

# 2500 Years Ago Today

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Almost 2500 years ago Jews who came to Israel from the Babylonian exile observed the first *Rosh Hashanah* through bringing sacrifices. About fifty years later, when more Jews had come, the celebration of the *yom tov* centered on Ezra teaching Torah to a large assembly all morning, followed by everyone going home for a festive meal in the afternoon. The accounts of the two celebrations—the first in Ezra, Chapter 3, the second in Nehemiah, Chapter 8—and the contrast between them are relevant to *Rosh Hashanah* today.

Challenges to Jewish life now that we may label “unprecedented” are actually parallel to what Ezra and Nehemiah faced then: a low level of Torah knowledge and observance; a high rate of intermarriage, even among the elite of the *kohanim* and the princes; missing genealogical records so that people did not know their ancestry. The opportunity to live in Israel was open to all Jews, but only a minority went on *aliyah*; they encountered opposition to restoring Jewish life in Israel and appeals to government authority in another country to stop their construction of a protective wall. According to Nehemiah 4.11 those who labored on the wall surrounding Jerusalem “worked with one hand, and with the other hand held a weapon.” Our generation is not the first to deal with these problems.

Their generation faced an additional challenge: Haggai and Zekhariah are mentioned in Ezra-Nehemiah, but the end of the era of prophecy was approaching. Where would people turn when they could no longer go to a prophet to learn what God wants?

The first group who came back to Israel understood that they were seeing the fulfillment of Jeremiah’s prophecy. Koresh, the king of Paras, invited them to re-build the Temple and gave back the gold and silver vessels that Nevuchadnezzar had plundered. Although they settled in different areas, they gathered together in Jerusalem.

*When the seventh month came and the children of Israel were in the cities, the people gathered together as one man to Jerusalem. Then Yeshua the son of Yozadak and his brothers the kohanim, and Zerubavel the son of She’altiel and his brothers, rose up and they built the altar of the God of Israel to offer burnt-offerings on it, as it is written in the Torah of Moshe the man of God.*

**Ezra 3:1-2**

*From the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt-offerings to God, but the foundation of God’s Temple was not yet laid.*

**Ezra 3:6**

ויגע החדש השביעי ובני ישראל  
בערים ויאספו העם כאיש אחד אל  
ירושלם: ויקם ישוע בן יוצדק ואחיו  
הכהנים וזרבבל בן שאלתיאל ואחיו  
ויבנו את מזבח אלהי ישראל להעלות  
עליו עלות ככתוב בתורת משה איש  
האלהים:

**עזרא ג:א-ב**

מיום אחד לחדש השביעי החלו  
להעלות עלות לה' והיכל ה' לא יסד:

**עזרא ג:ו**

In their desire to obey the Written Torah as precisely as possible, the people shared in observing a mitzvah that the *kohanim* performed. Because they intended to recreate the Temple as it was, the critical activities were building the altar, bringing the appropriate sacrifices, and anticipating the next stage of laying the foundation. Food and drink are mentioned in the next verse, but not for the enjoyment of *yom tov* at home; instead it was intended for the nations who brought cedar trees for building the Temple, which was their primary concern. Nevertheless, in the following year when they completed the foundation, those who remembered the First Temple wept; the glory of the past could not be recaptured.

In the ensuing decades despite numerous difficulties the Second Temple was built and inaugurated. Ezra came with many dignitaries to Israel, where he tried to solve the problem of intermarriage through a meeting of everyone who had returned from exile; there they agreed to a public, systematic arrangement for dissociating from their foreign wives. Ezra was trusted both for his lineage, going back to Aharon, the first *kohen* (Ezra 7:1-5), and because he was a *sofer mohir b'Torat Moshe asher natan Hashem Elohai Yisrael*, “a ready scribe in the *Torah* of Moshe that Hashem the God of Israel had given” (6). He had the background, the trustworthiness and the ability “to explain God’s *Torah*, to do, and to teach statutes and judgments in Israel” (11). These qualities, the mark of a person who could explain the Written *Torah*, won the people over: if Ezra said to separate from other nations, the people responded, “Yes, as you have said, we must do.” But the affirmation did not last.

When Nehemiah came to Israel and joined Ezra for the next *Rosh Hashanah* celebration, the Jews realized they needed something more. Despite all that Nehemiah had accomplished in building a wall around Jerusalem, setting up a security system, and solving economic problems, the people had reverted to their old ways, marrying non-Jews and abandoning observance.

The opening verses of the second account are almost identical to those of the first: “When the seventh month came, and the children of Israel were in their cities. Then all the people gathered together as one man” (Nehemiah 7.72 and 8.1). The first of Tishrei is again a catalyst for coming together, but the place, the purpose and the actions are all different this time:

*And they gathered in the open place that was before the water gate, and they said to Ezra the sofer to bring the sefer Torat Moshe that Hashem had commanded Israel. And Ezra the kohen brought the Torah before the congregation from man to woman and all who could hear with understanding on the first day of the seventh month. And he read in it...from the light [of early morning] until mid-day before all the men and the women and the me'vinim, and the ears of all the people were toward the sefer haTorah. And Ezra the sofer stood on a wooden platform that they made for this purpose [with thirteen men beside him]. And Ezra opened the sefer in the sight of*

ויאספו כל העם כאיש אחד אל הרחוב אשר לפני שער המים ויאמרו לעזרא הספר להביא את ספר תורת משה אשר צוה ה' את ישראל: ויביא עזרא הכהן את התורה לפני הקהל מאיש ועד אשה וכל מבין לשמע ביום אחד לחדש השביעי: ויקרא בו לפני הרחוב אשר לפני שער המים מן האור עד מחצית היום נגד האנשים והנשים והמבנינים ואזני כל העם אל ספר התורה: ויעמד עזרא הספר על מגדל עץ אשר עשו לדבר ויעמד אצלו מתתיה ושמע ועניה ואוריה וחלקיה ומעשיה על ימינו ומשמאלו פדיה ומישאל ומלכיה וחשם וחשבדנה זכריה משלם: ויפתח עזרא

all the people, for he was above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood.

**Nehemiah 8:1-5**

הספר לעיני כל העם כי מעל כל העם היה  
וכפתחו עמדו כל העם:  
נחמיה ח:א-ה

The people requested the reading of the *sefer Torah*. They realized that they had lost their connection to it and willingly stood for hours to learn. The emphasis is on the text and on the *me'vinim*, the scholars who can help the people understand it. Ezra led them in a *brakhah* to which the people answered *Amen, Amen* and bowed.

Also Jeshua, and Bani, and Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, even the Levites, caused the people to understand the Law; and the people stood in their place. They read in the book, in the Tora of G-d distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading.

**Nechemia 8:8 (Koren translation)**

וישוע ובני ושרביה ימין עקוב שבתי הודיה  
מעשיה קליטא עזריה יוזבד חנן פלאיה  
והלויים מבינים את העם לתורה והעם על  
עמדם: ויקראו בספר בתורת האלהים  
מפרש ושום שכל ויבינו במקרא:  
נחמיה ח:ז-ח

Rashi says *me'vinim* is *me'targemin*, “translating” or “interpreting.” This final verse can also be translated, “They read in the book, in Hashem’s *Torah* with explanation, and applying intellect, and they understood the reading.” In either way it is *Torah she’be’al peh*, Oral *Torah*.

Ezra and the Jewish people agreed: the *Torah* is the center of Jewish life; everyone must participate in studying it; everyone must understand it. They had to make an additional change; the *Torah* had to become part of their lives. “The people wept when they heard the words of the *Torah*” (9); they were taken aback by how much they did not know and how much they may have violated inadvertently. They had to learn what a *yom tov* is. Instead of watching the offering of sacrifices on the altar as the earlier assemblage had done, and thinking that was all, they had to take *Rosh Hashanah* into their homes. Their instructions were to “go, eat rich food, drink sweet drinks, and send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared” (10). They made a “great rejoicing because they understood the words that they taught them” (12).

Then the Jews came back on the second day. This was the critical test. They were looking to the future. The first *mitzvah* they encountered was *Sukkot* which had been in abeyance for so long that their leaders had to teach the nation how to observe it, just as they had to instruct the people the day before how to make a holiday meal. They studied *Torah* each day of *Sukkot*, which led to a national day of repentance and *Torah* study, a review of the relationship between God and His people, and a shared oath to keep the commandments, especially Shabbat and all the Beit HaMikdash offerings, and to stop intermarriage.

We don’t find the *takkanot*, the ordinances that Ezra decreed, listed here, although each was designed to enhance Jewish life then and in the future. We find them appropriately in the *Torah she’be’al peh*, in *Talmud Bavli, Bava Kama* 82b and *Talmud Yerushalmi, Megillah*, Chapter 4. Ezra established that the *Torah* should be read on Monday and Thursday, in addition to the Shabbat reading that Moshe had ordained. Together with his *takkanah* that the village courts should

meet on Monday and Thursday, he guaranteed that the nation would be attached to *Torah* study, and that *Torah* law would operate in daily life.

To prevent intermarriage he decreed that merchants should travel the length and breadth of the land to sell to young women whatever they needed to beautify themselves. Young men had complained that the Jewish girls did not take as much care of their appearance as the foreign women; through correcting that imbalance, Ezra wanted to promote Jewish men marrying Jewish women.

He built up the importance of Shabbat and family life by decreeing that laundry should be done on Thursday and garlic should be eaten on Friday, for health and because it makes one more loving. Bread should be baked early on Friday so that the homemaker has food to give to the poor. Rather than listing prohibitions, Ezra's decrees are positive and practical in bringing Jews closer to *Torah*.

The *Rosh Hashanah* of Ezra shifts focus from the sacrificial ritual to *Torah* knowledge and family observance. Instead of trying to recreate the past, this observance looks to the future; by increasing *Torah* knowledge, especially the Oral Law, and by strengthening the Jewish family, intermarriage can be fought and a full Jewish life can be enjoyed. He has fulfilled his mission "to explain the *Torah* of God, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments" (Ezra 7.10).

There would be backsliding. In the thirteenth and final chapter of Nehemiah he is still teaching people not to intermarry and still arranging for the gates of the city to be closed so that there won't be commerce on Shabbat, but a momentous change has happened: the people realize that to properly fulfill the Written *Torah*, as they had intended at the first *Rosh Hashanah* of their return to Israel, they must study and live according to the explanations of the Oral *Torah*.

This is the straightforward application of verses from Ezra-Nehemiah to our time. Rabbi Dr. Yaakov Elman, through a sophisticated analysis of Rav Zadok haKohen of Lublin's writings, traces the flowering of the Oral *Torah* to the gathering in Chapter 8 of Nehemiah.<sup>1</sup> In what Elman calls "the rule of inversion," failure must precede achievement, and do so "in direct proportion" (p.9). If prophecy had ceased, if the Jewish people had reached the lowest level of ignorance and abandonment of Jewish life, then a desire to learn and to foster intellectual leaders had to come next. Ezra taught so that all the people should be *me'vinim*.

We can take lessons from Ezra and Nehemiah. Ezra emphasized *Torah* study for everyone, family, and Shabbat, while Nehemiah created practical solutions. Their partnership exemplifies bringing different talents together to deal with the challenges. Ezra's focus on the Oral *Torah* gives us the tools to confront the problems of our time. Challenges will always be coming, will always be changing, and will always be demanding our ingenuity in applying the *Torah*.

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<sup>1</sup> See "R. Zadok Hakohen on the History of Halakha," *Tradition* (1985), 21.4, 1-26

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