

# The Fast of Gedalyah: The Measure of a Man

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## The Fast of Gedalyah, Version 1

In the fourth year of the reign of Persian King Darius, a small band of Jews made its way from Babylon to Jerusalem, where the new Beit haMikdash was under construction. Acting on behalf of Babylonian Jewry, they put a question to the prophet Zecharyah: "Shall we continue to fast in the fifth month," observing Tishah b'Av?<sup>1</sup>

As explained by Radak, the Jews of Babylon knew of the struggles of the Jews who had returned to Israel, and they were uncertain whether to view the troubled restoration of Jews to their ancestral land as full redemption.<sup>2</sup> To this Zecharyah responded that the fasts had never been of central importance to G-d; rather, the Divine emphasis was on heeding the words of the prophets. The fasts themselves would be abolished in the Second Beit haMikdash, transformed into days of joy.<sup>3</sup>

As part of his response,<sup>4</sup> Zecharyah listed "the fast of the fourth, and the fast of the fifth, and the fast of the seventh, and the fast of the tenth." The Talmud explains each numerical reference, offering the following commentary regarding "the fast of the seventh," the Fast of Gedalyah:

*"The fast of the seventh"—This is the third of Tishrei, on which Gedalyah ben Achikam was killed. And who killed him? Yishmael ben Netanyah killed him. This teaches you that the death of the righteous is equal to the burning of the house of our G-d. And why does the text call it "the seventh"? [It is in] the seventh month.*

**Rosh haShanah 18b**

צום השביעי" זה שלשה בתשרי,  
שבו נהרג גדליה בן אחיקם. ומי  
הרגו? ישמעאל בן נתניה הרגו,  
ללמדך ששקולה מיתתן של צדיקים  
כשריפת בית אלקיננו. ואמאי קרי ליה  
"שביעי"? שביעי להדשים.  
**ראש השנה יח:**

This passage states we fast on the third day of Tishrei because a righteous person, Gedalyah, was murdered. The existence of a fast memorializing the death of a righteous person teaches that

<sup>1</sup> Zecharyah 7:1-3.

<sup>2</sup> See the commentary of Don Isaac Abarbanel to Zecharyah 7 for harsh criticism of the Babylonian Jews of Zecharyah's day; his words may fairly be applied in our own day as well.

<sup>3</sup> For more regarding when these fasts are to be observed, see *Rosh haShanah* 18a-b, Ritva there, and Rambam's *Commentary to Mishnah*, *Rosh haShanah* 1:3.

<sup>4</sup> Zecharyah 8:19.

such a tragedy must be viewed as equal to<sup>5</sup> the event that triggered other fasts, the destruction of the Beit haMikdash.<sup>6</sup>

## The Fast of Gedalyah, Version 2

The Talmud's catalyst for the Fast of Gedalyah seems to be contradicted by Rambam, in his enumeration of fast days in *Mishneh Torah*:

*The third day of Tishrei: when Gedalyah ben Achikam was killed and the remaining ember of Israel was extinguished, leading to the completion of their exile.*

**Hilchot Taaniyot 5:2**

יום שלישי בתשרי שבו נהרג גדליה בן  
אחיקם ונכבית גחלת ישראל הנשארה וסיבב  
להתם גלותן.  
**הלכות תעניות ה:ב**

Rambam alludes to the greater context of Gedalyah's death: After Babylonian King Nevuchadnezzar destroyed the Beit haMikdash, he permitted a small population of Jews to remain in Israel under the leadership of a Jewish governor, Gedalyah ben Achikam. Ba'alis, king of Amon, hired a Jew from the royal line, Yishmael ben Netanyah, to assassinate Gedalyah.<sup>7</sup> Gedalyah received word of the plot, but he dismissed the rumors, and Yishmael killed him in the month of Tishrei.<sup>8</sup> The rest of the Jews, fearing that Nevuchadnezzar would see the assassination of his representative as a revolt against him, fled to Egypt. Thus ended a millennium of formal Jewish settlement in the Land of Israel.<sup>9</sup>

Certainly, Rambam's added cause for fasting resonates with the reader, but it seems to fly in the face of the Talmud's version of the Fast of Gedalyah, which emphasizes the death of a single righteous person. Why does Rambam make this the central feature of the fast?

## A Tale of Two Fasts

Chatam Sofer<sup>10</sup> sought to resolve the competing versions of the catalyst for the Fast of Gedalyah.

Basing himself on passages from the traditional *kinot* of Tishah b'Av, Chatam Sofer contended that after the Beit haMikdash was destroyed, no additional loss would warrant a new day of

<sup>5</sup> *Eichah Rabbah* 1:37 states that the death of the righteous is worse than the destruction of the Beit haMikdash; see *Meshech Chachmah* to Vayechi who attempts to resolve the different sources.

<sup>6</sup> Rabbi Shlomo haKohen of Vilna (*Cheshek Shlomo* to *Rosh haShanah* 18b) notes that this supports the view that all fasts should have the five deprivations observed on Tishah b'Av. Were it not so, having fasts of different levels for each event would not demonstrate the equivalence of their tragedies.

<sup>7</sup> Per Abarbanel, Yishmael, a member of the royal tribe of Yehudah, was also motivated by a desire to gain the throne for himself.

<sup>8</sup> There is some debate regarding whether Gedalyah was assassinated on the first, second or third of Tishrei. See Ibn Ezra Zecharyah 8:18, Radak Yirmiyahu 41:1, *Beit Yosef Orach Chaim* 549, Maharsha to *Rosh haShanah* 18b, and *Turei Even* to *Rosh haShanah* 18b. For practical ramifications of this disagreement, see *Taz Orach Chaim* 549 and *Mateh Ephraim* 602:3.

<sup>9</sup> *Melachim II* 25; *Yirmiyahu* 40-41.

<sup>10</sup> Rabbi Moshe Sofer, in *Torat Moshe, Mahadura Tinyana, Parshat Vayechi*.

mourning. Instead, all future tragedies would be commemorated on Tishah b'Av.<sup>11</sup> The sages of the Talmud knew this, and in our passage they addressed two implicit questions:

- Why is Gedalyah's death mourned on a day other than Tishah b'Av?
- If there is to be a special fast to mark the death of the righteous, why choose Gedalyah's death, as opposed to the death of some other righteous person?

To these questions the Talmud responded in two parts:

- "The death of the righteous is equal to the burning of the house of our G-d," which is why we need a distinct day to mark the loss of righteous individuals.<sup>12</sup>
- "Who killed him? Yishmael ben Netanyah killed him," precipitating the end of the Jewish community in Israel, which is why this death, in particular, is chosen for commemorating the death of all righteous individuals.<sup>13</sup>

As Chatam Sofer explains, Rambam mentioned only the answer to the second question—the end of the Jewish community in Israel—in order to emphasize that the Fast of Gedalyah commemorates the death of righteous individuals through the ages, because of the great national devastation which resulted from the death of this individual.

## The Measure of a Man

Chatam Sofer's approach resolves the apparent conflict between the Talmudic and Maimonidean explanations for the Fast of Gedalyah, but it raises a new question: Why do we need to learn the lesson that "the death of the righteous is equal to the burning of the house of our G-d"? We know well the value of a righteous person's life! We who are taught to violate almost every biblical law in order to save a life, we who have seen the impact of a Moshe, a Miriam, a King David upon the Jewish people, we who have suffered the passing of thousands of righteous people through the ages, surely we recognize that the loss of a righteous person can devastate the nation as a whole?

Another version of the Talmudic lesson may offer some insight; the Tosefta records a slightly different text:

*"The fast of the seventh"—This is the third of Tishrei, on which Gedalyah ben Achikam was killed, for Yishmael ben Netanyah killed him. This teaches you that the death of the righteous is as harsh before G-d as the destruction of the Beit haMikdash.*

*And why is it named "seventh"? For it is in the seventh month.*

**Tosefta Sotah 6:10**

צום השביעי" זה שלשה בתשרי, יום שנהרג בו גדליה בן אחיקם, שהרגו ישמעאל בן נתניה, ללמדך שקשה מיתתן של צדיקים לפני המקום כחורבן בית המקדש ולמה נקרא שמו "שביעי"? שהוא חדש שביעי.  
תוספתא, סוטה ו:י

<sup>11</sup> This was also the stated position of Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik (see, for example, *Halakhic Positions of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, Volume 4, page 98) and of Rabbi Moshe Feinstein (*Igrot Moshe Yoreh Deah 4:57:11*).

<sup>12</sup> In truth, our Kinot commemorate the death of King Yoshiyahu, and Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik explained that Tishah b'Av is also a day to commemorate the loss of individuals. Nonetheless, the central focus of Tishah b'Av is the loss of the Beit haMikdash.

<sup>13</sup> Indeed, *Pnei Yehoshua* noted that this line appears to be superfluous, as it conveys information that is explicit in biblical verses.

This Tosefta teaches that the lesson of the Fast of Gedalyah is not regarding the gravity of **human** grief when a righteous person passes on. Rather, the prophetic institution<sup>14</sup> of the Fast of Gedalyah sends the message of **Divine** grief at the passing of a righteous human being.

In truth, our sages teach that only one's spouse<sup>15</sup> or one's beneficiaries<sup>16</sup> are truly affected by one's death, but perhaps that only refers to the human plane. According to our Tosefta, G-d mourns as well, and His grief at the passing of the righteous matches even His grief at the burning of the Beit haMikdash. Although G-d has suffered no distancing from the deceased—indeed, the soul of the righteous is said to be bound at the Divine throne<sup>17</sup>—nonetheless, the righteous person is no longer active in this world, and for this G-d is described as "grieving" as well. Or as King David averred, "The death of His pious ones is difficult in His eyes."<sup>18</sup>

Thus the Fast of Gedalyah teaches humanity the measure of its existence and potential; we harbor within ourselves the G-d-given capacity to become a living equivalent of the Beit haMikdash, a sanctified and sanctifying home for G-d on earth.<sup>19</sup> The loss of that capacity is tragic in the celestial realms. If Tishah b'Av is a fast for the Divine loss of His wood and stone home on Earth, then the Fast of Gedalyah is a fast for the Divine loss of His flesh and blood home on Earth, the loss of a place where the Shechinah could rest even without grand architecture, and the loss of the one home is equal to the loss of the other.<sup>20</sup>

## The Fast of Gedalyah: Day of Inspiration

The Fast of Gedalyah, with its statement about human potential, comes at an ideal time on our calendar. True, the murder of Gedalyah is made more shocking by the realization that it occurred during the Ten Days of Repentance,<sup>21</sup> but observing this fast between Rosh haShanah and Yom Kippur also may provide an infusion of inspiration.

Our sages<sup>22</sup> teach us to see our world as balanced between good and evil, and our own actions as the added weight that could incline it either way. The Fast of Gedalyah, for all of its grief, provides the same empowering message. Twice in our past, for a collective period of 900 years, a sanctuary offered humanity the opportunity to sense the presence of the Divine, and to draw close. But each and every morning, for the more than 33 centuries since Sinai, we have woken up with the potential to match the achievements of that building, to bring the presence of G-d into this world.

This is the message of Tishah b'Av's twin, the Fast of Gedalyah. May we absorb the message, and live up to our potential in the year to come.

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<sup>14</sup> Per Chatam Sofer *ibid.*, Yirmiyahu and other prophets instituted the fast. Chatam Sofer sees a reference to this in Esther 9:31, apparently against the explanation of that verse in Ritva to *Taanit* 10a.

<sup>15</sup> *Sanhedrin* 22b.

<sup>16</sup> *Megilah* 15a.

<sup>17</sup> *Shabbat* 152b.

<sup>18</sup> *Tehillim* 116:15; see *Metzudat Tzion* there.

<sup>19</sup> *Bereishit Rabbah* 47:6, and see *Bach Orach Chaim* 47:2 regarding the righteous in every generation.

<sup>20</sup> Perhaps this is also why Zechariah 7:5 specifically pairs the Fast of Gedalyah with Tishah b'Av, to teach this equality.

<sup>21</sup> Maharsha, *Chiddushei Aggadot to Rosh haShanah* 18b.

<sup>22</sup> *Kiddushin* 40b; *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah* 3:4.