

TZOM GEDALYA - THE FAST OF GEDALYA

by Rabbi Yehudah Prero

The day after Rosh HaShana, the third day of Tishrei, is the Fast of Gedalya. The Gemora in Rosh HaShana explains that we first see this fast mentioned in Zecharia 8:19, when the verse speaks about "...the fast of the seventh...." As the seventh month (starting from Nissan) is the month of Tishrei, the fast mentioned in that verse is referring to Tzom Gedalya, the third day of Tishrei. (See #s 27 and 30 for more information on this verse.) On this day, the Gemora says, Gedalya ben Achikam was killed by Yishmael ben Nesania. The Gemora concludes that this fast teaches us that the death of a righteous person is on par with the burning and destruction of the Holy Temple.

Before we start to explain the reason for this fast, a little historical background as to who Gedalya was is needed. Gedalya is mentioned in Yirmiya (Jeremiah) 40 and in Melachim Bais (Kings II) 25. From looking at these two locations, one learns the following about Gedalya: After Nevuchadnezzar destroyed the Temple and the nation of Israel was exiled to Babylon, a small contingency of Jews remained in the land of Israel. Nevuchadnezzar appointed Gedalya as a "governor" over them. When the Jews who were in exile heard that a group of Jews was allowed to remain in Israel and that Gedalya was appointed to oversee them, they were happy, and people started returning to the land to live.

The King of the neighboring nation of Amon, Balis, did not want the Jews to stay happy. He convinced Yishmael ben Nesania that he should assassinate Gedalya. According to the commentators, Yishmael was of royal blood. Balis, in order to provoke Yishmael into killing Gedalya, would "tease" Yishmael about the fact that a "commoner" was appointed a leader over Israel, and that Yishmael, who was of royalty, was passed over for the job. This caused Yishmael to become envious and jealous of Gedalya, to the extent that Yishmael decided to kill Gedalya.

At the beginning of the month of Tishrei, Yishmael came to Gedalya. Although Gedalya had been told that Yishmael was coming to kill him, he did not believe it because he did not want to believe this "lashon ho'ra," or slander. When Yishmael arrived, Gedalya treated him with respect. Then Yishmael and his henchmen turned on Gedalya and killed him. The Jews who were then living in Israel feared reprisals from Nevuchadnezzar (as "they" killed the leader he had appointed) and fled to Egypt. The land of Israel was then devoid of Jews. This day, therefore, is a day of great tragedy, and therefore we fast. (For the reason why we fast on days of tragedy, see # 28.)

Now that we know about Gedalya, let us return to the Gemora. The Gemora, by stating that the fact

we have a fast on this day teaches us that the death of a righteous person is on par with the destruction of the Holy Temple, implies that just as we have fasts that commemorate the destruction of the Temple, so too do we have a fast commemorating the death of a righteous person. If this is truly what the Gemora means, a question becomes apparent: There have been many, many righteous people who have died. In fact, there is probably no day in the year which did not have a righteous person die on it. Does this mean that we should fast every day?

The Maharsha, who asks this question, provides the following explanation: We fast on this day not solely because Gedalya was killed. It is true that Gedalya's death in it of itself was a tragedy, as he was righteous. However, it is because of the effect his death had - that all Jews left the land of Israel and went into exile - that we fast. We see how great of a tragedy the death of a righteous person is by the fact that the mention of this fast in the verse in Zecharia is juxtaposed with all the other fasts which commemorate the destruction of the Temple. The common denominator between the four fasts listed in the verse is the fact that the extent of the tragedy of all of them is equal, because the death of a righteous person is on par with the destruction of the Temple. Although this is true, we do not, and we practically could not, fast on every day a righteous person died.

The Maharsha continues and tells us what we are supposed to learn from the events which we are commemorating with a fast today. This murder took place in the days between Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur - the holiest time of the year. Yishmael should have thought about what he was going to do, realized what time of the year it was, and instead of assassinating Gedalya, he should have repented. We all know that did not happen. Yishmael not only killed a person, he killed a righteous person, and caused the nation of Israel to suffer a great tragedy which we feel to this day.

We see that after the two days on which the whole nation of Israel prayed for life and a good year, we suffered a great downfall. On this day, we should truly feel troubled and worried about our devotion to Hashem. We should focus our prayers on requesting mercy from Hashem. We should not be so confident that the prayers we just completed on Rosh HaShana sufficed. We should ask from Hashem that not only should He raise us from the depths to which we have sunk after our downfalls, but He should decree a good and long life for the whole nation.

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