

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

SHIVAT TZION:
INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETS OF THE RETURN TO ZION
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Shiur #22: The *Teshuva* Revolution: Part 1 (*Nechemia* ch. 8)

Summary

Having completed the resettlement of the population, Nechemia turns to matters of spirituality. On the first day of the seventh month, the people gather in the street near the Water Gate, southeast of the Temple Mount, and ask Ezra to bring the “Torah of Moshe” (8:1). Ezra brings the Torah before the entire congregation, reading from the scroll until midday. He stands on a wooden platform that had been specially designed for the occasion, flanked on his right by six communal leaders and on his left by seven. Ezra opens the scroll for the entire nation to see, at which point the people stand. He blesses God, and the people respond by intoning, “Amen Amen,” bowing their heads, and prostrating to the ground. A number of individuals, as well as the Levites, explain the Torah’s meaning as Ezra reads aloud.

The people are profoundly impacted by their renewed exposure to the Torah. Next week, we will explore their response, including their highly unusual observance of Rosh Hashana and Sukkot. This week, we will focus our attention on the ritual of the Torah reading.

Between *Sefer Ezra* and *Sefer Nechemia*

Before jumping into the ceremony proper, a few introductory comments to our chapter are in order. As discussed, *Ezra* chapter 2 and *Nechemia* chapter 7 both recount Ezra’s census of the original *olim*. Confusingly, both chapters close by describing the Jews as having resettled in their ancestral homes by the beginning of the seventh month. With that introduction, the third chapter of *Sefer Ezra* describes the rebuilding of the altar, whereas our chapter recounts the Torah reading ceremony. Is it possible that both generations, those who had arrived with Zerubavel and those who came with Nechemia, had both coincidentally settled in their homes at the beginning of Tishrei?

Pointing to this apparent contradiction, and also noting that our chapter is the only context in which Ezra and Nechemia operate side-by-side, some

scholars suggest that the narrative in Nechemia is a later addition to our book. We will argue, however, that this “emendation” is unnecessary.

Malbim (7:73, s.v. *Va-yeshvu*) summarizes two alternative explanations. First, he proposes that in fact Ezra came twice to Israel, once in the time of Zerubavel and again under the leadership of Nechemia. Both events took place precisely as described, both under the leadership of Ezra.

This explanation is quite difficult, as *Malbim* himself notes. First, given that there is no hard evidence that Ezra came twice to Israel, such a hypothesis seems unlikely. Second, although the thesis might be more credible according to the rabbinic chronology, it seems extremely far-fetched from the perspective of the conventional chronology, as the two stories took place some sixty years apart.

Malbim’s preferred approach is more convincing. There were indeed significant similarities between the two events. In both the time of Zerubavel/Yeshua and Ezra/Nechemia, the Jews had achieved a sense of physical stability around the time of Rosh Hashana. In seeking to highlight these parallels and having just completed his account of his usage of the census documentation, Nechemia underscores this similarity by using similar language to *Ezra* in describing the background to the Torah reading ceremony.

This reading dovetails beautifully with an observation we made as we concluded our study of *Sefer Ezra*’s first six chapters: the events of *Shivat Zion* are cyclical. Although three different sets of events are recorded in our *sefer*, each mirrors the others. The similarity dramatizes the striking parallel between the events of the early chapters of *Ezra*, in which the Jews are restored to their homes and engage in a religious revival by rebuilding the altar, and Nechemia’s repopulation and inspiring Torah reading. The details differ and some sixty years separate the two events, but the fundamental challenges of *Shivat Zion* remain the same.

Ezra and Nechemia Together

As noted, our chapter is the only one in which Ezra and Nechemia appear together, leading some scholars to speculate that the event is ahistorical. This argument is unconvincing. It is evident throughout *Ezra-Nechemia* that whereas Ezra was highly esteemed as a scholar and role model, his political acumen was no match for that of Nechemia. Throughout the events of *Nechemia*, which until this point had emphasized matters of security, Ezra stood outside the limelight. Now that things have settled down considerably and Nechemia is finally ready to turn to religious matters, Ezra once again steps forward and plays a prominent role alongside his colleague.

Ezra's influence is felt throughout the chapter, especially in its emphasis on learning. The root *bina*, intellectual study, appears six times in our chapter (8:2,3,7,8,9,12). It is almost as if Ezra's entire *raison d'être* for having traveled to Judea has finally been achieved.¹ Granted, some of the characteristics we have previously associated with Ezra are present in our chapter as well. Instead of taking the initiative, Ezra is first asked to read from the Torah. Once he begins teaching, however, the community has nothing but attentive ears and the deepest reverence for Ezra and the Torah he teaches.

Hakhel

As we make our way through the ceremony, it becomes increasingly clear that Ezra's ritual is intended to recreate the *Hakhel* ceremony described in *Sefer Devarim* (31:10-13). As in the *Hakhel* ritual, a Jewish leader reads from the Torah before the nation during the month of Tishrei (*Hakhel* is generally performed on Sukkot). Just as the Torah requires men, women, and children to be present, Nechemia records that "men, women, and those who could understand" were in attendance (8:2).² Ezra reads the Torah "in the ears" of the people (8:3), in the same way that the Torah was to be read "before all the Jews in their ears" during *Hakhel* (*Devarim* 31:11).

Building on these comparisons, the Rabbis appear to have drawn a number of laws governing *Hakhel* from our story. The *mishna* (*Sota* 7:8) records that during the *Hakhel* ceremony, the king read the Torah from a wooden platform. This appears to be derived from Ezra, who is described as having read from a "wooden tower." The Rabbis also link the location of *Hakhel* with our ritual. While we are told that the ceremony took place in the street adjoining the Water Gate, the precise location of the street is not entirely clear. Perhaps picking up in this ambiguity, there is a dispute among the *Tanna'im* (*Yoma* 69b, *Sota* 40b) as to whether *Hakhel* must be performed on the Temple Mount or in the Women's Courtyard.³ The argument centers on the proper reading of the verses in our chapter in *Nechemia*. Both views among the *Tanna'im* apparently maintain that the laws of *Hakhel* may be deduced from Ezra's ceremony; they only dispute the particulars of the derivation.

What is the significance of Ezra's decision to model his ceremony after *Hakhel*? An additional insight into *Hakhel* sheds light on this question. There is a substantial body of evidence indicating that *Hakhel* is a septennial recreation of the Revelation at Sinai. All the Jews must be present, whether or not they understand the exact words being spoken. The ceremony is led by a prominent

¹ It is therefore appropriate that the Rabbis derive numerous *halakhic* rulings from our chapter.

² There is some discussion as to whether "those who understood" is meant to specifically exclude the children; see Ralbag 8:2, s.v. *ve-khol*. In the course of Ralbag's discussion, it becomes clear that he too views the Torah ceremony as modeled after *Hakhel*.

³ This is the reading of most commentators. See, for example, *Tosafot Yeshanim*, *Yoma* 69b, s.v. *meitivei*.

national leader, and the Torah is read in a powerful, inspiring fashion. As Rambam puts it:

And converts who do not recognize that they are obligated to direct their hearts and to attune their ears to hear with fear and reverence and joy trembling **like the day on which [Torah] was given at Sinai**. Even great sages who know the Torah completely are obligated to listen with exceptionally great concentration. And one who is unable to listen should direct his heart to the reading, that Scripture is established to strengthen true faith. And he should see himself as if now he is commanded and from God he heard it, that the king is an agent to cause the words of God to be heard.⁴ (*Mishneh Torah, Hilkhhot Chagiga* 3:6)

It is on the basis of the comparison between our chapter and the Sinaitic Revelation that the Rabbis drew extensive comparisons between Ezra and Moshe Rabbeinu, assigning Ezra an equal role in the transmission of the tradition. The *gemara* (*Sanhedrin* 21b) teaches that the Torah was originally given in *Ketav Ivri* (an ancient script) and Hebrew, and subsequently given again during Ezra's generation in *Ketav Ashuri* (another script) and in Aramaic. The same passage goes on to assert that had Moshe not preceded him, Ezra would have been fit to give the Torah to the Jewish People. Elsewhere, the Talmud (*Sukka* 20a) credits Ezra, Hillel, and R. Chiya for ensuring that the Torah was not forgotten. *Arukh La-Ner* (s.v. *chazra*) explains that Ezra ensured that the written Torah (the Torah of Moshe) would be preserved.

Drawing on our chapter in particular, the *gemara* in *Bava Kama* (82a) credits the institution of Torah reading to edicts of Moshe and Ezra. The *gemara* in *Menachot* (45a) comments that inaugural sacrifices were offered during Ezra's generation, just as they were in the days of Moshe. All these comparisons are grounded in our chapter's implicit identification of Ezra as reenacting the theophany at Sinai through a celebration of *Hakhel*.

By comparing our story to *Hakhel* and, by extension, to *Matan Torah*, our chapter suggests that we should view the Torah reading ceremony as a transformative event of *Shivat Tzion*, and even Jewish history. Indeed, the historical context bears this out. It is evident that there was mass ignorance on the part of the remnant in Judea. As we will see in the remainder of our chapter, basic laws concerning the construction of *sukkot* were entirely unfamiliar to the people. It would appear from the need for translators that the people did not understand Hebrew (hence the Talmud's assertion that Moshe gave the Torah in Hebrew and Ezra in Aramaic). Had Ezra not ascended from Babylonia, it is not at

⁴ There is a hint to this theme in our chapter as well, which opens with the phrase "the entire people assembled as one person" (8:1). Just as the Rabbis emphasize the sense of unity leading to the Revelation, so too the Jews are described in precisely this fashion in our story, accentuating the connection to *Matan Torah*. That the Jews specifically ask to read "the Torah of Moshe" further strengthens the connection between the two.

all self-evident that the Judean community would have ever learned the basics and recommitted themselves to a Torah-based lifestyle. The comparison to Sinai is thus certainly not an exaggeration.⁵

More broadly, our chapter serves as a model for the critical importance of Torah observance to Jewish survival, whether in Israel or the Diaspora. Moreover, the fact that the chapter opens with the people's request to study the Torah demonstrates the critical partnership between the religious leadership and lay community in the successful dissemination of Torah. Only when the community desires to study and the religious leader is embedded within in the community can the Torah be successfully transmitted to the next generation.

The Laws of Torah Reading

Given the pivotal role that the Rabbis assigned to Ezra in the transmission of Jewish law, it is not surprising that numerous laws concerning the reading of the Torah are derived from our chapter.⁶

One obvious law derived from our chapter is that of *hagba*, lifting the Torah. We similarly raise the Torah for all members of the congregation to see before (for Sephardim) or after (for Ashkenazim) the reading of the Torah.⁷ It is not entirely clear from our story whether the *hagba* was performed before or after the reading. Arguably, these two possible interpretations serve as the basis for the above variation in customs.⁸

Interestingly, the verse records that the people stood (“*amdu*”) when the Torah was raised. One might suspect that this serves as the source for the halakhic requirement to stand when the Torah is moving (*Shulchan Arukh*, YD 282:2). The Talmud (*Sota* 39a), however, followed by Rashi, Metzudat David,

⁵ The Ethiopian Jewish holiday Sigd, celebrated on 29 *Cheshvan* each year and adopted by the *Keneset* as a national Israeli holiday in 2008, is further evidence of the nexus of the events in *Nechemia* and the Revelation at Sinai. Most likely rooted in 15th century deliverance from Christian oppressors, Sigd is taken from the Aramaic root meaning to prostrate oneself. On the holiday, celebrated 50 days after Yom Kippur, Ethiopians fast, prostrate on the floor as in *Nechemia*, and read sections from the Torah, including the revelation at Sinai and *Nechemia*'s Torah reading. In Ethiopia, it was traditional for the event to take place on a tall mountain and for community elders to fence off sections of the mountain. It is, in other words, a reenactment of the events of both Biblical events.

⁶ There is a substantial body of evidence that the daily Torah reading, like *Hakhel*, is also intended as a small-scale recreation of Sinai. If so, the inference of laws of Torah reading from our chapter is especially appropriate. See, for instance, *Yerushalmi Megilla* 4:1, which requires an interpreter during the Torah reading, just as Moshe served as an intermediary at Sinai. For a similar analysis, see Rav Y. Soloveitchik's *Shiurim Le-Zecher Abba Mari z"l*, vol. 1, “Torah Reading on Shabbat, Monday, and Thursday.”

⁷ See *Shulchan Arukh*, OC 134:2.

⁸ See Daniel Sperber, *Minhagei Yisrael*, vol. 1, pp. 78-9. Professor Sperber cites R. Yehuda Bar Natan's *Sefer Ha-Machkim* as explicitly rooting the contemporary practice of *hagba* in the events of *Nechemia*.

and Malbim, interprets the word “*amdu*” as denoting silence, not standing. Still, Ibn Ezra proposes that the people literally stood up, citing the Talmudic tradition (*Megilla* 21a) that Torah was studied while standing from the time of Moshe to that of Rabban Gamliel. If so, our verse might hint to the requirement of standing while the Torah is in motion.

One more relevant law is the requirement of a blessing before and after the Torah reading. Ezra “blesses the Lord, the great God,” and the people answer “Amen, Amen, with their hands raised” (8:6). Ralbag (s.v. *va-yevarekh*) suggests that the blessing provides a basis for the blessings recited upon the reading of the Torah.