

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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

Shiur #19: Building and Securing Jerusalem's Walls (*Nechemia* chap. 3-4)

Summary

Having inspired the community to commit to rebuilding the wall, Nechemia moves swiftly to repair the breaches, dividing responsibility for forty-two stretches of wall among a range of leaders, families, and townspeople. The work begins with Elyashiv the high priest and his colleagues, who complete and sanctify the Sheep Gate. (We will consider below the nature of this sanctification.) Proceeding counter-clockwise, Nechemia describes the project as having begun with the eastern edge of what we now call “The Old City” of Jerusalem, continuing north, west, south, east, and north again. By the chapter’s end, the Jews had managed to complete the wall’s entire circumference, albeit to only half its intended height.

The remarkable success of the construction, however, fails to dissuade the Jews’ enemies. Sanbalat employs a psychological tactic, arguing, “What are the miserable Jews doing? Will they restore, offer sacrifice, and finish one day? Can they revive those stones out of the dust heaps, burned as they are?” (3:34). Tovia the Amonite, another antagonist, questions the walls’ adequacy: “That stone wall they are building – if a fox climbed it he would breach it!” (3:35). Upon hearing the invective, Nechemia beseeches God to remember the enemies’ machinations and recompense them in kind for their sins.

Seeing that psychological attacks had failed, in chapter 4 Sanbalat and his colleagues turn to the threat of physical violence. Given that Nechemia has arrived bearing the king’s official attestation, this is a risky tactic. Still, with these threats, Nechemia is forced to confront growing disaffection within the Jewish community for the first time. The people of Judea grouse, “The strength of the basket-carrier has failed, and there is so much rubble; we are not able ourselves to rebuild the wall” (4:4).

Nechemia responds by establishing guard duty throughout the course of the night. Giving arms to the citizens of Jerusalem, he inspires the people to be unafraid, remember God, and fight on behalf of their families. Because the sentries are spread perilously thin across the span of the wall, Nechemia devises a system whereby if he blows the *shofar*, everyone will rush toward him and

defend against enemy attack. Chapter 4 closes by noting that throughout the course of this tense period, Nechemia and those with him were so focused on ensuring the city's safety that they did not once manage to change their clothing.

Organizing the Construction

As in earlier chapters, Nechemia's political ingenuity is on full display throughout our narrative. The rebuilding project was treacherous in multiple respects. Not only did the work run the risk of physical danger, it also posed significant political pitfalls. How would he overcome the people's inertia? Who would be assigned each section of the wall? Would he end up insulting prominent community members by failing to assign them an appropriately respectful section of the wall? Which constituencies were crucial to approach in order to attain their buy-in and support Nechemia's activities moving forward?

In navigating this political minefield, Nechemia takes a number of steps.¹ First, he allows the people to become active partners in the work, generating buy-in. There is a clear hierarchy: the work begins with Elyashiv the high priest and goes from there. Many important groups are represented, including priests, Levites, Israelites, *netinim* (water-carriers from Yehoshua's time), and government officials. He instructs many people to build alongside their own homes, leveraging their vested personal interests to increase these families' motivation.

Despite Nechemia's overall success, there appears to have been a degree of internal opposition to the construction within the community. Few of the families that had made *aliya* (i.e., those listed in *Ezra* chapter 2 and *Nechemia* chapter 7) are included among those who worked on the walls. This raises the possibility that many of the non-Jerusalem families saw the wall as none of their business, even objectionable. After all, the project was likely to generate additional resentment among the Jews' foes, who, for instance, might no longer engage in commerce with the Jewish community (see *Nechemia* 10:32).

The verses note, moreover, that the noblemen of Tekoa, unlike the youth of that town, refused to participate (3:5). The reason for their noncompliance is left unstated. Did they feel they were above the demeaning task of building walls? Did they have a vested financial interest in not antagonizing the local population? While some suggest that the verses are intended in support of the noblemen² – they allowed their youth to build even as they were required to stay home and tend to their flocks – Rashi (3:5, s.v. *lo*) and most commentators read the verse as expressing criticism. The refusal of these Tekoans to participate raises the question as to how many additional towns are not listed because their residents chose not to participate at all.

¹ For extensive discussion, see Zakheim, pp. 77-89.

² R. Mordekhai Zer-Kavod, *Da'at Mikra*, p. 78.

Despite the murmurings of opposition, by the end of chapter 3 the people seem to largely stand behind Nechemia: “The people’s heart was in the work” (3:38). From Nechemia, then, we learn the importance of forward progress in the face of uncertainty. Sometimes, tangible results are a leader’s most effective response to constituents’ skepticism.

Sanctifying the Walls

Earlier, we noted that Elyashiv and his colleagues are granted the opportunity to “sanctify” the Sheep Gate, located immediately northeast of the Temple Mount. The nature of this dedication is subject to dispute among the commentaries. After all, what sort of sanctification was necessary for this segment of the wall above and beyond the others? Ralbag, perturbed by this disparity, suggests that the word “*va-yakdishu*” connotes preparation rather than sanctification. By building this stretch of wall, the priests prepared the surrounding enclosures for completion as well. This interpretation seems difficult. Was not the same true for every section that was being completed? Why is it specifically the portion of Elyashiv that is considered preparatory? For this reason, the majority of commentators to understand “*va-yakdishu*” as a literal act of sanctification.

Why was such a process required? It would appear that this segment of the barrier was an extension of the circumference that had stood during the First Temple period. In order to enlarge the borders of Jerusalem, a ceremony of sanctification was required. If so, it turns out that Nechemia not only secured the city’s borders, but widened them, increasing the sanctity of the city in the process.³

Tovia and the Jackal

As mentioned, Tovia mocks the Jews by suggesting that even a jackal could breach the city’s walls. The barrier, in other words, is too weak to be effective. The jackal imagery is consistent with the language of a verse in *Eikha*, which describes the Temple Mount as “desolate; jackals prowl over it” (5:18). The rabbis drew upon this image in the classic *aggada* of R. Akiva and the rabbis, in which R. Akiva laughs upon witnessing a jackal emerge from ground that once housed the Holy of Holies. Since the prophets foresaw both destruction and reparation, R. Akiva expounds to his bewildered colleagues, this sign of desolation is also a harbinger of redemption. The image of the jackal, an untamed desert beast, signals that the holy city is desolate, unfit for inhabitation. Beyond the physical instability of the wall, it is this underlying message of desolation that Tovia likely means to convey.

A Dip in Morale

³ *Da’at Mikra*, p. 76.

At the beginning of chapter 4, the Jews face increasingly violent opposition. Sanbalat, Tovia, and others threaten the community with bodily harm. This leads the Jews' murmurings to become a roar: "Judah was saying, 'The strength of the basket-carrier has failed, and there is so much rubble; we are not able ourselves to rebuild the wall'" (4:4).⁴

Once again, instead of dwelling on the negativity or engaging in extended conversations, Nechemia responds with decisive action. He first puts in place an espionage system, which involves encouraging traveling Jews to return with reports detailing the opposition's intentions (4:6). Next, he divides the nation into military units along the perimeter of the wall. He then delivers inspirational words to the people, urging them to fight on behalf of their families.

At this point, the enemies hear word of the Jews' continued success and back off from any immediate aggression, permitting the Jews to continue the project of completing the wall. Nechemia divides his assistants into two groups, some of whom will stand guard and others who will build. Throughout the process, Nechemia does not take a moment for himself. He not only oversees the building and guard duty, but accepts personal responsibility for both. In this respect, his actions echo those of Chagai and Zekharia, who similarly involved themselves personally in building the Temple (*Ezra* 5:2). Above all, Nechemia is a man of action, who moves at breakneck pace to create the facts on the ground necessary to ensure the Jews' safety. In so doing, he co-opts the Jews' energies into assisting with the construction, rendering irrelevant their complaints.

⁴ It is interesting that we find an analogous notion in *Megillat Esther* regarding Mordekhai, about whom the *Megilla* states, "ve-ratzuy le-rov echav." According to some commentators, this indicates that Mordekhai too was unpopular among a significant minority of the Jewish community. Arguably, it is specifically during *Shivat Tzion*, during the decline of prophetic leadership, that popularity plays a significant role in the effectiveness of the community leadership. It was self-evident that prophets would often be unpopular; their job was to deliver uncomfortable, uncompromising truths to the Jews, no matter the consequences. With the rise of a democratic, political model of communal leadership, "favorability ratings" gain a new importance.