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ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)  
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**SHIVAT TZION:**  
**INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETS OF THE RETURN TO ZION**  
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**Shiur #01: Background**

The Jews' return to Israel from Babylonian exile is one of the Bible's least studied yet most fascinating stories. The striking similarities to contemporary Jewish life are ubiquitous: the return to Zion, assimilation and intermarriage, antisemitism, political jockeying, the importance of intelligence for securing the community's security, a mass repentance movement, and the ambiguity of a partial redemption, to name just a few.

This series attempts to shine a spotlight on this period by closely examining the major biblical works written during this period: *Ezra-Nechemia*, *Chagai*, *Zekharia* and *Malakhi*. The sum total of these books paints a rich portrait of the returnees' immense struggles and impressive resiliency. The works also call attention to the transformative leadership of Ezra and Nechemia, whose contrasting yet complementary activities have left an indelible mark upon both the religious and political courses of Jewish history.

**The Biblical Background**

Before outlining the eventful timeline of *Shivat Tzion*, we must first review the backdrop against which its events unfolded. The book of *Melakhim* summarizes the final stages in the destruction of Judea and the First Temple. Eighteen years earlier, Nevukhadnetzar had ascended the throne and Babylon had arisen as an international superpower. The sinful Judean king Yehoyakim served the Babylonian emperor for three years, after which he fomented a rebellion. The uprising was quashed and Yehoyakim was dethroned.

Soon afterward Yehoyakhin, the penultimate king of the First Commonwealth, was banished from Jerusalem along with the upper crust of the Jewish community. Nevukhadnetzar lay siege to Jerusalem during the ninth year of the reign of Tzidkiyahu, the Commonwealth's final monarch. During his eleventh year the Babylonians breached Jerusalem's walls on the ninth of Tamuz,<sup>1</sup> executed the king's children and blinded and exiled Tzidkiyahu. Led by

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<sup>1</sup> See also *Yirmiyahu* 52:6. The Mishna in *Ta'anit* (4:6), however, records that we fast on the seventeenth of Tamuz because the city walls were breached on that date. This appears to contradict outright the biblical verses. The Babylonian Talmud (*Ta'anit* 28b) answers that the Mishna refers to the walls of the Second Temple. Because both calamities transpired in the same

General Nevuzaradan, the Babylonian army ravaged the Temple in the nineteenth year of Nevukhadnetzar's reign, beginning on the seventh day of Av.<sup>2</sup> The commander exiled the majority of the remaining population, leaving behind only the poorest of Jews. Gedalia was appointed governor of Judea but was quickly assassinated by the power-hungry Yishmael. The possibility of a substantial ongoing Jewish presence in Jerusalem, never mind redemption, seemed beyond reach.

## The Jews in Exile

What transpired for the Jews who had been exiled? It's difficult to know for sure. The majority seem to have diffused throughout the Babylonian empire. One thing seems clear: the prospect of a speedy return to Israel must have seemed remote. Little remained of the Judean community. And the Jews in Babylonia were treated relatively well; Evil Merodakh, who ruled after Nevukhadnetzar, had freed Yehoyakhin from prison and allowed him to eat at the emperor's table for the remainder of his life. Although Babylonia was usurped by Persia as the major international superpower some fifty years after the destruction, the Persian rulers' relatively liberal attitude toward religious minorities would seem to imply that, on the whole, the Jewish community was relatively secure. All of this gave reason for some confidence in the future of the exilic community. The Judean community, however, seemed destined for desolation.

Only one source of potential optimism remained. Yirmiyahu, the prophet of doom who was spurned by his people, had predicted that within just seventy years of the *churban* (destruction) the Babylonian Empire would be humbled and the Jews restored to their homeland. By closely examining the details of Yirmiyahu's prophecy we can more fully appreciate the context of the events of *Shivat Tzion*, especially the Persian king Cyrus' command to return and rebuild the Temple.

## The Seventy Years

Although Yirmiyahu had rejected outright the false prophets' claim that the Babylonians would be swept from power in just two years' time, Yirmiyahu did predict that the empire would be humbled in the not-too-distant future:

Thus said the Lord of hosts... This whole land shall remain a desolate ruin. And those nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. When the seventy years are over, I will punish the king of Babylon and

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month, we commemorate both events by fasting on the seventeenth. The Jerusalem Talmud (*Taanit* 4:5) offers a remarkable resolution, claiming that in fact the First Temple's walls were also breached on the seventeenth of Tamuz, but the Jews were so confused by the traumatic events that they mistakenly recorded the events as having taken place on the ninth.

<sup>2</sup> *Yirmiyahu* (52:12) gives the date as the tenth of Av. To resolve the contradiction, the Talmud (*Ta'anit* 29a) explains that whereas the outer walls of the Temple were destroyed beginning on 7 Av, the Sanctuary began burning on the ninth and was completely destroyed by the tenth.

that nation and the land of the Chaldeans for their sins, declares the Lord, and I will make it a desolation for all time. (*Yirmiyahu* 25:8-12)

A few chapters later, Yirmiyahu had prophesied that not only will Babylonia be destroyed at the end of seventy years, but the Jews will be restored to their homeland:

For thus said the Lord: When Babylon's seventy years are over, I will take note of you, and I will bring you My promise of favor – to bring you back to this place. (*ibid.*, 29:10)

In the two prophecies we have cited Yirmiyahu utilizes similar language – “thus said the Lord,” “when the seventy years are over” (*melot shiv'im shana*), and “I will take note” (*efkod*). In doing so, the prophet underscores that the predictions of Babylonia's fall and the Jews' restoration are two sides of the same coin. In seventy years' time, the former shall fall and the latter shall rise.

Building on Yirmiyahu's comforting prognostication, *Divrei Ha-yamim* picks up on the seventy years prediction:

[The king] exiled to Babylon those who survived the sword, and they became his and his sons' servants till the rise of the Persian kingdom, in fulfillment of the word of the Lord spoken by Yirmiyahu, until the land paid back its Sabbaths; as long as it lay desolate it kept Sabbath, till seventy years were completed. (II *Divrei Ha-yamim* 36:20-21)

The author of *Divrei Ha-yamim* builds on Yirmiyahu's prophecy along multiple axes. First, he implies that the land of Israel must lie fallow in recompense for the Jews' having violated the laws of the Sabbatical year. This follows Moshe's rebuke in *Vayikra*, in which he threatens that the land will “become a desolation... making up for its Sabbath years throughout the time that it is desolate and you are in the land of your enemies” (*Vayikra* 26:33-34). The seventy years are seen as an instance of preordained divine retribution.

Second, he suggests that the establishment of the Persian Empire marked the conclusion of the seventy years. The end of *Divrei Ha-yamim* and opening verses of *Ezra*, which are nearly identical to one another, confirm the point: “In the first year of the King Cyrus of Persia, when the word of the Lord spoken by Yirmiyahu was fulfilled, the Lord roused the spirit of Cyrus.” The authors of both *Divrei Ha-yamim* and *Ezra*<sup>3</sup> clearly understood Cyrus' call to have been a fulfillment of Yirmiyahu's prophecy.

## The Elusive Search for the Seventy Years

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<sup>3</sup> Many scholars ascribe the same authorship to both works. For a synopsis of this view, see H.G.M. Williamson, *Ezra and Nehemiah (Word Biblical Commentary)*, Waco, 1985, pp. 37-8.

Still, what was evident in retrospect was likely elusive to the Jews living in exile under Babylonian rule. After all, Yirmiyahu never had specified the precise date from which the seventy years were to be counted. Was it from the date he delivered his prophecies? (Were his two prophecies even delivered on the same date? There is no way of knowing.) From the exile of Yehoyakhin and the upper class? From the rise of Babylonia as an international superpower? From the destruction of the Temple proper? All these possibilities – and more – must have been live possibilities.

The ambiguity seems to have vexed even the prophet Daniel. In the ninth chapter of his book, Daniel, who, like Ezekiel, prophesied in the Babylonian exile, queried God about the precise calculation of the date:

In the first year of Darius son of Achashverosh, of Median descent, who was made king over the kingdom of the Chaldeans: In the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, consulted the books concerning the number of years that, according to the word of the Lord that had come to Yirmiyahu the prophet, were to be the term of Jerusalem's desolation: seventy years. (*Daniel* 9:1)

Daniel, whose prophecies<sup>4</sup> explore in great detail the dates of the redemption, was nonetheless uncertain as to the timing of the seventy years' expiration. Flummoxed, he "consulted the books" – commentators debate whether he simply speculated or consulted Yirmiyahu's and others' recorded prophecies as part of his research – and turned to God in prayer. As part of his search for understanding, Daniel proceeded to pour out his soul in heartfelt confession of the Jews' sins.

What was the cause of Daniel's desperate plea? According to many commentaries, it was an inaccurate calculation.<sup>5</sup> According to Daniel's judgment, the seventy years had passed and yet the Temple had not been rebuilt. Abravanel adds that Daniel feared that the Jews' sins had caused God to delay the restoration. Even a prophet who specialized in obscure predictions thus proved incapable of accurately interpreting Yirmiyahu's prophecy.

What is more, as is often the case in *Daniel*, the divine response is exceedingly difficult to make out. The angel Gavriel explains to the prophet:

Seventy weeks [*shavuim shivim*] have been decreed for your people and your holy city until the measure of transgression is filled and that of sin complete, until iniquity is expiated, and eternal righteousness ushered in; and the prophetic vision ratified, and the Holy of Holies anointed. You must know and understand: From the issuance of the word to restore and

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<sup>4</sup> There is some discussion as to whether Daniel was in fact a prophet. See *Megilla* 3a, Rashi (ibid. s.v. *de-inhu*), *Guide of the Perplexed* 2:45, Ramban to *Bereishit* 18:1 and Ibn Ezra to *Daniel* 9:2, *Shir Ha-shirim* 6:5 and *Kohelet* 5:1.

<sup>5</sup> Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Metzudat David and Malbim to *Daniel* 9:2.

rebuild Jerusalem until the tie of the anointed leader is seven weeks; and for sixty-two weeks it will be rebuilt, square and moat, but in a time of distress. And after those sixty-two weeks, the anointed one will disappear and vanish. (*Daniel* 9:24-26)

So much in these verses is unclear, beginning with the reference to *shavuim shivim*. The medieval commentaries understand that the reference is in fact not to seventy weeks but seventy Sabbatical cycles of seven years each, yielding 490 years. This refers to the seventy years of exile, followed by the 420 years during which the Second Temple stood. The difficulty with this approach is that the consensus of modern scholarship, as we will see next week, is that the Second Temple stood for roughly 586 years, not 420. Others understand the phrase literally, rendering seven periods of seventy weeks, but it is difficult to account for the meaning of this period of time. Whatever the significance of Daniel's obscure vision, we can be sure of one thing: the date that Yirmiyahu's prophecy was to be fulfilled was utterly opaque and eluded even the greatest of contemporary prophets during the period of the exile.

Intriguingly, the Talmud (*Megilla* 11b-12a), in addition to suggesting that Daniel erred in his accounting, adds that multiple gentile kings made mistakes as well. Belshatzar, the final emperor of Babylonia, believed that the seventy years had expired during his reign. When he saw that the time had come and gone, he decided to remove the Temple vessels that had been captured by Nevukhadnetzar and eat and drink from them. Achashverosh similarly erred and made use of the vessels in the opening chapter of *Esther*.

The ambiguity surrounding Yirmiyahu's prophecy is manifest in yet another way among the commentaries. A number of years after Cyrus' proclamation, *Zekharia* records that an angel demands of God:

O Lord of hosts! How long will you withhold pardon from Jerusalem and the towns of Judah, which you placed under a curse seventy years ago? (*Zekharia* 1:12)

This would appear to suggest that the seventy years had not yet been completed, which would contradict *Ezra's* apparent assertion that the seventy years prophesied by Yirmiyahu had come to a close. Furthermore, many note that the Second Temple was completed some seventy years following the former's destruction. (Cyrus' call took place fifty-two years after the destruction and eighteen prior to the completion of the Temple.) This led numerous commentaries (e.g., Rashi, *Ezra* 1:1) to suggest that there were in fact two periods of seventy years: from Yehoyakim's exile until Cyrus' call, and, eighteen years later, from the destruction of the First Temple to the completion of the Second. The suggestion that Yirmiyahu alluded to multiple counts of seventy underscores the utter opacity of the prophet's prediction.

Ultimately, as noted, it will become clear that Cyrus was the king who finally fulfilled Yirmiyahu's prophecy – at least the first count of seventy. Still, the mystery shrouding the end of the seventy years heightens the dramatic irony in the opening of *Ezra*. Preferring to believe the conveniently optimistic message of the false prophets, the people who had been expelled to Babylonia had not fully anticipated the destruction. Those who did arrive were traumatized and had little meaningful hope of redemption. While Yirmiyahu had predicted that the Temple would be rebuilt in relatively short order, it wasn't entirely clear when exactly it would be rebuilt, by whom and how. There was no meaningful plan in place for a return to Zion. The Jews were just becoming comfortable in their new surroundings as they received news of Cyrus' proclamation. And so when Cyrus did issue his proclamation, relatively few heeded the call. The majority remained in their relatively comfortable environment and continued to "multiply there... and seek the welfare of the city to which" they were exiled (*Yirmiyahu* 29:6-7). As we will see, those who did return were reproached by Chagai and Zekharia for their apathy, and required constant goading and emphatic leadership to finally complete the Temple.

It is against this backdrop of unanticipated trauma, unmitigated disaster, renewed comfort and prophetic uncertainty that the period of *Shivat Tzion* was ushered in. These challenges, and the overall sense of ambivalence, continued to plague the returnees.

With this prophetic and historical background in mind, we are now almost ready to turn to the book of *Ezra*. First, however, we must tackle a complex topic, but one that is essential for a proper understanding of *Shivat Tzion*: the chronology of Persian kings and the problem of the "missing 150 years" in the rabbinic chronology. Once we have established a reasonable set of working assumptions regarding the basic facts of our time period, we will be able to jump into the book of *Ezra* and the first flowerings of the return to Zion.