

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

SHIVAT TZION:
INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETS OF THE RETURN TO ZION
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Shiur #24: The Great Prayer and Confession (*Nechemia* chap. 9)

Summary

After reading the Torah and celebrating Sukkot in spectacular fashion, the people might have been expected to return to their homes. Instead, beginning on the twenty-fourth of Tishrei, they remain behind, mourning and fasting for their sins. Those who had intermarried separate from their foreign spouses, and the community recites confession. Standing in place, they read the Torah for a quarter of the day, and engage in confession and prostration for another quarter. The Levites then lead the community in an extended prayer-confession, which opens, "Rise, bless the Lord your God who is from eternity to eternity: 'May Your glorious name be blessed, exalted though it is above every blessing and praise!'" (9:5).

The Levites proceed to offer a whirlwind tour of Biblical history, beginning with creation and proceeding to a series of kindnesses performed by God on behalf of the Jewish People: the selection of Avraham, miracles of the Exodus, miraculous protection in the desert, and Revelation at Sinai. Despite being the recipients of Divine benevolence, the Jews consistently rebel against God, appointing a leader to return them to Egypt and worshipping the Golden Calf. Notwithstanding the Jews' unfaithful behavior, God remains compassionate and continues to provide for their desert journey, even bequeathing to them the land of the seven nations. Once the Jews inhabit the land, however, they become satiated and once again rebel. They cast the Torah behind their backs and murder the prophets bearing God's message.

As a punishment, God delivers the Jews into the hands of the oppressors, and yet He still does not allow the enemies to completely annihilate the nation. In light of God's ongoing compassion, the Levites declare:

And now, our God, great, mighty, and awesome God, who stays faithful to His covenant, do not treat lightly all the suffering that has overtaken us – our kings, our officers, our priests, our prophets, our fathers and all Your people – from the time of the Assyrian kings to this day. (9:33)

The Levites conclude by once again confessing their sins, with which they account for their contemporary predicament. The kings, priests, and officers have defied God's teachings. As a result, the Jews are no longer autonomous, but are servants to foreign rulers on the very same land God gave to our forefathers.

Separating From Foreign Spouses

In light of Ezra's attempts to eliminate intermarriage, it is not surprising that the people separate from their wives shortly after listening to the Torah and renewing their religious commitment. What is noteworthy is that for all of Ezra's efforts, the problem remains. Ralbag (9:1, s.v. *ne'esfu*) suggests that subsequent to Ezra's activities, additional *olim* arrived and intermarried. More likely is the argument of R. Zer-Kavod (*Da'at Mikra*, p. 109) that this demonstrates Ezra's limited success in attempting to stem the tide of intermarriage. It is quite possible that even those who had separated from their wives had been reunited.

Holidays and Fasting

In our discussion of chapter 8, we pointed out that the Rabbis derive numerous *halakhot* from the Torah-reading ceremony. It is similarly noteworthy that our chapter seems to allude to two additional laws. First, the people do not begin fasting until 24 Tishrei, two days after Shemini Atzeret. Why not begin mourning on the twenty-third? Malbim (9:1, s.v. *u-veyom*) suggests that our verse serves as a scriptural basis for the Rabbinic precept of *isru chag*, which teaches that the day following a major holiday is invested with some degree of joy.¹

Transitioning from joy to mourning, the rabbis also pick up on the division of the day into quarters. On this basis, the Rabbis carve fast days into four parts. Ralbag (9:3, s.v. *va-yikreu*), for example, maintains that one should read the Torah during the first quarter of the day, engage in repentance for the middle half, and engage in confession and prostration during the final quarter. Once again, *Ezra-Nechemia* tellingly serves as a major source for Rabbinic law.

Biblical Sources for the Levites' Prayer

Perhaps the most conspicuous aspect of the prayer is the extent to which the Levites draw upon earlier scriptural sources, including phrases such as, "You saw the suffering of our forefathers" (*Nechemia* 9:9, *Shemot* 3:7), "dry land" (*Nechemia* 9:11, *Shemot* 14:29), "like a stone" (*Nechemia* 9:11, *Shemot* 15:5), "a pillar of cloud" (*Nechemia* 9:12,19, *Shemot* 13:21), "they stiffened their neck" (*Nechemia* 9:17, *Shemot* 34:9), "they appointed a leader to return to Egypt" (*Nechemia* 9:17, *Bamidbar* 14:4), "a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, long-suffering and abounding in faithfulness" (*Nechemia* 9:17, *Shemot* 34:6), "they made themselves a molten calf and said, 'This is your God who brought

¹ See also *Yerushalmi Avoda Zara* 1:1, which, while not using the term "*isru chag*," cites our verse to similar effect.

you out of Egypt” (*Nechemia* 9:18, *Shemot* 32:8), “their clothes did not wear out and their feet did not swell” (*Nechemia* 9:21, *Devarim* 29:4), “houses filled with every good thing” (*Nechemia* 9:21, *Devarim* 6:11), “they grew fat” (*Nechemia* 9:25, *Devarim* 32:15), and “great, mighty, and awesome God” (*Nechemia* 9:32, *Devarim* 10:17). We can add to this already-extensive list the many allusions between the prayer and other Biblical works, such as *Tehillim* and *Divrei Ha-Yamim*.

Moreover, there are a few references that closely mirror Ezra’s prayer in chapter 9 of his book. Ezra also emphasizes the sins of the kings, priests, and leadership (*Ezra* 9:7) and had similarly stressed that the Jews remained enslaved in their homeland (*ibid.* 9:9). Both chapters address intermarriage as well, and both are constructed along the lines of similar arguments: despite God’s manifold kindnesses, we have sinned.

The larger point of the Levites seems to reinforce everything the people have been working toward over the previous weeks. The ideal is to anchor our prayers, as our actions, in those of the outstanding scholars of the current and previous generations. The prayer exemplifies the key role played by religious commitment born of deep understanding. As the curtain closes on the prophetic period, a new emphasis on the Torah tradition rises to the fore.

The Daily Prayer Service

The new emphasis on rootedness in tradition dovetails nicely with the Rabbis’ treatment of the phrase “great, mighty, and awesome God” (*Nechemia* 9:32):

R. Joshua b. Levi said: Why were they called men of the Great Assembly? Because they restored the crown of the Divine attributes to its ancient completeness. [For] Moshe had come and said: “The great God, the mighty, and the awesome.” Then Yirmiya came and said: Foreigners are destroying His Temple. Where are, then, His awesome deeds? Hence he omitted [the attribute] “the awesome.” Daniel came and said: Foreigners are enslaving his sons. Where are His mighty deeds? Hence he omitted the word “mighty.” But they came and said: On the contrary! Therein lie His mighty deeds – that He suppresses His wrath that He extends long-suffering to the wicked. (*Yoma* 69b)

The men of the Great Assembly – among whom the Rabbis count Mordekhai, Ezra, Nechemia, Chagai, Zekharia, and Malakhi – restored the full language of Moshe, who had praised God with the terms *gadol* (great), *gibbor* (mighty), and *nora* (awesome). Whereas previous generations had not invoked all three appellations, the Men of the Great Assembly were the first to do so since the time of Moshe. This is consistent with the emphasis on returning to the Torah of Moshe that we have seen throughout *Ezra-Nechemia*, including this chapter, in

which the Levites note that God “ordained for [the Jews] laws, commandments and Teaching, through Moshe Your servant” (9:14).

This motif is also evident in our daily prayers. The Rabbis attribute our text of prayer to the men of the Great Assembly (*Berakhot* 33a). In light of the above Talmudic passage, it is not surprising that the phrase “*ha-Kel ha-gadol ha-gibbor ve-hanora*” appears in the opening blessing of the *Amida*.

It was the leadership of the *Shivat Tzion* community that helped to renew the community’s commitment to Mosaic law as the touchstone for Jewish life and Jewish learning. Above all, this is the legacy of *Ezra-Nechemia*.

It is worth noting that a section of chapter 9, in particular the part reviewing the miracles of the Exodus, is incorporated into the daily prayer service. At first glance, it is not clear why these verses were added to *Pesukei De-Zimra*. After all, our prayers go on to cite directly from the verses in *Sefer Shemot* regarding the Song of the Sea. What could our verses possibly add that does not appear in *Sefer Shemot*?

Two explanations may be offered. First, just as during the *seder* night we go out of our way to cite the farmer’s recounting of the exodus as a way of demonstrating that later generations can remain profoundly connected to the events of a prior age, so too it is particularly powerful to quote the Levites’ historical summary. If they, living nearly a thousand years later, are still able to offer a compelling account of the miracles of the exodus, we too can find inspiration in these events during our daily prayers. Second, as our summary demonstrates, the Levites’ recounting of the exodus is presented as part of a wider narrative arc of Jewish history. Our invocation of *Nechemia* during our daily prayers hints to the larger idea that the miracles of the exodus are not isolated events, but are but one piece of the compassion with which God graced His people throughout the course of history.

In closing, a final note is in order. As part of *Pesukei De-Zimra*, immediately prior to reciting the verses from *Nechemia*, it is customary to first say the verses from *Divrei Ha-Yamim*, which begin:

David blessed the Lord in front of all the assemblage; David said, “Blessed are You, Lord, God of Israel our father, from eternity to eternity.” (I *Divrei Ha-Yamim* 29:10-13)

The idiom “from eternity to eternity” is identical to the phrase that appears in the Levites’ prayer (9:5) immediately preceding the section we cite in *Pesukei De-Zimra*. This connection helps to explain the inclusion of the verses from *Divrei Ha-Yamim* in the daily prayers. By adding this passage, we demonstrate that the verses in *Nechemia* drew directly upon those of King David. The Levites were actualizing the mission of *Pesukei De-Zimra*, which is to praise God with King

David's songs. By juxtaposing the two sections, we implicitly situate ourselves in the same tradition. Just as the Levites invoked King David's language in their praise of God, we do the same throughout *Pesukei De-Zimra*.

This also fits perfectly with the theme we have explored in relation to the confession. Just as the Levites anchored their prayers in the words of Moshe and David, we also root our daily praises of God in those of David. In the world of *Shivat Tzion*, in which halakhic innovation thrives alongside deep-seated traditionalism, no greater praise could be possible.