

**SHIVAT TZION:
INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETS OF THE RETURN TO ZION
By Rav Tzvi Sinensky**

Shiur #18: Nechemia's Fateful Request (*Nechemia* chap. 2)

Summary

During the month of *Nissan* in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes' reign, some five months after he had been approached with the worrisome news about the sorry state of Jerusalem, Nechemia was serving wine before the king. While Nechemia was generally in positive spirits, on this particular day the king noticed that Nechemia did not look well. Artaxerxes asked Nechemia if something was the matter, suggesting that Nechemia harbored an "ill heart," an allusion to treacherous intentions.¹ Frightened, Nechemia answered honestly: "May the king live forever! How should I not look bad when the city of the graveyard of my ancestors lies in ruins, and its gates have been consumed by fire?" The king responded, "What is your request?" After praying to God, Nechemia asked to be sent to the city and rebuild it. With the "*sheigal*" (queen)² sitting alongside, the king asked Nechemia how long the journey would take. Nechemia gave the king a time frame, although his exact response is not recorded. Nechemia pressed further, requesting letters granting him passage to the other side of the river, as well as timber to be given him by Asaf to rebuild the walls. Nechemia concluded that "the king gave me these, thanks to my God's benevolent care for me" (2:8). In addition to all the items he had requested, Nechemia received accompanying officers and cavalry for the journey.

Even before Nechemia had arrived, Sanbalat and Tovia, the Jews' enemies, had heard about his arrival and expressed deep concerns. He arrived safely, however, and remained in Jerusalem for three days before beginning his activity. On the third night, he secretly arose early with a small number of men

¹ Rashi 2:2, s.v. *ein* and other commentaries.

² The commentaries discuss the significance of this term. Ibn Ezra and Ralbag read the word as alluding to sexual behavior, meaning that her role was primarily to be available for physical intimacy. Rashi and Metzudat David, on the other hand, seem to maintain that *sheigal* is a term for the queen. *Da'at Mikra* similarly notes that in Assyrian, the *sheigal* is the primary queen. Malbim offers a remarkable suggestion of his own. Following *Chazal's* view that Esther was Artaxerxes' mother, he suggests that the *sheigal* was none other than Esther herself (!). Due to her love for her people, Esther was instrumental in swaying the king to respond positively to Nechemia's sensitive request. Needless to say, this interpretation is highly innovative and is inconsistent with the scholarly chronology.

and toured the city walls. While conducting his survey, he was compelled to dismount the animal he was riding, enabling him to complete the tour. Upon returning, Nechemia exclaimed to the leadership, “You see the bad state we are in. Jerusalem is lying in ruins and its gates are destroyed by fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem and suffer no more disgrace” (2:17). After he told them of God’s benevolence and the king’s command, the people were inspired to follow Nechemia’s lead.

When they heard about Nechemia’s plan, the Jews’ enemies mocked the people: “What is this that you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?” (2:19). Nechemia had none of it, responding bluntly that God will ensure the Jews’ success. Others will simply have no share in the city of Jerusalem.

Nechemia’s Approach to Artaxerxes

A number of important points may be noted about Nechemia’s approach to the king. First, it is interesting to observe that Nechemia waits five months before making his request of the ruler. This is especially interesting when we consider that Nechemia had already prayed to God, intending to make some sort of request from Artaxerxes. Moreover, Nechemia’s request does not seem to be planned; he only asks once the king inquires what is wrong, at which point Nechemia has no choice but to explain his dour expression.

It is unclear why Nechemia waits to ask. It seems most likely that his hesitancy stems from anxiety. After all, he has no idea what sort of response his request will provoke. There is good reason to suspect that Nechemia even feared that his life might be on the line. Indeed, this concern is borne out by Artaxerxes’ immediate response, in which he essentially accuses Nechemia of plotting the king’s assassination.

Despite his fears, once Nechemia begins his request, his political savvy is on full display. He opens with the obligatory, “May the king live forever” (2:3), and “If it please the king, and if your servant has found favor with you” (2:5). Framing his request as primarily personal – “send me to Judah, the city of my ancestors’ graves” (ibid.) – he avoids the impression that he intends to build an independent society that might be less than fully subject to the empire’s authority. He gives the king a concrete time frame rather than leaving his trip open-ended. Only after seeing the king’s receptiveness to the request does he press further, asking for letters and timber. Not only are these requests granted, but it seems that the king “throws in” additional accompanying officers, a request that had not been granted to Ezra during his *aliya*.

Nechemia and Esther

Upon reading our chapter, the similarities between our story and that of Esther’s approach to Achashverosh are immediately apparent. Both Nechemia and Esther find themselves in positions of major influence with a Persian king,

and they both decide to act for fear for the Jewish community's enemies in a "bira" (Jerusalem or Shushan). Each experiences tremendous trepidation before approaching the monarch. Fasting and prayer play a key role for both in the run-up to their fateful encounters with the king. Both also wait a certain period of time before approaching the king (Nechemia five months, Esther three days).

The word "melekh" is ubiquitous in both stories, appearing over 200 times throughout *Megillat Esther* and fifteen times in the space of just nine verses in chapter 1 of *Nechemia*. The king's wife appears to play an important role in both stories. Both Esther and Nechemia frame their request in terms of their personal connection to their heritage: Nechemia emphasizes that Jerusalem is the city of his ancestors' graves, and Esther stresses that she and her people have been sold to destruction.

Moreover, on a textual level, there are obvious resemblances. The king asks, "What do you request" (*Nechemia* 2:4, *Esther* 5:3,6), and the petitioner responds with the language "im al ha-melekh tov," "if it is good for the king" (*Nechemia* 2:5,7; *Esther* 5:4,8). In each case, formal proclamations play key roles in promulgating the king's positive response. Finally, in both stories the danger from the enemy is not completely eliminated merely on the basis of the king's decree.

What are we to make of these striking similarities? Three observations may be offered.

First, the larger picture that emerges is one of appreciation for the support of the Persian monarchs. As opposed to the Babylonians, the Persian kings were supportive toward the Jews and ensured their security. Cyrus, Darius, Artaxerxes, and, ultimately, even the knave Achashverosh were critically important in ensuring the security and success of the Jewish communities under their rule.

Second, Esther, who lived shortly before Nechemia, is presented as a model for later Jewish leaders. Nechemia is following not only in the footsteps of Moshe, Aaron, David, and Shlomo, all of whom his prayer invokes in chapter 1, but also Esther. Esther is not merely the hero of her own work; she casts a wide shadow over the entire era of *Shivat Tzion*.

In what respect does Nechemia follow her model? One might argue that Esther's greatest legacy is her personal commitment to sacrificial national service. At the key juncture in the *Megilla*, Esther answers Mordekhai's call to leadership:

Do not imagine that you, of all the Jews, will escape with your life by being in the king's palace. On the contrary, if you keep silent in this crisis, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter, while you and

your father's house will perish. And who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis. (*Esther* 4:13-14)

In many respects, Nechemia (along with Ezra) lived his life in Esther's image. He too, time and again, exposed himself to extraordinary personal risk in acting on behalf of the Jewish People's interests. By presenting Nechemia's approach to the king in highly similar language to that of Esther, the text hints that the *Shivat Tzion* community was saved not only due to the magnanimity of gentile emperors, but also due to the sacrificial action of outstanding Jewish leaders such as Esther, Ezra, and Nechemia.

Finally, despite the similarities between the two stories, there are two obvious differences. *Nechemia* regularly invokes God's name, whereas His name is famously absent in *Esther*. Our story, moreover, concerns the Jewish community in Israel, whereas Esther's centers on Shushan. Arguably, these two observations are two sides of the same coin. While God will come to the rescue of any Jewish community, whether in Israel or the diaspora, the nature of His presence necessarily will be different. In the diaspora, He remains obscure; in Israel, His name is omnipresent.

Nechemia's Survey

In the second half of our chapter, Nechemia moves at lightning speed. Within three days of his arrival, he arranges a clandestine tour of the city walls, convinces the people to follow his lead and complete the construction, and, shortly thereafter, rebuffs the Jews' enemies.³ In doing so, Nechemia both picks up on a strand of Ezra and parts ways. Nechemia invokes the terminology "like the good hand of God" (2:18), which echoes a regular motif in *Ezra* (7:9, 7:28, 8:18, 8:31). Also noteworthy is the fact that Nechemia uses the term "sover," "analyze" to describe his examination of the walls. This echoes the trend toward intellectualization that is present throughout *Ezra*. Both these comparisons strengthen the view that *Ezra* and *Nechemia* are to be viewed as fundamentally a single work.

Yet there is one key difference. Ezra goes out of his way to emphasize that he had not procured military accompaniment for his trip. Nechemia, without even so much as making the request, receives exactly that. This underscores their respective strengths. Ezra was a first-rate scholar but likely a political novice; Nechemia was highly experienced in matters of state. As noted previously, Ezra requires the urging of his supporters to rise and take action against intermarriage; Nechemia moves immediately to survey the wall and begin to fill its breaches. Nechemia's decisive actions foreshadow the steps taken by early Zionists in particular, especially between 1945 and 1948, who resorted to highly aggressive tactics in working to ensure the founding of the State.

³ Rashi (2:12-13) claims that Nechemia did not simply examine the walls; he damaged them further in the hopes of convincing the community to undertake the work.

Good and Evil

In closing, it is worth noting that the words *ra'a* (evil) and *tova* (good) each appear seven times over the course of chapter 2. Moreover, these terms are used strategically in that they highlight the range of emotions throughout this dramatic chapter. When Nechemia fears the worst for his people, his facial expression is described as *ra'a* (2:1-3). When he finds favor in the king's eyes, Nechemia formulates his request as "if it is good in the king's eyes" (2:5,7). Sanbalat and Tovia perceive the news of Nechemia's impending arrival as "a great evil" (2:10). After his successful reconnaissance mission, Nechemia describes his activities as having been inspired by God's goodness (2:18). Reinforcing the Nechemia-Esther linkage, the phraseology "if it is good in the king's eyes" (2:5,7) mimics the language used by Esther in her dramatic requests of Achashverosh to attend the parties (5:4,7) and spare her people (7:3).

The chapter's deliberately chosen key words underscore the critical role played by gentile kings in ensuring the Jews' salvation during *Shivat Tzion*. They also heighten the drama of our chapter, which represents a dramatic turning point in the fortunes of the beleaguered community.