FAST OF GEDALIA: Why Do We Fast Today?

Today September 28th, 2022, 3 of Tishri 5783, is Tsom Gedalia, a fast day instituted to remember the murder of Gedalia Ben Achiqam, the governor of Israel during the days of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon.

DESTRUCTION OF THE FIRST TEMPLE

When Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the Temple of Jerusalem (586 before the common era), he killed a large part of the population of Judea (Yehuda). He also took tens of thousands of Jews to Babylon. Many other Jews escaped to neighboring nations like Amon and Moab, (Jordan, today). Once Jerusalem was destroyed, the independent Jewish state ceased to exist. And Nebuchadnezzar declared Yehuda a province of the Babylonian Empire. The Babylonians allowed a few of the defeated Jewish population, the poorest peasants, to remain in Israel to work the land in order to avoid desertification.

GEDALIA BEN AHIQAM

To govern these few remaining Jews, Nebuchadnezzar appointed Gedalia ben Ahiqam, a Jewish nobleman who lived in Babylon, as governor of Judea. It was an unexpected positive gesture from Nebuchadnezzar. A miracle that a Jew, and not a gentile, was appointed to take care of Judea. Gedalia belonged to the Shafan family, noble Jews who settled in Babylon in the exile of Yekhonia (597 BCE) and had gained the emperor's trust. Gedalia promised loyalty to the king of Babel. The prophet Yirmiyahu (Jeremias) who had chosen to remain in Israel with the survivors, joined Gedalia in Mitspa and together they hoped that soon the Babylonian emperor would allow the Jews to return to Judea and perhaps allow them to rebuild the Temple. Optimism was in the air….

RETURNING TO ISRAEL

When the Jewish refugees who had escaped to Ammon, Moab to avoid death heard that Gedalia was assigned governor, they returned jubilantly to Israel. They resettled in the land, worked it, and reaped its fruits with great success. With Gedalia in charge, the hope of returning to normal life and rebuilding the Bet haMiqdash was now more real than ever.

THE MAGNICIDE

But then, the unimaginable happened. The kingdoms of Ammon and Egypt were allies, and they were enemies of Babylon. They knew that with Gedalia as governor of Judea, it would be easier for Babylon to eventually conquer Ammon. Ba'alis, the king of Ammon, designed a plan to get rid of Gedalia without being directly involved, avoiding in that way any retaliation by the Babylonians. A Jewish refugee descendant of King David, Yishma'el Ben Netania, voiced his opposition to Gedalia, claiming that the latter did not belong to the Davidic dynasty and therefore could not hold the position of governor of the Jews. This claim was obviously absurd, out of place and completely ridiculous.

WHEN THE ENEMY OF YOUR ENEMY IS NOT YOUR FRIEND

But knowing Yishma'el's personal ambitions, Ba'alis convinced him that he should kill Gedalia, and offered his help in carrying out the murder, and his political support to proclaim him as the new King of Judea. On the third day of the seventh Hebrew month (Tishri), Yishma'el and a group of armed men arrived in the city of Mitspa. Gedalia cordially received Yishmael with honors due to a descendant of the Davidic dynasty. Gedalia had been warned of Yishma'el's intention to kill him, but he refused to give credit to that information, convinced that a Jew would never kill another Jew. And besides, why would someone with a minimum of common sense, jeopardize the renewed hopes of Israel's redemption when those were crystallizing? … But the inexplicable happened. Yishma'el and his men murdered Gedalia and the Babylonian officers that were with him. This murder committed by a Jew was considered an act of insubordination against Nebuchadnezzar, a Jewish coup d'etat against Babylon …

THE SECOND EXILE

When hearing the news of this terrible crime, the Jews who had settled in Israel panicked and thought their best option was to flee to Egypt for fear of reprisals from Nebuchadnezzar. In Egypt, unfortunately, they only found more calamities, hunger, persecution, and death. And so, the land of Israel remained virtually without a Jewish population, and the hopes of returning to Yerushalayim and rebuilding the Bet haMiqdash vanished. It was as if we lost our land for a second time … or worse, because this time, the exile was caused by ourselves …

To remember this horrific tragedy, our Prophets instituted the Fast of Gedalia on the Third day of the Hebrew month of Tishri, the day after Rosh HaShana.

Rabbi Yosef Bitton

Who is exempted from fasting today?
Minors: boys under 13 and girls under 12 years old are 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. In some Sephardic communities and in Ashkenazi communities, nursing mothers are only exempt while they are actually nursing their babies. Pregnant women are exempt from fasting.
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 affect their health. If it will, they are exempted (or prohibited) from fasting.
The fast is observed from daybreak till nightfall.
UMJCA : From 5:35 AM to 7:12 PM. Other communities see here