Remembering Esti Weinstein...and Her Suicide: a blog by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Submitted by Laurynn Lowe on Tue, 07/26/2016 - 00:00

Did Esti Weinstein die in vain?

When we were in Jerusalem in late June, we heard the news of the suicide of Esti Weinstein, a 50 year old Israeli woman. She left a suicide note: “In this city I gave birth to my daughters, in this city I die because of my daughters.”

Esti Weinstein was raised in the Gur Hasidic community. She was married at age 17 and gave birth to seven daughters. According to an account she wrote, she suffered in an abusive marriage. Her husband, a “pious” Hasid, subjected her to terrible indignities. Yet, she felt helpless. She had nowhere to turn for help. In the Gur Hasidic community, she felt no one would believe her charges against her “upstanding” husband. Moreover, if she brought charges against her husband, it would create a scandal and would be a blemish on her family’s reputation. Her daughters would have difficulty finding husbands, since the “fine” families would not want their sons to marry into a scandal-ridden family.

She lived a tormented life until finally, at age 43, she up and left the community. She not only left the Gur Hasidic community and her own family; she left Orthodox religious life and became “secular.” Only one of her seven daughters remained in touch with her. The other six would have nothing to do with her. According to Esti, she had tried desperately to maintain contact with her daughters; but she felt that her ex-husband and the Hasidic community turned her daughters against her. They basically disowned her as their mother.

Esti tried to establish a new life for herself outside the Gur community. Yet she was in anguish over her past sufferings; she was tormented by her daughters’ alienation from her. She could not bear the authoritarianism of the Hasidic sect in which she had been raised.

She reached the point of total desperation. No one could heal her wounds. No one could understand her grief. She committed suicide.

Many of the Gur Hasidim, including Esti’s father, attended her funeral. Esti’s father sat Shiva for her. According to news reports, the Rebbe of the Gur Hasidim dismissed Esti’s father from his post as choirmaster, since the Rebbe noted the halakha that it is forbidden to sit Shiva for a suicide. So Esti’s father—and entire family—are left to deal with their grief, their spiritual isolation, their guilt and shame.

In their spin of the story, the Gur community claimed that Esti was mentally unstable; that Esti was an apostate who had betrayed her family, her community and her God. The daughters wanted
nothing to do with her because she was a sinner and a traitor. Esti’s suicide was the result of her own defective nature and her own sinfulness.

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It is not too likely that the Gur sect of Hasidim will change their ways because of Esti’s death. Yet, perhaps it might be possible for them—and other self-enclosed religious sects—to realize that they need to create a help center where trained psychologists and social workers can be available to help community members who are in distress. Perhaps if Esti had someone to turn to, someone who would actually take her claims seriously, her life story would have been far different and far less tragic.

Esti did not die in vain if all communities—Hasidic and otherwise—will provide proper channels for people to talk out their troubles, to consult confidentially with trustworthy and competent professionals. Esti did not die in vain if all communities—Hasidic and otherwise—will recognize the need to respect the autonomy of each individual, and to help individuals in their quest to live happy and fulfilling lives.

There are other Estis in our communities, people who suffer abuse but do not know where to turn for help. There are communities that deny that abuse exists among themselves; that blame victims rather than perpetrators; that protect “pious” men whose behavior is reprehensible; that allow terrible situations to fester rather than cause a public “scandal” by openly confronting unpleasant problems.

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I hope and pray that her death will somehow lead to communal soul-searching—and constructive action—so that others will be spared from the tragic dilemmas she faced.

By pondering the life and death of Esti Weinstein, we can all learn something about the mysteries of life and love, of alienation and despair…and we might learn more and do more about the other Estis in our world.

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