

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION  
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)  
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**SHIVAT TZION:**  
**INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETS OF THE RETURN TO ZION**  
**By Rav Tzvi Sinensky**

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**This shiur is dedicated *le-zekher nishmot* Amelia Ray and Morris Ray  
on the occasion of their tenth *yahrtzeits*  
by their children Patti Ray and Allen Ray**  
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**Shiur #20: Nechemia Fights for the Poor (*Nechemia* chap. 5)**

**Summary**

Having set the community's security on a firm foundation, in chapter 5, Nechemia turns to social concerns. Observing that the common men and women cry out against their fellow Jews, Nechemia discovers that poverty is deeply rooted. Families are desperate for food. They have relinquished property, borrowed money against fields to pay the king's tax, and even sold their children into slavery. Nechemia is infuriated. He denounces the wealthy Jewish noblemen, gathering a large crowd in protest and accusing them of taking advantage and pressing claims against their impoverished brethren. Nechemia has personally ransomed Jews who have sold themselves into slavery; will he now be required to ransom Jews from fellow Jews? The nobles are dumbfounded and have no response.

Nechemia presses forward, demanding that they forgive any loans against Jewish individuals and return their property; he, his brothers and servants will do the same. The nobles agree to comply. Nechemia adjures the priests to follow suit. As a symbolic gesture, Nechemia shakes out his pockets, declaring, "So may God shake free of his household and property any man who fails to keep this promise; may he be thus shaken out and stripped" (5:13). The nation answers "amen" and praises God.

As a coda, Nechemia adds that he was exceedingly careful throughout his twelve-year tenure in Judea not to hold himself above the impoverished nation. He never partook of the governor's stipend to which he was entitled by law. Whereas the previous governors levied heavy tax burdens on the people to support their lavish lifestyles, Nechemia did not do so, for fear of God. This was despite the fact that his household fed at least 150 individual each day. For all of this, Nechemia asks God to remember him favorably.

## Social Justice: Between Nechemia and the Prophets

In keeping with his assertive political style, Nechemia's approach to social justice differs strikingly from that of the prophets. Whereas the latter simply rebuked the people, Nechemia applies pressure against the noblemen by gathering a large crowd to protest. He also goes out of his way to ensure he is above all criticism by being extremely careful not to take advantage of the people, modeling any behavior he demands from others.

Nechemia also refers repeatedly to his "brothers and servants." Whether the brothers are literally family or his close supporters, this is another key component in Nechemia's success. We recall that at the very beginning of his *sefer*, while still in Shushan, Nechemia was approached by Chanani, "one of his brothers." This indicates that even before he had arrived, Nechemia had supporters on the ground in Judea. While we don't know how Nechemia earned that support, we can conjecture that this was a key part of Nechemia's determination to come to Judea. Over the last few chapters, this support has become increasingly crucial. In chapter 4, Nechemia attempts to inspire the community leadership and assigns them positions along the walls' military formation. In our chapter, he confronts them head on, demanding reform. Only with a substantial backing among the population could Nechemia have hoped that his efforts would yield success.

The prophets were lonely by design, railing on their own against the abuse of power by the upper class. As God informs Yirmiyahu in his opening prophecy:

I make you this day a fortified city, and an iron pillar, and bronze walls against the whole land: against Judah's kings and officers, and against its priests and citizens. They will attack you, but they shall not overcome you. For I am with you, declares the Lord, to save you. (*Yirmiyahu* 1:18-19)

Yirmiyahu wages a lonely war; God is his only true friend. He was beaten by his brothers (21:6), imprisoned by the king (37:15), and threatened with death and tossed into a pit by the king's officials (38:4-5).

Nechemia, by contrast, takes a political, non-prophetic approach. He earns the king's official endorsement. He develops relationships and alliances with princes and plebeians alike. He stirs up the people when necessary. Only then, with a "great crowd" gathered in his support, does he confront – and overcome – the entrenched powers.

Taking a step back, this difference reflects the larger moment in Biblical history. The era of prophecy is phasing out. Although there remain a handful of prophets, new models of leadership rise to the fore. Ezra represents the scholar, a type that will flourish especially beginning in the latter stages of the Second Temple. This category is spotlighted by the rabbis, who consider Ezra,

Nechemia, Mordekhai, Chagai, Zekharia, and Malakhi members of the *Anshei Keneset Ha-Gedola*, Men of the Great Assembly, who reimagined Judaism after the destruction of the First Temple, paving the way for what we call Rabbinic Judaism. Nechemia, for his part, plays the role of the religiously committed political leader, who prays to God but takes every precaution to set himself up for success in the complex and thorny world of Jewish communal politics. Both models, including Nechemia's activism as a precedent for the importance of actively combating social ills in modern Israel, remain highly relevant today.

### **What Compels Nechemia to Act?**

Strikingly, after encountering the nobles' inactivity, Nechemia records that "*Va-yimalekh libi alay*," literally translated, "My heart decided against me." What could this phrase possibly mean? JPS translates, "After pondering the matter carefully." This rendering, however, seems overly sanitized, and does not sufficiently account for either the word *libi* or *alay*.

Malbim suggests that the word "*va-yimalekh*" is drawn from the root *melekh*, king. He explains that in confronting the noblemen, Nechemia first had to conjure within himself the self-confidence of royalty. Malbim's intriguing suggestion, while capturing the essence of Nechemia's anxiety before accosting his rivals for the community's leadership, does not accord with the simple translation of *malakh*, which means to consult.

Instead, I would propose that the phrase indicates that Nechemia found himself torn between his mind and heart. His intellect told him that to attack the Jewish leaders was simply too risky. They would immediately circle the wagons and possibly seek vengeance from Nechemia, the self-righteous, moralizing outsider who sought to lord over the established leadership. Nechemia's heart, however, told him that the crime was too severe to look the other way. How could he stand by idly while the poor were literally sold as slaves to their fellow Jews? The situation was intolerable. Torn between his mind and his heart, the latter ultimately won the day. Nechemia's heart decided, as it were, against him. Although intellectually Nechemia understood the risk, his instincts told him that it was the right decision to stand up to the bullies, no matter the perils.

### **The People's Promise**

In attempting to compel the wealthy people to treat the impoverished properly moving forward, Nechemia performs two noteworthy acts in a single verse. First, he shakes his clothing and says, "So may God shake free of his household and property any man who fails to keep this promise; may he be thus shaken out and stripped" (5:13). Although it is hard to say for certain, this act resembles the (much) later custom of shaking the corner of one's clothing during *tashlikh*. Although the sources for this custom, to the best of my knowledge, do not cite Nechemia as a precedent, it is interesting to speculate whether there might be any connection. Possibly, by shaking our clothing during *tashlikh*, we

similarly commit that we will dispossess ourselves if we do not repent. Moreover, by evoking Nechemia's example, we implicitly make the statement that our repentance is equally for sins between man and one's fellow man as between man and God.

The other interesting component of the verse is the oath that Nechemia requires of the people. The language of "*arur*," "accursed," follows the language of the curses at Mount Gerizim and Mount Eival in *Parshat Ki Tavo*. Specifically, the final curse reads:

Cursed be he who will not uphold the terms of this teaching and observe them. And all the people shall say, Amen. (*Devarim 27:26*)

Although there is some dispute among the commentators as to the meaning of this verse,<sup>1</sup> the simplest reading would seem to follow Rashi (*ibid.*, s.v. *asher*), who maintains that the curse refers to one who violates any precept of the Torah. Nechemia, then, in drawing on this precedent, seems to implicitly make a bold and important assertion, in keeping with the theme we noted regarding *tashlikh*: one who takes advantage of another Jew is considered to have violated the entirety of the Torah. One who wantonly mistreats one's fellow Jews is not in position to develop a full relationship with God, no matter how diligent he might be in his observance of the ritual obligations.

### **Remember Me for Good**

At the chapter's conclusion, having detailed his remarkable achievements and high ethical standards, Nechemia declares: "O my God, remember to my credit all that I have done for this people!" As we noted in our discussion of chapter 1, although we understand Nechemia's desire to be well-regarded, this request might be taken to reflect poorly on our protagonist. Moreover, this language does not appear only in chapter 5; it repeats three times in Nechemia's final address at the end of the *sefer*, including the book's final words (13:14, 22, 31). It should be further noted that Nechemia spends a considerable amount of time in our chapter being critical of others. Not only does he reject the behavior of the noblemen, he also calls out his predecessors who served as government-appointed governors of Judea:

The former governors who preceded me laid heavy burdens on the people, and took from them for bread and wine more than forty shekels of silver. Their servants also tyrannized over the people. But I, out of the fear of God, did not do so.

Not only does this insult seem to be gratuitous, but the self-congratulatory statement at the end seems unnecessary.

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<sup>1</sup> See especially Rashi, Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, and Ramban.

Indeed, the Talmud sharply censures Nechemia for his behavior, suggesting that his book was not named after him – the Talmud assumes the book is named *Ezra* – in recompense for his hubris:

Now let us consider. The whole subject matter of [the book of] *Ezra* was narrated by Nechemia the son of Chakhalia. Why, then, was the book not called by his name? R. Yirmia b. Abba said: Because he claimed merit for himself, as it is written, “Think upon me, my God, for good...” R. Yosef said: Because he spoke disparagingly of his predecessors, as it is written, “But the former governors that had been before me were chargeable unto the people, and had taken of them bread, and wine, beside forty shekels of silver, etc.” Moreover, he spoke thus even of Daniel, who was greater than he... (*Sanhedrin* 93b)

Here, then, is the tension within Nechemia’s personality. His supreme confidence leads him to transform the struggling city by building its protective boundaries, lifting its spirits and forcefully challenging the status quo. The flipside, however, is that at key moments, Nechemia seems to have allowed his extraordinary talents to go to his head, leading him to unnecessarily diminish others and promote himself. *Nechemia* thus reminds us of the importance of humility, even, or especially, for those with outstanding leadership capacity.