

Elie Wiesel In the Bible: Ezra and Nehemiah

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Elie Wiesel:

(applause) Tonight, we shall study a strange and exciting adventure. Other ethnic and religious groups, other nations of antiquity, have been expelled from their lands, but the Jewish people alone returned, and did so more than once. A mysterious and nostalgic link does exist between our people and its land. No force has ever penetrated it, no force has ever broken it. Dominating the story before us are two men. Two lives. Two attitudes. Two outlooks. Two temperaments. But one destiny. And one story.

[00:01:00] A story that unites and elevates them to the rank of epoch-makers in Jewish history. The exultant story of a rupture followed by a return. Ezra, the scribe, the intellectual, the spiritual man, the student, the teacher involved with ideas, the ideologue. And next to him, there stands Nehemiah, the organizer, the eternal pragmatist, the man of action. Both Ezra and Nehemiah were given powers by the king, but only Nehemiah used them. Ezra resorted to prayer, Nehemiah to reason. Ezra rejected the king's escort, for he relied on prayer. Nehemiah accepted the offer. When Ezra witnessed the sins of people, he

wept. When Nehemiah witnessed them, he made the sinners weep.
[00:02:00] Together, they symbolize Israel's hope, Israel's right of renewal. Together, they incited their brethren to break with their familiar environment, to leave the comforts of exile, the seduction of temporary victory, and to go back where they had come from. To return home, and get in touch, physically as well as spiritually, with the city of their dreams, and ours: Jerusalem.

And not to fear the sight of the ruins which covered the city that God had chosen as His dwelling place among His people, the people of memory and faith. Together, Ezra and Nehemiah brought a new vision, and yet, an ancient one, to their dispersed people. Dispersed, yes, but united thanks to both of them. Without them, the history of exile would have ended differently.

[00:03:00] Without them, Jewish history might have vanished within the turbulent history of nations that have long since sunk into oblivion.

Together -- were Ezra and Nehemiah really together? Did they really participate side by side in the same labors and efforts that culminated in the glorious reconstruction of the indestructible city of Jerusalem? In our collective imagination, they always appear as an inseparable pair. Is the

image true? Does it correspond to fact, and to what we like to call historical truth? Would the one have succeeded without the other? Was one more important than the other? Theirs is a stimulating story, filled with romanticism, patriotism, today you would say, Zionism. But who was at the bottom of this Jewish renewal? [00:04:00] Ezra? Nehemiah? Not King, or Emperor, Cyrus of Persia? Or Xerxes -- the first, the second?

And once the decree was announced, what happened then? Did all the Jews pack up and go home to the land of their ancestors? No. Why not? We shall try to explore all these questions later. For the moment, let us begin at the beginning. We open the first book and we read the first verse of the first chapter. *U'vishnat achat l'khoresh melek paras likhlot d'var-AdoShem mipi Yirmiyah*". And it came to pass, that in this year, or in the first year, of the reign of King Cyrus of Persia, when God's work found its conclusion on Jeremiah's lips, that is when God [00:05:00] evoked Cyrus' good will, and moved him to adopt a positive, friendly attitude towards a small people that lost its kingdom and its temple to Babylonian invaders.

Thus, this story begins with a precise historic date. We are told when it happened, and where, and who did what to whom. And we are told why. This insistence on precision will permeate the

entire Book of Ezra. Names, functions, facts. The chronicler is a man of particular thoroughness, and from the outset, he wants us to know that this chapter in Jewish history will be inserted into the grand scheme of world history. It is clear from the outset that we are going to witness an important event, which the text links to Cyrus [00:06:00] on one hand, and Jeremiah on the other. It is already in the first sentence.

Jeremiah had predicted the end of exile after 70 years, and Cyrus was going to fulfill his prophecy. Just as Babylon was chosen by God to punish Judea, Cyrus was chosen to punish Babylon. The moral of the story: even if the Jewish people occasionally deserve to be persecuted, those who persecute them will be blamed and punished, for they could have said to God, "Why me? Choose Yourself another two." But, those who usually persecute the Jews enjoy it. And for this they are punished.

Let us reread the first sentence in the book. The first word is *u'vishnat*, with a vav. And in the year. [00:07:00] As if the chronicler were in the middle of telling us a story, which he was about to continue. Rashi says so explicitly in his commentary. "The Book of Ezra," says he, "is the continuation of the Book of Daniel. Better yet, it is a response to Daniel. Since Daniel questioned the meaning of Jeremiah's divine

promise, the Book of Ezra came to offer him an answer. 'Look: God's promise is being kept. Don't worry.'

Nachmanides, the Ramban, prefers to locate the Book of Ezra after the Chronicles, for the last verses of the Chronicles and the first verses of the Book of Ezra are almost identical. The *Tur* and the *Shulchan Aruch* are convinced that Ezra's book precedes the Chronicles, whereas the Talmud, in the treaties of *Bava Batra*, defends the idea [00:08:00] that between the Book of Daniel and the Book of Ezra, there is room for another book: that of Esther, which also takes place in Persia.

You see, everyone is intrigued by the Book of Ezra, inventing hypotheses upon hypotheses regarding its proper place in Scripture. And all because of that little unassuming letter, *vav*, which, after all, must mean something. "No. No," declares another commentator, the RaDaK, with his usual decisiveness. "The fact that the narrative begins with a *vav* means nothing," says he. "It's simply a matter of style, that is, of Biblical style. The people of the Bible loves the *vav*." (laughter) "Go argue with the Bible." (laughter)

All this sounds complicated. Wait, there is more. [00:09:00] The second word of the first sentence is *achat*. One? The first

year of Cyrus' reign? Chronologically impossible. We know that Cyrus had been king and ruler for some years before he had the good idea of becoming friend and benefactor of the Jewish people. Another possibility? The story took place during the first year of Cyrus' reign over Babylon. The third hypothesis, *achar* could mean simply "a year," any year. It happened one year, one day. The style of ancient fables was not necessarily limited to fables.

And so, you see that the Book of Ezra, as is the Book of Nehemiah, a difficult book about difficult times, and you stumble upon Persian and Hebrew words, you stop before names or places and men that seem to belong everywhere, but not here.

[00:10:00] And so we discover, in this seemingly precise and concrete narrative, too much confusion. Or at least, much room for confusion. Jeremiah's 70 year prophecy -- from when does it date? From the destruction of Jerusalem? Or earlier, from the day when King Jehoiakim and his court were deported to Babylon?

Many versions have been offered, and more than one has been accepted. Should we then stop counting, and neglect truth for the sake of legend, and accept the triumph of Jewish will to survive as a beautiful story that will come to pass one day, one

year? And see in the Book of Ezra and Nehemiah, a prefiguration of what will happen to and in our generation?

We shall retell the story in a moment, [00:11:00] but first we must remain true to our tradition, and open parentheses for some preliminary remarks. One is always the same. Proponents of Biblical criticism have written much about Ezra and Nehemiah, and their books, attempting to show inconsistencies, discrepancies, in writings they attribute to various anonymous chroniclers -- we shall not deal with them tonight. As in years past, we shall take the text as our primary source, and appeal mainly to Talmudic and Midrashic commentaries for much-needed help. If we manage to offer you a glimpse of the portraits of the two men, *dayenu*. (laughter)

Two. For the last 20 years, we have attempted to explore the captivating beauty of ancient texts, and their relevance for our contemporaries. [00:12:00] As in the past, the first encounter is devoted to Biblical themes, for it is from the Bible and thanks to the Bible that everything followed. History of the past and vision of the future, the Bible is the crossroad where all destinies converge. Those of individuals, as well as those of nations. Thus, we have evoked the drama of Abraham and

Isaac, Cain and Abel. The prophetic anguish of Jeremiah and Ezekiel. The solitude of Saul and the nostalgia of David.

And tonight, we shall go to Babylon, and in order to proceed to Jerusalem, where we shall accompany Ezra and Nehemiah, two extraordinary leaders who knew how to decipher the signs of their times, and bring back exiled families to their homeland. We shall see them at work, as they rebuild Jerusalem and the walls that surround it. [00:13:00] We shall relive their anxiety, and I hope that we shall be uplifted by their fervor.

Three. The emphasis is on study. Without it, our people would not have had the strength to endure the trials and agonies of exile. Study for the Jew is a vehicle of hope and survival. Moses is Moses, not only because he liberated our people from bondage, but also because he remained our teacher, and we are all his disciples. And therefore, it is always gratifying to know that before our meetings here, there are hundreds of men and women, young and old, who meet here to study the text that later on we shall, together, explore.

Four. That has been -- meaning, teaching has been, and studying has been, our objective for the last 20 years. [00:14:00] To study our history and our tradition through the masters who have

fashioned and shaped their development. We see them as persons and we remember their teaching. In studying them, we keep their memory alive, and in turn, it keeps us alive. I think it was Chesterton who said that the most underprivileged and discriminated group in history is the group of our ancestors, the dead. Somehow, they don't exist, and only we exist, and he feels that tradition means to give the ancestors the right of vote.

And I believe this is surely the spirit of the Jewish tradition. Moses has a right of vote, as does Rabbi Akiva, of whom we shall speak next week. Or Isaiah, or Jeremiah. All of our masters, teachers, students, disciples, [00:15:00] and their followers. All those who for 3,000 years have prepared the way for us. All of them have the right to vote. It only depends on us, whether we should listen. And the listening is our work. Surely, you remember the marvelous Chinese proverb? That when the finger points to the moon, only the imbecile looks at the finger.

(laughter)

And lastly, although at this precise moment our favorite adversary, President Reagan, is giving a press conference (laughter), I am glad that the study of Torah prevails.

(laughter) (applause) Mind you, surely you will -- [00:16:00] if

you were to listen, you would probably hear much about a subject with which I am not familiar, Wall Street, and I am glad that you don't expect me to discuss the situation on Wall Street.

(laughter) For then, I would have to escape through these doors, and paraphrase the poet: "Never ask for whom the doors open."

(laughter) (pause)

As always, history begins with words. [00:17:00] And these words sounded like the accomplishment of a promise and a blessing. Thus said King Cyrus of Persia, and I quote, "It is God, the Lord of the heavens, who gave me all the kingdoms of the earth. It is He who ordered me to rebuild His sanctuary in Jerusalem, which is in Judea. Whoever wishes to go there, may God be with him. Whoever prefers to stay here, let him take gold and silver and other gifts, and entrust them with those who are leaving as offering for God's house in Jerusalem." That is how it all began.

Now, how does a nation maintain its identity in hostile surroundings? Where does it draw the strength to pursue goals, [00:18:00] ridiculed by mighty enemies? Where does it find the courage and the resolve to remain a minority instead of integrating and assimilating in Babylon, in Rome, in Yemen? When we study the story of Ezra and Nehemiah, we ask ourself

these questions and others, and maybe they are the same. After a tragedy, after a national catastrophe, how does one handle ruins? What does one do with so much suffering? And how does one join individual suffering with collective suffering, and for what purpose?

And what is the role of memory in all that? What is the role of longing in history? The period before us is filled with all of these questions [00:19:00] and all of these elements. The story of Babylonian exile is one of romanticism. Separated from Jerusalem, physically, militarily, an entire community was waiting to return to its mysterious beauty. Born in exile, men and women chose to remain faithful to the image they had of their home, far away, and faithful to the dreams that linked them to the Temple, although the Temple was already in ruins.

The story of Ezra and Nehemiah is astonishing in many respects. Firstly, how is one to explain that in a relatively short period of time, so many exiled Jews managed to do so well in Babylon? Secondly, since they did adjust so easily in Babylonian society, [00:20:00] what kept them Jewish? These questions could apply to so many communities, in so many lands. Even today. But let us stay with Ezra and Nehemiah, who also fared rather well in

Persia before deciding to work for their nation's and their people's renaissance and sovereignty.

Who was Ezra? A world-class agitator. But he had no sense for public relations. He seems to have wanted to keep his private life always private. What mattered to him was the event, not the person. Surely not his person. If he could, he would have written his entire book in the third person, unlike his colleague Nehemiah, who appears to have enjoyed being in the limelight.

Ezra is generous. He speaks to everybody, [00:21:00] he speaks of everybody, he alone stays in the shadow. He praises Cyrus, quotes his declaration in all its facets, draws up lists of people and their belongings. He is concerned with fragments and details, interested in everything, attentive to everybody, except to himself. What do we know about him? From the book, only what he wants us to know, which is very little. His book, as an autobiography, leaves much to be desired. Fortunately, as always, there is the Midrash and its treasures.

Born in Babylon, into a priestly family, he performs important functions in the royal palace. As a scribe? Perhaps as a counselor on Jewish affairs. It is he who prevailed upon the

king to rebuild Jerusalem. That is one version. [00:22:00] The text does not say so. What the text does say, is that he, Ezra, was there, present, when the declaration of independence for the Jewish people was issued. Was he instrumental in obtaining it, or at least in editing it? Or at least in transmitting it? Were there other agents who communicated the king's edict? There must have been, but it is Ezra who plays the principal part in acting upon it.

He organizes the first *aliyah*. Galvanizes potential immigrants. But he himself is not part of the convoy. Why not? We do not know. Ezra, the leader, sends others to *Eretz Yisrael*. But he himself stays behind. Why? [00:23:00] Because of health reasons? Because of family obligations? We don't even know whether he is married. A -veil of mystery covers the latter part of his life as well. When did he die? Where? Flavius maintains that his tomb is in Jerusalem. However, the great traveler Rabbi Binyamin of Tudela, as well as Rabbi Petachiah of Regensburg and Rabbi Yehuda Alharizi -- they claim that he was buried in Iraq, near Basra.

Naturally, such discretion in the Biblical text would be compensated by Midrashic commentators and interpreters. For the Midrash, Ezra is a character so special that, and I quote, "Had

Moses not preceded him, through him God would have given the Torah to His people," unquote. Another source states, [00:24:00] "Had Aharon, the high priest, and he been contemporaries, Ezra would have surpassed him in greatness." "When the Torah was forgotten among Jews," insists a third source, "it was he, Ezra, who brought it back to them."

Like most secretive persons, Ezra intrigues the reader. And the Talmud is not the only one to be taken by him. Flavius, Spinoza, the church fathers, and the Koran. All praise his powers and achievements. He is exalted by Muhammad, who claims that Jews had seen in him the son of God. A miracle-maker, according to Muhammad, Ezra rode the Torah like an acrobat. He kept five pens in his five fingers, to write five different words simultaneously. (laughter)

The Midrashic version is somewhat more poetic. [00:25:00] Having gone into a retreat, says the Midrash, Ezra dictated to five scribes the teachings of Torah. And they were together 40 days. After the first day, Ezra heard a heavenly voice telling him, "Open thy mouth and drink." He obeyed, and a cup was handed to him filled with something that resembled at the same time fire and water. His mouth opened to drink, and remained

open for the entire 40 days. As for the scribes, they wrote things down in symbols they did not understand.

In the Midrash, his powers were felt both here below and in the heavens. Whenever the people of Israel needed an intercessor, he responded. [00:26:00] Once, he complained to God of the misfortune of Israel, whereas pagans, nonbelievers, had it so good. An angel named Uriel tried to explain the mystery, but Ezra found the answer unsatisfactory. Strange, but neither he nor Nehemiah acted upon the word of God. It is not God who told them to go to Jerusalem, to make *aliyah*. This, they did on their own. And maybe that was their greatness. They felt the urge, they felt the need, to rebuild an ancient homeland.

Were they prophets? No. One Talmudic source wants us to believe that actually, Ezra was a prophet, although under a different name: Malachi. Yes, Ezra, we are told, [00:27:00] according to that source, was the last of the prophets in Scripture. But let's not jump to conclusions. Ezra's case is not unique in this respect. Of Nehemiah, too, it has been said, that it was not he. He was not he. That he was someone else. (laughter) Zerubbabel. Which brings us to Nehemiah.

We already mentioned that he is different from Ezra. He does not have Ezra's complexes. Since he's called upon to do important things, he says so. Since he's destined to be at the center of crucial events, he wants it to be known. He's aware of the dangers inherent in reserve. Leaders cannot afford the luxury of shyness. Born in Shushan, or Susa, the capital of the Persian empire, he received a good Jewish education. That is clear from his name, and from that of his father. [00:28:00] His father is called Hachaliah, which may mean *hakei lei*, waiting for God, or waiting for the redeemer.

As for Nehemiah, the name means, the consolation of God. One who will be consoled by God. Or, one who will console God. Nehemiah has brothers. One of them, Hanani, lives in Jerusalem. It is he who brings the message to Nehemiah from Jerusalem and its inhabitants. Later, Nehemiah will appoint Hanani to the important position as guardian of the gates. And he is not afraid of being accused of nepotism. He is not afraid of what people might say about the way he conducts the affairs of state. Quick to make a decision, he will implement it [00:29:00] in the best possible way.

His occupation? We know it. *Mashkei la melech*, the cupbearer. He is, so to speak, responsible for the royal bar. He is the

barman. As such, he's also the official taster. It is he who hands drinks to the king. And this is, you should know, this was a high position in the Persian empire, and in many empires in antiquity. Fearing attempts on his life, the king needs someone whom he can trust. Someone who will not be bought by conspirators. Certain rulers change their cupbearers every two or three years, so as to prevent them from being corrupted. New ministers always display greater loyalty, and are more eager to please.

Being close to the king, Nehemiah is in [00:30:00] ideal position to share with him his concerns, his fears, his plans. Let us open his book. We are at the month of *Kislev*, of the twentieth year, which means, in our calendar, 445 before the Common Era. *V'ani hayyiti b'Shushan ha-birah*", says the author. "And I happened to be in the capital, Shushan. On that day, I received a visit of my brother Hanani, and several men from Judea. I questioned them on the faith of the saving remnant, and on what was going on in Jerusalem, and they told me of the distress, and they told me of the shame of the survivors. Pierced are the walls around Jerusalem, her gates burned down. Then, having heard these words, I fell to the ground. As in mourning, I wept and wept for days on end. I fasted and implored God in heaven." [00:31:00] End of quote.

There is his portrait. I almost said his self-portrait. The "I" dominates the page. It is he who is in the capital. It is he who is visited by a delegation from Judea. It is he who asks questions. It is he who takes the report to heart, and weeps, and fasts. It is he who implores the heavens. Today, he would be called, at least superficially, an egotist. Or at least, a candidate running for office. (laughter)

Today, he would be called anything, but indeed, you should know that some Talmudic passages corroborate this first impression. Actually, says one source, it is he who wrote Ezra's book as well as his own. Why, then, doesn't it carry his byline? Why doesn't he get credit for it? [00:32:00] Because our sages found him self-centered. *Zakhar-li Elokim l'tovah!*, says Nehemiah, "God has remembered me favorably. God has rewarded me in helping Judea overcome its severe and tragic problems." He? He alone? And what about Ezra? And what about Zerubbabel? Nehemiah does not give them enough credit, and that is why he is punished.

Still, do not deduce from all this that he does not elicit esteem and affection in the Talmud. He does. Some sages lift him to dazzling heights. They compare him to the Messiah

himself, or almost. How are we to reconcile these two perspectives, these two evaluations? Easily. The Talmudic tradition, as we already know, does not favor great men without shortcomings. Nobody is perfect, [00:33:00] could be a Talmudic dictum. The perfect sage is an imperfect definition. The great leader may be less than great, in his private life.

But, let us leave our principal heroes and return to the story that is of interest to us. A story in which they are not the only heroes. Everyone is a hero. There are times that make people greater than they are. Take Sheshbazzar, and Zerubbabel. These two men made *aliyah* long before Ezra, long before Nehemiah. To understand the significance of their return, we ought mention, however briefly, the exile that preceded it.

By now, you surely have guessed that those were turbulent times. [00:34:00] Perhaps the most turbulent of antiquity. One could feel the brutal clash of empires, and measure the violence of their rulers' ambitions by following any event to its conclusion -- which means, to its tragic conclusion, for they all ended in tragedy. How is one to explain, to comprehend, the Jewish involvement in their destinies? Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome. Why was Judea always in the middle? It somehow seems impossible to study Jewish history without, at the same time, discover some

crucial element about world history. Why? The story of Ezra and Nehemiah, are actually, the best example of the way our history has always been involved with the history of greater nations, empires, [00:35:00] that no longer exist.

The first national tragedy occurred in 595 Before the Common Era, when King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon exiled King Jehoiakim and his court to Babylon, where they remained prisoners for 37 years. And we are told that these prisoners, although they were royal prisoners, were not treated according to their rank. Usually, kings would treat other kings, although prisoners, as kings. Not Nebuchadnezzar. Constantly humbled, tormented, the Jewish royal family is subjected to the shame of hunger. The royal victor shows his royal prisoner no magnanimity, no grace, no sympathy, [00:36:00] which is unusual even for those cruel times. Protocol prevailed even then in many courts.

Apparently, Nebuchadnezzar had a special coldness in his heart for the Jewish sovereign. It was only when his son, Awil-Marduk, succeeded to the throne in 562 Before the Common Era that Jehoiakim's lot improved. In the meantime, so many things had happened back home. Was he aware of them, this poor imprisoned king? Did he know that his kingdom had been abolished, his city ravaged, his palace demolished? His Temple

reduced to ashes, his sanctuary violated and profanated? Far away, he was neither a participant in, nor a witness to, the second catastrophe, which took place in 586 Before the Common Era.

One must read Jeremiah's lamentations to grasp the distress that [00:37:00] dominated Jerusalem after its fall. Ruins everywhere. Desolation everywhere. Despair in every home, in every heart. Still, the real exile, the great mass exodus, occurred only four years later, in 582, and thus, during the intervening four years, there continued to be organized Jewish life in occupied Jerusalem. Following a long-established policy, Babylon allowed conquered countries to go on existing and living in order to finance the conquerors' military projects. Hostile or willful leaders and chieftains were deported, but the essential structure of the conquered society remained unchanged.

Why, then, the general cruelty in 582? Because Jerusalem's Babylonian-appointed governor, a certain Gedaliah ben Ahikam, Gedaliah, son of Ahikam, was assassinated by a group of zealots, headed by a certain Yishmael ben Nethaniah. [00:38:00] It is noteworthy that Gedaliah was forewarned by his friend Johanan ben Kareah, but he refused to believe him. In his naïveté,

Gedaliah could not believe that Jews could kill Jews. His naïveté was harshly criticized by certain Talmudic masters, who hold him responsible for the vengeance that ensued. Inhuman vengeance, that took the form of mass deportation. The Talmudic scholars say had he believed the warning, he would have remained alive, and therefore, the deportation would not have taken place, and therefore, say these Talmudic masters, it was his responsibility. It's as though he had killed the victims.

The Babylonian enemy understood that as long as Jews would remain in touch with their land, they would not be vanquished. Seven hundred forty-five persons [00:39:00] or families of clans, according to sources -- differences are there -- were deported by General Nebuzaradan. They had constituted the last living community of Judea. After their departure, the land was occupied by Edomites and Ammonites. One might have concluded that Jewish history had come to an end, as was the case of so many other nations. Defeated by the great powers of the time.

At this point, one half of the Jewish population went to Babylon. The other half voluntarily sought refuge in Egypt. Jeremiah, after spending ten days and nights in prayer and meditation, pronounced himself in favor of a third alternative: to do everything possible and not go away. Jeremiah wanted to

stay in Judea, in the land of his ancestors, in spite of the enemy, [00:40:00] in spite of the enemy's decrees. But Jeremiah, as always, was not heeded. His ideas were met with anger and indignation. He was called, again, a liar, a false prophet. Perhaps because Jewish immigrants were treated relatively well by the Egyptians, Judea's former allies against Babylon, and in Babylon itself, the new wave of exiled found compassion and aid, in the existing Jewish community there, and therefore, the Jews from Judea wanted to go either to Egypt or to Babylon.

So let us remember: with the exception of the royal family of Jehoiakim, other Jews did not fare too poorly in their land of exile. They had taken Jeremiah's advice seriously. Even before the fall of Jerusalem, he had told them in a famous letter, and I quote, "Build homes, and dwell in them. Plant gardens and eat their fruit. [00:41:00] Take wives, and beget sons and daughters. Take wives for your sons, and give daughters to husbands, so that they may bear sons and daughters, and multiply there, and be not diminished, and seek the peace of the city where you have been carried away captive, and pray for its welfare."

No, the Jewish community in Babylon could not complain. The local authorities were responsive to its needs. Jewish life there was truly Jewish. So much so that Ezra placed it above the semblance of Jewish life that, though miserable and debased, continued here and there in Judea. Ezra actually considered the new immigrants more Jewish than the natives. Why? Firstly, because the elite had been taken away in captivity. Secondly, because without spiritual leaders, Judean Jews could not flourish, [00:42:00] and remain totally faithful to their mandate. There was more tradition in Babylonian Jewry, more learning, more piety, more creativity. Remember: a thousand years have elapsed since, under Joshua's command, the 12 tribes of Israel arrived in the land of Canaan, carried by a divine vision that made their progress irresistible and their triumph irrevocable. The judges, the prophets, the kings, the generals, the Levites, the priests, the dreamers, all that history, for what?

Were all the ambitions, all the battles, all the victories, meant to be reduced to an abdication before the fall? Of the 12 tribes, ten had already been dispersed throughout the planet, never to be reunited except in the coming of the Messiah. Of the two that remained, what had become of their grandeur? Where was [00:43:00] the sublimation of their glory to be found in

Judea? In Babylon, under the Chaldean rule, Jews underwent different regimes. They suffered under Nebuchadnezzar, breathed the air of liberation under Awil-Marduk, and sighed again and suffered again under *Nabonat*, who was the last king of Babylon.

For history is never stagnant. It moves at its own pace, affecting the destinies of individuals and kingdoms. Even absolute power is not eternal. Yesterday's victor is today's victim. *Nabonat* adopted a new policy of repression, thinking that cruelty could elevate man to the status of God. He was wrong. Immortality can be attained neither by bloodshed nor by fire. *Nabonat* was still reigning through fear and terror when a new empire was already raising on the horizon. Its leader Cyrus defeated Babylon and established a Persian empire [00:44:00] that was to last two centuries. *Nabonat's* defeat caused the Jews to rejoice. It meant for them the closing of a circle. Another was to open, one that brought joy and consolation and, above all, a renewed sense of freedom.

Why was Cyrus so good to the Jews? Midrashic legends mention some heavenly intervention. One day or one night, Babylon's King Belshazzar had the bad idea of giving a dinner at which the guests were served with vessels, and used stencils brought from the temple in Jerusalem. That is when God decided that enough

was enough. Babylon would lose its power. To whom? To Persia. Recognizing, then, the importance of Jerusalem, Cyrus decided to rebuild it. Other legends have Daniel playing a role in the story, but all of them stress the idea that Cyrus's pro-Jewish sentiments [00:45:00] resulted from God's benevolence towards him.

Historically, we must add, Cyrus was kind towards all the nations he had conquered, not only to the Jewish nation. With him, it was a matter of foreign policy. He was generous even towards Babylon. Why? Because he conquered it without meeting any resistance. While King *Nabonat* and his advisers and his court took part in orgies, the Persian army occupied the entire capital city without a single casualty. In gratitude for the orgies? (laughter) Cyrus ordered his soldier to treat the inhabitants with kindness, and especially to leave the strangers in peace.

Would you like to learn how he obtained the post of expedition leader? It happened during the reign of King Darius.

[00:46:00] After a good meal, Darius fell asleep. To kill time, his three bodyguards played at solving riddles, and one asked, "What is the mightiest thing in the world?" "Wine," said the first bodyguard. The second answered, "The king." The third,

Zerubbabel, who was also a bodyguard, said, "Women." But he corrected himself immediately. "Truth is still stronger." Half-awake, Darius followed the conversation and said, "Zerubbabel's answer pleases me most." He wished to reward him, but Zerubbabel politely refused all reward. All he wanted was permission to go and rebuild the Temple of Jerusalem.

Another legend holds that the angel Metatron had a special affection for Zerubbabel. Only the angel? The *Shekhina* rested on him. [00:47:00] The *Shekhina* endowed him with prophetic powers, and occasionally, Zerubbabel talked with the Messiah himself. The Apocrypha literature made Zerubbabel into one of its favorite heroes. It claims that Zerubbabel discovered the secret of redemption, but he was not free to reveal it. Though, after the coming of the Messiah, Zerubbabel will be in the prophet Elijah's position, and that he will, like him, resolve all the obscure problems in the Book of Books. But then, if he was so great, so special, why does he disappear so suddenly from the story? It's a natural question, and I hope he will answer it in due time. (laughter)

Anyway, it was Zerubbabel who led the first convoy towards the Holy Land, and who began the restoration. The text described the expedition in great detail. Were there other captives who

had returned home, [00:48:00] to other lands? If so, their number must have been insignificant, for their exploit has not been recorded. Perhaps it is characteristic of Jews that they were and are so profoundly attached to their kinsmen and their history. It is enough to open the Book of Ezra to come across their names. Soon, we learn everything about them. They numbered 42,360 persons. They took with them 736 horses, 435 camels, 6,720 donkeys. We know exactly how much gold and silver -- their own, and what they had received from their brethren for the temple -- the first UJA after the *Shekhinah* -- (laughter) -- what they had then in their possession. We also know how many servants accompanied them. To protect them throughout the 600-mile journey, Cyrus offered them an armed escort of 1,000 soldiers.

The journey that [00:49:00] began in the spring of 537 Before the Common Era lasted from four to five months. No incident, no obstacle, no misunderstanding. No problem marked that trip. Everybody felt protected, shielded, blessed, secure, great. When they left Babylon, they were accompanied by the Babylonian Jews, who looked upon them with a mixture of envy and admiration. Those in the convoy were making history, whereas those who stayed behind remained only objects, or subjects, of history, but not the same.

The mood of the Jews upon their arrival home -- let us read from the 124th psalm. "*B'shuv AdoShem et shivat Tzion, hayyinu k'cholmim.*" "When God allowed us to return into Zion, we thought we were dreaming. Our mouths were full of laughter, our tongues were filled with song." [00:50:00] I always like to see the present in the past, and the past in the present, and at this point, we cannot not remember this particular psalm in connection with the *aliyah* of today, from Soviet Russia. This generation's heroic *olim*, who go to Jerusalem, who return to Jerusalem. Surely you know that lately, some of them who have done heroic things have already received permission to go to Israel. Ida Nudel is already in Jerusalem, and our friends Vladimir and Masha Slepak are leaving on Sunday.

I so wish I could be with my friends as they pack their last belongings. Nearly 18 years [00:51:00] have elapsed since they applied for a visa. They were five years in Siberia, in jail, in exile, and when my wife and I saw them in Moscow last year, we felt sad and guilty to leave them behind. As we celebrated *Simchat Torah* together, I wished Volodya, Torah in hand, *B'Rosh haShanah nerayo*" I wished that next year we should meet again. And all our prayers were received. Exactly a year later, he gave us the good news on the phone. My wife cried. I tried to

hold back my tears, but these were tears of joy. Volodya and Masha will arrive Sunday in Vienna, and if any one of you has a plane, I would take it. (laughter) And go, simply to take the Slepaks to Israel, on Sunday. [00:52:00] Otherwise, they have to stay in Vienna until Wednesday, and somehow, it doesn't seem right. Having waited 17 years, they should wait another two days in the city of Waldheim? It's wrong.

But, Tuesday, they will be -- or, Wednesday, in Jerusalem. And I so wish I could be with them, when they discover the special light of our people's most luminous city. Accompany them to the Wall, and join my prayers to his. But, we live in extraordinary times. I really believe our times are comparable to those of Ezra and Nehemiah. But there are dangers, too. I just heard today, this morning, a news report from Russia which frightens me. Maybe you read that a new organization [00:53:00] is taking *glasnost*, the new policy, for its own advantage. It's an anti-Semitic organization called Pamyat, and ironically, that means "memory."

And these people, who belong to this organization, are simply anti-Semites. Now, a Jew called Nahum Nemchenko went to Leningrad to do some research on this organization, and they just found him dead. (pause) In Jerusalem, Zerubbabel and his

friends must have experienced sadness, too. The city of God was empty. The sanctuary and the Temple, piles of stone and rubble. The city in which God and His people had celebrated their alliance was now morbid and scared, and scarred.

[00:54:00] Assisted by the high priest of the time, Joshua, Zerubbabel did not waste a single day. They immediately began the work of restoring the glamour and beauty to the city they had so loved and missed. Priority was accorded to the building of the altar, so as not to hinder the sacred service. Then came the sanctuary. The entire population participated in the work. The dedication ceremony was solemn and magnificent. Priests and Levites, dressed in their ritual garments, led the service with musicians playing their instruments, and the people responding with fervor, thanking God for manifesting His grace towards the people of Israel. And listen to this passage.

There were priests, and Levites, and old men who remembered the first temple, and therefore, could not withhold their tears. They wept aloud. While the younger ones shouted with joy, so much so that people could not [00:55:00] distinguish the sound of weeping from the sound of singing. But why were the old men weeping? Because they remembered that the first Temple was larger, says Rashi. The Talmud elaborates. "The second Temple

did not possess the ark, and the cherubins, or the eternal flame, which in the first Temple, maintained miraculously the fire of the altar. Nor did it have the divine presence and the prophetic spirit." These explanations sound plausible, but there is another, there must be, and here it is. Those who remembered the first Temple also remembered how it ended. That is why they cried. They wondered if the second Temple would not also be destroyed.

But Ezra, where was he? Still in Babylon. Why hasn't he made *aliyah* yet? He who had urged others to make theirs? As a Zionist leader, [00:56:00] why hasn't he recognized the need to teach by example? Is it that he wanted to serve as an example for those modern Zionist leaders, who yesterday and today had seen fit not to make *aliyah*? Has he taught them how to justify their recalcitrance, by saying that they are more urgently needed in diaspora? Let's admit it, the text is charitably not clear on this issue.

The Midrash is more clement, too. It offers a more human and imaginative explanation. Ezra was the disciple of the prophet Baruch ben Neriah. You know? Jeremiah's scribe and disciple. And he refused to abandon his teacher. He refused to abandon Baruch. He preferred to be student than political leader. But

then, another question could be raised: why didn't Baruch ben Neriah go to Jerusalem? [00:57:00] Maybe he was too old, too weak to undertake such a taxing journey. In not wanting to leave him alone, Ezra emerges as a compassionate man, a selfless man.

There is another explanation. Ezra was afraid of embarrassing the high priest Joshua ben Jozadak, who officiated in Jerusalem. Since Ezra was more erudite than he, better qualified and more famous, there was a risk that people would urge him to replace Joshua ben Jozadak, and that is why he waited. He came to Judea only after the high priest passed away. Actually, it was Ezra who led the second *aliyah*, some 80 years later, in April 557. The journey lasted three months, and the convoy was much smaller. One thousand, seven hundred forty-six men. From the king, he asked only an authorization, which he obtained in five parts.

[00:58:00] One: to grant the right to anyone to join him if he or she so wishes. Two: to be allowed to visit Judea and its capital, and see whether their inhabitants lived according to the laws of the Torah. Three: to be able to bring financial subsidies to Jerusalem. Four: to grant tax-free status to

priests, Levites, and other Temple personnel. And five: to establish a judicial network throughout the land.

Ezra, and later Nehemiah, then began working in Judea, and rebuilding Judea, for the king could not refuse Ezra anything. But no sooner had Ezra arrived in Judea, with a royal appointment ordered in hand, that he was confronted by a new problem. From some dignitaries he learned that a number of citizens and influential persons among them had married non-Jewish women. How many? [00:59:00] Hundred and thirteen. Names and titles were in the file that was handed to Ezra, who took it badly. He rent his garments, tore at his beard, and remained speechless the entire day, until the evening service, when he rose to deliver a wrenching speech of despair.

Why such overreaction? Hundred thirteen out of tens of thousands of Jews. After all, the women had converted to the Jewish faith, and had accepted Jewish law, and Jewish destiny as their own. Legally, they were Jewish, as were their children. Why, then, were they excluded by Ezra? Maybe it was the shock. Ezra had expected to find a different situation. Mixed marriages did not exist in Babylon's diaspora. The Jews there were strict. [01:00:00] Assimilation was no real threat, and therefore, Ezra established a kind of tribunal, or senate, to

monitor the situation. All men whose wives were not Jewish-born had to register and swear that they would leave their wives and children.

But not all obeyed. Ezra wept, pleaded, warned, threatened. Still, his success was limited. The fact is that when Nehemiah arrived, 13 years later, the two leaders were compelled to renew their efforts to persuade certain recalcitrants. But during those 13 years, Ezra's authority was undisputed throughout Judea. With the secular powers vested in him by the Persian king, and with the spiritual powers that he represented, he was the ruler both in theory and in practice. He had the power of life and death over Jewish citizens. It was written in the royal letter.

Still, Ezra preferred to appeal not to fear but to the people's intelligence, [01:01:00] and sense of solidarity. A superb teacher and social worker, he introduced regulations, ten regulations. For instance, to read the Torah on the Sabbath and on Mondays and Thursdays. Flavius later said that this was the greatest educational endeavor ever undertaken in history. Then, he also wanted the Torah to be read on Mondays and Thursdays to strictly observe the Sabbath. To hold court sessions on Mondays and Thursdays. To do the laundry on Thursdays, not on Fridays.

And to eat garlic on Friday, for it's healthy. To bake bread early in the morning, so it would be ready for beggars whenever they might appear. To force or allow women to wear girdles. To comb one's hair before taking a ritual bath. To see in prayer and study alternatives to offerings. [01:02:00] And finally, to permit peddlers to sell cosmetics to women.

And the educational network, which he created, established the first groups of scribes, who were to become the forerunners of the *Tannaim*, thus of the rabbinic period, and he changed Scripture from Canaanite to Assyrian, which was easier to read. Reading was his passion, study his obsession. Better than anyone in his time, he understood that without study, the Jewish people could have no chance to survive. And yet, this element was not covered by the royal charter which he had received. This he did on his own. And when, for the first time, he read the Torah to the entire people in Judea, there must have been ancient reverberations of Sinai in the air.

[01:03:00] We know when it happened. On the first day of *Tishrei* in the year 444 Before the Common Era. Ezra had gathered all the people near the water gate in Jerusalem. Standing on an elevated wooden stand, he read the Torah aloud, thus giving the multitude of listeners a sense of their past

place in history. And they all cried. They cried as they listened to the maledictions for disobeying God's law, and they cried as they listened to the promises for good behavior. That day was marked by destiny.

Nehemiah was already there. The event was staged by both of them. They formed a perfect team. One suspects that Nehemiah functioned as stage manager, Ezra as stage director. The two possessed a flair for the dramatic, for pageantry. When they dedicated or rededicated the new Temple [01:04:00] in the year 515 or 16, 70 years after the destruction of the temple, the nation felt uplifted and in near ecstasy. And one reads with admiration the description of the dedication of the new wall surrounding Jerusalem. Two choirs of Levites were singing. One was headed by Ezra, and the other by Nehemiah. And they came from opposite directions, and when they met, the assembled people were struck by the grace and the solemnity of the scene.

The ceremony marked Nehemiah's victory over local enemies, Ammonites, Shomronites, who had tried again and again, through intrigues, denunciations, armed assaults, to sabotage the resurrection of Israel. And the erection of the walls. Nehemiah had to create a kind of national guard to fight them, and his own account of the matter deserves to be read,

[01:05:00] and I hope you read it, if not tonight, another night, because the expressions are so topical. When we read how Israel behaved in 1948, we have the feeling we reread Nehemiah. When he says that when we worked on the walls, with one -- in one hand, we had the weapon, and the other, a tool. And then he describes how he organized the whole militia. They had a man on guard, and he had to look. And whenever one point was attacked, simply the *shofar* was blown, and all had to converge. On the twenty-fifth day of *Elul*, the wall was finished. In 52 days.

Ezra and Nehemiah, a new era opened in Jewish history. The second commonwealth [01:06:00] lasted 600 years, but knew only 80 years of total independence. A turbulent history produced international upheavals. The Persian empire was defeated by the Greek empire, which was defeated by the Roman empire. Still, Ezra and Nehemiah's endeavors proved everlasting. Together, they wrote the first constitution in any people's history. It is referred in scripture as *Omnah*, the charter, the covenant. Signed by 120 notables, the men of the *Knesset Hagedolah*, the Great Assembly, it spelled out the reasons, the obligations, the principles of the relationship between the people and the state. All hundred and twenty names are indicated. Nehemiah's is there.

And Ezra's? It seems to be missing. [01:07:00] It seems -- yes, some say, it really is missing, for unknown reasons. Maybe he was shy. He didn't sign the paper. Others say that the name Azariah, which is there, actually means Ezra. As members of the Great Assembly, Ezra and Nehemiah were the great healers of their nation. They restored its faith in God and in itself. You remember the Midrashic saying, "Why were they called the men of the Great Assembly? Because they restored the splendor to God's crown."

Moses had said, "*HaKel HaGadol HaGibor v'HaNora*, God who is great and awesome and strong." Said Daniel, "Foreigners have enslaved His children, where is His strength?" So he stopped saying *HaGibor*. Said Jeremiah, "Enemies have invaded His sanctuary. Where is His awesomeness?" So he stopped saying *HaNora*. [01:08:00] And then came the men of the Great Assembly, and said, "He is strong, for He controls His anger. He is awesome, for if He were not, how could a small nation, a Jewish nation, survive among so many hostile nations?" And they restored God's attributes to His crown.

In conclusion, we said at the outset that Ezra and Nehemiah's times bear a striking resemblance to our own. Our generation, too, had difficulties in uttering certain words in our prayers.

Words of unlimited praise and infinite faith. And we say them nevertheless. Recently, I read a story about the late *rebbe* of Kretchnif. I remember him from my hometown, in the Carpathian Mountains. On the train taking him and his followers, and thousands of Jews from Sighet, to the Kingdom of Night, [01:09:00] he began consoling his disciples. "It is written," he said, "that when the Messiah will come, God, blessed be He, will arrange a *machol*, a dance, for the just. *Machol*," said the *rebbe*, "may also come from the word *limchol*, to forgive. There will come a time," said the *rebbe*, "when the just men, the *tzaddikim*, will have to forgive God, blessed be He."

The end of Ezra? It is as obscure as is the death of Nehemiah. Both men vanish from the stage as if on their tiptoes. Some legends lead us to believe that both returned to Babylon to plead in favor of their brethren in Judea. Of Nehemiah, it is said that he returned because he had given his word to the king. In so many ways, our era reminds us of theirs, for our era is influenced and inspired by theirs. [01:10:00]

The end of a certain exile, or at least of a certain notion of exile. The reestablishment of a Jewish state, proud and generous, on its ancestral soil. The reconquest of Jerusalem. The problems, the tensions, between Israel and diaspora, Babylon

and Jerusalem, the center and the periphery. The relations between a small but resolute nation and its neighbors, and beyond them, with the world's great powers. Is today's America yesterday's Persia? Is Reagan Cyrus? (laughter)

What has changed since? Israel needs allies, and we need Israel. And we need today also to rediscover the secrets of memory, and the beauty of learning every day. Today, too, we must ascertain and reaffirm the belief [01:11:00] that Jewish communities everywhere are united. As in Ezra's time, our sadness and our joy reflect the sadness and the joy that exists in Jerusalem. As in Ezra and Nehemiah's time, Jewish destiny is everywhere the same. Never boring. Often puzzling. At times, fraught with anguish, but always filled with wonder and dreams. (applause) [01:12:00] (pause)

M:

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