

**SHIVAT TZION:  
INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETS OF THE RETURN TO ZION  
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**Shiur #12: Ezra Chapters 5-6: The Pesach Sacrifice**

**Summary**

Chapter 5 of *Ezra* opens with a reference to Chagai and Zekharia's role in supporting the Temple project:

Then the prophets, Chagai the prophet and Zekharia son of Ido, prophesied to the Jews in Jerusalem, inspired by the God of Israel. Thereupon, Zerubavel son of Shealtiel and Yeshua son of Yehotzadak began rebuilding the House of God in Jerusalem, with the full support of the prophets of God. (5:1-2)

The nature of the prophets' "full support" is not immediately clear. We will return to these verses later in our discussion.

Chapters 5 and 6 proceed to relate another back-and-forth in the political chess match between the Jews and the indigenous population. The Jews restart the construction, only to be met with opposition. This time it is Tatenai, the local governor, and Shetar Bozenai who attempt to obstruct the returnees' progress. After interrogating the Jews as to who had granted them permission to build, the provocateurs dispatch a letter of complaint to King Darius. It becomes clear from the letter's content that the Jewish community had responded to Tatenai and Shetar Bozenai by invoking the precedent of Cyrus' decree. This is a savvy response; it is truthful, yet conveniently sidesteps the fact that another king, Artaxerxes, had subsequently commanded that the Jews halt all construction. Apparently, the Jews are willing to bet that Darius is ignorant of Artaxerxes' decree, and, having been pointed in the direction of Cyrus' command, will find the official record of the kings' original edict (recall the Persian government's commitment to accurate record-keeping).

The Jews' wager pays off. Not only does Darius locate Cyrus' letter and support the Jews' right to continue building, he rules that Tatenai must provide animals, wheat, salt, wine, and oil for the Temple sacrifices. The governor and his colleagues, seeing their maneuver backfire, grudgingly carry out the king's command. The Temple is finally completed more than four years later, on the 30<sup>th</sup> of Adar, during the sixth year of Darius' reign. The Jews celebrate the inauguration by offerings hundreds of sacrifices – not only burnt offerings, as they

had done in chapter 3, but sin-offerings as well. They then appoint the priests and Levites to their roles as taught in “the book of Moshe” (6:18).

Finally, after purifying themselves, the “returned exiles” offer the Pesach sacrifice on the 14<sup>th</sup> of Nissan. Both those who had returned from exile and those who had remained behind in Judea partake of the Pesach. They joyously celebrate the seven-day holiday, acknowledging that God had turned the heart of the king “so as to give them support in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel” (6:22).

### **Chagai and Zekharia**

Let us begin with a brief note regarding the activity of Chagai and Zekharia. Interestingly, the verses imply that the prophets played an active role in building the Temple. What exactly does this mean? Malbim (5:2) seems to suggest that the two prophets were instrumental merely by urging the populace to build. Rashi (ibid., s.v. *ve-sarav*), on the other hand, seems to take the verse at face value: the prophets practiced what they preached, rolling up their sleeves and doing some heavy lifting. On Rashi’s reading, this is a remarkable model of leadership. As prophets, Chagai and Zekharia easily could have excused themselves from dirtying their hands. Their commitment to personally engage in the construction demonstrates their passionate commitment to the reconstruction and their outstanding leadership qualities.

### **The Pesach Sacrifice**

The Pesach is perhaps the most puzzling element in these two chapters. We will pose four questions concerning the ceremony and offer a resolution.

First, the entire emphasis on the sacrifice seems extraneous. After all, the true celebration takes place with the inauguration described in the verses immediately beforehand. Second, the emphasis on the people’s purification seems similarly extraneous. What difference does it make that they were able to purify themselves in time to offer the Pesach on the 14<sup>th</sup> of Nissan? Isn’t the primary point of our narrative that the Jews had completed the Temple? The matter of ritual purity seems beside the point.

Third, it is bizarre that Darius is referred to here as an Assyrian king. This is patently false; Darius – like Cyrus, Artaxerxes, and Achashveirosh – was Persian. Why does our verse misidentify the emperor? Finally, the verses emphasize twice that it was the exiled Jews who brought the sacrifice. Of what relevance is their place of origin?

R. Mordekhai Zer-Kavod (*Da’at Mikra*) suggests that to properly appreciate our passage, we must turn to a strikingly similar Pesach celebration outlined in chapter 30 of *Divrei Ha-Yamim II*. King Chizkiya sends letters to the Jews inviting them to participate in a massive Pesach sacrifice. That offering,

however, could only be sacrificed during the month of Iyar, because the people were unprepared to offer the sacrifice in Nissan. They offered the Pesach in Iyar despite the fact that many Jews refused to participate. Moreover, among those who did participate, many were impure. Nonetheless, Chizkiya went ahead with the sacrifice, praying that “the good Lord will provide atonement” (ibid., 30:18). The people went on to celebrate Pesach with great joy for seven days. They added yet another seven-day period of celebration, offering 1,000 bulls and 7,000 sheep. A similar celebration had not taken place since the days of Shlomo. In the following chapter, the Jews go on to abandon their idols and recommit themselves to monotheistic practice.

Of course, there are significant differences between our Pesach and that of Chizkiya. The returnees were able to offer the Pesach during the first month, while Chizkiya’s generation could do so only in the second. In *Ezra*, the celebration lasted for seven days, in *Divrei Ha-Yamim* for fourteen. The number of sacrifices offered by the Second Temple community far outnumbered those of the Judeans.

Still, the similarities between the two episodes are self-evident and striking. They include: the central role of official letters in the narrative; the importance of a king (gentile or Jewish) in facilitating the event; sheer joy; an ongoing celebration of “*Chag Ha-Matzot*” (Holiday of Unleavened Bread) for seven days; the emphasis on the central role played by the priests and Levites in the celebration; the sacrifice of enormous numbers of bulls and sheep in celebration of the occasion; and the root “*darash*,” seek out in worship, which appears in both stories (*Ezra* 6:21; *Divrei Ha-Yamim II* 30:19).

The affinities enable us to resolve two of the questions we noted above. First, we wondered why Ezra refers to the Jews as returnees from the exile. In light of the passage in *Divrei Ha-Yamim*, we may suggest that Ezra picks up on Chizkiya’s assertion that if the Jews repent, God will return the remnant that has fled from Assyria. To accentuate the connection between the two historic Pesach celebrations, the author of Ezra goes out of his way to incorporate similar language. Second, Chizkiya refers to the Assyrian kings as the enemy. Picking up on this, Ezra refers to the Persian king as Assyrian, which is accurate in the sense that the Persians were heirs to the Assyrian/Babylonian empire, the savior whose heart “was inclined” by God toward the Jewish People. Again, to emphasize the connection between the narratives, *Ezra* intentionally borrows the language of *Divrei Ha-Yamim* in telling its story.

These remarkable resemblances buttress the theory that *Ezra-Nechemia* is a continuation of *Divrei Ha-Yamim*. Of course, the concerns of idolatry are no longer pertinent during *Shivat Tzion*; there is no need for the Jews to discard their idols. Nevertheless, the story of *Ezra* to this point – recall that Ezra himself has still not arrived on the scene six chapters into the book – is that of a community guided by Zerubavel, a scion of the Davidic dynasty, just as Chizkiya inspired his generation to participate in a religious revolution.

Both episodes, moreover, indicate the religious potential of even the most sinful and uneducated of communities. The Jews of Chizkiya's time were largely recalcitrant, to the point that many refused to participate in the sacrifice and celebration. At the time of *Ezra*, the Jews were similarly unobservant. Yet both communities were swayed, even transformed, under the influence of extraordinary events and historic leadership. Our narratives are testaments to the deep religious recesses of the Jews' soul, and the capacity of inspired leaders to spark that passion.

### **Coming Full Circle**

In many respects, the chapter's conclusion brings full circle the book's first six chapters. On a textual and thematic level, the reference to the Jews who "separated themselves from the uncleanness of the nations of the lands to worship [*le-drosh*] the God of Israel" (6:21) corresponds to the stated desire of the Samaritans to "build with you, for we too worship [*nidrosh*] your God" (4:1). The Jews have counteracted their foes' schemes and fulfilled the prophets' political (building) and spiritual (sacrifices and religious revival) charges. As a result, instead of being coerced to worship alongside nations whose true intention was to undermine their work, the Jews manage to dissociate from these idolatrous groups and worship independently.

The final words of chapter six return us to the beginning. The Jews rejoice because "God had swayed the monarch's heart" to support them "in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel" (6:22). This verse echoes Cyrus' original decree: "Anyone of you of all His people – may His God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem that is in Judah and build the house of the Lord God of Israel" (1:3). *Ezra's* opening act has come full circle: although the Jews deserve tremendous credit for having listened to their prophets, ironically, it is ultimately due to gentile kings that the community has come this far.