THE FAST OF GEDALIA: Why do we fast today?

Today, Monday September 14, the third of Tishri of the new year 5787, we observe Tsom Gedalia, a fast day established to remember the assassination of Gedalia ben Achiqam, the governor of Israel in the days of Nebuchadnetsar. That murder brought about the final exile of the Jews from the land of Israel in the times of the First Bet HaMiqdash (the Temple of Jerusalem).

This is the story.

After the Destruction of the First Temple

When Nebuchadnetsar, the emperor of Babylonia, destroyed the Temple of Jerusalem in 586 BCE, he killed a large part of the population of the kingdom of Judea (Yehuda). He also took tens of thousands of Jews captive to Babylonia. Many others escaped to the areas outside Jerusalem, or to neighboring nations such as Ammon, Moab (today Jordan) and Edom. Once Jerusalem was destroyed, the independent Jewish State ceased to exist, and Nebuchadnetsar declared Judea a province of the Babylonian Empire. The Babylonians allowed a small number of survivors, the poorest farmers, to remain in Israel to work the land and keep it from turning to desert.

Gedalia ben Achiqam

To govern the Jews who were left in Israel, Nebuchadnetsar brought Gedalia ben Achiqam, a Hebrew nobleman, from Babylonia, and appointed him governor of the province of Judea. It was unexpected, a miracle really, that a Yehudi would be named to govern Judea. Gedalia belonged to the family of Shafan, Jewish noblemen who had settled in Babylonia during the exile of Yekhonia (597 BCE), and he had the emperor’s

trust. Gedalia established himself in Mitspa, a city north of Jerusalem. The king of Babylonia declared the war over and guaranteed that the Jews who had escaped to neighboring countries could return to Israel and live there in peace as his subjects. The prophet Yirmiyahu (Jeremiah) joined Gedalia. Together they held on to the hope that one day the emperor of Babel would let the exiles return and rebuild the Temple.

When the surviving Jews who had fled Jerusalem heard that Gedalia had been appointed governor, they came back to Israel rejoicing. They settled the land, worked it, and harvested its fruit with great success and joy. With Gedalia in charge, the hope of returning to a normal life and rebuilding the Bet HaMiqdash was now a matter of time, and it looked more real than ever.

The Assassination

Then the unimaginable happened. Ba'alis, the king of Ammon, was an ally of Egypt, the main enemy of Babylonia. Ba'alis knew that with Gedalia as governor of Judea it would be easier for Babylonia to conquer his own kingdom. So he designed a plan to get rid of Gedalia, destabilize Judea, and keep Babylonia away from his borders. He identified Yishma'el ben Netania, a violent and ambitious Yehudi, a descendant of the dynasty of King David, and convinced him to murder Gedalia and claim the government of Israel for himself. Ba'alis offered him logistical help and political support, and promised he would be the first to recognize him as the new king of Judea.

A Dangerous Naivety

At the beginning of the seventh Hebrew month, Tishri, Yishma'el and a group of armed men arrived in the city of Mitspa. Gedalia received them warmly and gave them the honors due to a descendant of the dynasty of David. A Jewish general, Yochanan ben Qareach, had warned Gedalia that Yishma'el was planning to kill him. Gedalia dismissed the warning, certain

that no Jew would murder another Jew, and that such rumors were absurd. And then the inexplicable happened. Yishma'el and his men murdered Gedalia and the Babylonian officers who were with him. This murder, committed by a Jew, was an act of war and insubordination against the emperor of Babylonia.

The Second Exile

Yishma'el took every Jew in Mitspa prisoner and set out for Ammon to proclaim himself king. Yochanan pursued him, and Yishma'el escaped with his men and took refuge with Ba'alis. The Jews, now led by Yochanan, did not know what to do. Staying meant risking that the king of Babylonia, no matter who had planned the murder of Gedalia, would blame them and kill them all for insubordination. The other option was to flee to Egypt and side with Babylonia's enemies.

Yochanan asked the prophet Yirmiyahu to pray and to ask God to give them light and help them decide whether to stay in Israel or flee to Egypt. After ten days of prayer and meditation, Yirmiyahu received a clear Divine message: "Stay in the land of Israel. The king of Babylonia will do you no harm. God will help you settle and rebuild the Jewish community. But if you escape to Egypt, the sword and the hunger you fear so much will find you there."

Inexplicably, Yochanan and the Jewish refugees refused to listen to Yirmiyahu. They accused him of lying, and of falsely claiming to have received a Divine message. And they decided to flee to Egypt under Yochanan's leadership.

Exactly as Yirmiyahu had said, in Egypt they met hunger, persecution, calamity and death. When those Jews escaped to Egypt, the land of Israel was left desolate, and for fifty-two years there was no organized Jewish population in it. The hope of returning to Yerushalayim and rebuilding the Bet HaMiqdash vanished completely. It was as if the Temple of Jerusalem had been destroyed a second time, and this time by the actions of

the Yehudim themselves: the murder of Gedalia, and Yochanan's decision not to listen to the Divine word delivered by the prophet Yirmiyahu.

The Fast of Gedalia

In memory of these tragedies, which sealed our first exile, the prophets of Israel established Tsom Gedalia, a fast day observed the day after Rosh HaShana. The prophet Zekharia mentions it together with the other three fasts that recall the fall of Jerusalem:

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"Thus said □□: the fast of the fourth month, the fast of the fifth, the fast of the seventh and the fast of the tenth will be for the house of Yehuda days of gladness and joy, and good festivals. Seek truth and peace" (Zekharia 8:19).

"The fast of the seventh month," □□□□□□□□□□□□ □□□□, is this one, the fast of Gedalia. That is its name in the Tanakh. The other three recall 1. the siege of Jerusalem, 2. the breach of the wall, and 3. the destruction of the Temple. This fast recalls the end: the day the land of Israel was left empty of Jews.

The prophet Zekharia promised that in the future these four fasts will become days of joy. May God grant that Zekharia's future be our present.

Rabbi Yosef Bitton

Who is exempt from today's fast?

Minors: boys under 13 and girls under 12 are completely exempt from this fast.

Pregnant women are exempt from the fast of Gedalia.

Nursing mothers. In many Sephardic communities, the tradition is that after giving birth, a woman is exempt from fasting for 24 months, even when she is no longer nursing her baby. In other Sephardic communities, and in Ashkenazic communities, a mother is excused during those 24 months only if she is still nursing. Consult your community rabbi about which custom to follow.

Someone who feels ill, with flu symptoms or fever, for example, or someone with a chronic illness such as diabetes, should not fast.

Older people should ask their doctors whether fasting will affect their health. If it will, they are exempt.

Times

The fast is observed from dawn today until nightfall.

In UMJCA, the times for the fast are from 5:22 AM until 7:35 PM. For other cities or communities, check the times at myzmanim.com.