religion was a constant source of inspiration and comfort. There were plenty of other Jewish religious businesswomen like her. Almost every woman then had to be involved commercially in one way or another just to survive. But she is remembered because, unusually, she wrote a diary that is still in print today. So we know so much more about her, her private thoughts, her approach to life than we do of any other premodern Jewish woman. Her diary is invaluable to historians for its comments on the significant events in the Jewish and the non-Jewish world of her lifetime.

She lived out the whole of her life confined socially to a narrow circle of fellow Jews, and despite her wealth she was always constrained to live in claustrophobic, dark, unsanitary ghettos. But commercially her world extended throughout Northern Europe. She was a pious and learned woman who lived according to the strictness of Jewish law, a loyal and devoted wife, and the mother of twelve children. Her diary records the lengths she went to ensure that she married them well, into that small circle of similarly pious and economically prosperous contemporary Jews.

But what makes her particularly interesting is that, in addition to being such a Balabusta, an effective mother of the home, a strong personality in her family, she was a highly successful and energetic businesswoman.

Her first husband, Chaim, was a banker in Hamburg, where she went to live and spent most of her life. He had dealings with cities as far afield as Amsterdam, Paris, Vienna, and Leipzig. While he concentrated on finance, Gluckel traded in commodities, garments even timber, anything that could be bought and sold. She used her own capital, and there is no record that her husband financed her trades. She would travel to the major fairs of the Rhineland and east to Leipzig. She records one business trip that involved traveling to Cleves, Altona, Amsterdam, Emmerich, Delftzil, Emden, Wangerooge, and Hanover before finally returning to Hamburg. These were journeys of months, not days.

She usually travelled alone and dealt with her clients and agents with confidence and expertise. But above all, she was honest and fair and conscious of the ethical values and demands of Torah. She strongly disapproved of those Jews who were either dishonest or devious. When her husband, friend, and partner died in 1689, she took over the whole of his banking business, ran it successfully, and expanded it.

She remarried, another banker, Cerf Levi from Metz, in 1700 and went to live with him there. They were also happily married and worked together in business. But a few years later, he made some disastrous decisions and lost all of his and her money. Shortly afterwards he died, and she was left to rebuild her life and those of her unmarried children, which she did.

Gluckel, like many historical figures, is claimed by disparate and different groups. She wrote in Yiddish, so she is a Yiddishist. She passionately believed in the Return to Zion. She even records salting meat for the journey to Israel because she had heard that Shabbetai Zvi was the Messiah and soon all Jews would be coming together in the Land. Alas, Shabbetai turned out to be yet another a false messiah.

Her learning and religious commitment make her a pietist, what we might call a very "frum" woman. Her independence and commercial success make her a champion of women, and she always supported them in their quests for justice from the rabbinical authorities. Her insistence on her children being independent make her a very model of a wise but firm mother. No time for spoiling anyone. Life was brutish and hard, and you had to fight to survive. Most significant was her emphasis on business ethics. You might call her an ethical icon. How ironic that one of her descendants has been prosecuted in connection with the notorious Madoff affair in the United states.

In the end, Gluckel defies category. She was her own unique person, and when we read Gluckel's life and realize how hard and unpredictable it was, we are bound to conclude that for all the pressures, we Jews are really very fortunate to live in freer times, and that but for the sacrifices of women like her we would not be where we are today. If you are interested, you can read *The Memoirs of Gluckel of Hameln*.