

Binyamin Lau

THE SAGES

CHARACTER, CONTEXT & CREATIVITY

VOLUME I: THE SECOND TEMPLE PERIOD

TRANSLATED BY

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Maggid Books

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Part One

From Prophecy to Halakha

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Chapter One

The Men of the Great Assembly

Moses received the Torah at Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua. Joshua transmitted it to the Elders, the Elders to the Prophets, and the Prophets transmitted it to the Men of the Great Assembly. They said three things: Be cautious in judgment, raise many students, and make a protective fence for the Torah. (Avot 1:1)

Tractate *Avot* introduces us to the world of the Oral Law. It begins with a description of the Torah's transmission: Sinai, Moses, the Great Assembly. There is much to be learned about the method of transmitting the Oral Law, but our focus is on the final stage, which is also the first stage of the world of the sages – the transition from the prophets to the members of the Great Assembly.

HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL BACKGROUND¹

In 539 BCE, Cyrus, Emperor of Persia, conquered Babylonia: a conquest which began the Persian Age, ended the Jewish Exile, and initiated the period of *Shivat Tziyon* – the Return to Zion. Cyrus made a proclamation bringing seventy years of Jewish Exile to an end and heralding the beginning of the return to *Eretz Yisrael*, the land of Israel. The Persian policy of restoring peoples to their homelands was not directed exclusively at the Jews, but rather at all subjects of the Persian Empire, and was based on the principle of granting religious freedom and administrative autonomy to all subjects of the Empire. The restoration of the Jewish people to their homeland in Zion was financed by the treasury of the Persian State, which considered it important to settle its subjects at the western borders of the Persian Kingdom. The return to *Eretz Yisrael* occurred in several waves:

The first wave, shortly after Cyrus' proclamation, was accompanied by an abundance of frustrated hopes. This was the period of which Zechariah had prophesied, "Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion! For lo, I will come and dwell in your midst, says the Lord" (Zechariah 2:10). The words "I will come" are God's promise to return home with His people. If the people would only gather themselves and return to Zion, God would come back with them. It seems that, after years of crisis and the destruction of the Temple, there was a tremendous religious revival, accompanied by a great optimism. But great expectations led to great disappointment. The immigrants comprised a number of groups, including many of unclear family background. Another significant group was composed of Jews who had assimilated through intermarriage. In all, some tens of thousands moved back to *Eretz Yisrael* in this first wave, while the majority of Jews remained in Babylonia. A wonderful but tragic description of the consequences of this failed *aliya* is provided by Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi, in the *Kuzari*, responding to the Khazar king's query

1. Historians are divided regarding the historicity of the Men of the Great Assembly in Jewish History (see H.D. Mantel, *The Men of the Great Synagogue* [Tel Aviv: Devir, 1983], pt. 2, pp. 63–88). In the current framework however we will rely exclusively on the works of the rabbis, taken from all realms of the Torah.

regarding the phenomenon of Jews who, while praying for the return to Zion, actually fail to return there:

It is the sin which prevented the divine promise with regard to the Second Temple: viz. “Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion” [Zechariah 2:10], from being fulfilled. Divine Providence was ready to restore everything as it had been at first, if they had all willingly consented to return. But only a part was ready to do so, whilst the majority and the aristocracy remained in Babylon, preferring dependence and slavery, and unwilling to leave their houses and their affairs. An allusion to them might be found in the enigmatic words of Solomon, “I was asleep, but my heart was wakeful” [Song of Songs 5:2–4]. He designates the exile as sleep, and the continuance of prophecy among them by the wakefulness of the heart. “Hark, my beloved knocks” [ibid.] means God’s call to return; “My head is drenched with dew” [ibid.] alludes to the Divine Presence which emerged from the shadow of the Temple. The words: “I had taken off my robe” [ibid. 5:3] refer to the people’s slothfulness in consenting to return. The sentence: “My beloved took his hand through the latch” [ibid. 5:4] may be interpreted as the urgent call of Ezra, Nehemiah, and the Prophets, until a portion of the people grudgingly responded to their invitation. (*Kuzari* 11:24)

Led by Zerubbabel and Joshua the High Priest, these returnees to the land of Israel laid the foundations for the Temple but did not rebuild Jerusalem. For lack of sources, we have only vague knowledge of the sixty-year period between Cyrus’ proclamation and the arrival of Ezra. The book of Ezra jumps from the days of the first returnees (Zerubbabel and Joshua) to the arrival of Ezra himself, in the mid-fifth century BCE. Ezra’s governorship and that of Nehemiah which followed soon after, mark the beginning of what we know as the period of the “Men of the Great Assembly.” The last of the prophets – Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi – all belong to this period of the Return to Zion. Ezra himself, though a member of a distinguished priestly family, is referred to as “scribe,” a term whose meaning we shall consider below. This group of people came in

the wake of the prophets, but lacked the force of prophetic revelation. In brief, the period of the Great Assembly can be viewed as extending from the days of Ezra to the time that the Greeks entered upon the stage of our history, around 400–350 BCE.

Among this entire group, the only sage known to us by name is Shimon HaTzaddik, Simeon the Just, the last surviving member of the Great Assembly. The group as a whole is anonymous, and we will have to explore its nature and its teachings without becoming familiar with individual personalities.

THE ABSENCE OF THE PRIESTS IN MISHNA AVOT

In the description of the chain of tradition which opens Mishna *Avot*, the absence of the priests is striking: "... from the Elders to the Prophets, and the Prophets transmitted it to the Men of the Great Assembly."² This absence cries out for an explanation, especially in light of the Bible's description of the tribe of Levi in general, and the priests in particular, as being responsible for receiving and transmitting the Torah. The verses on this point in Deuteronomy are explicit: "And Moses wrote this Teaching, and gave it to the priests, sons of Levi, who carried the Ark of the Lord's Covenant, and to all the elders of Israel" (31:9). The priests were chosen as the teachers of Torah, and it was for this reason that they were exempt from all the other burdens borne by the rest of the nation and did not inherit portions in the land itself. Throughout the biblical period, it was the priests who were charged with the transmission of the Torah and its instruction, as the Bible notes: "They shall teach Your laws to Jacob and Your instructions to Israel" (Deuteronomy 33:10).

The priests were evidently a disappointment in that they failed to transmit the Torah as expected of them. This expectation is reiterated on a number of occasions by the First Temple prophets. For example, the prophet Jeremiah presents the ideal division of leadership roles:

2. On the exclusion of the priests from the chain of transmission of the Torah, see article of M.D. Herr, "Continuity in the Chain of Transmission of Torah," *Zion* 44 (5739) pp. 43–56. He attempts to determine the editing date of these sources and to prove that the exclusion of the priests began toward the end of the Hasmonean era, but, as mentioned, my intention is to listen to the sources themselves and not to the dates of their redaction.

For instruction shall not fail from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophet. (Jeremiah 18:18)

And likewise in the book of Ezekiel:

And they shall seek a vision of the prophet in vain, instruction shall perish from the priest, and counsel from the elders. (Ezekiel 7:26)

At the time of the Return to Zion, the expectation remained that the priests would bear the mantle of instruction, but their failure apparently matched the level of expectation:

For the lips of the priest shall guard knowledge, and men seek rulings from his mouth; for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts. But you have turned away from that course: You have made the many stumble through your rulings; you have corrupted the covenant of Levites, said the Lord of hosts. (Malachi 2:7–8)

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah abound with criticism of a corrupt priesthood, which had intermarried with foreign women and was alienated from the people. Hence, the Mishna (*Avot*) chose to skip over the priests and to convey the torch of the Torah directly from the prophets to the sages of the Second Temple: Ezra, Nehemiah and the Men of the Great Assembly.

THE CHANGES INTRODUCED BY THE MEN OF THE GREAT ASSEMBLY

The dramatic transition from a world characterized by Divine Revelation to one governed by acquired knowledge, meant that the Men of the Great Assembly had to bring about far-reaching changes in the way the people interacted with the Torah. In particular, their twofold challenge was to change (1) the *context* of this interaction – bringing the Torah out of the Temple into the world of the people; and (2) the *nature* of this interaction – moving from a world of prophets and visions to one of tradition and learning.

We shall examine these changes as they found expression in the enactments of the sages of the period.

1. Bringing the Torah out of the Temple into the public realm

The greatest innovation of the leaders in this period was transferring the center of divine service from the Temple into the home and community. Ezra and Nehemiah generated a religious reform that emphasized reaching out to broad sectors of the people and calling for their active participation in all aspects of religious life. The tenth chapter of the book of Nehemiah describes the making of a covenant between Nehemiah, the leader, and all the residents of the land. Looking at the names of the signatories, we can see that all sectors of society were involved. This covenant represented a direct continuation of the approach of the prophets. Every prophet, from first to last, warned against ritual practice disconnected from a focus on the relationship between man and God: “Surely obedience is better than sacrifice” (1 Samuel 15:22); “What need have I of the multitude of your sacrifices” (Isaiah 1:11); and, the most sublime hope, that “the land shall be filled with the knowledge of the Lord, as waters cover the sea” (Isaiah 11:9). In the spirit of these teachings, the first action of the Men of the Great Assembly was to bring the Torah into the public realm, bequeathing it to the entire nation without making any distinction based on tribe or status.

The enactment of prayers and blessings

The renewal of life in the land of Israel spurred the leadership to actualize the teachings of the prophets as part of the religious reform. This required the enactment of edicts, decrees, and customs. The most well-known of these dealt with the institutionalization of religious life:

The Men of the Great Assembly enacted blessings and prayers, sanctifications and *Havdalot*, for Israel. (*Berakhot* 33a)

This sentence from the Talmud embodies a wealth of material concerning the activities of the Men of the Great Assembly. The single phrase “blessings and prayers” encompasses almost the entirety of our religious world. Can a person be religious without reciting blessings and prayers?

Our daily routine is almost inconceivable in their absence, since one's entire daily connection to God is summed up in these two words, "blessings" and "prayers." Without a blessing or a prayer we have no stable meeting point with God, and are left only with spontaneous overtures at times of grace, of joy or, heaven forbid, of crisis. The Men of the Great Assembly understood that the life of simple people far from the Temple – a rural farmer perhaps – had no spiritual dimension or possibility of touching the holy. They saw that only by formalizing the relationship between the individual and his Creator would all people have access to their inner spiritual lives. Prayer and blessings introduced a framework of basic religious consciousness into the religious world of the layman. This was a revolution that called upon every Jew to participate actively in the service of God, rather than simply to rely on the knowledge that sacrifices were being offered in the Temple on his behalf.

The enactment of reading the Torah

The Talmud recounts that ten enactments were introduced by Ezra the Scribe:

Ezra enacted ten enactments: That the Torah be read [publicly] in the Afternoon Service on the Sabbath; that the law be read [publicly] on Mondays and Thursdays ... (*Bava Kamma* 82b)

Ezra's first enactment was the public reading of the Torah. Astonishingly, throughout almost the entire period of the First Temple there was hardly any study of Torah even at the most basic level. There are many who love to romanticize this era, claiming that during the First Temple period all the people were suffused with Torah. A frequently quoted passage of this kind appears in Tractate *Sanhedrin*, praising the generation of Hezekiah:

The yoke of Sennacherib shall be destroyed on account of the oil of Hezekiah, which burned in the synagogues and houses of study. What did he do? He planted a sword by the door of the house of study and proclaimed, "Whoever does not study the Torah will be pierced with the sword." They searched from Dan until Beer Sheba, and no ignoramus was found; from Gabbath unto

Antipatris, nor did they find a single boy or girl, man or woman, who was not thoroughly familiar with the laws of purity and impurity. (*Sanhedrin* 94b)³

Yet, notwithstanding the greatness of Hezekiah's generation, this was the exception among all the generations of the First Temple. A more typical situation is described by Ezra, Jeremiah and the other prophets, in which the people were estranged from the Torah.⁴ Conceivably, this alienation may have had its source in the priests' distinct status and their guarding of the Torah in inner sanctums, remote from the nation. However, this was not born of malevolence. Rather it was the result of an overzealous sense of their responsibility for preserving the Torah and ensuring its transmission, intact and complete, to the coming generations. This protectiveness led the priests to conceal the Torah from the masses, just as one hides a valuable vessel. But as the priests guarded the secrets of Torah, they slowly and unintentionally caused the nation's spirit to wither, severed from its life source. Ezra came to redress this

3. This passage is usually cited when depicting the decline of the generations. See, for example, the letter of rebuke written by the Hatam Sofer to the Trieste community in Italy, addressing the issue of small children baking *matzot* (*Responsa Hatam Sofer*, ch. 5, "Omissions," 196): "It appears that the source of this stumbling block is in the decline of the generations. In the days of our ancestors, the youth were proficient in the halakha, as our sages said, 'In the days of Hezekiah the King of Judah they searched from Dan until Beer Sheba and even the children were thoroughly familiar with the laws of impurity and purity.' Such was the situation in days of old, when the young boys were learned in Torah and were God-fearing, and so the judges and scholars were also prepared to rely on them. However, since then, due to our copious sins the generation is no longer qualified, and the Torah has been forgotten by the laymen and neither are they God-fearing, and so take courage and be strengthened you nobles of Israel and continue to do as we are doing here today..."
4. According to Talmudic tradition it was Moses who enacted the custom of reading the Torah on the Sabbaths and Festivals (see Tractate *Soferim*, ch. 10), but it is doubtful whether this enactment endured during the First Temple period, bearing in mind the total surprise at the discovery of the Torah in the days of King Josiah. While the forgetting of Torah can be ascribed to the period of Josiah's grandfather, Menasseh (whose reign the sages describe as so wicked that it engendered the hiding of the Torah by the righteous priests), our concern is still with the common people and not its leadership, and evidently the people had no knowledge of the Torah.

situation. The Talmud teaches that Ezra's enactments were inspired by the biblical verse describing the Israelites walking in the desert for three days until they found water to quench their thirst. By comparing the Torah to water ("there is no water other than Torah"), Ezra ensured that three days would never pass without the reading of Torah: Monday, Thursday and Shabbat.

Changing the script of the Torah

The Talmud also states that Ezra was not satisfied with establishing a framework for the reading of the Torah, but even changed its script.⁵

Originally, the Torah was given to Israel in Hebrew characters and in the sacred [Hebrew] language; in the time of Ezra, the Torah was given again in Assyrian script and the Aramaic language. Finally, they chose the Assyrian characters and Hebrew language for Israel, leaving the Hebrew characters and Aramaic language for the *hedyotot* [usually: "laymen"].

To whom does *hedyotot* refer? Rabbi Ḥisda said: The Cutheans.

And what is meant by Hebrew characters? Rabbi Ḥisda said: The *libuna'ah* [i.e., ancient Hebrew] script.

It was taught: Rabbi Yose said: Had Moses not preceded him, Ezra would have merited receiving the Torah for Israel. Of Moses it is written, "And Moses went up to God" [Exodus 19:3], and of Ezra it is written, "He, Ezra, went up from Babylon" [Ezra 7:5]. Just as the going up of the former refers to the [receiving of the] Law, so too the going up of the latter. Of Moses it says: "And at that time the Lord commanded me to teach you statutes and laws" [Deuteronomy 4:14]; and of Ezra it says: "For Ezra prepared his heart to expound the law of the Lord [his God] to do it and to teach Israel statutes and laws" [Ezra 7:10]. Even though the

5. The subject of the script in which the Torah was given and its transformation during time of Ezra, raises profound questions that have engaged Jewish scholars from the tannaitic period and throughout the generations. See a partial summary of the topic in Rabbi Kasher, *Torah Shelema, Yitro* (Supplements, letter *yod*).

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Torah was not given through him, its script was changed through him. (*Sanhedrin* 21b)

This homily links the character of Ezra to that of Moses. While Moses was chosen to give the Torah to Israel, it was Ezra who merited the renewal of its script and, by extension, the creation of a framework linking the Torah to the people. The Babylonian exile had not only severed the Jewish people from its land, but from its language as well. Seventy years of exile sufficed to replace the Hebrew vernacular with Aramaic. Over the vast expanses of the Persian Empire, Aramaic was the “official state language”; indeed we have found letters and bills written entirely in Aramaic. The book of Ezra describes how Ezra, meeting with the returnees in Jerusalem, discovered that the Hebrew Torah was incomprehensible for many of them:

Ezra the priest brought the Torah before the congregation consisting of men and women, and all those old enough to understand, on the first day of the seventh month. And he read from it, facing the square... to the men and the women and those who could understand; the ears of all the people were given to the scroll of the Torah.... And they read from the scroll, in the Torah of God, translating it and giving the sense, so that they understood the reading. (*Nehemiah* 8:2–8)

Without Ezra’s mediation (“translating it and giving the sense”), there was no chance of understanding the text.

The ancient Hebrew script of the monarchical period was that used by the educated classes, the Torah’s professional spokesmen. We see a similar phenomenon today in the professional writing of various disciplines, such as law, medicine, and science, which leave laymen totally dependent upon the mediation of the professionals. Evidently, the Torah was preserved by the priests in its ancient language, and none of the laymen (*amei ha’aretz*) had any possibility of understanding or reading it. The educated strata were loath to have the masses of ordinary folk participate in their lofty deliberations. Concealment served the interest of guarding a body of knowledge that was regarded as infinitely precious.

This code was violated by Ezra, a member of the professional guild of the priests. Ezra thus rendered the Torah comprehensible and accessible to the masses. Now that the script had been changed, Ezra could demand that the people begin to avail themselves of this user-friendly Torah, which had until then been a closed book.

Ensuring payment for the scribes

The Talmud, in Tractate *Pesahim*, describes a number of fasts that were observed by the Men of the Great Assembly:

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: The Men of the Great Assembly observed twenty-four fasts so that those who write [Torah] scrolls, *tefillin*, and *mezuzot* would not become wealthy, for if they became wealthy they would not write. (*Pesahim* 50b)

Unless we recalled the prior enactments of the Men of the Great Assembly, this passage makes no sense. Why was it specifically the Men of the Great Assembly who had to fast and to ensure the livelihood of the scribes? Evidently, introducing the Torah to the entire people through public readings, and writing it in comprehensible Assyrian script, resulted in an increased demand for the scrolls, and naturally prices rose. The Men of the Great Assembly wanted Torah scrolls to be in every household, and it was for this reason that they prayed for the scribes not to become too rich, to make sure they would continue their work.

Restoring Torah observance

Alongside renewing the study of the Torah by all sectors of the nation, the Men of the Great Assembly attempted to restore the former stature of the observance of the Torah. The spiritual condition of the returnees to Zion was abysmal. Assimilation, estrangement from the Torah, and the banality of everyday existence all combined to create an alienated Jewish society with an amorphous religious identity. At this point the Men of the Great Assembly acted to “make a protective fence around the Torah.” The need to introduce edicts so as to prevent people from sinning resulted from the loss of standing of the halakha among the people. The clearest example of this is the decree of the Men of the Great Assembly regarding the laws of *muktzeh*:

Our rabbis taught: At first they [the sages] ruled that three utensils may be handled on the Sabbath: a fig-cake knife, a soup-pot ladle and a small table-knife. Then they permitted [other articles], and they permitted again [still more], and they permitted yet further, until they ruled: All utensils may be handled on the Sabbath except a large saw and the pin of a plough [...] Rabbi Hanina said: This mishna was taught in the days of Nehemiah son of Hakhalia, as is written [Nehemiah 13:15], “In those days I saw in Judah some treading winepresses on the Sabbath, and bringing in sheaves.” (*Shabbat* 123b)

The oral tradition recorded in this *baraita* describes the development of the laws of *muktzeh*. According to this tradition, Nehemiah witnessed wholesale desecration of Shabbat in Jerusalem, as evidenced by people treading winepresses and gathering sheaves. Shabbat had become totally profane, its observance at an all-time low. Not only was it not observed, its very existence had been forgotten. Perhaps it was the returnees’ struggle for survival that had thrown them into such an intense whirlwind of work – seven days a week, three hundred and sixty-five days a year – but this was the sad situation in Jerusalem in the days of the Great Assembly. The people’s alienation from Torah was so deep that it could not be remedied simply by the cosmetic fix of instituting public readings of the Torah. A major upheaval was needed to bring the people back to its roots.

Nehemiah was no democrat and made no pretension of consulting with others. To make the Shabbat part of the world and the mentality of the Jews once again, he decided to introduce a dramatic change. The Shabbat was desecrated primarily by the wine-treaders and wine merchants; in other words, in the context of trade and employment. Accordingly, Nehemiah prohibited the use of all tools on Shabbat, only permitting the three tools that were used by the people for their Shabbat meals. Over the years, as general awareness of Shabbat observance increased, it became possible to become gradually more lenient, so “they permitted again [still more],” until they arrived at the Mishnaic formulation: “All utensils may be handled on the Sabbath except a large saw and the pin of a plough” – classic utensils for performing professional

work on Shabbat. This was part of the concept, “place a protective fence around the Torah.”⁶

2. From the world of the prophets to the world of the sages:

From prophetic vision to auditory transmission

As the Men of the Great Assembly were instituting these changes, they also had to confront a major shift in the manner in which the Torah was transmitted. It was toward the end of their era, during the days of Shimon HaTzaddik, or Simeon the Just (discussed in detail in the following chapter), that the phenomenon of prophecy disappeared, to be replaced by the transmission of wisdom and knowledge.

Prophecy had instilled tremendous religious trust among the people, so much so that its disappearance created a crisis that almost defies description. When the prophet “who beheld the likeness of God” (Numbers 12:8) stood by the leaders who bestowed the Torah, everyone knew that God’s word was present in the world, even if in practice they did not listen to it. But the Second Temple period heralded a new era.

The Tosefta records a tradition that “Upon the death of the last prophets, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, the Holy Spirit [i.e., prophetic inspiration] departed from Israel” (*Sota* 13:3). These three were the last link in the chain of prophets who transmitted the Torah to the Men of the Great Assembly. This occurred at the dawn of the return from Babylonia, the beginning of the rebuilding of the Second Temple, and the Jewish people’s renewed attempt to consolidate itself in the land. The cessation of prophecy actually facilitated the growth of the Oral Law during the Second Temple, a process for which the scribes were responsible. The scribes were called *sofrim* (the Hebrew root *s-f-r* means “to count”) because they counted the letters of the Torah, and by dint of their learning succeeded in arriving at the required halakhic conclusion. This group, apparently led by Ezra, is generally regarded as consisting of scholars who sat in the study houses, where they engaged in the transcribing of the

6. See Y.Z. Gilat, “*Isurei Shevut Aḥadim*,” *Mehakrei Talmud*, 2 (5753), pp. 197–219.

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holy Scriptures and the teaching of halakha based on the Written Torah.⁷ We do not have an exact date for the beginning of the Oral Law, nor for the work of the scribes; it seems that the beginning of this period must be placed somewhere between the time of Ezra and Nehemiah (about 450 BCE) and the ascent of Alexander of Macedonia (333 BCE). It was this stretch of one hundred and twenty years that saw the development of the learning format of the sages-scribes, who replaced the prophets. This is the dating which is clearly described in *Seder Olam Raba*:

“And the rough he-goat is the king of Greece [...] he is the first king” [Daniel 8:21]. “And a mighty king shall stand up [...] And when he shall stand up his kingdom shall be broken” (Daniel 11:3–4). This is Alexander of Macedonia, who reigned for twelve years. Until then the prophets prophesied with the divine spirit; from this time onward “incline your ear and hear the words of the wise” [Proverbs 22:17]. (*Seder Olam Raba* 30)

The disappearance of prophecy during the Second Temple is similarly attested to by Rabbi Aḥa in the Jerusalem Talmud:

In the name of Rabbi Aḥa: Five things existed in the First Temple, but were missing from the Second Temple: Divine Fire, the Holy Ark, the Urim and Thummim, the anointing oil and the Holy Spirit [of prophetic inspiration]. (Talmud Yerushalmi, *Ta’anit* 2:10 [5a])

The same tradition is repeated in the Babylonian Talmud:

Our rabbis taught: Since the death of the last prophets, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, the Holy Spirit has departed from Israel. (*Sanhedrin* 11a)

The tension between the clear vision of the world of prophecy and the

7. E.E. Urbach, *The Halakha – Its Sources and Its Development* (Ramat Gan: 1984), pp. 71–72.

understanding of the world of wisdom generated a wealth of dicta, generally extolling the superiority of wisdom. For example:

The words of scribes are more beloved than the words of Torah ... to what can they be compared? To a king who sent two emissaries to a certain province. Concerning one of them he wrote, "If he does not show you my seal and signet, do not believe him." But concerning the other he wrote, "Even though he does not show you my seal and signet, believe him." Thus, in the case of a prophet it is written, "and he gives you a sign or wonder" (Deuteronomy 13:1), but here [regarding a scribe] it says, "according to the instructions they give you." (Talmud Yerushalmi, *Avoda Zara* 2:4[41c])

In his introduction to the Mishna, Maimonides recognizes that prophecy may reflect a higher spiritual level than wisdom, but insists that wisdom takes precedence:⁸

And you should know that prophecy has no advantage over explanation of the Torah and the derivation of its laws on the basis of the thirteen hermeneutical principles, for the inferences and logical deductions derived by Joshua and Pinehas are of the same standing as those of Rabina and Rabbi Ashi.

This leads us from the prophetic era to the era of wisdom, with its advantages and disadvantages.

SUMMARY OF THE LEGACY OF THE MEN OF THE GREAT ASSEMBLY

We have seen how the Men of the Great Assembly, feeling a responsibility to transmit the Torah to all walks of society, worked to ensure that the renewed Jewish state would be grounded on the foundations of Torah and that its people would reestablish their connection with God. On the

8. See the words of Rabbi Kook in his article, "The Sage Is More Important than the Prophet" [Hebrew], *Zera'im, Orot* (Jerusalem: 1963).

one hand, they actively established themselves as the connecting force that linked the Jewish people to the Torah by the process of translating and mediating the Torah. On the other hand, they ensured that the life cycle of every Jew would involve the service of God and study of Torah, “so that it not be forgotten from the mouths of their seed.” This is the meaning of the teaching of the Men of the Great Assembly as taught to us by the following mishna in *Avot*:

Be prudent in judgment, raise up many students, and make a fence for the Torah. (*Avot* 1:1)

This mishna provides a succinct description of their activity. They understood that prudence in law, sensitive and cautious adjudication, is the key to connecting with all levels of the people. They understood that the Torah could only thrive among the people and be experienced in a heartfelt way if it was present everywhere, through the spread of its students. They also understood the need for legislation and protective measures in those fields which were characterized by defiance and forgetfulness.

**THE MEN OF THE GREAT ASSEMBLY –
THE MEANING OF THE NAME**

What is the meaning of the unique name conferred upon this new and revitalizing group that paved the way to the world of the Oral Law: namely, “The Men of the Great Assembly”? The Talmud provides the following answer:

Rabbi Simon said in the name of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi: Why were they called the Men of the Great Assembly? Because they restored the “crown” to its former status. Rabbi Pineḥas said: Moses fixed the formula of benediction: “The great, the mighty, and the awesome God” [Deuteronomy 10:17].

Jeremiah said [Jeremiah 32:18], “the great and the mighty God,” but he omitted “the awesome.” Why did he say “the mighty”? He may properly be called “mighty,” for He witnesses the destruction and is silent. And why did he not say “the awe-

some”? Awesome only applies regarding the Temple, as it is said, “You are awesome, O God, in Your holy place” [Psalms 68:36].

Daniel said [Daniel 9:4], “The great and the awesome God,” but did not say “the mighty.” His sons are put in neck irons, where then is His might? Why then did he say “the awesome”? He may well be called awesome, for the wonders He did for us in the fiery oven.

But when the Men of the Great Assembly came, they restored the crown to its former place: “The great, the mighty and the awesome God.” Does flesh and blood have power to set limits in these matters? Rabbi Yitzhak ben Elazar said, “The prophets know that their God is Truth and they will not fawn before Him.” (Talmud Yerushalmi, *Berakhot* 7:3 [11c])

The Talmud contrasts the prayer of the Men of the Great Assembly with the prayers of great figures from previous generations: Moses, Jeremiah and Daniel. Moses established the formula for describing God’s virtues: “great, mighty, and awesome.” The prophets, who saw God through His actions, praised Him according to His works. For Jeremiah, God’s might is seen when He remains silent as He watches His House burning, but when His Temple is no longer, He is awesome no more; the fear of God exists only in the context of His Sanctuary: “You shall be in awe of My Sanctuary” (Leviticus 19:30). This indeed is the basis of Jeremiah’s devastating challenge to Heaven: without the Sanctuary, there can be no fear of God in our religious life. God’s presence in the world finds expression only in the holy place. According to Daniel, by contrast, it is God’s acts which attest to His awesomeness, such as the fearsome deeds He performed in the fiery furnace. For Daniel, the powerful experience of entering the jaws of death and emerging alive opened his eyes to the awesomeness of God, though not His greatness. For when the King’s sons are led in shackles as humiliated prisoners, the King Himself is humiliated. Accordingly, Daniel omitted the adjective “mighty” when addressing God.

According to the Talmudic passage, the prophets recognize God’s reality. They do not seek to flatter Him, but rather they tell Him what they

think. But ours is the world of the Men of the Great Assembly, a world in which there is no longer any prophecy. We have made the transition from the world of vision to the world of hearing and listening to God's voice. At times He displays His greatness, at others His might, and on still other occasions – His awesomeness. Sometimes we see all them all and sometimes we see none of them.

In a lecture on prayer, Elie Wiesel argued that the existing prayers appear to us as either incongruous or irrelevant. "How can a person praise and extol divine justice and divine mercy in the generation of Majdanek and Treblinka? 'Great love' and Auschwitz? 'Great and exceeding compassion' and Belsen? How can a person utter these words without turning them into lies and a desecration of God?!"⁹

This was the great innovation of the Men of the Great Assembly. They, like us, were not prophets. We too are not privy to visions. Rather, we hear and we listen. Our responsibility for the transmission and bequeathal of the Torah to the next generations requires us to pray, to communicate with God, and not to allow the Temple service to be the focus of religious ritual. This was the starting point of the activity of the Great Assembly. A man's prayer is not the result of his understanding or knowledge of the ways of God, for he knows that he does not know. When we stand in prayer on Holocaust Remembrance Day, uttering the words "the great, the mighty and the awesome," as we are instructed to do by the Men of the Great Assembly, we are not lying, neither are we praising God in vain. Rather, we are approaching God with a demand, as if to say: We received the Torah from Moses, who received it at Sinai. It was he who taught us that You are a great and mighty and awesome God. Now we turn to You, with a prayer that You reveal Yourself to us in all of Your attributes, in all of Your greatness and glory. There are times when this prayer can only be said with gritted teeth, but still it must be said, because it links us to the prayers of all those generations who preserved the tradition of the Torah in its transmission from Sinai, to Moses, and on to themselves, through the Men of the Great Assembly.

9. E. Wiesel, "Prayer and Contemporary Man" [Hebrew], in G. Cohen (ed.), *Jewish Prayer: Continuity and Innovation* (Ramat Gan: 1978), pp. 13–26.