

SHIVAT TZION:
INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETS OF THE RETURN TO ZION
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Shiur #16: Ezra Chapter 10: Separating From Foreign Wives

Summary

Having mourned the sin of intermarriage until evening, Ezra is joined by a segment of the people. Shechania son of Yechiel, representing the group, confesses the nation's sins, insisting that hope remains. He says that the people will forge a covenant and commit to separating from foreign wives. He urges Ezra to "arise, for the matter falls to you, and we are with you; be strong and act" (10:4).

Ezra stands and adjures the priests, Levites and Israelites to follow through. He leaves the Temple and enters another chamber, refusing to eat or drink as a sign of mourning. A proclamation is issued, requiring the entire community to gather in Jerusalem. Anyone who does not arrive within three days' time will be subject to confiscation of property and excommunication.

The people gather on the 20th of Kislev, fearing the grave matter of intermarriage as well as the impending rains. Ezra thunders at the nation, demanding that they confess and separate from their wives. The people agree, but point out that a downpour is expected, and it is impractical to imagine that the nation could separate in such a brief period of time. Instead, they propose, elders should be appointed to meet with families at appointed times to implement the decree. Ezra consents. Only Yonatan son of Asael and Yechazya son of Tikva remain behind as elders; Meshulam and Shabtei the Levites also stay to assist them.

Within three months, all the couples who had scheduled meetings arrive and separate, offering a ram as a sacrifice for expiation. The chapter concludes by listing the men who divorced their wives.

Ezra's Response

Ezra's response to the news of intermarriage is at once severe and passive. He mourns bitterly for the sin of exogamy, yet is not quick to act against the behavior. Instead, while he mourns, the people gather around him of their own accord. Shechania is the first to speak up and broach the possibility of a

path forward, recommending that the people forge a covenant and separate from their wives. He urges Ezra to “arise, for the responsibility is yours and we are with you” (10:4). As Metzudat David puts it, “Act with alacrity, for the matter rests with you. For you are the leader for us all, and we will support you” (ibid.). Ezra acts, but only once he has been prodded by his supporters.

Even then, Ezra’s actions seem conflicted. On the one hand, he demands that the people to swear that they will impose the covenant. On the other hand, he again secludes himself in the chamber, where he continues to fast. The voice calling the Jews to gather in Jerusalem seems to emanate not from Ezra, but from his followers.

The success of the initiative is similarly mixed. At first glance, it appears to be a remarkable triumph; the Jews gather in Jerusalem within three days, follow Ezra’s command, and separate from their wives within just three months. Considering that Ezra has just arrived in Judea, this is nothing short of remarkable.

Upon closer examination, however, the people’s commitment appears lukewarm. After all, imagine the scene. The situation is dire. Ezra has called upon the nation to gather in three days’ time. Grasping the gravity of the situation, the people drop all their responsibilities and travel immediately to Jerusalem. They arrive, fearing the grave situation – and the weather forecast. Ezra continues to thunder at them, demanding confession. They gamely agree, but add that the process probably ought be delayed due to the imminent precipitation. The odd juxtaposition of fear of sin and rain, no matter how relentless the precipitation might have been during the rainy season of Kislev, seems to belie the Jews’ commitment.¹

Even the actual separation produces mixed results. While many couples do divorce, a count of the families reveals that just 113 marriages dissolve. While this is a remarkable achievement on the part of Ezra, it represents a miniscule percentage of the total families in Judea, which equaled roughly 50,000. While we don’t know exactly how many had intermarried, the verses do record that “they had transgressed extensively in this matter” (10:13). That three months were required for the process to unfold would seem to indicate that many more families were expected to appear but never did. Moreover, the fact that Ezra’s contemporary Nechemia was repeatedly required to confront the sin implies that Ezra had failed to truly solve the problem. In the words of R. Zer-Kavod, “We learn that Ezra did not succeed in fulfilling his intention in its entirety, until Nechemia arrived and realized [the task] with the strength of his rule” (*Da’at Mikra*, p. 68).

¹ See, however, *Da’at Mikra* to 10:7, who maintains that the people’s fear reflects the sheer intensity of the Kislev rains and does not connote any implicit criticism of the community.

Where does this leave Ezra's legacy? By no means does this analysis imply that Ezra was lacking as a leader. In fact, in *Nechemia* chapter 8, Ezra will lead a stunning, mass *teshuva* movement that revolutionizes the *Shivat Zion* community. Instead, it seems more precise to say, consistent with our discussion of *Ezra* chapter 7, that Ezra was simply a different type of leader than Nechemia. Whereas Nechemia was a forceful political personality deeply grounded in Torah values, Ezra was first and foremost a brilliant, dedicated scholar. Ezra was not, in essence, a man of action. At the end of the day, Ezra is an introvert who thrives on the solitude of the "*Beit Midrash*." Only when prodded does Ezra rise to the occasion and move mountains to profoundly shape his community.

Sinai Reaffirmed

We have previously suggested that Ezra is to be viewed as a modern-day Moshe Rabbeinu who restores the Torah to the Jewish People. In that vein, it is worth noting that in describing Ezra's efforts to separate the Jews from their gentile wives, our chapter uses a number of phrases evoking Moshe's ascent to Mount Sinai and the theophany.

First, just as the people declare "*na'aseh ve-nishma*," "we shall perform and listen" (*Shemot* 24:7), the Jews of Ezra's time affirm "in a loud voice, we will surely do as you say" (10:12). Moreover, the eighth chapter of *Nechemia* represents a quasi-revelation that carries numerous parallels to that of Sinai. In this light, it is noteworthy that at least one phrase – "they called out in a great voice" – appears in both our chapter (10:7) and *Nechemia* (8:15). Finally, we are told that when Ezra retires to the chambers to continue mourning, he does not eat or drink. This formulation precisely echoes the language used to describe Moshe's forty-day-and-night ascent to receive the second tablets (*Shemot* 34:28).

A greater focus on this final connection, however, seems to undercut the parallel. After all, Moshe "does not eat bread and does not drink water" while *receiving the tablets*, whereas Ezra does not eat or drink due to the Jews' *violation of the Torah*. If anything, one might argue, the similarity in language reinforces the fundamental difference between the two scenarios: Moshe refrains from eating because he resembles the angels during his stay at Sinai, while Ezra fasts as a mark of mourning.

Upon closer analysis, however, this critique does not withstand scrutiny. The only reason Moshe returns to Sinai is due to the Jews' sin of the Golden Calf. His return to the mountaintop comes under far from ideal circumstances. Quite the opposite: it is an attempt to achieve repentance for the Jews' transgression. The parallels to the Revelation in *Ezra* chapter 10, as well as in *Nechemia* chapter 8, are intended to accomplish much the same. Although the community has sinned, effectively trampling the Torah that Moshe taught at Sinai, as in the case of Moshe's return to the mountain, repentance creates the possibility of renewed covenantal commitment. The parallels to Sinai, in other

words, reinforce the idea that *Shivat Tzion* represents a time of renewed commitment to our relationship with God, the central theme of the theophany and Moshe's ascent to Sinai in search of atonement.

In light of this motif, we may more fully appreciate the ubiquity of variations on the term "covenant" in *Ezra-Nechemia*. In our story, the people commit to a "*brit*," covenant, to separate from foreign wives. In *Nechemia*, we read that despite the Jews' sins, God has stayed faithful to His covenant (*Nechemia* 9:32). The people craft an "*amana*," pledge (*ibid.*, 10:1), an oath, and a vow to "follow the teaching of God, given through Moshe God's servant" (10:30).² Although Ezra's work remains incomplete, the larger, optimistic theme of the restoration of the covenant has been established as a cornerstone of our book.

In concluding our study of *Sefer Ezra*, it is worth noting that this optimistic message underlying our chapter and the entirety of *Ezra* is perhaps best encapsulated by the word *tikva*, hope. As noted earlier, Ezra is stirred to action by Shechania, who clings tenaciously to the hope, *mikve*, that the people will separate from their wives (*Ezra* 10:2). Perhaps not coincidentally, it is Yechazya son of Tikva who volunteers to assist Ezra over the course of the three months (10:15). Despite Ezra's despondency, the possibility of renewed commitment offers hope to the people of *Shivat Tzion*, as well as to the contemporary reader, for whom intermarriage and assimilation loom large and seem impossible to overcome. As we turn to *Nechemia*, we will continue to see that despite the extraordinary difficulty in combating mass ignorance and exogamy, under the complementary leadership styles of Ezra and Nechemia, there is good reason to be hopeful that the nascent community will flourish and rededicate itself to the covenant of Sinai.

² The prevalence of repentance and renewed covenantal commitment may help to account for the Rabbis' classic interpretation of the phrase "*kiyemu ve-kibbelu*," "they fulfilled and accepted" (*Esther* 9:27). The Rabbis take this to mean that the Jews fulfilled that which they had originally accepted at Sinai, meaning that they recommitted themselves to the covenant (*Shabbat* 88a). Possibly, the Talmud's exegesis is influenced by the larger thrust of the period of the Babylonian exile and *Shivat Tzion*, which constitute a period of renewed covenantal commitment.