

# A MEAL, A MURDER, AND A FAST:

## Understanding Tzom Gedaliah

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**W**HY IS THERE a fast day on the third day of Tishrei? Tzom Gedaliah often feels awkward and inconvenient. To go straight from two days of Rosh Hashanah, a joyous festival full of eating, into a fast day, can feel like whiplash. But the timing of this fast is deliberate. Understanding the background of this too often overlooked fast brings into focus its important message.

Tzom Gedaliah commemorates events described in Sefer Yirmiyahu (chapters 40–41), referenced briefly also in the final chapter of Melakhim Bet. The setting: The Babylonians have destroyed Yerushalayim and the Temple and exiled most of the Jewish nobility to Bavel. Yet not everyone has been exiled—many have remained in Yehudah, where the Babylonians have appointed a Jewish man named Gedaliah (or Gedalyahu) as governor. Gedaliah has gathered the Jewish remnants in the town of Mitzpah, assuring them that they will be able to return to normal life.

For reasons that are not fully clear, a man named Yishmael ben Netanyah, a descendant of the Davidic house, sets out to kill Gedaliah. Yohanan ben Karei'ah, a Jewish general, warns Gedaliah, but he refuses to believe the report. And so, when Yishmael and ten of his men come to dine with Gedaliah in the seventh month (i.e., Tishrei), they rise after the meal and kill him and his allies (including some Babylonian officials), along with a group of devout Jews mourning the destruction of the Temple. Yohanan eventually confronts Yishmael and releases the captives he took at Mitzpah, though Yishmael himself manages to escape.

Why did Yishmael commit these atrocities? Yohanan claims that Yishmael has been sent by the neighboring king

of Ammon, but does not explain why this should be the case. Sefer Yirmiyahu does tell us that Yishmael was a Davidic scion and suggests his disdain at Gedaliah's appointment as a Babylonian puppet, perhaps implying that his killing of Gedaliah may have been an attempt to seize power (albeit with an army of ten). The ambiguity surrounding Yishmael's motive underscores the senselessness of his actions, and the impossibility of reading this episode as a neat parable with a tidy moral message. All we are left with is the breakdown of social norms and violation of the basic rules of human conduct; it is this that we commemorate on Tzom Gedaliah.

The aftermath of Gedaliah's murder compounds the breakdown in political relations among the Jewish elite with a rupture between the people and God. Sefer Yirmiyahu tells this story as the catalyst for Yohanan and the remaining leadership of Yehudah to leave Mitzpah and seek refuge in Babylon's main regional rival Egypt, terrified of Babylonian retaliation for murdering their installed leader and his attachés. They choose this drastic course despite Yirmiyahu's warnings of disaster. God, through the prophet, makes it clear that the Jewish remnant's best chance of survival and flourishing is to follow Gedaliah's plan: remain in Yehudah and return to normal life.

This decision is all the more surprising because Yirmiyahu does not offer the advice to remain in Yehudah unbidden. Instead, the people themselves come to Yirmiyahu—God's representative—and ask him what God wants, confirming their intention to comply. However, as soon as Yirmiyahu finishes talking, they announce their intention to completely ignore him—and God!—and go to Egypt instead. In the flow of the

narrative, what was first a breakdown of social norms devolves further into a breakdown of religious norms: the people, despite their claims otherwise, no longer care what God wants them to do.

The rhythm of this story—assurance of return followed by social and religious catastrophe—to me is encapsulated in the first three days of Tishrei. Tzom Gedaliah comes right on the heels of Rosh Hashanah—celebration followed by a tragedy, feasting followed by fasting—bidding us to reenact the story and to heed its warning. On Rosh Hashanah, we declare our acceptance of God's Kingship; on Tzom Gedaliah we remember that words are meaningless if not followed by actions.

Perhaps this year we might listen to God's word. ♦