

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

Shiur #23: The Teshuva Revolution: Part 2 (*Nechemia*, ch. 8)

Summary

Having been inspired by the Torah reading ceremony and crushed by their ignorance and sinfulness, the people beg to be permitted to fast. Nechemia, Ezra, and the Levites tell the people not to fast, but rather to rejoice. They encourage the people to “eat choice foods, drink sweet drinks, and send portions to whomever has nothing prepared, for the day is holy to our Lord. Do not be sad, for your rejoicing in the Lord is the source of your strength” (*Nechemia* 8:9). The masses act accordingly.

The next day, the second of Tishrei, the community once again gathers to hear the Torah. They learn that “the Lord had commanded Moshe that the Israelites must dwell in booths during the festival of the seventh month” (8:14). They go to the mountain and collect branches of olive trees, pine trees, myrtles, and palms to construct *sukkot*. The people construct *sukkot* throughout the city: on rooftops, in courtyards, in the Temple courtyards, and in the streets adjoining the Water Gate and Ephraim Gate. The text recounts that the celebration was greater than any since the time of Yehoshua bin Nun. The people read the Torah throughout the holiday of Sukkot, celebrating each day as is prescribed.

Celebrating Rosh Hashanah

Perhaps more than in any other context in *Ezra-Nechemia*, the halakhic practices described in our chapter seem to depart from those with which we are familiar not only from contemporary practice, but even the Torah itself. The celebration of Rosh Hashana is puzzling in numerous respects. There is no mention of the *shofar* or any other ritual practice with which we generally associate the “Jewish New Year.” Our chapter similarly omits any mention of Yom Kippur, as well as numerous central observances of *sukkot*, including any explicit mention of waving the four species. It is also unclear what we are to make of the Jews’ desire to fast and the leadership’s firm opposition. Was there a common custom to fast on Rosh Hashana? And are we to infer from the answer that fasting is prohibited on Rosh Hashana? In general, the emphasis on joy seems to depart from the somber tone that we generally associate with the day of judgment.

Furthermore, as part of the required celebration for Rosh Hashana, the people are instructed to send portions to those who do not have food. The language closely resembles that used in *Megillat Esther* to describe *mishloach manot* (*Esther* 9:19, 22). What is going on here? Have Ezra and Nechemia confused Rosh Hashana for Purim?

Regarding the omission of other practices of Rosh Hashana and Sukkot, in addition to the entirety of Yom Kippur, some scholars maintain that these holidays were not observed in the same way with which we are familiar, and that the text of Torah read by Ezra differed considerably from our own.

This conclusion, however, is unwarranted. Our chapter does not focus on the classic practices of each holiday, but only on the unique ways in which each was observed in our narrative.¹ The emphasis on the Rosh Hashana celebration is on the question of fasting versus celebration, and Sukkot focuses on the reinvigoration of the *mitzva* of *sukka*. Moreover, consistent with the transition we have detailed from a Temple-based Judaism to a Torah-centered lifestyle, even as the people find themselves celebrating Sukkot in the Temple courtyard, the emphasis in our chapter is decidedly not on the Temple service. Many, if not all, of the practices omitted in our chapter bear significant connections to the Temple service, including *shofar* on Rosh Hashana (in particular when Rosh Hashana falls on Shabbat), the service of Yom Kippur, and the four species on Sukkot. Ezra's revolution, which seeks to reimagine Jewish life in the aftermath of the destruction of the First Commonwealth, envisions an observance of the holidays that does not revolve around the sacrificial service.

How are we to understand the exchange regarding mourning versus celebrating? Some have suggested that the masses' instinct to mourn was rooted in an earlier tradition that viewed Rosh Hashana as a somber day. Others have proposed similarly that Rosh Hashana had been designated as a day of mourning ever since the assassination of Gedalia, governor of Judea in the aftermath of the *churban*, which according to many took place on Rosh Hashana (see *Yirmiyahu* 41:1 and Radak ad loc., s.v. *va-yehi*).² These suggestions, however, do not accord with the simple reading of our chapter, in which the people's desire to mourn seems to be rooted in a spontaneous reaction to their devastating consciousness of ignorance.

It is interesting to observe in this connection that the exchange between the people and leaders spawned a substantial halakhic literature regarding the question of fasting on Rosh Hashana. Some *Ge'onim* maintained that it is preferable for one to fast on both days of Rosh Hashana, or at least on the second, which is only Rabbinic. The Rosh (*Rosh Hashana* 4:14) cites and rejects

¹ Zakheim, *Nehemiah: Statesman and Sage*, p. 158.

² See, however, Maharsha (*Chiddushei Aggadot, Rosh Hashana* 18b, s.v. *u-mi*), who maintains that Gedalia was assassinated on the third of Tishrei.

these views, arguing that it is best not to fast on either day: “For so said the early leaders of the Jewish people on Rosh Hashana: ‘Eat choice foods and drink sweet drinks, for today is holy.’” Although the accepted *halakha* follows the Rosh’s opinion (*Shulchan Arukh*, OC 597:1), one wonders how the other decisors read our verse.

A careful examination of our chapter reveals an alternative reading. Although our verses do emphasize that the reason the Jews were to fast was because “this day is holy to our master,” it is plausible that the requirement of celebration was not due to Rosh Hashana, but the joy of rediscovering the Torah. In fact, there seems to be strong support for this view from verse 12, which records that “the people went to eat and drink and send portions and make great merriment, **for they understood the things they were told.**” While it is possible to read the verse as suggesting that the Jews celebrated because they had come to understand that this was their obligation (Malbim, s.v. *ki heivinu*), the more convincing reading is that the Jews celebrated due to their excitement at having rediscovered the Torah (*Metzudat David*, s.v. *ki heivinu*). On this view, the prohibition against fasting and mourning was not due to the sanctity of Rosh Hashana, but rather the significance of a day on which there was a renewed commitment to Torah.

If so, our story provides a scriptural basis for the Rabbinic notion that Torah study is a joyous activity. The Rabbis anchored this concept in the verse in *Tehillim*, “*Pikudei Hashem yesharim mesamechei lev*,” “the precepts of God are straight, they gladden the heart” (*Tehillim* 19:9; see *Ta’anit* 30a, *Arakhin* 11a, and *Yoma* 72b). Arguably, our narrative provides an additional basis for this central Rabbinic teaching.

Mishloach Manot

Turning to the question of *mishloach manot*, a few notes are in order. First, scholars note that Persians customarily distributed gifts to their friends on the Persian New Year. If so, perhaps the leaders were informing the people that such a practice was not objectionable and was in fact meritorious. The fact that their pagan neighbors followed this custom was not *ipso facto* reason to disqualify the behavior.

Second, the practice of caring for the impoverished is fully consistent with a key component of Nechemia’s social program, which sought to level the playing field between the higher and lower classes. Integrating these concerns into the New Year practices of the community helped to reinforce these values.

Third, although the language of *Nechemia* clearly borrows from that of Purim and *Megillat Esther*, the larger motif is drawn directly from *Chumash*. The Torah commands, “You shall rejoice in your festival, with your son and daughter, your male and female slave, the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow in your communities” (*Devarim* 16:14). While cast in contemporary

language and consistent with contemporary gentile practice, Nechemia's charge is deeply rooted in the Bible's vision of the proper celebration of a holiday.³

One final note should be made of the connection to *Esther*. We have already reviewed the striking resemblances between Nechemia and Esther's approaches to the king. Similarly, it is surely no coincidence that the terminology of *mishloach manot* appears only in these two contexts. Putting *Esther* and *Nechemia* together, it appears that repairing the Jewish People's social fabric was a major point of emphasis for both post-exilic communities. It is almost as if *Tanakh* implies that Jews of Persia and Israel sought to "undo" the sins of previous generations, in which the wealthy trampled upon the poor and there were irreparable divisions between the different classes of society. Both Esther and Nechemia worked to create greater unity by emphasizing the importance of generosity at times of communal celebration, so that no one would feel excluded.

Sukkot

The celebration of Sukkot is extremely curious and demands careful consideration. As mentioned, there is no obvious reference to the four species. At the same time, at least two of the items that the Jews are commanded to collect for their huts are the same species one is required to wave: the palm branch and myrtle leaves. This is perplexing. Were these taken only for the construction of *sukkot* or for the waving of the species? If the former is correct, is it merely a coincidence that the text makes note of materials that were required for the *lulav*? And if the latter is true, and the *lulav* and *hadasim* were being collected to be waved, why are the people not commanded to collect the *etrog* and *aravot*?

The continuation of the story is equally puzzling. Is it really plausible that the Jews had not sat in *sukkot* since the days of Yehoshua bin Nun? In the words of the Talmud (*Arakhin* 32b), "Is it possible that when David came, they made no booths, [when Solomon came, they did not make booths] until Ezra came?" What are we to make of this sensational assertion?

Numerous suggestions have been offered in response to both questions. Concerning the four materials, the Rabbis make a number of points. First, the Talmud (*Sukka* 12a) raises an additional problem: aren't *hadas* and *etz avot* both myrtles? Why were the Jews obligated to collect both? The Talmud (*ibid.*) answers that there are two types of myrtle – one that is fit for the four species and another that only externally resembles the "true" myrtle. The Jews were instructed to collect one type for building *sukkot* and the other for the four species. According to the Rabbis, the Jews were indeed collecting for both

³ See Rambam, *Hilkhot Yom Tov* 6:18. Of course, the sources in *Chumash* and Rambam refer specifically to Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot. Ezra and Nechemia's innovation is to extend these themes to include Rosh Hashana as well.

mitzvot, not only to construct *sukkot*. Rashi (*Nechemia* 8:15, s.v. *va-alei hadas*) and Metzudat David (*ibid.*) follow this view.⁴

Another Talmudic passage (*Sukka* 36b-37a), however, seems to read our story quite differently. The Talmud cites a fascinating dispute between R. Meir and R. Yehuda. R. Meir holds the conventional view that one may build the *sekhakh* out of any material that does not contract impurity, while R. Yehuda maintains that the *sekhakh* may only consist of the four species. R. Meir cites our story as evidence for his opinion. In addition to palm branches and myrtles, the Jews were also instructed to collect olive branches and pine trees. This proves that all materials are fit for *sekhakh*.⁵ R. Yehuda responds that whereas the palm branches and myrtles were collected for *sekhakh*, the olive branches and pine wood were for the doors. Both R. Meir and R. Yehuda appear to agree that all the materials were being collected for the *sukka*, and not the four species; they only dispute whether the items were being gathered for *sekhakh* only or for the doors as well.

Perhaps the most compelling interpretation may be offered on the basis of a combination of an interpretive insight of Ibn Ezra coupled with a perspective from ancient near eastern botany. Ibn Ezra (*Nechemia* 8:15, sv. *va'asher*) argues that the Jews were not commanded to collect all these materials; they were simply being instructed to collect **any** of these items. The “vav,” as elsewhere, does not denote “and,” but “or.” This resolves any question regarding the four species; the sole purpose of the mountain expedition was to collect materials for the *sukka*, and any of these materials sufficed for this purpose.

The one question that Ibn Ezra fails to address is the coincidence of the material generally used for the species. This is where the botanical research comes into play. Dr. Yehuda Felix argues that the reason these specific materials were designated for the four species was due to the ubiquity of these materials in

⁴ Along somewhat similar lines, Metzudat David (s.v. *etz avot*) suggests that the Jews were commanded to collect *etrogim* and *aravot* as well, but the verse omitted these for the sake of brevity. This seems difficult, as it seems unlikely that the verse would omit these items if the omission would lead to so much confusion. In his commentary to *Vayikra* (23:40), R. David Tzvi Hoffman suggests that the verse leaves them out since the *etrog* and *aravot* were easily accessible, as opposed to the *lulav* and *hadas*, which required considerable effort to procure. Professor Yehuda Felix (*Teva Ve-Eretz Ba-Tanakh*, pp. 377-379) proposes that the *etrog* and *aravot*, which grow on the coast and on rivers respectively, were inaccessible to the landlocked Judean community.

⁵ Contemporary halakhic practice, of course, follows the view of R. Meir. It is interesting to note that some Karaite scholars maintained that only the four species may be used for *sekhakh*. For a brief discussion of this view, see Ibn Ezra (*Vayikra* 23:40, s.v. *u-lekachtem*). Samaritans use only luscious fruit and the four species for their *sekhakh*. Some Karaite scholars have held similar views. For a discussion of the Samaritan practice, see <http://thetorah.com/fruity-Sukkah-made-from-the-four-species/>.

Israel at the time the Jews were exiting Egypt and traveling toward Cana'an.⁶ In his *Guide to the Perplexed*, Maimonides offers a similar view:

I believe that the four species are a symbolical expression of our rejoicing that the Israelites changed the wilderness, "no place of seed, or of figs, or of vines, or of pomegranates, or of water to drink" (*Bamidbar* 20:5), with a country full of fruit-trees and rivers. In order to remember this, we take the fruit which is the most pleasant of the fruit of the land, branches which smell best, most beautiful leaves, and also the best of herbs, i.e., the willows of the brook. These four kinds have also those three purposes. First, they were plentiful in those days in Palestine, so that everyone could easily get them. Second, they have a good appearance; they are green; some of them, viz., the citron and the myrtle, are also excellent as regards their smell, the branches of the palm-tree and the willow having neither good nor bad smell. Third, they keep fresh and green for seven days, which is not the case with peaches, pomegranates, asparagus, nuts, and the like. (3:43)

If so, we would expect overlap between materials that the Jews were obligated to take for the four species and those they would have naturally located in the area. In light of this thesis, the confusion surrounding our narrative is neatly resolved.

What of the problem of a *sukkot* not seen since the days of Yehoshua bin Nun? Here too the Talmud weighs in, although the suggestion seems somewhat tenuous:

Rather, he compares their arrival in the days of Ezra to their arrival in the days of Joshua. Just as at their arrival in the days of Joshua they counted the years of release and the Jubilees and consecrated cities encompassed by walls, thus also at their arrival in the days of Ezra they counted the years of release and the Jubilees and consecrated walled cities. (*Arakhin* 32b)

At first glance, there seems to be little connection between the celebration of Sukkot and the consecration of the land. We will offer a possible explanation of the Talmud's intention at the end of our discussion.

Others (*Da'at Mikra* p. 108; see also *Kuzari* 3:63) propose that the purpose of the narrative is simply to exaggerate for effect, emphasizing the historic nature of the Sukkot observance. This finds support in that we find similar claims in relation to other historic religious biblical events, such as the Pesach of Yoshiyahu (II *Melakhim* 23:22 - "the Passover sacrifice had not been offered in

⁶ See Noga Ha-Reuveni, "Arba'at Ha-Minim," originally published in *Teva Ve-Nof Be-Moreshet Yisrael*, available at <http://www.daat.ac.il/he-il/tanach/iyunim/tora/vayikra/maamarim/hareuveni-arbaat.htm>. See also Professor Felix, "Motivim shel Nof Ve-Chakla'ut Mimei Shivat Tzion," published in *Sefer Zer Kavod*, available at <http://mikranet.cet.ac.il/mikradidact/pages/printitem.asp?item=14272>.

that manner in the days of the Judges who ruled Israel”); the parallel in II *Divrei Ha-Yamim* (35:8 - “from the days of Shmuel”); and the Pesach of Chizkiyahu (II *Divrei Ha-Yamim* 30:26 - “from the days of Shlomo”).

Ralbag (8:17, s.v. *ki*) proposes that the Jews had not performed the *mitzva* so wholeheartedly since the time of Yehoshua. Along similar lines, Metzudat David (ibid., s.v. *va-yeshvu*) claims that although the Jews had sat in *sukkot* regularly, they had previously spent the minimal amount of time necessary in the huts. Only this year did they sit “in great permanence,” meaning for the majority of the holiday, as is appropriate.

Malbim offers a sort of compromise view. In fact, many Jews were previously unable to sit in *sukkot*. This was because they lacked private property, including their own private domain, which would allow them to fulfill the *mitzva* properly. Only now, when *beit din* had expropriated the public domain as belonging to the entirety of the Jewish People, were even the poorer members of the community able to fulfill their obligation. This explanation, while not as persuasive a textual reading as some others, does have the benefit of dovetailing nicely with Nechemia’s economic agenda of narrowing the gaps between the rich and the poor.

Perhaps the most compelling explanation (Zer-Kavod, *Da’at Mikra*, p. 108, note 20:3) picks up on the opening clause of the verse: “The entire nation that had returned from captivity fashioned *sukkot*” (8:17). This clearly evokes the opening phrase of chapter 8, returning us full circle: “The entire nation gathered as a single man.” If we consider the matter carefully, there is good reason to believe that this is the first time since the time of Yehoshua’s entry to the land when the entire population of Israel gathered together to celebrate *sukkot*. At what other time did the entire, sprawling population join together? Even in the best of scenarios, on the holidays, only the men would have been required to journey to the Temple. The scant population of Judea ironically created a national, religious opportunity that could not be achieved at times when the Jewish community was more established. Furthermore, it is possible that the passage in the Talmud (*Arakhin* 32b) cited above is hinting to this similarity. The fact that the entry of Yehoshua and Ezra restored the sanctity of the land of Israel, resulting in renewed calculations of the *shemitta* and *yovel* cycles, reflected the presence of the entire Jewish community in renewing that *kedusha*.

Whether or not this is the intent of the Talmud, this reading of the verse is quite compelling. This extraordinary moment of solidarity, coupled with the dramatic impact of the Torah reading ceremony just a few days earlier, combines to make the events of *Nechemia* chapter eight some of the most climactic known to biblical history.