

**SHIVAT TZION:  
INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETS OF THE RETURN TO ZION  
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**Shiur #30: Shivat Tzion: A Retrospective**

Having completed our study of all the works of *Shivat Tzion*, let us take a step back and consider some larger thematic questions around which these books revolve. At the chapter's end, we will consider a number of lessons we may draw from *Shivat Tzion* for the contemporary Jewish landscape.

**One Sefer or Two?**

Regarding *Ezra-Nechemia*, one question arises above the rest: To what extent are *Ezra* and *Nechemia* to be viewed as a single *sefer*? On the one hand, the rabbis counted them as just one of the Bible's 24 books; on the other hand, the two sections carry separate names. This tension regarding the enumeration and naming of the works is emblematic of the larger conflicting body of evidence we have observed throughout our study.

There are significant indications that the two should be viewed as separate. No other *sefer* in *Tanakh* is comprised of two distinct sections featuring separate protagonists. Moreover, with the exception of chapter 8 of *Nechemia*, *Ezra* and *Nechemia* operate entirely independently and do not appear in one another's book. Indeed, according to the scholarly view, the first six chapters of *Ezra* clearly stand chronologically apart from the remainder of *Ezra* and the entirety of *Nechemia*. They also differ in their literary styles: *Ezra* is presented overwhelmingly as a third-person account, whereas *Nechemia* is predominantly written in the first person. Finally, there is good reason to suspect (see *Bava Batra* 14b) that *Ezra* and *Nechemia* were not composed by the same individual, strengthening the position that they are to be viewed as separate works.

It is important, however, not to overstate these proofs. Although *Ezra* and *Nechemia* largely operate independently of one another, they **are** active together in *Nechemia* chapter 8. And while it is true that *Ezra* and *Nechemia* do write in somewhat contrasting styles, there are instances in which *Ezra* writes in the first person and *Nechemia* in the third. In fact, a closer examination of *Ezra* reveals that he writes in the first person for half the chapters in which he appears (8-9). On the other hand, chapters 8-12 of *Nechemia* refer to the book's protagonist in the third person. Moreover, the very fact that major sections of both books are written as memoirs – highly unusual in *Tanakh* – ties them together even more closely.

There is additional evidence linking the two books. Numerous phrases in *Ezra* and *Nechemia* appear nowhere else in *Tanakh*. We previously noted the repetition of the term “*yad Elokim le-tova*,” a phrase emphasizing God’s providence, which occurs in *Ezra* 7:6, 7:28, 8:18, 8:22, 8:31 and *Nechemia* 2:18.<sup>1</sup> Numerous other parallels are summarized by R. Mordekhai Zer-Kavod.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, *Ezra* and *Nechemia* confront a strikingly similar set of concerns: intermarriage, local enemies, construction in Jerusalem, a struggle to maintain the community’s morale, a protagonist who leaves Babylonia at great personal risk to assist a desperate Judean community, a nerve-wracking encounter with the Persian monarch, an emphasis on genealogy, and census documents that distinguish between the Levites, singers, and gatekeepers of the Temple. In addition to facing these challenges, both *Ezra* and *Nechemia* inspire renewed commitment to Torah observance and deliver moving confessions.

More telling yet, the census in *Ezra* chapter 2 recurs almost verbatim in *Nechemia* chapter 7. This repetition even more strongly ties together the books. Finally, as noted in a previous *shiur*, the first six chapters of *Ezra*, the final four, and the entirety of *Nechemia* feature parallel literary structures: *aliya* followed by a confrontation with antisemitism, support of the Temple/Jerusalem, and sustained effort to ensure the everyday functioning of society.

What sense are we to make of the conflicting data? A careful review makes plain that the preponderance of evidence inclines toward the position that they are a single, unified work. In particular, the repetition of an entire passage, and especially the strong textual similarities between the two books, underscore the close connection. What, then, of the evidence that they are distinct? It is worth observing that all the differences we noted center on *Ezra* and *Nechemia*’s distinct leadership styles, one religious and the other political. Implicit in *Ezra-Nechemia*, then, is a profound insight: the discrepancy in styles is in of itself a major theme in the book. This Biblical work intentionally presents dueling models of responses to similar difficulties, two contrasting modes of leadership. As we enter the post-Biblical era, *Tanakh* presents two legitimate, indeed crucial models of leadership.

### ***Ezra-Nechemia* and the Biblical Canon**

The insight that *Ezra-Nechemia* is stylistically unique raises another key question. To what extent are we intended to view *Ezra-Nechemia* as a typical Biblical work, and to what extent is it *sui generis* in the Biblical canon? Here too, there are indicators in each direction. Similarities to the rest of *Tanakh* abound. Divine inspiration and prophecy remain in force. *Ezra-Nechemia* contains numerous allusions to classic Biblical episodes, including Yoshiyahu and Yechezkel’s Pesach offerings, Shlomo’s First Temple inauguration, the revelation at Sinai, and the *Hakhel* ceremony.

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<sup>1</sup> See also *Nechemia* 5:19, 6:14, 13:14, 13:22, 13:29 and 13:31.

<sup>2</sup> *Da’at Mikra*, p. 8, notes 6-7.

*Chagai, Zekharia, and Malakhi* also bear significant resemblances to the rest of the Bible, especially the Later Prophets. In classic prophetic style, both *Chagai* and *Zekharia* exhort repentance; indeed, in his warning, *Zekharia* explicitly invokes the “earlier prophets.” The final six chapters of *Zekharia*, especially his eschatological visions, echo multiple books in *Trei Asar*. *Malakhi* similarly echoes earlier Biblical motifs, including the metaphor of a familial relationship to capture the Jews’ relationships with *Hashem*. His invocation of *Eliyahu* links his book with *Parashat Pinchas*, and especially *Sefer Melakhim*.

Still, there are eye-popping departures from the rest of *Tanakh*. While *Chagai* speaks of repentance, he focuses not so much on spiritual return, but on a practical political program. *Zekharia* envisions a messianic period that is significantly less cataclysmic than that depicted by *Yoel* and others. *Malakhi*’s dialogue format is unique among the Prophets. Ironically, some of the references to *nevua* in *Nechemia* chapter 6 do not refer to prophecy. Perhaps most remarkable, at the beginning of *Ezra*, the Jews are inspired to return to Israel not by a Jewish prophet, but by *Cyrus*, a quasi-prophetic gentile king.

The terrain, moreover, has shifted considerably from earlier eras. The omnipresent temptation of idolatry has been overtaken by the allure of intermarriage. *Ezra* and *Nechemia* represent radically new models of spiritual and political leadership. Like modern leaders and unlike the Prophets, they are charged not to denounce moral failings, but to inspire practical change. Like many post-Biblical memoirists, they write much of their stories in first person. Their language, in particular *Ezra*’s heavy reliance on Biblical Aramaic, is not utterly unique in *Tanakh*, but is fairly unusual.

The presentation of *Halakha* is particularly eye-opening. As discussed in a previous *shiur*, there are major question marks surrounding the exact relationship between the *halakhot* as presented in *Ezra-Nechemia* and Biblical law. More broadly, the need for a renewed commitment to the covenant certainly implies that we have entered a new era in Jewish history.

Just like the relationship between the books of *Ezra* and *Nechemia*, the larger relationship between the era of *Shiva Tzion* and previous Biblical periods is complex and fraught. What are we to make of it? There is good reason to suspect that the ambiguity is intentional. The question marks surrounding the Biblical works of *Shivat Tzion* are indicative of the disorientation plaguing the returnees. Was this a time of redemption or not? More existentially, was the community destined to survive? Could Jewish life continue to dedicate itself to Temple worship even as it developed new paradigms that extended beyond the Temple’s four walls? Could the scourges of intermarriage and mass ignorance be solved? Would halakhic commitment be transmitted to a new generation? The larger ambiguity clouding these works, then, is a metaphor for the larger questions plaguing the *Shivat Tzion* community.

Juxtaposing these two insights – that *Ezra-Nechemia* models two leadership archetypes and that the ambiguities surrounding *Shivat Zion* capture the community's profound fears and ambivalence – we come to a new appreciation of these collective works' central message. The post-Biblical period will feature uncharted territory for a Jewish community that had been led by monarchs and prophets for as long as they could remember. As opposed to the prophets' black-and-white, explicit directives, the *Shivat Zion* community must learn to embrace ambiguity. This is simply the nature of Jewish life in a time when prophecy is fading fast. Therefore, instead of proposing a monolithic path forward, *Tanakh* instead offers rich, textured portraits of competing yet complementary styles of leadership. It is up to the people to activate their wisdom – a key term throughout *Ezra-Nechemia* – and navigate as best they can.

### **Relevance to the Current Generation**

What, precisely, then, are the larger messages the works of *Shivat Zion* seek to convey? We will conclude our series by briefly listing seven key lessons:

1. As stated, and as embodied by Ezra and Nechemia as well as Chagai and Zekharia, there are multiple legitimate models of Jewish leadership. The contrasts between each pairing are striking and tell powerful stories. A variety of models of Jewish leadership exist, and are to be embraced rather than shunned. Indeed, these varied styles may be essential to Jewish continuity in uncertain times.
2. Sometimes leadership demands that we cling tenaciously to core principles, even if doing so placing us at significant risk. Ezra confronts intermarriage uncompromisingly. Not only does Nechemia stand up for halakhic principles, he also castigates the ruling class for corruption and acts decisively in examining and reconstructing Jerusalem's collapsed walls.
3. Redemption, in *Shivat Zion* as today, comes in all shapes and sizes, and is not an all-or-nothing proposition. *Shivat Zion* interweaves idealism and realism, reminding us that we can celebrate partial victories, even as the work remains dauntingly incomplete.
4. National rituals and shared memory are keys to Jewish survival. The public Torah reading and national oath provide models for how we might go about inspiring national commitment in future generations.
5. Education is the key that unlocks Jewish commitment and continuity. Indeed, *Nechemia* chapter 8 is one of the great illustrations of the power of education to transform a community.
6. Politics – there is no other way to describe many of the challenges that *Ezra* and *Nechemia* faced – are unpleasant and challenging, but are necessary and are not inherently evil. Moreover, a key part of politics is developing the savvy to ward off and head off our anti-Semitic enemies with a range of tactics, which Ezra and especially Nechemia achieve with astonishing success.

7. Above all, in the words of Malakhi, no matter the challenges, we remain God's beloved. With all the trials that will confront the Jewish community in the post-Biblical era waiting on the other side of *Malakhi*, in the end, the reciprocal love between God and His people remains eternal.