

Rabbi Noah Arnow
Kol Rinah
Shabbat Shuvah / Parashat Vayeilech
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Today is Shabbat Shuvah, the Shabbat between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and it is also the 20th anniversary of September 11, 2001. But I want to go back further.

In 586 BCE, King Nebuchadnezzar (sometimes called Nebuchadnezzar—the Bible is not consistent) of Babylon besieged and captured Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple. But Nebuchadnezzar entrusted the prophet Jeremiah to Nebuzaradan, the chief of the guards. There were a few poor Jews left in Judea, and Nebuzaradan committed Jeremiah to the care of one Gedaliah the son of Achikam.

The remaining Jewish troops in Judea heard that Nebuchadnezzar had put Gedaliah in charge of the region and those poorest Israelites who had not been exiled to Babylon. Gedaliah hears that Ishmael ben Netanya, a Jew of royal descent, intends to kill him, and he waves it off. Then, at the behest of the non-Israelite King of Ammon, Ishmael ben Netanya kills Gedaliah, and from that point on, there is no Jewish autonomy in the land of Israel.

This story is told at length in Jeremiah 39-42, and also in the last chapter of Second Kings, II Kings 25.

Gedaliah's assassination took place, it says, in the 7th month, Tishrei. This, the Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 18b) says is Tzom Gedaliah, the Fast of Gedaliah, and is on the 3rd of Tishrei, the day after Rosh Hashanah—this past Thursday.

But Tzom Gedaliah is the last of four fast days around the Temple's destruction. The 10th of Tevet, in the winter, commemorates the beginning of the siege of Jerusalem. The 17th of Tammuz in the summer remembers the breaching of the walls of Jerusalem a year and a half after the beginning of the siege. Tisha b'Av, the 9th of Av is the day we recall the actual destruction of the Temple, 3 weeks after the breaching of the walls. And then, Tzom Gedaliah comes about two months later, and it marks the end of the period of destruction, when the last shred of Jewish sovereignty in Israel was ended.

Tisha b'Av is of course the day that gets the full 25-hour fast, whereas the others are only from sunup to sundown. But our tradition marks so much of the context around the Temple's destruction.

Each on their own was a tragedy, and particularly, the 9th of Av and Tzom Gedaliah were tragic, and the Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 18b) pairs these two, and since they are both fast days, says that this teaches that

נִשְׁקוּלָה מִיָּתֶתָן שֶׁל צְדִיקִים בְּשָׂרִיפַת בֵּית אֱלֹהֵינוּ

the death of the righteous is equivalent to the burning of the house of God.

These four days are all about remembering literally ancient history, ancient rupture and ancient trauma.

Historians love periodization--trying to identify when a "period" in time ends and another begins. Our tradition defines, in some sense, when this period of destruction begins and ends, and it's about 21 months, from beginning to end--the period of destruction whose observance ended on Thursday began back in January 2020 with 10th of Tevet 21 months ago.

It's much too soon to know what the notable dates around our current crisis, the pandemic, will be. A date of a first infection, when the first quarantine began, when a vaccine was approved, when things reopened, when things closed again, when vaccines for children, then young children were approved (hasn't happened yet). By the way, it's about the same amount of time now that has passed since the pandemic began as the time from the beginning of the siege of Jerusalem to Tzom Gedaliah - 21 months or so, if you count from January or so in China.

Today is September 11, 2021, the 20th anniversary of the hijacking of four planes, two of which crashed into the World Trade Center, bringing the Twin Towers down, one of which crashed in to the Pentagon, and a fourth which was crashed by its heroic hostages.

2,977 people died. Our lives and our nation were changed. And the world was changed. If we were to think about the periodization, the important dates, what would they be?

9/11 might be the first date. On October 7, 2001, the United States launched its first strikes, air strikes on Afghanistan, on Taliban and Al Qaida targets. On October 26, 2001, President George W. Bush signed the Patriot Act, changing the way we police, watch for and punish terrorism.

On August 31, 2021, the United States brought its last troops home from Afghanistan. Is this really the end of this "period?" I do not know.

We have the benefit of perspective and distance from our ancient history; I was in Manhattan on 9/11 and it is fresh and vivid, still.

Jewish tradition weaves a broad story into our calendar--a story of fear anticipated, of fear realized, of slaughter and destruction, and of a nation and people utterly conquered and dispersed.

We have not yet fully woven into the fabric of America all that 9/11 has wrought, for us, and for the world.

The story that we tell, that the Bible tells, for why all this destruction befell the Israelites, is because of our sinfulness. We recall these stories as an act of atonement, and repentance, as a reminder never to sin like this again. But the prophet Zachariah (8:19) says that these fast days

יְהִיָּה לְבֵית־יְהוּדָה לְשִׂשׁוֹן וּלְשִׂמְחָה וּלְמַעֲדִים טוֹבִים וְהָאֵמֶת וְהַשְּׁלוֹם אֲהָבוּ
shall become occasions for joy and gladness, happy festivals for the House of Judah; but you must love honesty and integrity.

This is to say, an honest evaluation of these days will lead them to become days of joy, eventually.

We are not guilty for the attacks on America on 9/11. God forbid. But could our responses have been better, looking back at recent history? For sure.

Facing our history, our Jewish history, our American history, our personal history, looking at the important moments, acknowledging the ways we could have done better--a process of teshuva - of loving honesty and integrity - this is what transforms those moments from tragedy to days of gladness.

This Shabbat Shuvah, and these 10 days of repentance, may we too love honesty, and integrity, and examine our actions, turn, and return.

Shabbat Shalom and Gemar Chatima Tova—may you have a good seal!