

HISTORICAL NOTE TO TSOM GEDALYOH

Adapted from an article by S Kramer in the September 1963 issue of "HAMAOR"

(The Journal of the Federation of Synagogues)

It must be very difficult for someone who has never made a proper study of our history to appreciate the significance of the fast-day on the third of Tishrei associated with the name of the nobleman, Gedalyoh the son of Achikkom.

Most people simply have a vague idea that it is the anniversary of the assassination of the Jewish Governor of Judea appointed by Nevuchadnetzar after the destruction of the first Beis HaMikdash. (As a matter of fact, the assassination happened the day before the anniversary, on Rosh HaShannah. Tsom Gedalyoh was fixed to be on the first weekday after Rosh HaShannah because we can't have a public fast day on a Yom Tov.) Yet we see that this tragedy is regarded as so calamitous that it warranted the establishment of a special fast-day to mark its anniversary and this date then took its place among the commemorations of other turning-points in our history.

We know the facts from Yirmiyohu HaNovvi, who is best qualified to give us a graphic account of this episode and especially so as he himself was there, at Mitzpoh, at the time. After the destruction of Yerushalaim, Yirmiyohu tells us, Mitzpoh had taken its place as the centre of government. Thus, even after the destruction of the Beis HaMikdash, the state continued to exist, governed in the meantime from Mitzpoh. Gedalyoh had been charged by Nevuchadnetzar with the responsibility for rebuilding Jewish life among the remnants in Judea and of ensuring their loyalty to Babylonia and as long as there was a Jewish presence and a community in Eretz Yisroel, there was hope. After all, Nevuchadnetzar was here today but he will be gone tomorrow and after he was gone there was the possibility of the Jewish people, dispersed as they were, to return and join the Jewish community in Eretz Yisroel and begin the reconstruction of the People on its Holy Land.

For a few weeks all went well. But then Baalis, the king of the neighbouring country of Ammon, jealous of the new prosperity of the re-emerging Jewish state despite its conquest by Nevuchadnetzar, persuaded Yishmo'el, son of Nesanyoh, a scion of the royal House of David who had fled to Ammon to take refuge from the Babylonians, to return to Judea with the intention of assassinating Gedalyoh. As a matter of fact, our Chachommim do criticise Gedalyoh for his naïveté — for he was informed of the conspiracy but refused to believe it — and they say that even without accepting the report as true, he should have suspected the possibility and taken avoiding action. In

HISTORICAL NOTE TO TSOM GEDALYOH

the event, Yishmo'el ben Nesanyoh claimed that Gedalyoh had no right to be Governor when he, Yishmo'el was of the royal House of David. This, to his thinking, justified his jealousy and his anger — and his act of murder. His opportunity came when the Governor held a banquet on the Yom Tov of Rosh HaShannah. Yishmo'el and his followers, after “eating bread with him,” suddenly arose and slaughtered Gedalyoh and his retinue.

The consequence was that the remnants of the Jews, ignoring the pleas and warnings of Yirmiyohu, fled to Egypt and thus abandoned the land which had been Divinely promised to our forefathers. For the first time, after so many centuries of Jewish settlement, the Holy Land was without an organized Jewish community. This was the final tragic phase in the *Churban*. It can thus be said that this major national disaster set the seal on the foundations of a Diaspora (that is, the dispersion of the Jewish People away from their Homeland) which has lasted to this day. The inhabitants of the Kingdom of Israel had earlier been deported by the Assyrians. They were taken away, dispersed, lost, gone. Then those in the Kingdom of Judah were exiled by the Babylonians. Now, in addition to the Jewish settlement in Babylon, there was a new Jewish settlement in Egypt (although this was later decimated by Nevuchadnetzar). But no longer was there an organized Jewish community in Eretz Yisroel and even when a part of our Nation returned to Eretz Yisroel, it was only a part. The vast majority did not. Ever since, “the Diaspora” has remained and it has consequently been our grim lot to be at the mercy of other nations and to suffer unbearably at their hands throughout what has transpired to be the greater part of our history.

Approximately five sixths of our people are still dispersed throughout the world “in the Jewish Diaspora.” In some countries today, Jews have to be fearful of what the morrow may bring, while even in the so-called enlightened lands of the West one never knows whether or when the friendly attitude of the bulk of the population may change, *chas v'shollom*, as a result of circumstances.

All this should be borne in mind when the Fast of Gedalyoh comes round and it will then be realised that we fast not simply because a Tzaddik was murdered but it is because the ramifications of this tragedy have affected our history to this very day. In other words, it was not merely because of the assassination of one man that our Chachommim established a fast-day but because of the far-reaching consequences which followed in the wake of that assassination.

We mourn for the whole horror of our Exile and our inability to worship in the Beis HaMikdash as required. We fast to bring this home to us, so that we may return wholeheartedly to the way of life prescribed for us in our Torah and we pray sincerely that the full Redemption may come about in our own day.