

BELIEF

The Fast for the Furious

Why Tzom Gedaliah is the observance our angry society desperately needs

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JEWES AREN'T HISTORICALLY INTO AFTER-PARTIES. EXCEPT FOR Shushan Purim, that observed-only-in-Jerusalem afterglow of everyone's favorite holiday, the days after our holidays tend to be, well, just like any other day. But then there is Tzom Gedaliah, the fast day

that falls right after Rosh Hashanah.

Who was Gedaliah? And why did he merit having a fast day of his own, one, no less, following the merriment and honey-dipped apples of our new year's celebration?

Neither as adventurous as Abraham nor as memorable as Moses, Gedaliah ben Ahikam was a minor biblical figure mentioned in the books of Jeremiah and II Kings. After the Babylonians defeated the Judeans and destroyed the First Temple in 586 BCE, Gedaliah was entrusted with the very difficult job of giving his broken and desperate people some structure and much hope. Under his leadership, the refugees who had fled the Babylonian assault began to return home and rebuild, and things were looking up. That is, until Gedaliah was assassinated.

In a coup instigated by the king of neighboring Ammon, a fellow Jew named Ishmael son of Netanya slew Gedaliah, leaving the already traumatized survivors doubly devastated. Many fled to Egypt to escape what had become an irreparable fractured polity, the sort of society where no one trusts anyone, where partisanship is rampant, and where a great unraveling feels imminent.

Sound familiar?

Given the contemporary state of American politics, it's a very small exaggeration to say that Tzom Gedaliah is one of the most important holidays we'll commemorate this year. As we prepare to fast in the slain leader's memory, we won't be thinking merely of abstractions like unity or civility, as we did in years past. We'll be thinking of the very real dangers of societies imploding into violence, of life in the digital thunderdome where the call comes daily to cancel all Others and where the Overton window of acceptable opinions moves so rapidly and so often that it makes ancient, fractured Jerusalem feel like a bastion of stability and opportunity.

So this year, let's not let this natural and essential chance to repent and reflect on what happens when societies collapse pass us by. Instead, let's take the time and do the serious spiritual heavy lifting we need to do if America has any chance of emerging from the spiral of rage and despondency in which it's currently trapped.

Where to begin? Sadly, ask too many of our leaders these days—political, communal, intellectual, and otherwise—and you'll hear some version of “aw-but-can't-we-all-just-get-along?” It's an appealing sentiment. It's also a dangerous one: We can't get along because our differences, like the ones that set Gedaliah and his assassin apart, are very real and very substantial. Try ignoring them, or try arguing that an abstraction like unity is somehow a strong enough bulwark to stop the tidal waves of political resentment, and you're likely to learn the same lesson as the tragically slain leader, killed in large part for believing that a house divided could somehow stand.

Instead of Hallmark sentiments, then, instead of futile appeals to character or virtue or other ephemeral traits that melt into air as soon as reality turns up its infernal heat, let us turn to the best source available to us, that masterwork on disputations and disagreements, the Talmud.

In tractate Rosh Hashanah, the Talmud tells us that the reason we fast in memory of Gedaliah is because “the death of the righteous is equivalent to the burning of the Temple of our Lord.” In other words, Gedaliah's death, the result of political violence, was akin to the reconstruction of the place meant to unify Israel and God, coming so soon after the actual building's physical destruction.

This isn't just a platitude. It's a reminder that the commemoration of Tzom Gedaliah is meant to be a clarion call for individual responsibility rather than collective guilt. And so, whether or not you fast for Gedaliah, you can still take the day to try your part to restore order amid the layers of uncertainty, anger, and fear. You can stop the tide of overall madness with a small but significant act

of personal agency.

One way would be to find someone you disagree with in a true, profound way. I'm not talking reaching out to, say, a Red Sox fan—though for a die-hard Yankees supporter like myself that can be plenty hard. I'm talking about selecting a friend or relative who feels very differently about immigration bans, say, or guns, or any other matter that truly rankles and invites flights of moral indignation. Now, give that friend a call, or write her a letter (hey, it could even be handwritten). Do not, under any circumstances, dance around the real difference at hand. Start by saying something like, "It really upset me when you wrote/said/tweeted/shared X or Y, but I just wanted to reach out so we could talk it through."

Maybe some common ground will emerge, some small but still firm sliver of soil on which you can both stand together. Maybe not. Maybe invitations to the next in-person Thanksgiving meal that can be held will be extended, despite the last one ending in a political food fight (then again, maybe you're not quite there yet). Honestly, the outcome doesn't really matter; only the conversation does.

The Talmud teaches us that, too: Each and every page of our people's seminal work is a master class on how to argue, epically, and on how arguing keeps people from, well, killing each other. Reish Lakish, a bandit-turned-scholar, used to hurl 24 questions at every judicial opinion his brother-in-law and intellectual sparring partner Rabbi Yochanan would throw his way. Rabbi Eliezer uprooted carob trees, reversed the direction of rivers, and bent the walls of the study hall to make a point about the ritual purity of an oven. And the followers of Hillel and Shammai? They argued over no less than 300 different laws. One would need over 200 pages just to list all the insults and curses the rabbis hurled at each other (you can in fact, buy such a volume). But the whole time, they were talking to each other, not at each other, and despite their differences, or maybe because of them, they kept a community going and going strong.

I am not for one second recommending feeling compelled to engage with others' opinions simply because they have been offered. The right to an opinion does not necessitate the validity of all opinions. Like the ancient rabbis, who believed there are "70 faces to the Torah" within the walls of the *beit midrash*, boundaries are a crucial element to any conversation, even as that conversation is full of dynamic disagreement. But as long as the person you disagree with so *righteously* shares with you the core tenet of loving other Jews, say, or caring for America's future—as long as the other person shares with you the basic foundations of morality—you should engage. You may disagree. You may even yell, if you must. Do not mistake high decibels for anything more than the outcome of a passionate debate. When giving the celebrated political analyst George Will a tour of the Yeshiva University Washington Heights *beit midrash* a few years back, he turned aside, amid the bickering bustle of hundreds of *chavruta* pairs gesticulating vehemently over the Talmud's tractates and asked, "How does anyone get any thinking done amid all this shouting!?" His question is funny but also profound: It's precisely the shouting that propels all that thinking forward.

But it's a funny thing about shouting: It's only valuable when two sides are doing it. One side shouting while keeping the other silent isn't a valuable debate; it's a form of oppression. This applies even—or particularly—when you're absolutely convinced that the other side is morally, intellectually, spiritually, irreparably, utterly, and completely wrong.

In the greatest speech in American history, Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, now inscribed on the Lincoln Memorial, the president had no righteous indignation in his heart. Instead, despite the fact that his opponents were slavers who fought for the privilege to continue to rob other human beings of their basic freedom and dignity, Lincoln had little patience for basking in his own morality or signaling his own virtues. He simply reminded his listeners of the inconvenient and unavoidable truth, that the North and the South "both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God."

Thousands of years prior, in Gedaliah's own civil war, commonalities had similarly been obliterated by brutality. Gedaliah's name means, "God will make great." His assassin's name? "God will listen, the son of God has given."

Maybe this year, when it seems that Americans aren't even sharing the same book, and obedience is given only to deities of the digital variety, we can still find a way to memorialize Gedaliah. His tragic story reminds us that without dialogue, there is death. It reminds us that unyielding righteousness will yield only violence. And it reminds us that we are better off making room for others than standing grandly as we box them out.

Our gestures on Tzom Gedaliah most definitely won't end in hugs, even if we wanted them to. And we won't magically repair the world that, tomorrow, will still seem so very shattered. Feasts of reconciliation will have to wait. But at the very least, we can take the day in which we remember Gedaliah as an opportunity to address what's broken by fixing the only ones we can truly control: ourselves.

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