

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

**Shiur #21: Nechemia Wards Off his Enemies (*Nechemia* chap. 6-7)**

**Summary**

Following Nechemia's successes in securing a safe future for Jerusalem, his enemies adopt increasingly desperate tactics. First, Sanbalat and Geshem send a missive requesting that Nechemia meet them in the Ono Valley. Nechemia sends messengers of his own to decline, explaining that he is simply too busy with the building. This occurs no less than four times. On the fifth occasion, they say that they have heard rumors that Nechemia has appointed prophets declaring him king and fomenting a rebellion. They "generously" offer to meet with Nechemia in an attempt to determine how best to rebut the swirling accusations. Nechemia, never one to fall for a ruse, responds by simply denying the rumors.

Next, Nechemia visits the home of a housebound man named Shemaya.<sup>1</sup> Shemaya recommends that they barricade themselves in the Temple sanctuary, for Nechemia's enemies are coming tonight to assassinate him. Nechemia demurs, explaining that it is not his style to flee. Moreover, if he enters the sanctuary he will die anyway, presumably for having violated the prohibition of entry for a non-priest (see Rashi to 6:11).

Nechemia then comes to the realization that Shemaya was in fact lying. He had been hired by Tovia and Sanbalat to lead Nechemia to sin by entering the Temple, thereby sully his name. After recounting this episode, Nechemia asks God to punish Sanbalat, Tovia, and the false prophets, who seek to intimidate him from proceeding with his sacred work.

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<sup>1</sup> The text uses the term "atzur," "bound" (6:10). Why Shemaya was housebound is subject to speculation and various interpretations. Rashi explains that the verse simply means that Shemaya was housebound, nothing more. Malbim also offers a prosaic explanation, suggesting that Shemaya was ill. Ibn Ezra proposes that he had locked himself up for ascetic, religious reasons. (Ibn Ezra's portrayal seems rather reminiscent of a monk.) Ralbag takes Ibn Ezra's general direction but with a twist, suggesting that Shemaya sought to achieve prophecy. According to Ibn Ezra and Ralbag, Shemaya's religious intentions highlight his hypocrisy in trying to compromise Nechemia in exchange for money. It also underscores the complexity of the relationships and alliances that Nechemia was required to navigate.

Despite these additional provocations, the work on the wall is completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, after fifty-two days. The enemies finally concede that will not be able to block the project. Even so, the nobles of Judea continue to maintain a regular correspondence with Tovia, informing him as to Nechemia's intentions. Many Judeans had sworn loyalty to him, for he was the son-in-law of Shechania son of Arakh, a prominent Jewish leader.

## Recasting Prophecy

On multiple occasions in chapter 6, the term *nevua* is used ambiguously. At one point, Sanbalat accuses Nechemia of having appointed *nevi'im* to proclaim him king of Jerusalem (6:7). Here, the term *navi* does not seem to refer to a prophet, as pronouncing someone king is not necessarily associated with the role of the prophet. Granted, Malbim (s.v. *ve-gam*) does read the term as referring to prophecy, explaining that Nechemia stood accused of having hired false prophets to predict that he would be anointed king. Still, Rashi (s.v. *nevi'im*) and Metzudat David (s.v. *ve-gam*), by contrast, explain that the *nevi'im* are *ba'alei lashon*, speakers, as in "*niv sefatayim*," "the word of the lips" (*Yeshayahu* 57:19).

Just a few verses later, on the other hand, we find two classical usages of the term. Upon discovering Shemaya's ill intentions, Nechemia remarks that the former had "uttered prophecy about me" (6:12), meaning that Shemaya had prophesied falsely about Sanbalat and Tovia's intention to murder Nechemia that night. Two verses afterward, Nechemia asks God to recall the false prophets who sought to do him harm (6:14). In both these cases, the term "*nevi'im*" refers to prophets, albeit of the false variety.

What are we to make of the confusing usages of this phrase in our chapter? At this point in our study of *Shivat Tzion*, the answer is evident. Prophecy is on the wane. In this transitional moment, *Nechemia* invokes the term "*navi*" in both ambiguous and shifting ways. Prophecy still exists, but it casts a far shorter shadow than in earlier ages.

Ironically, the generic usage of *navi* as "mouth" returns us to the earliest references to *nevua* in *Tanakh*. After Avimelekh had kidnapped Sara, God appears to the king in a dream demanding her return. God instructs, "Now, return the man's wife for he is a *navi*, and he shall pray for you and you shall live" (*Bereishit* 20:7). Of what relevance are Avraham's prophetic faculties? Rashi (s.v. *ki*) explains that since Avraham is a prophet, he knows that the king did not violate her, and he shall therefore pray on Avimelekh's behalf. Radak (*ibid.*) suggests that Avraham's status as a prophet proves just how close his relationship with God is. For that reason God will hearken to his prayer. Rashbam (*ibid.*), however, convincingly posits that in these verses, the term has nothing to do with prophecy. Just as Rashi and Metzudat David do in our context, Rashbam invokes the verse in *Yeshayahu*:

For he is a *navi* – the language of word of the lips. [He is] regularly with me and speaks my words; I love his words and will listen to his prayer.

Thus, the first invocation of the word *navi* in the Torah likely refers not to prophecy, but to the root word of speech.

Similarly, God informs Moshe that “Aaron your brother shall be your *navi*” (*Shemot* 7:1). Given that Aharon is speaking on behalf of Moshe, not God, the commentaries overwhelmingly maintain that Aharon is being described not as a prophet, but as a translator (Onkelos, Rashi, R. Saadia Gaon) or spokesperson (Rashbam).<sup>2</sup>

The Bible, in other words, comes full circle. During the time of the patriarchs and Moshe, prophecy certainly existed. Indeed, Moshe himself was the greatest of prophets. Nonetheless, Moshe’s primary mode of leadership was not necessarily exercised in the way of the later prophets. The same may be said of the patriarchs. Similarly, as the Biblical period ebbs away, prophecy continues to exist, but no longer represents a major mode of Jewish leadership. It is appropriate, therefore, that just as the earliest usages of *navi* are unclear, so too in *Ezra-Nechemia*, we find ambiguous usages of the word that gradually transition away from prophecy.

## Recasting Sin

Strikingly, we encounter another instance of the recasting of traditional categories in connection with the failed attempt to lead Nechemia to enter the sanctuary. We might have anticipated that his foes’ intention was to seek to cause him harm by leading him to sin, which would incur divine punishment. But this is not the case. Nechemia explains that they hoped that he “might be intimidated and act thus and commit a sin, *and so provide them a scandal with which to reproach me*” (6:13). While Ibn Ezra (s.v. *yecharefuni*) understands that they intended to shame him by revealing his fear, the simple reading seems to follow Metzudat David (s.v. *ve-haya*) that the shame would result from Nechemia’s transgression. While divine reward and punishment still figure heavily in *Ezra-Nechemia*, Sanbalat and Tovia’s concern for tarnishing Nechemia’s reputation has a strikingly modern ring to it; they wished to embroil him in scandal. As before, here too we find evidence that the transition to a post-prophetic period is well underway.

## Sanctuary

In Shemaya’s suggestion that Nechemia flee to the Temple for sanctuary, we may encounter a third instance of a category that has shifted in meaning. In previous generations, individuals were permitted to seek asylum by fleeing to the

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<sup>2</sup> See, however, Ibn Ezra (long commentary), *Shemot* 7:1, s.v. *va-yomer*.

Temple.<sup>3</sup> At first glance, Shamaya's suggestion is that Nechemia do the same. A closer analysis, however, makes it plain that this is not the case. At the beginning of the chapter, Nechemia makes a point of noting that he had not yet erected the doors in the city's doorposts (6:1). Later we learn that the houses had not been completed (7:4). The Temple was apparently the only secure place in Jerusalem where Nechemia could hope to barricade himself. For this reason, Rashi, Metzudat David, and Malbim all assert that Nechemia was not being told to flee due to the religious status of the Temple as a place of asylum, but simply because the Temple was the only location with a functioning door that might be locked. Once again, an act that on the surface echoes past religious practice, upon closer inspection, means something rather different at the sunset of the Biblical period.

## Chapter Seven

We discussed *Nechemia* chapter 7 at length in conjunction with the second chapter of Ezra. At this point, we will merely review the chapter's events in order to segue to our discussion of chapter 8 in our next class.

Nechemia appoints his brothers Chanani and Chanania over Jerusalem, issuing strict orders regarding the hours during which the city gates are to remain open. Even at this point, the city remains largely uninhabited, and most people do not have homes in which to live. Given the confusion over who has rights to which homes, Nechemia discovers and relies upon the document summarizing the first wave of *olim* and their ancestral homes, which we first encountered in *Ezra* chapter 2. By the chapter's close, "The priests, Levites, gatekeepers, singers, some of the people, temple servants, and all Israel [had taken] up residence in their towns" (7:72).

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<sup>3</sup> See *Shemot* 21:14; I *Melakhim* 2:28; and *Midrash Tanchuma, Masei* 9.