

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

**Shiur #13: Ezra Chapter 7: Ezra Arrives on the Scene**

**Summary**

*Ezra* chapter 7 finally introduces us to Ezra himself. The first ten verses expend significant energy delineating Ezra's lineage and scholarly qualifications, as well as the divine assistance he merited. Next, we learn that during the reign of Artaxerxes, Ezra led a group of Jews on *aliya*. Receiving permission on the first of Nissan and arriving at the beginning of Av, Ezra was poised to teach Torah to the unlettered Jews of Judea.

At this point, the chapter cites a letter issued by the king to Ezra in advance of his journey. As we might have anticipated, the missive is transcribed in Aramaic and closely resembles the earlier letters in *Ezra*. Ezra is to be provided with silver, gold, animals, and vessels for the Temple service. Moreover, He is charged with the enforcement of Jewish law in Judea. Ezra is to appoint judges and magistrates. Anyone who opposes him will be subject to retribution, including death and corporal punishment.

The chapter's closing verses offer Ezra's first-hand account. He thanks the Almighty for having inspired the king to beautify God's home. He concludes by recognizing God for having granted him the strength to inspire members of the communal leadership to participate in the fateful journey.

**An Historical Introduction**

The first point to consider is our story's timing and the meaning of the chapter's opening words, "After these events." The answer hinges on the larger chronological controversy that we explored toward the beginning of the course. The *Malbim* (7:1) neatly summarizes the issue as it applies to Ezra's activities. According to the traditional rabbinic chronology, Darius and Artaxerxes are one and the same. On this view, Ezra's *aliya* transpired only one year after the conclusion of chapter 6. According to Ba'al Ha-Maor and the scholarly consensus, however, Artaxerxes reigned from 465-422 BCE, dating Ezra to roughly fifty years after the Temple's completion in 516 BCE. As before, for the purpose of our discussion, we will adopt the latter view.

## Ezra: Character and Motif

Ezra's commitment to Torah is clearly the chapter's dominant motif. Although this theme is explicit, almost insistent, throughout, the first verse already hints to it. Chapter 7 begins with the words, "After these events," as if a story is about to unfold. Instead, the text simply proceeds to summarize Ezra's lineage. It is as if Ezra's very existence *is* the central subject of the sentence, and it ought to be read: "After these matters, there was a man by the name of Ezra." The arrival of such an individual on the scene is news enough to be our chapter's opening event.

Next, we encounter Ezra's extensive lineage. No other individual Biblical character is introduced with such fanfare.<sup>1</sup> His genealogy is traced for *seventeen generations*, going back to Aaron the high priest.<sup>2</sup> The lengthy list grants Ezra an air of authenticity.

The repetition of Ezra's name bears similar testimony to his stature. The word Ezra appears seven times in our chapter. As Martin Buber first noted, a seven-fold repetition within a unit of *Tanakh* is indicative of a phrase's importance.

Further underscoring Ezra's stature, he is described as a "*sofer*," which, according to most commentaries, refers not to a scribe, but to a scholar who is expert in Moshe's Torah.<sup>3</sup> The reference to Moshe Rabbeinu is especially significant; Ezra is viewed by many as a contemporary Moshe. The rabbis emphasized this point, suggesting that had not Moshe preceded him, Ezra would have been fit to give the Torah (*Sanhedrin* 21b). The Talmud goes on to cite numerous parallels between our chapter and verses that appear in relation to Moshe. The similarities, which become even more pronounced in chapter 8 of *Nechemia*, further highlight Ezra's towering stature.

## Priest and Scholar

Another theme emerges from the verses' introduction of Ezra. Upon describing his lineage, Ezra is referred to as both priest and scholar. The fusion of priesthood and scholarship is not new; Moshe Rabbeinu already referred to the Levites' role as teachers (*Devarim* 49:10). But there is particular emphasis on

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<sup>1</sup> Among the *Nevi'im Rishonim* and *Nevi'im Acharonim*, the respective lineages of Tzefania and Zekharia are traced for four generations. No other prophet's lineage is traced for more than one generation. *Rut* does conclude by tracing the generations from Boaz and Rut to David, but that is forward-looking rather than backward, and in any case does not appear in reference to a prophet. The one rough similarity we do find to such an introduction is Pinchas, who is similarly described as the "son of Elazar, son of Aharon the priest" (*Bamidbar* 25:11). Still, the sheer number of generations necessary to trace Ezra back to Aharon renders this case *sui generis*.

<sup>2</sup> A close examination of *Divrei Ha-Yamim I* 5:27-41 further reveals that six additional generations have been omitted from Ezra's lineage, perhaps for the sake of convenience.

<sup>3</sup> *Da'at Mikra* to 7:6 with footnote 7. See, however, *Targum* and Ibn Ezra.

the role of the priestly teacher in the works of *Shivat Tzion*. Zekharia relates that the angel instructs Yeshua the High Priest to “walk in God’s path, observe his laws and properly instruct his household” (3:7). Chapter 2 of *Malakhi* stresses the priests’ dual sacerdotal and scholarly responsibilities, reaming out the priests for having abandoned both stations. This represents a larger shift away from charismatic priestly and prophetic roles toward an emphasis on Torah and, in the case of Nechemia, political leadership. The fact that Ezra is identified as a priest without reference to the Temple service accentuates the transition underway.

In this light, we may more fully appreciate the Talmud’s curious identification of Ezra with Malakhi (*Rosh Hashana* 3b). What motivates the rabbis to draw this surprising connection? Central to both works is this emphasis on Torah teaching and Torah law. Furthermore, although it is unclear whether Malakhi himself was a priest, he took a significant interest in the their roles and responsibilities. The fact that both *Ezra* and *Malakhi* perceive the priestly and scholarly roles as intertwined likely influenced the rabbis’ conflation of the two personas.

Even the gentile king Artaxerxes repeatedly emphasizes Ezra’s expansive rabbinic abilities and newfound responsibilities. The letter is addressed to “Ezra the priest-scribe, a scholar in matters concerning the commandments of the Lord and His laws to Israel” (7:11). Ezra is “commissioned by the king and his seven advisors to regulate Judah and Jerusalem according to the law of your God, which is in your care” (7:14). Ezra is empowered to, “by the divine wisdom [he] possess[es], appoint magistrates and judges to judge all the people in the province of Beyond the River who know the laws of the God, and to teach those who do not know them” (7:26).

Indeed, the king goes on to explicitly spell out his reverence for the Judean God, exclaiming that if his decree is not carried out, God’s wrath will descend upon him and his sons (7:23). It is almost as if Artaxerxes has been touched by Ezra’s personal piety, embracing the legitimacy of Ezra’s mission and profound religious commitment.

One familiar word further underscores the importance of Ezra’s religious commitment. Ezra is described as having been “*doresh*,” sought after, God’s Torah (7:10). This term evokes the Jews who, in the previous chapter, offered the Pesach sacrifice and are similarly described as seeking God (6:21). The shift in meaning in the term “*doresh*” is telling. Whereas in the opening section of *Ezra*, the only form of worship practiced by the Jews is that of sacrifice, Ezra ushers in a new emphasis on Torah study and observance. This shift foreshadows the revolution on which Ezra was about to embark.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the centrality of Torah scholarship in *Ezra*, see Joshua Berman, *Created Equal: How the Bible Broke with Ancient Political Thought*, p. 128 with footnote 89.

It is worth noting as well the need for a scholar of the caliber of Ezra to be “shipped” from Babylonia to Israel. As will become evident throughout his book, the Judean Jewish community was not only lacking in scholarly leadership, but also, for the most part, was utterly ignorant. In contemporary terms, one can argue that with the exception of the period of the Mishnah and the early Amoraic period, ours is the first era in some 2,500 years during which Israel is the center of Torah life. Indeed, the unfortunate religious realities during Ezra’s life enable us to appreciate the unique flourishing of Torah in Israel in modern times.

### ***Yad Elokav Ha-Tova***

It is worth noting that in addition to Ezra’s name and title, one phrase appears repeatedly in our chapter and the next: “*ke-yad Elokav ha-tova*, thanks to the benevolence of the Lord’s hand [toward Ezra]” (7:6, 7:28, 8:18, 8:22, 8:31). In these words, Ezra deflects credit from himself toward God. This theme of *hashgacha* – that while God no longer performs open miracles, He nonetheless profoundly influences world events – pervades the literature of *Shivat Tzion*. Just as prophecy may be waning but divine inspiration remains, so too God continues to guide earthly events. *Ezra* 5:5 records that “God’s eyes watched over the elders of the Jews,” allowing them to continue building the Temple even after a complaint had been registered with Darius. Zekharia similarly accounts for the symbolism of his famed seven-branch candelabra as representing “the seven eyes of the Lord, ranging over the whole earth” (4:10).

It is also interesting that this phrase, which occurs predominantly in *Ezra*, appears in *Nechemia* (2:10) as well. This recurrence touches on the larger relationship between the two books. As we will explore more extensively later in our series, the fact that this term appears in both *Ezra* and *Nechemia* but nowhere else in the Bible points to the unique relationship between the two works.

### **A Closing Personal Reflection**

Ezra concludes our chapter with personal thanks to God for having inspired the king to beautify the Temple, granting Ezra favor in the eyes of the king, and enabling Ezra to successfully recruit other leaders to travel with him. Ezra continues to speak in the first-person singular throughout chapters 8 and 9. The usage of the first person is unusual in the Bible, but common in *Ezra*, and especially in *Nechemia*, which is written entirely in the first person. This gives our books the feel of semi-autobiographical memoirs. While any explanation of the significance of this literary feature is conjectural, it seems fair to hypothesize that the memoir style is part of the larger transition we have identified. *Ezra-Nechemia*, like *Kohelet*’s struggle for personal enlightenment,<sup>5</sup> represents a more

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<sup>5</sup> Significantly, *Kohelet* is the only other Biblical work written in the first person. It would appear that *Kohelet* is analogous to *Ezra-Nechemia*. Grasping for the true meaning of life, the king turns to philosophical brooding to try and pinpoint life’s ultimate meaning. His eventual answer – observe the commandments and fear God – emanates not from divine revelation, but from

personal, non-prophetic journey. Absolute divine clarity is declining. In that vacuum, divinely-inspired personal reminiscences rise to the fore.

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intellectual analysis and hard-earned life lessons. It is precisely in these contexts where the biblical text shifts from its classic third-person narrative to the first person. In many ways, this is also what *Ezra-Nehemiah*, in particular beginning with *Ezra* chapter 7, are all about: in the absence of prophetic revelation, it is up to us to use God's Torah as a blueprint for making our own way.