

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

**Shiur #15: *Ezra* Chapter 9: Intermarriage During Shivat Zion**

**Summary**

Fresh off his arrival in Judea, Ezra is approached with dire news: the Jews have intermarried with the indigenous population, whose behavior resembles that of the Caananites, Egyptians and other nations with abhorrent practices. Indeed, the leaders were the first to engage in this despicable behavior.

Ezra is crushed. He rends his garments, tears out his hair and sits alone, devastated. Dedicated Jews surround him throughout the course of the day, but he does not arise from his fast until evening. Turning to God, Ezra confesses the Jews' unending shame and guilt. Despite His mercy in having granted the Jews a foothold in Judea, they have abandoned the commandments and disdained the teachings of the prophets. God is righteous, Ezra concludes his confession and the chapter, and we have forfeited our right to stand before Him.

**Confronting Intermarriage During *Shivat Zion***

Intermarriage, as is evident, is a major concern in *Ezra*. Two of the five chapters (*Ezra* 9-10) in which Ezra is active (*Ezra* 7-10, *Nechemia* 8) are dedicated wholly to this problem. In the course of his confession, Ezra designates the sin as "*ashma*," "deep guilt," four times, and invokes that root twice more.

It is not only Ezra who responds to intermarriage in a fit of fury. Nechemia also takes no prisoners in his confrontation with exogamy. After hearing a public Torah reading, the people immediately separate from foreign wives (*Nechemia* 9:2). In binding themselves to an oath to obey the Torah's laws, the signatories of the vow include those who had separated from their wives (10:29). The oath first lists the repudiation of intermarriage (10:31), indicating that the concern was of paramount importance at the time. In *Nechemia*'s final chapter, upon hearing the Torah law requiring separation from Moavites and Amonites, the people "remove the alien admixture from Israel" (13:3). And in an incident that does not technically involve marriage but is nonetheless revealing, Nechemia is infuriated when he discovers that Elyashiv the priest has designated Temple office space for his relative Toviah, an idolator. Nechemia expels Toviah and his possessions,

demands that the room be purified, and returns the Temple items that had previously been stored in that space (13:4-9).

At the very end of his work, Nechemia observes Jews marrying Ashdodite, Moavite, and Amonite women. Distressingly, their children speak the lingua franca of their mothers, not Judean.<sup>1</sup> Nechemia again responds fiercely, flogging the Jewish parents and adjuring them by God's name to never again intermarry. He cites the example of Shlomo, a great and righteous king who was led astray by his foreign wives. When he learns that Elyashiv's grandson has become the son-in-law of Sanbalat the Choromite, Nechemia drives that grandchild away.

Ezra and Nechemia, moreover, are not the only personalities during *Shivat Zion* to confront this scourge. Malakhi, the final Biblical prophet whose book we will analyze at the end of our course, makes a point of confronting this sin as well, arguing that intermarriage is not only a sin against God, but also against one's fellow Jew (2:10-11).

It should be further noted that Ezra seems to extend the prohibition beyond that which is explicit in *Devarim*. The *Chumash* merely states that exogamy is prohibited with the seven nations of Canaan. Ezra argues that since the behavior of the indigenous population resembles that of the seven nations, the injunction applies equally to the people of Judea (9:2).

What are we to make of the new emphasis on the sin of intermarriage, including the seemingly harsh responses? Is the increased focus merely a function of the renewed prevalence of intermarriage in the contemporary landscape? As many scholars have noted,<sup>2</sup> a careful examination of the treatment of this issue in earlier Biblical works indicates that something more is at play. The leaders of *Shivat Zion* seem to present the sin somewhat differently than earlier Biblical works. This apparent contradiction illuminates the significance and nature of Ezra, Nechemia and Malakhi's forceful response.

## The Contradiction

Beyond the greater emphasis on intermarriage, the books of *Shivat Zion* seem to present a different underlying reason for the prohibition than do earlier Biblical texts. To begin, let us consider the reasoning for the prohibition against intermarriage as described in *Devarim* 7, where the proscription first appears:

---

<sup>1</sup> Judean refers to a dialect of Hebrew spoken in the First Temple period. See *Da'at Mikra*, p. 145, note 31.

<sup>2</sup> See in particular Christine Hayes, "Intermarriage and Impurity in Ancient Jewish Sources," *The Harvard Theological Review* 92:1 (1999), pp. 3-36. There is extensive literature on the subject of Ezra's attitude toward intermarriage. For those wishing to explore more deeply, see, for example, Sara Japhet, "The Expulsion of the Foreign Women (*Ezra* 9–10): The Legal Basis, Precedents, and Consequences for the Definition of Jewish Identity," in *Sieben Augen Auf Einem Stein*; Saul Olyan, "Purity Ideology in Ezra-Nehemiah as a Tool to Reconstitute the Community," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 35:1 (2004), pp. 1-16; and Louis M. Epstein, *Marriage Laws in the Bible and the Talmud* (Cambridge, 1968).

When the Lord your God brings you to the land that you are about to enter... you must doom them to destruction; grant them no terms and give them no quarter. You shall not intermarry with them; do not give your daughters to their sons or take their sons for your sons. **For they will turn your children away from Me to worship other Gods...** (*Devarim* 7:3-4)

Endogamy, in other words, is required so as not to lead one's children toward idolatry. It would appear that the emphasis here is not on the prohibition per se, but against its potentially idolatrous outcome. The reasoning, in other words, is extrinsic, not intrinsic.

In introducing Shlomo's sin of exogamy, *Melakhim* invokes language closely resembling that of *Devarim*:

King Shlomo loved many foreign wives in addition to Pharaoh's daughter – Moabite, Amonite, Phoenician, and Hittite women, from the nations of which the Lord had told the Israelites, “None of you shall join them and none of them shall join you, **lest they turn your heart away to follow their Gods.**” (I *Melakhim* 11:1-2)

In contrast, the leaders of *Shivat Tzion* seem to speak with a different point of emphasis. Ezra in particular introduces a new set of terminology to our discussion. He first observes that “the holy seed [of Israel] has been intermingled with the peoples of the land” (9:2). This phraseology is arresting and implies that the sin is not so much about the concern for idolatry or otherwise sinful lifestyle (extrinsic), but runs counter to the holiness of the Jew (intrinsic). *Malakhi* (2:15) similarly suggests that God desires “Godly seed,” and *Nechemia* records that the “Israelite seed separated from all foreigners” (9:2).

Moreover, on no less than five occasions, the verses refer to exogamy as “*ma'al ha-gola*,” “the trespass of the exile” (9:2, 4; 10:2,6,10; see also *Nechemia* 13:27). *Meila* generally refers to an act of betrayal. For instance, in the context of the *sota*, *meila* refers to adultery on the part of an unfaithful wife (*Bamidbar* 6). In numerous instances throughout *Nevi'im*, especially in *Sefer Yechezkel*, *meila* refers to the betrayal of idolatry (*Yechezkel* 14:13, 15:8, 17:20, 18:24, 20:21, 39:26). Strikingly, with one possible exception (*Nechemia* 1:8), during the period of *Shivat Tzion*, *meila* is used exclusively in reference to intermarriage. Malakhi also refers to intermarriage as “breaking faith” and an “abhorrent thing.” This implies that the demand of endogamy is a function of our loving relationship with God, our “sacred seed,” not merely due to the extrinsic concern of *avoda zara*.

How are we to resolve this apparent contradiction between the books of *Shivat Tzion* and earlier books regarding the reason for the injunction against intermarriage?

## **Ezra and Daniel's Confessions**

Before attempting to resolve the contradiction, one additional note is in order. The severity of Ezra's censure also sheds light on a series of parallels between Ezra's confession and that of Daniel. In chapter 9 of his book, Daniel expresses fear that the seventy years about which Yirmiyahu prophesied have come and gone without the Temple having been rebuilt. Fearing that this is due to the Jewish People's sins, Daniel launches into a lengthy confession. In many respects, his prayer anticipates that of Ezra. Both engage in prayer and fasting (*Ezra* 9:5; *Daniel* 9:3) until the evening (*Ezra* 9:5; *Daniel* 9:21); both suggest that the Jews have spurned the earlier prophets (*Ezra* 9:11; *Daniel* 9:5), who had spoken to the kings and princes (*Ezra* 9:7; *Daniel* 9:6); and both invoke the language of *meila* (*Ezra* 9:2, 4; *Daniel* 9:7). In other words, there seems to be strong textual basis for the assumption that Ezra intentionally modeled his confession after that of Daniel.

Despite the similarities, however, there remain two basic differences between the declarations. Most obvious is that prophesying during the period in between the Temples, Daniel prays for the Temple to be rebuilt, using the term *ashma* to refer to Jerusalem's sorry state. Ezra makes the opposite point, confessing that despite the gift awarded them, the Jews have remained sinful. More subtle, but for our purposes more insightful, Ezra intentionally borrows the term *meila* and assigns it a new meaning. Whereas Daniel uses the word in a generic sense, referring to the Jews' transgressions, Ezra infuses it with unique meaning that is consistent with his time and theology.<sup>3</sup>

### **Toward a Resolution**

Two fundamental questions, then, require our attention. How are we to resolve the apparent contradiction between *Devarim* and the works of *Shivat Tzion*? And what might have motivated Ezra to accentuate the intrinsic reasoning at the cost of the extrinsic?<sup>4</sup>

To propose a solution, let us begin by making a few observations. First, in his description of Shlomo's wives, Nechemia asserts that "foreign wives caused even him to sin" (13:26). This implies that Nechemia also accepted the "extrinsic" basis for the prohibition. Additionally, when Shimshon sought to marry Philistine women, his parents seemed to object on intrinsic, not extrinsic grounds (*Shoftim* 14:2-3). This indicates that the authors of *Shivat Tzion* recognized the extrinsic

---

<sup>3</sup> There are also parallels between both Daniel and Ezra's confessions and the one that appears in chapter 9 of *Nechemia*. We will examine these similarities in our discussion of that chapter.

<sup>4</sup> There is an extensive literature on the subject of *Ezra-Nechemia* as an instance of inner-Biblical exegesis. See Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Gloucestershire, 1988); B.D. Sommer, "Inner-Biblical Interpretation," in *The Jewish Study Bible* (New York, 2004), pp. 1835-1841; Y. Kaufman, *Toldot Ha-Emumah Ha-Yisraelit* (Jerusalem, 1966), vol. 8, pp. 291-293. For discussion of the permissibility of Rut's marriage to Boaz, see Yair Zakovich, *Rut: Introduction and Commentary* (Jerusalem, 1990), pp. 19-20.

reasoning, just as at least one earlier Biblical text recognizes the intrinsic logic of the prohibition.

Moreover, a closer examination of the verses in *Devarim* reveals another possibility as to their meaning and significance. Just a few verses later the Torah emphasizes, “For you are a people consecrated to the Lord your God; of all the peoples on earth your God chose you to be His treasured people” (*Devarim* 7:6). A strong case can be made that this verse offers an additional reasoning for the injunction against exogamy – namely, that intermarriage contradicts our unique relationship with God. If so, *Devarim* actually offers both an extrinsic and intrinsic reason, just as Nechemia offers an extrinsic reason to complement his and Ezra’s emphasis on the intrinsic prohibition. A strong case can be made, in other words, that the difference between *Devarim* and *Shivat Tzion* is not one of principles but of emphasis.

If *Devarim* and *Shivat Tzion* do not contradict, why the shift in accent? The answer seems to harken back to a recurring theme. For arguably the first time in history, during the period of Ezra and Nechemia, the temptation of idolatry no longer looms large. Therefore, whereas *Devarim* and *Melakhim* tended to stress the lure of paganism, Ezra, Nechemia and Malakhi, no longer confronting this threat, emphasized the inherently objectionable nature of the proscription. Furthermore, given that intermarriage was a grave danger confronting the entire nation – as opposed to previously, when the concern was either theoretical or particular to an individual, such as Shimshon or Shlomo – Ezra and Nechemia sounded the alarm and responded in dramatic fashion. Thus, although his approach is technically consistent with that of *Devarim*, Ezra’s point of emphasis is quite different and is in accordance with the needs of his time.

Ultimately, Ezra and Nechemia’s uncompromising, aggressive response to the challenge of intermarriage serves as an important reminder to contemporary Jewish leaders and communities. Whether their response is exactly the correct approach to the challenge of intermarriage in our generation is a separate question. What does emerge with clarity from *Ezra-Nechemia* is that there are times, especially when the Jewish community faces an existential challenge, when an unyielding approach is necessary. Although many might take offense to such a “heavy-handed” response, sometimes proper leadership demands an approach that closely follows the firm stand taken by Ezra and Nechemia.