

The Fast of Gedaliah: Judaism's Most Important, Ignored Observance

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Many of us are planning to fast on Yom Kippur. I would guess, though, that few if any of us gathered here tonight also fasted during daylight hours this Wednesday, the day before yesterday, the third of Tishri, designated as the Fast of Gedaliah.

In a Facebook post this week, Dr. Yehuda Kurtzer, North American President of the Shalom Hartman Institute, referred to the Fast of Gedaliah as “an ill-timed obscure fast.”ⁱ Ill-timed, because most Jews could not muster attention to the matter immediately following Rosh Hashanah, pointed toward Yom Kippur. “Obscure” because most Jews, likely including some who observe the fast, don’t really understand the reason for it.

The story is told rather tersely at the end of the Book of Second Kings. The Temple has been destroyed. All the leadership of Judea has been exiled to Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian King, appointed a Jew, Gedaliah ben Achikam, as governor of Judea.ⁱⁱ Some time thereafter, a member of the Judean royal family, Ishmael son of Netanya, assassinated Gedaliah.ⁱⁱⁱ “And all the people, young and old, and the officers of the troops, set out and went to Egypt, because they were afraid of the” Babylonians.^{iv}

Second Kings does not ordain a fast in Gedaliah’s memory. In fact, while the Bible tells us that the murder took place during this seventh month, it does not specify the day. The prophet Zechariah refers to a “fast of the seventh month,”^v but with no specifics to identify the observance with the events recounted in Second Kings 25. Our Talmudic sages teach us that the assassination took place on the third of Tishri, elaborating, “The Sages established a fast to commemorate Gedaliah’s death to teach you that the death of the righteous is equivalent to the burning of the Temple of Adonai.”^{vi}

Much as we may appreciate the sentiment, we may be unmoved by that explanation. After all, every single day is the *yahrzeit* of a righteous person. By the Talmud's logic, then, we should never eat during daylight hours.

Scholar and author Micah Goodman, speaking at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem this summer, suggests other explanations for the Fast of Gedaliah, and we would do well to reconsider its importance.^{vii}

Gedaliah's assassination, and the descent of the survivors into Egypt, is the very last story told at the end of the Book of Second Kings. Second Kings is the final biblical book that recounts the narrative of ancient Israel, beginning with the election of Abraham in Genesis and concluding with the destruction of the First Temple. The story of Gedaliah's murder and the return to Egypt is something of an epilogue.

We who study Torah are familiar with many of its stories. However, Goodman reminds us that we are commanded to remember only one: The Exodus from Egypt. Goodman emphasizes that fact because bondage in Egypt and liberation from it does not only describe our past but also our future. Entering the Promised Land, the Israelites are charged to create the opposite of Egypt. Any king they choose to appoint is prohibited from "sending people back to Egypt to add to his horses, since Adonai has warned you, 'You must not go back that way again.'"^{viii}

Nevertheless, the story that is, in its entirety, primarily about leaving Egypt ends with our people back in the land of our prior enslavement. Moreover, Goodman notes a symmetry to our people's two descents into Egypt. Our patriarchs and matriarchs end up in Egypt the first time because one brother, Joseph, got what others thought they deserved, their father's affection and a coat of many colors. We return to Egypt because Ishmael ben Netanya murdered the man who got what Ishmael thought he deserved, power over Judea.

At a personal level, then, Gedaliah's fast teaches us that jealousy can lead to exile. Whenever one sibling believes that another is receiving more than their

fair share – be that a parent’s love and attention or material goods, even a bequest after the parents have died – jealousy can lead to the siblings’ estrangement, that is, exile from one another. In the workplace, when one employee receives a raise or a special assignment, or even something less measurable like an extra pat on the back, the work environment quickly becomes toxic, with one coworker pitted against the next, rather than all pulling for the same team. And we know all too well, in 21st Century America, that when one group believes that others are unfairly getting more than their share, a nation can tear itself apart.

Goodman suggests a broad message. He points out that the Bible is the first Ancient Near Eastern text that doesn’t glorify power and the powerful. Full of prophetic criticism of those in power, the Bible isn’t so much about how to treat the powerful as it is about how to care for the powerless. That’s the message of the Exodus, as we’re reminded, 36 times: “You shall not wrong strangers or oppress them, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”^{ix}

But the Kings of Israel do not always “remember the stranger.” The prophets repeatedly equate mistreatment of the poor with idolatry. Kings and courtiers set themselves up as ultimate – that is, godlike – employing their power to enrich themselves. In words that we shall read from Isaiah on Yom Kippur, the prophet declares that God will not heed the fast of the ruling elite “Because on your fast day you see to your business and oppress your laborers! Because you fast in strife and contention, and you strike with a wicked fist!”^x

By the time Gedaliah is assassinated, the Temple has been destroyed as a result of monarchic idolatry – not so much literally, bowing down to gods of wood and stone, as morally, ruling like Egyptian taskmasters. The postscript that ends Second Kings is pointed: The remnant of Israel returns to Egypt. “The Fast of Gedaliah,” Goodman declares, “is the opposite of Passover.”

We ignore that message at our peril. Freeing us from Egyptian bondage and charging us to “remember the stranger,” God has granted us the opportunity to

bring freedom and justice and love into this world. When we find new strangers to oppress – immigrants, Muslims, all who identify as LGBTQ, whoever – we repudiate God’s liberation from bondage. When we establish regimes to glorify the powerful, enrich the wealthy, and oppress the poor, we risk return to Egypt.

The commandment not to go back to Egypt is not an injunction forbidding us to visit the pyramids or cruise the Nile. Instead, let us learn the central teaching of Torah: When we gain power, we are commanded never to repeat the abuses of the mighty Pharaoh who enslaved us. Let us learn, and let us live our mandate: Love one another and to love the stranger. Strengthen the powerless. And give voice to those who cannot speak up for themselves.

Amen.

ⁱ Yehuda Kurtzer Facebook post, September 12, 2018.

ⁱⁱ 2Kings 25:22.

ⁱⁱⁱ 2Kings 25:25.

^{iv} 2Kings 25:26.

^v Zechariah 8:19.

^{vi} Rosh Hashanah 18b.

^{vii} Much of the remainder of this sermon is based on an introduction offered by Micah Goodman, Rabbinic Torah Study Seminar, Shalom Hartman Institute, Jerusalem, Israel, July 5, 2018.

^{viii} Deuteronomy 17:16.

^{ix} Exodus 22:20. The thirty-six repetition include several different specific formulations of the injunction.

^x Isaiah 58:3-4.