

**SHIVAT TZION:  
INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETS OF THE RETURN TO ZION  
By Rav Tzvi Sinensky**

**Shiur #06: Confronting Anti-Semitism (*Ezra*, ch. 4)**

**Summary**

Following the completion of the altar and Temple foundation, the foes take more active steps in their attempt to thwart the people's progress. In a clear bid to undermine the community's work from within, they approach the Jewish leadership, requesting that they be permitted to join with the Jews in the construction. After all, they have been worshipping the Israelite God ever since the Assyrian king Eisar Chadon relocated them to Israel. The Jews decline the offer, explaining that, as per Cyrus' decree, they alone will build. Nonetheless, the gentiles continue to plot against the Jews, hiring advisors to try and thwart the rebuilding throughout Cyrus' reign and beyond.

The remainder of the chapter, written overwhelmingly in biblical Aramaic, records the foes' attempts to undermine the Jewish efforts during the reign of Artaxerxes (465-422 CE). Although this episode occurs more than sixty years after the previous affair, they are recorded side-by-side, apparently due to the common denominator of anti-Semitism. Rechum the commissioner and Shimshai the scribe write a letter to Artaxerxes, charging that the Jews are repairing the walls of Jerusalem and revitalizing that rebellious city. Permit the work to continue, they contend, and the Persian empire shall forfeit any share in the province beyond the river. Artaxerxes' research reveals that the city's residents have indeed been seditious since ancient times. The king therefore denounces the Jews, commanding Rechum and Shimshai to oppose the construction by force. The Jews are forced to cease and desist until the second year of King Darius' reign.

**Early Opposition**

The opposition of the indigenous populations is noteworthy in two major respects, both of which reflect key themes in the book of *Ezra*. First, the Samaritans, who were displaced from Babylonia and other countries to Samaria (*Melakhim II* chapter 17), are syncretists, sacrificing to both their original Gods and that of the Israelites. This dualism resembles Israelite practice throughout much of the First Temple period, when many Jews in both the northern and

southern kingdoms worshipped the Jewish God and those of the local pagan tribes. By contrast, during the Second Temple period, idolatry no longer poses a challenge for the Jewish community. It is only the Samaritans who worship multiple Gods. This reflects one of the key developments in the Second Temple period, during which idolatry fades as a temptation.

Second, the Jews excuse themselves from the proposed partnership by citing the command of “Cyrus king of Persia.” It is obvious that this is not the Jews’ true reasoning, but rather a pro forma explanation intended to deflect the Samaritans. Indeed, the political maneuvering of the Jewish community throughout *Ezra-Nehemiah* serves as a model for the realpolitik practiced by the State of Israel throughout its history. Still, it should be noted that this is the seventh invocation of the phrase “Cyrus king of Persia” in *Ezra*, underscoring the king’s centrality to the book. Not only does the emperor redeem the Jews, he inadvertently grants them a ready rationalization to fend off their adversaries. As in chapter one, Cyrus continues to loom large over our *sefer*.

## **Biblical Aramaic**

Turning to the Samaritans’ hateful letter, perhaps the most conspicuous aspect of the epistle is its language, Aramaic. Although the subject of biblical Aramaic is complex and deserving of extensive treatment, for our purposes we will suffice with a few brief observations.<sup>1</sup>

While Aramaic makes limited appearances earlier in *Tanakh* (*Bereishit* 31:47 and *Yirmiyahu* 10:11), by far the most extensive usage of the language occurs in *Daniel* (2:4-7:26) and *Ezra* (4:6-6:18, 7:12-26). By the time of the exile and *Shivat Tzion*, Aramaic had developed as the lingua franca in Judea, Mesopotamia, and Assyria. It is therefore easily understood why biblical Aramaic appears in large quantities only in *Daniel* and *Ezra*, not earlier works.

Interestingly, scholars, who divide classical Aramaic into five discrete historical time periods, associate the Aramaic of *Daniel* and *Ezra* with at least some characteristics of the second stage, generally termed “imperial Aramaic.” As Shaul Shaked has suggested (*Encyclopedia Iranica*, “Aramaic,” p. 251), during the 5th and 4th centuries BCE, Aramaic was adopted by the Achaemenid dynasty, founded by Cyrus, as the official language governing all interactions between the empire and its far-flung constituents. This was an effective tool in maintaining the empire’s unity. It is therefore not surprising that biblical Aramaic occurs most often in official Persian documents, especially in *Sefer Ezra*. The Aramaic sections of our book cite or summarize official communications with the Persian empire. Thus, *Ezra*’s Aramaic highlights both the general adoption of the

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<sup>1</sup> For an accessible comparison between biblical Aramaic and other Aramaic dialects, see [http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/judaica/ejud\\_0002\\_0002\\_0\\_01230.html#Biblical\\_Aramaic](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/judaica/ejud_0002_0002_0_01230.html#Biblical_Aramaic).

language by the residents of Judea and the official records of the Persian government.

## The Timing

Another striking aspect of the letter is its timing. As mentioned, the events of the majority of our chapter transpire during the reign of Artaxerxes, who ruled long after Cyrus and Darius. The Jews' enemies, Rechum and Shimshai, similarly bear different names than foes such as Sanballat and Nachash the Amonite, to whom we'll be introduced later on. Even more unusual, the fifth chapter curiously segues to the activities of Chagai and Zecharia, who prophesied during the reign of Darius, long before Artaxerxes. Why does the text confusingly vacillate between different eras?<sup>2</sup>

A similar anomaly presents itself in *Ezra's* transition from chapter six to seven. We have already mentioned that Ezra does not appear until chapter seven of his own book. What is more, the *sefer* does not clearly announce that it is omitting over half a century. Instead, the opening verse of chapter seven simply states, "And after these events." The uninitiated reader has no idea that so much time has elapsed in between.

These unexpected chronological about-faces demand explanation. Granted, the rabbis assert that the Torah does not proceed in chronological order (*Pesakhim* 6b). Still, *Ezra-Nechemia* does generally proceed in well-dated, clear-cut chronological fashion, and so our problem remains.

At this point, it is useful to make note of another unusual literary feature of our work. *Ezra-Nechemia* is sub-divided into three major sections: *Ezra* 1-6, which describes the first *aliya*; *Ezra* 7-10, which outlines Ezra's *aliya* and activities; and *Nechemia*, which records Nechemia's *aliya* and aggressive leadership. Each of the three major segments evinces a similar organizational structure: (a) *aliya*, (b) a confrontation with antisemitism, (c) support of the Temple/Jerusalem, and (d) working toward ensuring the everyday functioning of society. Structurally speaking, *Ezra-Nechemia* repeats itself three times.

On a local level, chapters 4-6 of *Ezra* neatly break down in similar fashion. The three chapters sub-divide into three sections: the Samaritans' early attempt to join in the construction (4:1-5), Rechum and Shimshai's letter to Artaxerxes (4:6-24), and, as we will discuss, Tatenai and Shetar Bozenai's failed attempt to stymie the building (5:3-6:18). All three segments consist of the enemies' efforts to stall the construction, a response from the Jews or king, and a resolution.

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<sup>2</sup> Of course, according to the rabbinic view that the Persian dynasty lasted all of fifty-two years, the question is muted. It is specifically according to the scholarly consensus, which we have preferred, that the question arises.

*Chagai*, to which the beginning of *Ezra* chapter five points, also follows a tripartite pattern. On three separate dates, Chagai urges the leadership and nation to pay heed to their deeds, see the positive potential in the Second Temple, and drive forward the process of its completion.

What is the relevance of the tripartite literary structure to the chronological confusion? The author of *Ezra-Nechamia* (as well as *Chagai*) implies that although the events of *Shivat Tzion* transpired over the course of nearly a century, featuring varied monarchs, Jewish leaders, and gentile antagonists, fundamentally the story is the same. The major motifs in *Shivat Tzion* are recurring: the challenge of abandoning comfortable diaspora communities and returning to Judea; the need for proactivity in combating antisemitism and rebuilding; and the importance of confronting the social rifts in our community. By presenting the stories of *Shivat Tzion* in chronologically interwoven, structurally repetitious fashion, our author suggests that these challenges are universal to the era of *Shivat Tzion*, and possibly all eras as well.

As noted, the beginning of *Ezra* chapter five refers to the prophecies of Chagai and Zekharia. Next week, we begin our study of those respective works. Afterward, we will return to the fifth chapter of *Sefer Ezra*.