

**SHIVAT TZION:
INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETS OF THE RETURN TO ZION
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Shiur #14: *Ezra* Chapter 8: *Ezra's* Journey

Summary

Ezra chapter 8 begins with a list of those who traveled with Ezra from Babylon to Judea. Ezra gathers the people at the Ahava River for three days, and notes that no Levites were present. He therefore sends emissaries to collect “assistants for God’s house” (8:17). They manage to persuade two extended families to join, totaling thirty-eight Levites who came on the journey.

Before setting out, Ezra calls for a fast to beseech God to ensure a safe journey. This was necessary because he had specifically opted not to request army accompaniment, which would have undercut his explanation to Artaxerxes that “the benevolent care of our God is upon all those who seek Him, while His fierce anger is against all those who forsake Him” (8:22). Ezra ensures that the travelers transport the silver, gold, and vessels that the king had commanded.

They leave for Jerusalem on the twelfth of Nissan, and, thanks to God’s guiding hand, arrive safely in the holy city. They encamp for three days, after which they deliver all the gold, silver, and vessels to the Temple. The precise amounts of the delivery are recorded. The returnees offer burnt sacrifices in the Temple. They hand the royal edicts to the local governors, who implement the instructions properly by supporting the newly arrived immigrants.

The Levites

Why did the Levites originally decline to participate in the journey to Judea? It is worth adding that this is not the only context in *Ezra* in which the Levites are underrepresented. In chapter 2, which details those who came on *aliya*, only 341 out of over 42,000 people listed were Levites. Why did the Levites return in such miniscule numbers?

Theories abound. Some have suggested that there were socio-economic factors at play that made it difficult for the Levites to travel. (Recall that the Levites were ideally intended to be supported by the tithes, not their own labor. When, with the exile, *ma’aser* was no longer available, the Levites may have struggled to develop economic skills to become self-sustaining.) Alternatively,

some have proposed that the Levites experienced profound depression after the exile. *Tehillim* 137, “*Al naharot Bavel*,” graphically describes the abject misery of the exilic community members, who refuse to “play the song of the Lord on foreign soil” (137:4). Since the Levites played music in the Temple, some have argued that a Levite authored this particular Psalm. If so, perhaps the Levites returned in small numbers due to their depression over the destruction.¹

A more compelling explanation requires some background. In truth, it is possible to trace a wider decline of the Levites during the First Temple period. *Divrei Ha-Yamim II* (11:13-14) records that after Yeravam ben Nevat established the northern temples, the Levites were replaced by Yeravam’s clerics and forced to relocate to Judea. Although it is unclear to what extent they did or did not integrate with the Judean community, the verses emphasize the sense of dislocation, stressing that “the Levites had left their pasturelands and their holdings and had set out for Judah and Jerusalem.”

Furthermore, Yechezkel suggests that due to sins, all Levites with the exception of the Tzadok family were stripped of their rights to *teruma*: “This consecrated area shall be for the priests of the line of Tzadok, who kept My charge and did not go astray, as the Levites did when the people of Israel went astray” (*Yechezkel* 48:11). As R. Mordekhai Zer-Kavod notes, it is plausible that the Levites did not ascend because they feared joining Ezra, who was descended from the Tzadokites (*Ezra* 7:2).

Indeed, it likely is not coincidental that the decline of the Levites continues during the Second Temple period, to the point that they almost completely assimilate during that era.²

Evaluating Ezra’s Trip

By many measures, Ezra’s journey is a resounding success. With God’s help, he earns the support of the king. He convinces Jewish leaders to accompany him (7:28). Perhaps as a sign of this achievement, the first fourteen verses of chapter 8 list these prominent individuals and their families. His fast and prayer are apparently effective, and his group arrives safely in Jerusalem. After carefully appointing the priests as stewards of the gold, silver, and other materials, those items are delivered safely and precisely accounted for in the Temple.

Despite his successes, though, Ezra confronts significant challenges along the way. The Levites, as discussed, at first are a no-show. Although they ultimately accede and participate, their hesitation leaves a bitter taste. According

¹ Rashi (*Kiddushin* 69b, s.v. *ve-avina*) claims that there were Levites who made *aliya*, but they were unable to play music properly in the Temple due to the injury to their thumbs.

² There is a large body of evidence attesting to the decline of the Levites during the Second Temple period. See Cana Werman, *Dead Sea Discoveries* 4:2, “Levi and Levites in the Second Temple Period,” pp. 214-15.

to the Talmud (*Yevamot* 86b), Ezra penalized the Levites, requiring them to forfeit their right to the Temple tithes.³

Later on in our chapter, Ezra notes that he was required to pray for safety on his trip because he “was embarrassed” to ask the king for protection. By contrast, upon Nechemia’s *aliya*, the latter receives military accompaniment throughout his travels. Although it is difficult to know whether Ezra erred in refraining from making the request, one gets the sense that he demonstrates a certain tentativeness in his interactions with the king. Of course, this is to be expected; as opposed to Nechemia, who was the Artaxerxes’ cup-bearer, Ezra enjoyed no prior relationship with Artaxerxes. In fact, even Nechemia was anxious before approaching the king to request a leave of absence from his responsibilities as butler. Still, one gets the sense that Ezra the scholar is out of his element in making direct requests of the king.

That our protagonist is not fully prepared for the challenges awaiting him becomes evident in chapter 9. Almost immediately after arriving, Ezra learns that intermarriage is rampant among the Jews. He expresses shock, rending his clothing and hair, and sitting alone for the remainder of the day. It is as if he came to save “the *treife medina*,” as America was once called, only to find the country even less kosher than he could have possibly imagined. Similarly, in chapter 10, the Jews consent to separate from their gentile wives, but decline to do so immediately because it is about to rain outside. This excuse comes off as a rationalization, but there is little that Ezra can offer in the way of a response.

To be clear, this is far from a criticism of Ezra, but rather a realistic portrait as to the sort of realpolitik problems facing the heroic scholar who had given up everything to inspire a far-flung Jewish community. Indeed, as noted in our previous *shiur*, scholarship and intellectual achievement are emphasized throughout chapters 7-8. Ezra is identified as a “remarkable scholar” (7:6) and as one who “had dedicated himself to study the teaching of the Lord so as to observe it, and to teach laws and rules to Israel” (7:10). The king’s letter is termed “the letter which King Artaxerxes gave to Ezra the priest-scribe, a scholar in matters concerning the commandments of the Lord and His laws to Israel” (7:11).

In describing Ezra’s observation that no Levites were present, the verse records that Ezra “analyzed the nation (*ve-avina ba-am*)” (8:15). One of the Levites who was convinced to join is described by Ezra as an “*ish sekhel*,” “a man of intellect” (8:18). Upon discovering the extent of the intermarriage crisis, Ezra retires with the elders “to study the matter” (*le-daryosh ha-davar*) (10:16). The ubiquity of the intellect is consistent with Ezra’s area of expertise,

³ It appears, however, that by the time of Nechemia, the decree was no longer in force. See *Nechemia* 10:38. This apparent contradiction is the subject of a substantial literature among the commentaries.

underscoring some of the difficulties the scholar was destined to confront, as well as his remarkable scholarship and talents.

Ultimately, the fact that Ezra was compelled to face a series of challenges extending him beyond his scholarly expertise serves to highlight the extent of his self-sacrifice. It is his willingness to abandon the comforts of his diaspora home to teach Torah to a far-flung, ignorant community – in short, his *shelichut* – that is the mark of his heroism.