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By Everett Gendler

"GEDALIAH? WHO'S THAT?" IF SUCH words express your first reaction to the title, you've plenty of company. Almost certainly the least known figure whose name designates a day in the Jewish calendar, the Fast of Gedaliah (pronounced guh-dahl-yuh) itself has also been little noticed for many decades. Yes, it's still listed in traditional printings of Jewish calendars as 3 Tishre, the day following the second day of Rosh Hashanah (for those who observe two days), but even in these printings it receives only the uninformative description, "commemorates the climax of the disasters that befell the Jewish Commonwealth in 586 BCE." The URJ and the WRJ calendars take no notice of it, and neither Hayim Schauss in the 1938 UAHC volume, *The Jewish Festivals*, nor Theodor Gaster in his 1952 *Festivals of the Jewish Year*, bothers to mention it. Quite likely, then, even many who use traditional calendars pay little attention to the day.

Why, then, propose that we remember Gedaliah this particular year? To answer the question, a few words about the historical period in which Gedaliah lived are necessary. During the turbulent times of 587/586 BCE, as the Babylonians advanced on Jerusalem to subdue the Judean kingdom, the Jews were sharply divided on the best response. One faction favored a political alliance with Egypt and its army to fight the Babylonian threat; another advocated a negotiated submission to the Babylonians to ensure the survival of a Jewish presence in Jerusalem and Jewish life and religious practices within the Judean Kingdom. The prophet Jeremiah was a strong advocate of this neutralism, rejecting an alliance with Egyptian power as the safeguard against Babylonia. His words denouncing royal collaboration with the Egyptians angered pro-Egyptian Jewish princes and other prophets, and in a dramatic trial, Jeremiah was threatened with death (see Jeremiah 26 for the vivid account). In this situation, a member of a politically prominent family, Ahikam, son of Shaphan, used his high-level influence to save Jeremiah from falling into the hands of the people who wanted to execute him.

Following further periods of dramatic and dangerous prophetic activity (see Jeremiah 27-29 for the remarkably exciting details), with Babylonian advance units having already breached the walls of Jerusalem, Jeremiah again passionately urged accommodation with the Babylonians. This time, too, as popular feelings grew more heated, there were again arrests and threats to Jeremiah's life. This time it was Ahikam's son, Gedaliah, who, like his father, became Jeremiah's protector. Gedaliah used his political position and his personal power to ensure Jeremiah's survival. As events unfolded, Gedaliah became governor of those Jews who remained in Jerusalem and Judea, cooperating with the Babylonians while also securing concessions from the invaders to improve the lives of the conquered.

Was this treasonable collaboration or life-preserving accommodation? Just as our assessments might differ, Jews at the time also disagreed, some quite vehemently (for lively details, see Jeremiah 40-41). One faction, encouraged by the King of Ammon and led by Ishmael, son of Nethaniah, undertook a mission to assassinate Gedaliah. Advisors to Gedaliah warned him of the plot, but he refused to take seriously their reports, and was, indeed, slain, along with many of his advisors. According to tradition (the sources are not clear about the exact timing), this assassination occurred on the 3rd of Tishre, and to commemorate Gedaliah, the rabbinic sages enacted a fast day.

This enactment reflected the rabbinic judgment that there had been advantages for the Jews from the non-entanglement-with-big-powers policy that Jeremiah advocated and that Gedaliah administered. Josephus (*Antiquities*, 10:9) gives details of an extensive resettlement policy. Jews who had fled the Babylonian invasion could return, reclaim land for cultivation, and live Jewish lives if they would accept Babylonian sovereignty. In the trenchant words of the eminent historian, David Biale: "The final destruction of any form of Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel came about not because of prior policies of Assyria and Babylonia, but because of the victory of the Jewish party of revolt over the party of accommodation" (*Power and Powerlessness in Jewish History*, p. 17). With this prophetic neutralism there is no rabbinic quarrel.

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Yet the rabbis did not unequivocally approve of all Gedaliah's actions. There is explicit rabbinic condemnation of Gedaliah's naivete in dismissing the reports of Ishmael's assassination plans. "He should have taken note of the advice of Johanan the son of Kareah" [about the plot to kill him and his associates], and acted to thwart it. Because he failed to do this, one strain of rabbinic thought regards him as complicit in the slaying of his associates (Talmud Niddah 61a). One might say that the rabbis supported neutralism but not naivete.

Reading this ancient, nearly forgotten history, we can understand why the Fast of Gedaliah became the most minor of the four minor fast days. But there is a coincidence of dates this year that suggests a fresh significance to Gedaliah, one that might stimulate us to take note of the day even if we don't choose to fast on it. This past October, in a resolution co-sponsored by 140 nations, the United Nations designated Gandhi's birthday, October 2nd, to be observed and celebrated each year as the International Day of Non-Violence. "Bearing in mind that non-violence, tolerance, full respect for all human rights and fundamental freedoms for all, democracy, development, mutual understanding and respect for diversity are interlinked and mutually reinforcing," the Resolution asks that each year organizations and individuals focus attention on these interlinked basic human values. And this year the International Day of Non-Violence, October 2nd, coincides with 3 Tishre, our traditional if mostly forgotten Fast of Gedaliah.

Is there any connection to be made? Viewed from our current perspective, I see Gedaliah, the peace-seeking compromiser, as a forerunner of Anwar Sadat and Yitzhak Rabin. Both of these men were, like Gedaliah, killed by uncompromising nationalist zealots. While none of the three can be claimed as principled practitioners of non-violence, all of them are certainly related in spirit to the two most effective non-violent leaders of the past century, Gandhi and King, both of whom were also victims of fanaticism become violent.

So how might this observance be given some acceptable ceremonial expression today? Reconstitute the fast? With the approach of Yom Kippur, forget fasting. More liturgical hymns of Divine Sovereignty and poems of Self-Inspection? Immediately following Rosh Hashanah, too much already! However, to do some reading and to give some serious thought to neutralism, naivete, nonviolence, their interrelations and their implications, could be a compelling contemporary way to observe this day commemorating Gedaliah. Is nonviolence practical? Isn't it a naive approach to a tough world of power politics? But what is power? Obviously nonviolence has worked at some times in some places. Where? How has it operated? Can it become more pragmatic, more practical, more powerful? Reading for discussion of these issues at greater depth (see below) could be both a stimulating and an appropriate way to observe the Fast of Gedaliah this year as it coincides with the International Day of Non-Violence.

A group discussion or an individual study session could appropriately begin with the traditional blessing before studying Torah:

BA-RUCH A-TA A-DO-NAI E-LO-HE-NU ME-LECH HA-O-LAM

A-SHER KID-SHA-NU B'MITZ-VO-TAV

V'TZI-VA-NU LA-A-SOK B'DIV-REI TORAH.

You abound in blessings, Eternal our God, Source of All Creation, making our lives holy through Your injunctions, and directing us to study Torah.

And the readings? I would propose some chapters from Jeremiah and two short pamphlets for a beginning, with a longer volume for further inquiry.

Jeremiah Chapters 26-41.

Gene Sharp: From Dictatorship to Democracy (a brief pamphlet that inspired, among others, the successful OTPOR student strategy that toppled Milosevich).

Robert L. Helvey: On Strategic Nonviolent Conflict: Thinking About the Fundamentals (a compellingly nonnaive treatment of nonviolence by a retired U.S. Army colonel) (both available from The Albert Einstein Institution, P. O. Box 455, East Boston, MA 02128).

Gene Sharp: Waging Nonviolent Struggle (a 2005 summary and update of Sharp's classic 1973 work on the dynamics of nonviolent struggle, with numerous brief case studies of recent nonviolent actions around the world).

But are the secular readings listed above in any sense "Torah"? I would suggest that in truth they are. I see both Sharp and Helvey's work as "Midrashim of Maaseh," action-interpretations and applications of Isaiah's remarkable formulation of a nonviolent approach to power in 30:15:

"In turning and tranquility shall you be saved, in stillness and trust shall be your strength."

A fuller exploration of the meaning of each of the four key Hebrew terms must await another occasion. But Sharp and Helvey provide numerous instances and analyses of how morality gains muscle, how spirit has sinews (my terms, not theirs).

To do this reading and to give some serious thought to neutralism, naivete, non-violence, their interrelations and their implications, could be a powerful and significant contemporary way to observe the Fast of Gedaliah.

Finally, a personal note, or perhaps simply "full disclosure." Since our retirement from regular work commitments in 1995, my wife Mary and I have been helping the Tibetan exiles in India develop a community-wide educational program on Strategic Nonviolent Struggle for the Tibetan cause. With the approval of the Dalai Lama and under the guidance of the Tibetan Government in Exile, the project, after these twelve years of our intermittent, once-or-twice-a-year teaching tours, has now become a Tibetan-run, Tibetan-staffed Non-Governmental Agency, ANEC, the Active Nonviolence Education Center. And in a most auspicious coincidence of timing, its formal dedication will be (God willing) this year on 2nd October-- Gandhi's birthday, the International Day of Non-Violence, and the Fast of Gedaliah. "B'siman tov uv'mazal tov!" May it, indeed, take place under these most favorable and fortunate of circumstances.

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