

**SHIVAT TZION:  
INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETS OF THE RETURN TO ZION**

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**Shiur #04: The Census**

**Summary**

Chapter two of *Ezra*, which runs for an impressive seventy verses, is solely dedicated to a census of those who came on *aliya* from Babylonia to Judea. Tightly structured, the chapter begins by emphasizing that each of the families detailed in the chapter was restored to its original hometown. Next, the chapter lists some of the most prominent returnees, including Zerubavel, Yeshua, Nechemia, Mordekhai, Bilshan,<sup>1</sup> and others. The chapter then lists the returning families in the following order: Israelites (verses 3-35), priests (36-39), Levites, including singers and gatekeepers (40-42), Temple servants (*Netinim*,<sup>2</sup> 43-54) and servants of Shlomo (55-58).

Some families, however, were unable to properly establish their genealogies, either as Jews or as priests. Regarding the families from Tel Melach, Tel Charsha, Keruv Adan, and Imer, who fall under the first category, no resolution to their genealogy is mentioned. Concerning the families of Chavaya, Kotz, and Barzilai, for whom the priestly genealogy was questionable, the governor (“*tirshata*”) determined that they were no longer eligible to partake of the sacrifices until a priest bearing the *Urim Ve-Tumim* appeared to resolve the doubt.

After listing the servants and livestock of the *olim*, the chapter adds that a number of the leaders joined together to contribute gold, silver, and priestly garments toward the rebuilding of the Temple. The chapter concludes by returning to where it started, stressing that the families settled together in their original homes.

**An Overall Impression**

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<sup>1</sup> We will see that according to the Sages, Mordekhai Bilshan is a single name.

<sup>2</sup> The inclusion of the *Netinim*, a group that converted during the days of Yehoshua, likely indicates that by this point they were fully integrated into the Jewish community. This exemplifies the critical importance of fully embracing converts into the Jewish community.

What are we to make of the list? What is its purpose and larger significance? Why does the author of *Ezra* see the need to reach this level of detail in his book? Although we will explore a few possibilities, it is hard to say for certain. What does seem clear is that on the whole, the chapter neatly captures the fundamental tension running throughout all the accomplishments of the *Shivat Tzion* community. While the people's achievements are remarkable, it is always a struggle, achieved against the backdrop of the significant challenges plaguing the community.

This tension runs throughout our chapter. The Jewish return to Zion seventy years after the destruction is nothing short of miraculous. Still, fewer than 50,000 people in total returned, most of whom were lacking in means, leaving the community undermanned and lacking in resources to fend for itself. Our chapter's wide-ranging organizational structure would appear to indicate that Jews of all stripes returned. A closer look, however, reveals that a distressingly low number of Levites came along (341 out of 42,360!). The tight organization implies that all was in order, yet a substantial number of families were unable to prove their Jewishness (652) or priesthood (unstated number). In other words, there were nearly twice as many people who were unable to prove their Jewishness than there were Levites! When viewed alongside the fundamental ambiguity as to the purpose, time frame, and precision of our chapter's list, as we will analyze shortly, it is apparent that the question as to the overall success of the *aliya* is complex and unresolvable.

### **The Nature of the List**

What time period does the list include? It is hard to say. At first glance we might assume that the list covers only the first wave of *aliya* and excludes that of Ezra and Nechemia, just as the remainder of chapters 1-6 in *Ezra* precede the arrival of the two leaders on the Judean scene. This assumption, however, is questionable. The list mentions Nechemia's name, although that could plausibly refer to a different individual by the same name.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, the list of gifts toward the building of the Temple was no longer pertinent by the time of Ezra and Nechemia's arrival, which came after the Temple had been completed, indicating an earlier time frame for the census.

### **Individuals on the List**

As mentioned, the prominent names Zerubavel, Yeshua, Nechemia, and Mordekhai all appear on the list. Notable for its absence is the name Ezra. Interestingly, in the parallel list reproduced in Nechemia chapter seven, a similar name, Azarya, appears. Are Nechemia, Mordekhai, and Azarya the same personalities with which we are familiar?

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<sup>3</sup> See *Da'at Mikra*, p. 9.

With regard to Nechemia, it seems unlikely that they are the same. First, if we maintain that the list was compiled in the earlier generation, Nechemia would by definition be excluded from the list. Moreover, in chapter seven of *Nechemia*, the protagonist procures a copy of the list, which has his name on it. This makes more sense if Nechemia is reading about another individual who lived at an earlier time. Still, it is not implausible that our verse refers to the Nechemia of our book, and this suggestion is followed by at least one major commentator.<sup>4</sup>

A dispute concerning the identity of the character termed the “*tirshata*, governor” may hinge on the question of Nechemia’s appearance on the list. Toward the end of the census, we read that the “*tirshata*” determined that no priest from the families lacking clear genealogies were permitted to partake of the sacrifices. Similarly, we learn that the *tirshata* participated in the leaders’ Temple gift. In *Sefer Nechemia*, Nechemia is termed “the *Tirshata*” (8:9, 10:2). Is Nechemia also the *tirshata* referenced in our chapter? It is not entirely clear, and the question may hinge on whether “Nechemia” is the same Nechemia as the one mentioned in our chapter. Rashi (2:63, s.v. *hatirshata*) identifies him as Nechemia, while R. Mordekhai Zer-Kavod (*Da’at Mikra*, p. 21) proposes Zerubavel as a candidate for the title.

Who was Mordekhai? The Talmud (*Megilla* 15a) asserts that the reference is to Mordekhai of *Megillat Esther*. Moreover, the Talmud asserts that his full name was Mordekhai Bilshan, which alludes to his mastery of the seventy languages as a member of the *Sanhedrin*. This position is adopted by Rashi (2:2, s.v. *Nechemia*) and Ralbag (ibid.). Ibn Ezra (ibid.), however, while accepting that Mordekhai is the same as that of *Esther*, maintains that Bilshan is a different name.

The suggestion that Mordekhai made *aliya*, presumably after the Purim story, is intriguing, but seems quite difficult. It seems unlikely that he would consider leaving the Jewish community of Persia after having been elevated to his position of prominence in Persia. Grappling with this problem, Ralbag hypothesizes that matters had become so desperate in Judea that Mordekhai felt compelled to travel and assist in completing the Temple.

## Genealogical Gaps

The glaring gaps in the community’s genealogical records speak directly to some of the key challenges facing the community: intermarriage, mass ignorance, and the concomitant need to establish religious bona fides.

Significantly, not only did the families experience a doubt in status, but their standing remains ambiguous even by the end of our chapter. Any resolution concerning the status of the families whose Jewishness was in doubt is left unstated. Regarding the families whose priesthood was questionable, while the

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<sup>4</sup> Ralbag 2:2, s.v. *Nechemia*.

governor rules that they may not eat from the sacrifices, the implication is that they may not be entirely disqualified from the priesthood; they might be allowed to eat tithes, for instance. Later on (*Ezra* 8:33, *Nehemiah* 3:3), moreover, they are listed as priestly families, implying that they were not entirely disqualified. Their ambiguous status underscores the sense of ambiguity shot through our entire chapter.

### **Between Our Chapter and *Nehemiah* Chapter Seven**

One of the more unusual aspects of our census is that it is reproduced in whole, with minor variations, in chapter seven of *Nehemiah*. The reasons for the discrepancies – some names are different, and some of the amounts differ somewhat – are the subject of some discussion. Rashi (*Nehemiah* 7:7, s.v. *eleh*) claims that the details are not essential; the larger sketch is what is most critical, and so the conflicts are immaterial. Ibn Ezra (7:6, s.v. *eleh*) similarly suggests that the numbers are rounded off, and therefore not fully aligned. Others suggest that there were two slightly different traditions as to the counting, reflected in the differences between the documents. Either way, the questions swirling around the precise numbers – and whether or not they matter – once again highlights the uncertainties clouding the nascent community. As we will see in our study of the next chapter, mixed feelings will continue to mark the achievements of the *Shivat Tzion* community.