



Greater Miami Jewish Federation

July 2010

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Tzom Gedaliah

In the past, we have provided refreshments as we distribute our gifts for the High Holidays. This year however, we will not do so, in observance of Tzom Gedaliah, the fast of Gedaliah.

Many are not aware of this custom, which is observed by some Jews within our community. Tzom Gedaliah is one of the four fast days on the Jewish calendar that commemorate the destruction of the two Temples in Jerusalem, and we believe the story of this fast day may interest you, as its message rings true today.

The year is 586 BCE, and the Nebuchadrezzar, king of the Chaldeans, has just destroyed the Temple and has exile the last king of Judah, King Zedekiah. Captured in Jericho, his royal heirs are murdered before his eyes, before his own eyes are plucked out and he is taken as a slave to Babylon. The walls and city of Jerusalem are reduced to ashes, and Jewish sovereignty is not to return to this land for thousands of years, with the exception of a brief period of independence under the Hasmoneans. (See 2 Kings, ch. 25, and Jeremiah ch. 41) The Chaldeans appoint a Jewish nobleman, Gedaliah ben Achikam, to be governor of Judah, which is now an administrative district of the Chaldean empire. He assures the oppressed remnant not to be afraid, and to serve the king of Babylon. His policy of political moderation pays off, and he encourages a program of rebuilding. The Jews exiled to the lands of Moab, Ammon and Edom hear about Gedaliah's plans and begin to trickle back into the land of Israel. Baalis, King of Ammon, a political enemy of Israel, is suspicious of the new prosperity of the region, and enters into a pact with none other than Ishmael son of Netanel, a Davidic descendant and of royal stock, to assassinate Gedaliah. Despite the fact that Gedaliah had heard these rumors, he discounted them in disbelief that a fellow Jew, much less a Davidic descendent would commit such an atrocity. He forbids his generals from touching him. Ishmael and his men come to Mitzpah, the capitol of Gedaliah, and in the midst of a celebratory meal kill Gedaliah and many of his supporters, casting their bodies into a pit. Whether for personal gain or objection to the conciliatory posture of Gedaliah to the Babylonians, Ishmael's act destroyed the last vestige of hope for Jewish autonomy. *While the details remain unclear to this day, what is clear is that Jew on Jew violence had disastrous consequences, and ever since was commemorated as "the fast of the seventh month" as a day of mourning and fasting (Zechariah 9:19).*

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The Mission of the Greater Miami Jewish Federation is to mobilize human and financial resources to care for those in need, strengthen Jewish life and advance the unity, values and shared purpose of the Jewish people in Miami, in Israel and around the world.

As we stand between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we must consider how we operate as a community. Are we truly one Jewish people? Can there be a situation in our generation where Jew can turn against Jew? Where people can resort to violence? It is clear that we have many enemies in our world, but can we be our own worst enemies? These are questions to ponder during these important days.

At JCS, we are responding to these questions not through philosophical speculation, but through proactive acts of *chesed* (kindness) to one another which strengthen the bonds of Jewish unity. Milk and Honey therefore is the perfect way to spend the day reaching out to one another, and demonstrating the value of Ahavat Yisrael, that in spite of all our differences, we are one family.

Rabbi Frederick L. Klein
Director, The Jewish Chaplaincy Program
Greater Miami Jewish Federation
Executive Vice President,
Rabbinic Association of Greater Miami