

SHIVAT TZION:
INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETS OF THE RETURN TO ZION
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Shiur #05: An Imperfect Inauguration (*Ezra*, ch. 3)

Summary

Having resettled in their homes, the Jews are ready to turn to the task of rebuilding the Temple. They construct the altar and offer fully-burnt sacrifices (*korbenot olah*), including the offerings of Sukkot, Rosh Chodesh, and other holiday and voluntary donations. In keeping with Cyrus' decree, they pay residents of Sidon and Tyre to deliver cedar wood from Lebanon. Finally, in the second month following the first wave of *aliya*, the Levites are appointed to oversee the process of the reconstruction of the Temple proper. The foundation is laid and a great inaugural celebration is held, featuring priests and Levites playing instruments and singing the songs of David. Many of the elderly people who had beheld the First Temple, however, do not rejoice, but rather cry, to the extent that the nation is unable to distinguish the sounds of joy from those of sorrow.

An Auspicious Beginning

At the chapter's opening, everything seems just right. With the families having been restored to their homesteads, there is an aura of wholeness in the air. Tishrei, a time brimming with religious potential,¹ arrives. The Jews gather as a single person ("*ke-ish echad*") in Jerusalem. The language at the beginning of our chapter closely parallels that of *Nechemia* chapter eight, in which Ezra and Nechemia orchestrate a stunning mass repentance on the part of the Jewish People, which in many ways constitutes a reenactment of the revelation at Sinai.² This linkage seems to herald the auspicious events to come.

Building the Altar

As the community constructs the altar, there are indications that not all is well. The fact that the community builds only the altar without the Temple, if we consider it for a moment, is stunning. Clearly not all is well. Second, while the entire nation is present, only Yeshua, Zerubavel, and their assistants actually

¹ This is especially true in *Ezra-Nechemia*, as we will see in *Nechemia* chapter eight.

² The parallel between the two chapters helps to account for Rashi's famous words in *Shemot* 19:1: "*Ke-ish echad be-lev echad*, as a single person with a single heart."

participate in the manual labor. This appears to imply a lack of full unity, or at least a lack of initiative, on the part of the people.

In verse three, things take an alarming turn, as reference is made to the Jews' decision to build the altar "for fear of the indigenous people." The commentators offer four interpretations as to the exact relevance of the threat to the building project. Rashi explains that the Jews rushed to complete the altar in order to establish facts on the ground, thereby thwarting the enemies' attempts to halt the construction. Ibn Ezra maintains that the Jews built the altar to more effectively pray for protection from their foes. Malbim suggests that in order to heighten security, the builders waited for a large group of Jews to be present before beginning to build. R. Mordechai Zer-Kavod, author of the *Da'at Mikra* commentary to *Ezra-Nehemiah*, claims that as a result of the threat, rather than reconstructing the altar in its entirety, the people used the original foundation to create a temporary, functional place of worship. Whichever interpretation we adopt, one thing is clear: even as they rejoiced, fear clouded the Jews' accomplishments.

Moreover, the verses repeatedly emphasize that only the *olah* was offered. This is somewhat inexplicable. Why would the people offer only one among the various sacrificial categories? Malbim offers a halakhic explanation: since the Temple edifice had not yet been built, the altar's sanctity was incomplete and only certain sacrifices were permitted to be brought. Whether or not we accept Malbim's interpretation, the limited sacrifice menu further underscores that only a partial success had been achieved.

The concluding verse of this section perfectly encapsulates the ambivalence: "From the first day of the seventh month they began to make burnt offerings to the Lord, though the foundation of the Temple had not been laid" (3:6). The sacrifices had begun in earnest, yet they were limited in scope. And while the altar had been completed, the Temple remained in ruins.

Laying the Temple Foundation

Having completed the altar, the community turns to the Temple as a whole. The first step, as noted, is to procure the wood from Sidon and Tyre. The *Shivat Tzion* community takes a page out of Shlomo's book. Shlomo similarly paid exorbitant fees to the Tyrians to deliver massive quantities of cedar wood for the First Temple. Both were completed, moreover, in the month of Iyar (*Ezra* 3:8, *Melakhim I* 6:1). Yet the similarities mostly underscore the disparities. Beyond the immense divergence in the respective quantity of materials, Shlomo was required to impose forced labor upon the Jews, employing 30,000 men in all. Shlomo's work took years; the returnees completed theirs in less than a month. Above all, Shlomo's kingdom was autonomous, whereas the "captives" completed their work "in accord with the authorization granted them by King Cyrus of Persia" (3:7). Paraphrasing the words of the Talmud, even after having completing the Temple, "we remained the servants of Cyrus" (see *Megilla* 14a).

Tellingly, the phrase “Cyrus king of Persia” recalls *Ezra* chapter one, in which the expression is repeated five times. As we discussed in our analysis of that chapter, the fact that the process was initiated by a foreign monarch demonstrates the waning of prophecy during *Shivat Tzion*. The ambivalence clouding the Jews’ accomplishments similarly captures the pervasive climate of divine diminishment.

The Inauguration Ceremony

Having laid the Temple’s foundations, the people invoke King David’s songs in offering praise to God. In addition to a clear allusion to the song “*Hodu la-Hashem ki tov*, Praise God for He is good,” which appears in our Shabbat prayers and is drawn from *Tehillim* (136:1), there is an additional reference. *Divrei Ha-Yamim I* (29:10-13) records that after receiving substantial contributions from the nation toward the Temple’s construction, King David breaks out in song:

Wherefore David blessed the Lord before all the congregation; and David said: “Blessed be You, O Lord, the God of Israel our father, forever and ever. Yours, O Lord, is the greatness, and the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty; for all that is in the heaven and in the earth is Yours. Yours is the kingdom, O Lord, and You are exalted as head above all. Both riches and honor come from You, and You rule over all; and in Your hand is power and might; and in Your hand it is to make great, and to give strength unto all. Now therefore, our God, we thank You, and praise Your glorious name.”

The connection between our verses and those from *Divrei Ha-Yamim* fits nicely with our earlier linkage between the two books. If the purpose of *Divrei Ha-Yamim* is to advocate for the Davidic line, our passage in *Ezra* serves to reestablish the Davidic dynasty by invoking the very same prayers established by King David at the dawn of the Temple’s erection. At the same time, the truncated version of the ceremony in *Ezra*, when compared with the elaborate ceremony of Shlomo, is a bow to the curbed enthusiasm that necessarily accompanies the relatively modest accomplishments of the returnees.

Mixed Emotions

The chapter concludes by depicting arguably one of the most poignant scenes in the Bible:

Many of the priests and Levites and the chiefs of the clans, the old men who had seen the first house, wept loudly at the sight of the founding of this house. Many others shouted joyously at the top of their voices. The people could not distinguish the shouts of joy from the people’s weeping,

for the people raised a great shout, the sound of which could be heard from afar. (3:12-13)

The dedication produced two opposite reactions. The younger population celebrated the remarkable, even miraculous accomplishment. Yet the elderly individuals who had witnessed the First Temple broke down in tears. Why did they cry? The profound ambivalence we have observed throughout the chapter leads one to conclude that the tears were not those of joy, but melancholy.

This reading is confirmed by Chagai. In urging the people to proceed with the Temple project, after the work had stalled for a number of years due to enemy opposition, the prophet acknowledges what curbs their enthusiasm:

Who is there left among you who saw this House in its former splendor? How does it look to you now? It must seem like nothing to you. (*Chagai* 2:3)

Evidently, those who had witnessed the First Temple's splendor were unimpressed by the efforts to build the Second, which seemed paltry by comparison. The range of responses brilliantly sums up the conflicting emotions coursing through the Jews at a highly complex moment in Jewish history.

The message of the chapter's narrative is two-fold. First, *Ezra* acknowledges that even joyous occasions may be marked with elements of sadness. Human reality is complex, and our book does not shy away from that complexity. Quite the opposite. Chapter three shines a spotlight on the tensions inherent to the human condition. Second, the fact that a celebratory moment is imperfect is no reason to avoid rejoicing altogether. An imperfect altar dedication is still cause for joy.

The ability of the Jews of *Shivat Tzion* to celebrate even partial successes is poignantly pertinent to our community today. Matters in Israel, as in all countries, are far from perfect. Still, *Ezra* reminds us that we must never lose sight of the stunning miracle and astounding accomplishments of the modern State of Israel.

Halakhic Implications of Our Chapter

In concluding our discussion, it should be noted that our chapter carries significant halakhic implications. First, it is evident from our chapter that one may offer sacrifices on the Temple altar even in the absence of a surrounding structure. The Talmud (*Zevachim* 62a) rules this way on the basis of our story, claiming that "three prophets ascended from the exile and testified to three laws." Among these are the size and location of the altar, as well as the permissibility of offering sacrifices in the absence of a Temple. On the basis of these sources, Chatam Sofer (YD 2:236) and R. Tzvi Hirsch Kalischer (*Derishat Tzion*) ruled (Chatam Sofer as a theoretical matter and R. Kalischer in practice) that one may

offer the Passover sacrifice nowadays, despite the lack of a Temple edifice. The proposal generated heated opposition, in particular from R. Yaakov Ettlinger, who dedicated the opening three responsa of his *Binyan Tzion* to the matter of offering the *Korban Pesach* in contemporary times.

The relevance of *Sefer Ezra* to proto-Zionist halakhic discourse is significant in two respects. First, it foreshadowed the many instances in which the events of *Shivat Tzion* were to carry ramifications for modern times. Second, as is alluded to in the aforementioned passage in *Zevachim*, *Shivat Tzion* was the crucial transitional period from the era of the prophets to that of scholarly leadership. Put differently, Ezra is credited by many for having ushered in the era of rabbinic Judaism. The roughly contemporaneous prophet Malakhi, amplifying a theme first stressed in the book of *Devarim*, emphasizes the role of the priests as not only offering sacrifices, but also providing legal rulings to the people. In light of these insights, it is perhaps unsurprising that Rashi identifies the three prophets in *Zevachim* as none other than Chagai, Zekharia, and Malakhi. At the time of *Shivat Tzion*, even the prophets played a parallel role as guardians of the halakhic tradition.

This final insight brings us full circle to an observation we made at the outset of our discussion. The phrase “as one person” frames both our chapter, in which the sacrifices and Temple foundation are restored, and *Nechemia* chapter eight, in which the nation reclaims the Torah. During the transitional period of *Shivat Tzion*, both institutions are essential to Jewish spiritual survival.