

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION  
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)  
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**SHIVAT TZION:**  
**INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETS OF THE RETURN TO ZION**  
**By Rav Tzvi Sinensky**

**Shiur #26: The End of *Nechemia***

In this *shiur*, we will briefly review the final three chapters of *Sefer Nechemia*.

**Chapter 11**

Chapter 11 reports that a tenth of the Jewish population of Judea was selected by lottery to live in Jerusalem, with an eye toward ensuring the city's ongoing security. The bulk of the chapter reviews the list of those who settled in Jerusalem.

Two elements in this highly unusual chapter are worthy of brief note. First, the notion of separating a "human tithe" is striking and arguably without precedent. Produce and animal tithes, of course, are the subject of considerable attention in *Nechemia*. On the basis of the precedent of Yaakov, moreover, many separate a tenth of their income to charity; according to some views, this obligation is Biblical. Still, a human tithe would appear to be something else entirely. We will return to this odd feature below.

Second, the emphasis on the lottery is significant. The term "*goralot*," "lots," appears in chapter 9 concerning the allotment of wood sacrifices, itself an unusual institution. A *goral*, of course, also carries echoes of Haman's lottery in the book of *Esther*. Possibly, the common denominator between *Nechemia* and *Esther* is that although lots have existed previously in Jewish history (such as in the distribution of portions in the land of Canaan and in ascertaining whom to throw overboard on Yona's ship), during *Shivat Tzion*, lotteries no longer carry the Divine imprimatur. The Jerusalem lottery was a random, rather than Divine, mechanism for determining who was to live in the holy city. Much the same may be said for Haman's (heinous) *goral*. This is consistent with the fact that the determination to choose one-tenth of the population to remain behind was not Divinely inspired but a purely rational human decision. The same appears to be true of the wood offerings. The emptying of Divine significance from Biblical lotteries, in other words, is consistent with the tenor of desacralization running throughout the period of *Shivat Tzion*.

**Chapter 12**

Chapter 12 enumerates the priests and Levites who settled in Judea at various junctures during *Shivat Tzion*. While there are numerous difficulties regarding this chapter, due to space constraints, we will limit ourselves to a few observations.

First and foremost, it is not entirely clear why this chapter appears specifically at this juncture of *Nechemia*. One possibility – and this applies to chapter 11 as well – is simply that these lists don't have an obvious home. Since, as we will soon see, the details collected in *Nechemia* chapter 13 are appropriate material with which to conclude the *sefer*, the content of chapters 11 and 12 is placed immediately beforehand. Put differently, lists play a prominent roles in *Ezra-Nechemia*. Those lists that lack an obvious location, instead of simply being omitted entirely, are placed toward the work's end.

The second half of the chapter details all those who participated in the celebratory dedication of Jerusalem's walls. The ceremony, which consisted of trumpet-blowing, recitation of Davidic songs, and marches around the city, closely resembles the celebration in the third chapter of *Ezra*. Buried among the many similarities, however, is a basic difference. In *Nechemia*, the joy is unmitigated. In *Ezra*, as we recall, it is muted by the sobbing of those who had witnessed the First Temple's grandeur. Indeed, the confused emotions clouded Ezra's festivities to the point that Chagai felt compelled to urge the Jews to nonetheless proceed with the rebuilding. Perhaps underscoring this difference is the number of times the term "*simcha*," "joy" appears in each context: five times in our chapter in *Nechemia*, yet only twice in *Ezra*.

What are we to make of these sharp differences? We might simply argue that Nechemia succeeded more fully where Ezra did not. In fact, however, an opposite case can be made. In so many ways, Nechemia completed Ezra's work, bringing security to a fledgling community to which Ezra had already given so much. From this perspective, the similarities may indicate that Nechemia is to be viewed as having brought Ezra's work to a point of greater completion. This may also account for the unusual placement of the inauguration ceremony toward the very end of *Nechemia*. The wall, after all, was completed in *Nechemia* chapters 3-4, which is where we might have expected our chapter would appear. Why does the celebration only appear in the latter part of *Nechemia*'s penultimate chapter? Possibly, the inauguration brings a degree of closure to *Ezra* and *Nechemia*, hinting that we are intended to view the two protagonists as having operated on a continuum.

### **Chapter 13**

Chapter 13 reads almost like Nechemia's valedictory address. He recaps his final activities, each of which carries echoes of issues with which he grappled previously. First, the people read in the Torah that a Jew may not marry an Amonite or Moavite. This leads the Jews to (once again) separate from their gentile wives. Next, upon returning from a trip to visit with Artaxerxes, Nechemia

learns that Toviah, an idolater, has been given an office in the Temple. Nechemia is outraged; he expels Toviah and purifies the office.

Nechemia then hears that the Levites have not been receiving the tithes. Fuming, he castigates the leadership and rectifies the situation. He observes that people are treading on winepresses and engaging in commercial activity on Shabbat. Confronting the Judean nobles, he notes that the Jews' forefathers were punished for precisely such sinful behavior. To remedy the situation, he stations guards outside the city gates to ensure that the gates remain closed throughout Shabbat. After evicting merchants who had been spending Friday nights near the city gates, he appoints Levites to purify themselves and assist in guarding the gates.

He then encounters further intermarriage, and forcibly separates the men from their foreign wives. Finally, he establishes set rotations for the Temple service, wood sacrifices, and first fruit.

A number of items stand out in this final chapter.

First, the verse describes Nechemia's having learned of Toviah's Temple office with the term "*ve-avina*," "and I understood" (13:7). This is consistent with the use of this root in numerous other contexts in *Ezra-Nechemia*, and is consistent with the larger migration in our books toward scholarly and sophisticated political Jewish leadership.

Second, there is a significant emphasis on purity in our chapter, at times not in connection with the Temple. Along similar lines, in an effort to preserve the sanctity of Shabbat, the Levites are summoned to guard not the gates of the Temple, but of Jerusalem. The refashioning of traditional categories confirms the shifting emphases in Jewish life at the close of Nechemia's memoir.

It is also interesting that in emphasizing the forefathers' sins and punishments, Nechemia closely parallels Zekharia's opening admonition that the people not continue the ways of their sinful forefathers (*Zekharia* 1:3-6). This serves to counterbalance the sense that things are shifting dramatically during the sunset of Nechemia's book. Despite all the changes, in the end, the traditional categories of prophetic reward and punishment remain in force.

Taking a step back, we may observe that Nechemia's final chapter not only neatly summarizes many of his major concerns throughout his tenure in Judea, but it also brings his story full circle. Just as at the beginning of his *sefer*, Nechemia is elsewhere and arrives on the scene with decisive action, so too in our chapter, he arrives on the scene and acts decisively regarding the purity of the Temple offices.

At the same time, the differences between the events of *Nechemia* chapter 1 and chapter 13 neatly capture the enormity of the governor's achievements. At the book's opening, there is an existential crisis. The walls of Jerusalem are burnt to the ground, and the community's survival is far from assured. By the *sefer's* end, the wall has been completed and the community's safety secured. Nechemia has turned his attention to matters of ethics (tithes), the Temple, and religious practice (Shabbat and intermarriage).

Also of significance is Nechemia's repeated insistence that he be "remembered for good" (13:14, 22, 29, 31; see also 5:19). The rabbis (*Sanhedrin* 93b) were critical of what they saw as Nechemia's boastful expressions, critiquing him for either inappropriately trumpeting his own actions or for, in chapter 5, having denigrated the behavior of past leaders.

Nechemia's call for recognition touches on another element of our chapter, namely the emphasis on Shabbat observance. There are a number of striking parallels between Nechemia's fight against Shabbat breaches and that of Yirmiyahu in chapter 17 of his book. Moreover, in the first part of that same chapter of *Yirmiyahu*, the prophet explicitly beseeches God to protect him from his mortal enemies. Here too, there are unusual similarities between Nechemia and Yirmiyahu.

This leads us to a novel understanding of the rabbinic critique of Nechemia. Possibly, the rabbis understood that Nechemia was implicitly claiming the mantle of Yirmiyahu, the most reviled of prophets. Nechemia suggests that like Yirmiyahu, he endured tremendous sacrifices in pressing the people to religious obedience. The rabbis, however, viewed Nechemia's comparison unfavorably. They may have felt that there was no room for comparison. Not only did Yirmiyahu suffer far worse than did Nechemia, but he understood that this was his mission from the outset. As a prophet, Yirmiyahu was charged with speaking truth to power, no matter the consequences. By contrast, Nechemia's mission was not merely to critique the people for their shortcomings, but to move them in a positive direction. Thus, the comparison to Yirmiyahu is off the mark, and therefore presumptuous.

While the rabbis' critique is not textually obvious – after all, there is no hint in the text that Nechemia is censured – they do seem to be picking up on an important motif. Despite his stunning successes, if the final chapter is any indication, Nechemia's ultimate legacy is ambiguous. Arguably, Nechemia "protesteth too much." In the end, it is not clear to what extent he truly succeeds in his efforts to address intermarriage, purity, Shabbat, the tithes, and the Temple service. His calls for recognition, in our chapter in particular, seem to mask his limited success. Given Nechemia's remarkable achievements at earlier stages in his book, this is remarkable. For all his accomplishments and efforts, Nechemia concludes his *sefer* with his work incomplete. The battle for the hearts and minds

of the people was destined to continue in *Sefer Malakhi*, a work written some years following Ezra and Nechemia's careers, to which we turn next week.