The Fast of Gedalia

Today, Sunday September 28, 2014, is the fast of Gedalia, a fast-day instituted by the Rabbis to remember the assassination of Gedalia Ben Ahiqam, the governor of Israel during the days of Nebukhadnetzar, King of Babylonia. The fast is observed on the 3rd of Tishri, the day after Rosh haShana. This year, because Rosh haShana was followed by Shabbat, we fast today, the 4th of Tishri.

When Nebukhadnetzar destroyed the Temple (586 BCE) and exiled the Jews to Babylonia, he allowed a few Jews (mainly poor farmers) to remain in Israel and work the land. He appointed Gedalia Ben Ahiqam as their governor. Many of the exiled Jews were planning to return shortly from Babylon to Israel to work the land under the auspices of the king of Babylonia, hoping that eventually the Babylonian King (or his successor) would allow all the Jews to reestablish again in their land.

A man from Davidic descendant, Yishma'el Ben Netania, was opposed to the appointment of Gedalia, because he did not belong to the Davidic dynasty. Simultaneously, Ba'alis, the King of Amon (=today Jordan) knew that a Babylonian appointed governor, Gedalia, would mean an easier access for the Babylonian to conquer Amon. Ba'alis then encouraged Yishma'el Ben Netania to assassinate Gedalia. In the beginning of the seventh month (Tishri) Yishma'el and a group of men came to Gedalia in the town of Mitzpa where they were cordially welcomed with the honors due to descendent of Davidic dynasty. Gedalia had been warned of his guests murderous intent, but he refused to believe his informants, convinced that a Jew would never kill another Jew, and compromise their hopes for redemption. However, Yishma'el and his men murdered Gedalia together with the Jews who had joined him in Mitzpa, and a numbers of Babylonians whom Nebukhadnetzar had left with Gedalia. Fearing the reaction of the Babylonian king, the few Jews that were left in Israel to work the land fled to

Egypt. And Israel remained virtually without Jews. Thus, the exile of the people of Israel from its land reached its highest peak, and the hopes for returning to the land vanished.

In remembrance of this tragedy our Sages instituted the Fast of Gedalia.

The fast is observed today from daybreak till nightfall (from 5.38 am to 7.04 pm, NYT)

Who is exempted from fasting today?

Minors: boys under 13 and girls under 12 years old are completely exempt from fasting.

Nursing women: According to the Sephardic Minhag, after giving birth women are exempted from fasting for 24 months, even if they are not actually nursing their baby.

Pregnant women are exempt from fasting today.

A person who feels ill, or who experiences symptoms of flu or fever, or a person with a chronic disease, such as diabetes, should not fast today.

Elders should consult with their physicians if the fast will not affect their health. If it will, they are exempted (and in some cases, prohibited) from fasting