

Tzom Gedaliah - גדליה צום

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# Introduction

The Fast of Gedaliah is a day set aside to commemorate the assassination of Gedaliah,[[1]](#footnote-1) the Babylonian-appointed, Jewish, official charged with administering the Jewish population remaining in Judah following the destruction of the Temple and exile in 586 B.C.E. It is observed on the third of Tishri (the day after Rosh Hashanah) with a fast from sunrise to sundown, and like on other fast days, the recital of special prayers ("Anenu") and the reading of selected biblical readings (Exodus 32:14; 34:1-10). In years when Rosh Hashanah begins on Thursday, the fast is postponed until Sunday, as fasts other than Yom Kippur are not permitted on Shabbat.

This fast day is spoken about two separate times in Zechariah. The first is in chapter seven which says:

***Zechariah 7:4-5*** *Then came the word of HaShem of hosts unto me, saying: 'Speak unto all the people of the land, and to the priests, saying: When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and in the seventh month, even these seventy years, did you at all fast unto Me, even to Me?*

The second time this fast is spoken about is in chapter eight when this day will be turned into a day of joy in the Messianic Age.

***Zechariah 8:18-19*** *And the word of HaShem of hosts came unto me, saying: 'Thus says HaShem of hosts: The fast of the fourth month,[[2]](#footnote-2) and the fast of the fifth,[[3]](#footnote-3) and the fast of the seventh,[[4]](#footnote-4) and the fast of the tenth,[[5]](#footnote-5) shall be to the house of Judah joy and gladness, and cheerful seasons; therefore love truth and peace.*

Gedaliah Ben Achikam was one of the Gedolei HaDor[[6]](#footnote-6) of his generation. It is a little known fact, that he was also a Navi.[[7]](#footnote-7) Indeed the Gemara[[8]](#footnote-8) explains that HaShem Himself[[9]](#footnote-9) equates the death of this great tzadik with the destruction of the Beit HaMikdash! Rarely if ever do we find such testimony as to the stature of any individual. HaShem himself is his character witness.

In the Prophetic Writings this fast day is called *"The Fast of the Seventh"* because Tishri is the seventh month of the Jewish calendar.

It is also called "Tzom Ha'Shvii", meaning "The fast of the 7th month".

The origin of this fast is explained in two places in the bible: Kings II, chapter 25; The Book of Jeremiah, chapters 40-41.

Tzom Gedaliah begins at dawn in the Diaspora on:

Sunday, October 02, 2011 (4th of Tishri, 5772)

Wednesday, September 19, 2012 (3rd of Tishri, 5773)

Sunday, September 08, 2013 (4th of Tishri, 5774)

Sunday, September 28, 2014 (4th of Tishri, 5775)

Wednesday, September 16, 2015 (3rd of Tishri, 5776)

**Torah Portion**: Shemot (Exodus) 32:11 - 34:10

# Like the burning of the Temple

As to the symbolism of this murder, it signified the end of Jewish Monarchy, and led to the destruction of what remained of the Jewish settlement in Israel. This all happened soon after the Temple was destroyed. It strengthened the sense of despair, and therefore the day of the murder was declared a day of mourning.

The Rabbis decreed a Day of Fasting to commemorate the assassination. And yet, this Fast has seemed somewhat puzzling in the context of the other non-Biblical Fasts. For they are all related to profound national catastrophes – actual or potential. “Asarah B’Tevet” (10th of Tevet), “Shivah Asar B’Tammuz” (17th of Tammuz) and, of course “Tishah B’Av” (9th of Av) are all related to the destruction of the national spiritual center, the “Beit HaMikdash,” the Holy Temple. “Ta’anit Esther” (Fast of Esther) is related to the avoidance by a “Nes Nistar,” a “hidden miracle,” of the genocide of the entire People. By contrast, “Tzom Gedaliah” seems relatively small, relating only to a miniscule remnant of the People that had been allowed to stay on after the Destruction of the Temple and the City and, at first glance, without comparable historical impact.

In Hilchot Taaniot (5:1), the Rambam discusses the concept of the Fast on days of national tragedy in order to arouse our hearts to Repentance. In Taaniot (5:2), he begins the list of these Fasts with a reference to “Tzom Gedaliah:” “And these are those Fast Days: the Third of Tishri, on which Gedaliah ben Achikam was assassinated...” This echoes what we find in the Yerushalmi[[10]](#footnote-10) and the Talmud Bavli:

***Rosh HaShana 18b*** *‘The fast of the seventh month’: this is the third of Tishri on which Gedaliah the son of Ahikam was killed.[[11]](#footnote-11) Who killed him? Ishmael the son of Nethaniah killed him; and [the fact that a fast was instituted on this day] shows that the death of the righteous is put on a level with the burning of the House of our God.*

And now the Rambam will introduce a new idea, with a dramatic expression not mentioned here in the Talmud, that magnifies the historical impact of that event – “... and with that act was extinguished the last burning coal of Israel, that sealed the entry into Exile of the People...”

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 Zechariah 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.

Consider that if Gedaliah’s death is like the burning of the Bait HaMikdash, then his death is also like the destruction of all the Jewish people because HaShem dwells in the Beit HaMikdash and in His people. This concept is brought out beautifully in the Nazarean Codicil:

***I Tsefet (Peter) 2:5*** *Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Yeshua HaMashiach.*

Thus we understand that:

**Gedaliah = Temple = Israel**

We also learned, in [another study](file:///F%3A%5CWord%5CDOC%5Cadam.html), that

**Israel = Adam**

In that study we proved this connection by quoting the following sources:

***Yechezkel (Ezekiel) 34:31*** *'You are my sheep, the sheep of my flock, you are Adam, and I am your G-d,' declares the Lord G-d.*

***Yevamot 61a*** *You* [*Israel*](file:///F%3A%5CWord%5CDOC%5Cgen-jew.html) *are collectively called Adam ...*

When we put these pieces together we find that there is a direct connection between the death of Gedaliah and the sin of Adam:

**Gedaliah = Temple = Israel = Adam**

Thus on the very day that Adam was created and sinned, on the very day when we are supposed to correct Adam’s fall, on that very day we sinned again. But wait! There is even more to this amazing relationship. In [another study](file:///F%3A%5CWord%5CDOC%5Cmashiach.html), we learned that:

**Israel = Mashiach**

The Fast of Gedaliah, in particular, is linked to the Era of the Redemption by the identity of the person for whom the fast is named, Gedaliah ben Achikam, the governor appointed by the Babylonians after their conquest of *Eretz Yisrael.* According to some opinions, Gedaliah stemmed from the House of David[[12]](#footnote-12) and was the last member of that royal family who commanded authority over *Eretz Yisrael.* This links this “day of Divine goodwill” with “the scion of David,”[[13]](#footnote-13) Mashiach*,* who will restore the Davidic dynasty.[[14]](#footnote-14)

The Fast of Gedaliah is also connected with the Redemp­tion by virtue of the meaning of Gedaliah’s name. The Hebrew letters of Gedaliah[[15]](#footnote-15) form the words Gadol Yud-Hai, “HaShem is great.” It is during the Era of the Redemption that HaShem’s greatness will be manifest throughout the world.[[16]](#footnote-16)

This adds another piece to our understanding:

**Gedaliah = Temple = Israel = Adam = Mashiach**

Now we can begin to understand how devastating the sin and death of Gedaliah was!

The sin and death of Gedaliah was literally a recreation of the sin and the death of Adam!

**Gedaliah was killed on Rosh Hashana**

There is an opinion[[17]](#footnote-17) that Gedaliah was slain on the first day of Tishri, but the fast was postponed till after Rosh Hashanah, since fasting is prohibited during a festival.

When Rosh Hashanah falls on Thursday and Friday, the fast is postponed till Sunday, since no public fast is observed on Shabbat with the exception of Yom HaKippurim.

The Maharsha adds a new idea that seems to fit better with the fact that this great sin – this murder – happened on the Day after Rosh Hashanah, thereby raising the level of the tragedy to a spiritual catastrophe! In the words of the Maharsha, “... Another idea is that the murder occurred during the Ten Days of Repentance, and Yishmael ben Netanya should have been aroused to repent, but was not. And his failure in that regard caused great harm to the Community of Israel... Scripture writes, ‘He will grant us life after two days...,’ which is a reference to the first two days of the Days of Repentance, during which we pray for life, but on the third day of the Days of Repentance, on which Gedaliah was murdered, we experienced a national falling into sin on that very day. And therefore, we have to be more worried, and to ask for greater Mercy from Heaven, for two reasons: that HaShem raise us up from that great fall, and that He restore our verdict of Life that we merited on Rosh Hashanah.”

Thus, the Fast of “Tzom Gedaliah” embodies the concept of the frailty of Man in the sense of his spiritual commitment, that on the day immediately following the Day of Judgment we fell back into sin, and we pray that HaShem take this weakness into account in judging us, and remember that “we are but dust.”

The fast is observed from daybreak till the stars appear at night. The cantor includes the prayer Anenu in the repetition of the Shacharit amidah. A Torah Scroll is withdrawn (from the ark) the Thirteen Divine Attributes are said and the Passages of Vayechal are read from the Torah (Shemot 32: 14 and 34: 1-10).

There is a unique dimension to the Fast of Gedaliah. It is the only one of these fasts which is never held on the day of the tragedy which it commemorates. According to the Rishonim[[18]](#footnote-18) and many authorities, Gedaliah's murder took place on the second day of Rosh Hashanah[[19]](#footnote-19) and since, as mentioned above, that holiday should be celebrated by "eating succulent foods and drinking sweet beverages," the fast is postponed to the following day.

***Yeremiyahu (Jeremiah) 41:1*** *Now it came to pass* ***in the seventh month****, that Ishmael the son of Nethaniah the son of Elishama, of the seed royal, and the princes of the king, even ten men with him, came unto Gedaliah the son of Ahikam to Mizpah; and there they did eat bread together in Mizpah. 2 Then arose Ishmael the son of Nethaniah, and the ten men that were with him, and smote Gedaliah the son of Ahikam the son of Shaphan with the sword, and slew him, whom the king of Babylon had made governor over the land.*

Some years there is an added postponement and, because of Shabbat, the fast is not held on the day when it is usually held. In the Talmud, there is an opinion that once a fast is postponed, it should be nullified entirely. Although, in practice, this opinion is not accepted, the postponement of a fast does strengthen our hope in the coming of the Messianic era during which all fasts will be nullified entirely, and indeed, transformed into festivals and days of rejoicing.

Tzom Gedaliah is deferred every year. As noted above, the tragedy for which this fast was established happened on Rosh Hashanah, but because of the festival, the fast was postponed to the third of Tishri. Thus this year, Tzom Gedaliah is postponed twice:

1) From Rosh Hashanah to the third of Tishri - every year;

2) From the third to the fourth of Tishri.

According to many commentaries,[[20]](#footnote-20) this actually took place on Rosh Hashanah. The commemoration of the tragedy was postponed, however, so as not to conflict with the festive celebration of Rosh Hashanah, a day when we should “partake of delicacies and drink sweet beverages.”[[21]](#footnote-21)

With regard to the postponement of a fast day, there is a Talmudic opinion[[22]](#footnote-22) that “Once [the commemoration of a communal fast] has been postponed, it should be postponed [indefinitely, i.e., cancelled].” Understood literally, this statement expresses the minority opinion that when a com­munal fast falls on *Shabbat,* the observance of the fast should not merely be postponed until Sunday (which is the *halacha* as we practice it), but that there is no need to fast at all. How­ever, the Hebrew wording of this expression leaves room for an extended interpretation, “Once it has been postponed, may it be utterly cancelled.” I.e., a postponed fast is a time when there is a greater potential for bringing about the redemptive era during which the misfortunes recalled by the communal fasts will be nullified entirely.

The fact that the commemoration of the Fast of Gedaliah is always postponed,[[23]](#footnote-23) indicates that this day is uniquely empowered to hasten the coming of the Era of the Redemp­tion, when all the commemorative fasts will be transformed into “days of rejoicing and celebration.” May this take place in the immediate future.

# The Tragedy

Gedaliah was warned of the plot on his life, yet he did not act on it. He treated it as Lashon HaRa rather than considering it and taking appropriate action. Gedaliah was killed as a result of his inaction. Grave as that was, the results of his inaction continued on and affected thousands of other Jews.

The results of Gedaliah’s inaction were so grave that the *Mesillat Yesharim* notes that the Gemara[[24]](#footnote-24) considers it as if Gedaliah himself had killed all of his people!

***Nidah 61a*** *It was taught: Abba Saul stated, It once happened that a clod at Beth Horon was held in a presumptive state of uncleanness, and the Sages could not properly examine it because its area was extensive. But there was an old man in the place whose name was R. Joshua b. Hananiah and he said to them, ‘Bring me some sheets’. They brought to him sheets and he soaked them in water and then spread them over the clod. The clean area[[25]](#footnote-25) remained dry while the unclean area[[26]](#footnote-26) became moist. And, having examined the latter, they found a large pit full of bones. One taught: That was the pit which Ishmael the son of Nethaniah had filled with slain bodies, as it is written, Now the pit wherein Ishmael cast all the dead bodies of the men whom he had slain by the hand of Gedaliah.[[27]](#footnote-27) But was it Gedaliah that killed them? Was it not in fact Ishmael that killed them?[[28]](#footnote-28) — But owing to the fact that he[[29]](#footnote-29) should have taken note of the advice of Johanan the son of Kareah[[30]](#footnote-30) and did not do so Scripture regards him as though he had killed them.*

This is a remarkably thought-provoking notion. Here is what we find in Mesillat Yesharim:

“What you have to understand is that you cannot judge matters relevant to piety by first impressions. You must reflect and analyze their ramifications. Sometimes an act may appear to be good, but it must be abandoned because what would come out of it would be bad, and if you were to do it you would actually be a sinner, not a pious person. The actions of Gedaliah ben Achikam[[31]](#footnote-31) bespeak this. Because of his over piety and his unwillingness to adjudge Ishmael guilty or to hear out slander, he said to Yochanan ben Koreach: "You are lying about Ishmael." What happened because of that? He died, Israel was dispersed, and their last dying ember was extinguished. *The Torah credits him with the death of those who were killed as if he himself had killed them*, as our sages explained.[[32]](#footnote-32) They based their proof on the verse: ”[[33]](#footnote-33)

***Jeremiah 41:9*** *...all of the corpses of the men struck by the hand of Gedaliah.*

The Yerushalmi agrees with the conclusion of Mesillat Yesharim. *Gedaliah* caused his own death. *He was, himself to blame, not only for his death but for those of thousands of others*.[[34]](#footnote-34)

The future of klal Israel was in the hands of this great tzadik and Gadol. His decisions were of paramount importance. Notwithstanding his greatness and piety and the fact that he was a prophet of HaShem, Chazal tell us that he made a crucial error in halacha and in its application. Gedaliah refused to take protective measures against Yishmael, when he was warned by Yochanan Ben Korayach of Yishmael Ben Netanya’s malevolent intent.[[35]](#footnote-35) The consequences were quite grave indeed. *Gedaliah and all his men were brutally murdered*.[[36]](#footnote-36)

Chazal place the blame of the tragedy on Gedaliah himself. Yochanan Ben Karayach’s warning about Yishmael Ben Netanyah should have been listened to. If Gedaliah Ben Achikam would have done so, thousands would not have died and sovereignty would remain in the hands of Jews.

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1. This extinguished the last ember of Jewish rule in Eretz Israel and consummated the exile (Rambam *Hilchot Taanit* 5:2). This is why the prophets declared [the third of Tishri] a fast day. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Tzom ha'Revi'I - Shiva Asar b'Tammuz [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Tzom ha'Chamishi - Tisha B’Ab [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Tzom ha'Shevi'I - Tzom Gedaliah [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Tzom ha'Asiri - Asarah B'Tebet [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Gedolei HaDor = Greatest tzadik of his generation. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Navi = Prophet. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Rosh HaShana 18b [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Zechariah 8:19 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Yerushalmi, Taanit 4:5 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Yeremiyahu (Jeremiah) 41:1-2 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. There are some indications that Gedaliah was related to the House of David, for it was a Babylonian custom to appoint relatives of the kings as governors. Even according to the authorities (Radak and Abarbanel to II Melachim [2 Kings] 25:25)*,* who state that Gedaliah was not related to the House of David, his murder shares a connec­tion with that dynasty. Yishmael, the son of Netanyah, was a descendant of the House of David. Jealous that Gedaliah and not he, had been appointed as governor, Yishmael murdered him. See *Sefer HaSichot,* 5751, p. 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. In our daily prayers. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See Rambam*, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Melachim* 11:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. In Yirmeyahu and II Melachim*,* Gedaliah’s name is sometimes written as Gedaliah ( e.g. Yirmeyahu 40:5) and other times as Gedalyahu (e.g., Yirmeyahu40:11). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See *Rashi’s* commentary to Tehillim 48:2. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See the gloss of *Radak* to Yirmeyahu 40:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. This is what Rabbeinu Yerucham writes (*Netiv* 18, beginning of section 2). In accordance with this, the Ibn Ezra and Radak explain that the word chodesh (month) [see the verses above] implies the first of the month, because that is when the month is renewed. [The Rabbis] simply postponed the fast until the third of the month. Even though [the Jews] observed only one day of Rosh Hashanah at that time, [the Rabbis] did not want to [require us to] fast immediately following a holiday. Therefore, they pushed the fast off until the third of Tishri. And even after [the Jews] began keeping two days of Rosh Hashanah, the fast remained on the third of Tishri. See further sources on this in *Torat HaMo’adim* 1:2 (p. 8). The author of *Responsa Rosh Yosef* holds that since Tzom Gedaliah is observed on a day other than its true date, its laws are more lenient [than those of the other fasts]. Hence, one who celebrates a brit milah [on the third of Tishri] may eat a festive meal and need not make up the fast. The Taz (sec. 549), however, dismisses his words, as does the Bi’ur Halachah (ibid.), based on the Ritva. Their reasoning: even if we say that Gedaliah was actually killed on the first of Tishri, since the fast was established on the third of the month, it is not considered “postponed.” Rather, that is its [proper] date. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. After the destruction of the first Temple by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C.E. and the deportation of the nobles and the upper classes to Babylon, Gedaliah the son of Ahikam was appointed governor of the small community that was left. As a result of a conspiracy he was slain on the second day of Tishri. Jer. XL-XLI. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See the gloss of Radak to Yirmeyahu 40:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. *Nechemiah* 8:10. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. *Megillah* 5b. See *Likkutei Sichos,* Vol. XXXIII, the Seventeenth of Tammuz, 5748. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Moreover, Rosh Hashanah often falls on Thursday. In those years, the third of Tishri, the day when the Fast of Gedaliah is usually commemorated, falls on *Shabbat*, and the fast is postponed further. Thus when the Fast of Gedaliah falls on *Shabbat,* the day is an even more potent catalyst for the Era of the Redemption. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Niddah 61a [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. The soil of which had never been dug and was, therefore, hard and impervious to the moisture from the sheets. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Which contained corpses and which, having been dug, consisted of loose earth that absorbed the moisture. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Yeremiyahu (Jeremiah) 41:9. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Why then was it stated, ‘By the hand of Gedaliah’? [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Gedaliah [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Who told him that Simeon b. Netanya wished to kill him. V. Jer. XL, 13ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Jeremiah 40:16 [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Niddah61a [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Mesillat Yesharim**:** The Path of the Just, by Moshe Ḥayyim Luzzatto, chapter twenty. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. The words of the Panim Meirot on the Yerushalmi in Horiot 3:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Yirmeyahu (Jeremiah) 40:16 [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Yirmeyahu (Jeremiah) 41:2 [↑](#footnote-ref-36)