

FASCINATING FACTS

9.3.2021

When the Babylonians came to Israel their goal was not only destroying the Temple but suppressing the entire country. By the end of their campaign, they had left villages and towns in ruins, murdered thousands of Jews and carried off thousands more into exile in Babylon. However, once Babylon had achieved its military victory, it had no reason to destroy every trace of normal life in the conquered territory. A Jewish governor, Gedaliah ben Achikum, was appointed in order to restore some semblance of order. Gedaliah was a member of a leading Judean family, the son of Achikum ben Shafan, a political adviser to King Josiah (II Kings 22:12), who had protected the prophet Jeremiah (Jeremiah 26:24). When the Babylonians released Jeremiah from prison (Jeremiah 39:14) in recognition of his opposition to the Jewish rebellion they placed him in Gedaliah's protection. Gedaliah set about the impossible task of bringing normalcy back to the land. Urging the people to come to terms with the Babylonian regime, he promised, "It will be well with you." (Jeremiah 40:9) The economy began to improve: "they gathered wine and summer fruits in abundance". (Jeremiah 40:12) Life settled down but all was not well.

Ishmael ben Netaniah, of royal origins (Jeremiah 41:1) but perhaps not even Jewish, resented the governor's appointment and criticized his policies. He formed an alliance with the nearby kingdom of Ammon (present day Jordan) and gathered disaffected Jewish elements around him. Gedaliah was warned by his advisers to tread carefully, but he did not believe the warnings. On Rosh Hashanah, Gedaliah invited Ishmael to a meal in the hope of achieving some form of reconciliation. In the course of this meal Ishmael and the ten supporters who were at the table with him rose up, assassinated the governor and his staff, and ran off to Ammon. Their hopes shattered and certain that the Babylonian retribution would be swift and harsh, the people asked Jeremiah if they should flee to Egypt. Jeremiah told them not to flee, G-d would protect them. Thereupon the Jewish community picked up Jeremiah and fled to Egypt.

Though the assassination probably took place on Rosh Hashanah, a fast was not possible on a festival so, according to Rabbi David Kimchi (RaDaK), a fast in memory of Gedaliah was instituted on the next available day, 3 Tishrei the day after Rosh Hashanah. Although Gedaliah was a good man many greater men have been murdered. Why was Gedaliah's assassination designated a fast day?

The episode marked a major national catastrophe, the apparent end of Jewish communal life in the Holy Land. The final blow of the destruction of the 1st Temple. Although it comes the day after Rosh Hashanah and seems like the first fast of the year it is actually the last of the 4 fasts (10 Teves , 17 Tammuz, 9 Av and 3 Tishrei) mourning the Destruction. A sobering day following the Coronation of the King on Rosh Hashanah.