

Jewish Journeys  
The Second Temple Period to the Bar Kokhba Revolt  
536 BCE–136 CE



## **Board of Advisors**

Dr. David Bernstein, Chairman, Dean of Pardes Institute, Jerusalem, Israel

Ronnen Grauman, Head of Jewish Life and Learning, Moriah College, Sydney, Australia

Damien H. Green, Jewish History Teacher, The King David School, Melbourne, Australia

Rabbi James Kennard, Principal, Mount Scopus Memorial College, Melbourne, Australia

Rabbi Leonard Matanky, Dean of Ida Crown Jewish Academy  
& President Emeritus, RCA, Chicago, IL, USA

CB Neugroschl, Head of School at the Samuel H. Wang  
Yeshiva University High School for Girls (Central), New York, USA

Rabbi Michael Pollak, Senior Advisor at PaJeS and UJIA  
Faculty of Graduate Studies at LSJS, London, UK

Dr. Daniel Rose, Director of Education, The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust, Modiin, Israel

Rabbi Eddie Shostak, Dean of Hebrew Academy, Montreal, Canada

Rabbi Aryeh Sufrin, Head of School, YULA, Los Angeles, CA, USA

Dr. Gil Troy, Professor, Distinguished Scholar of North American History,  
McGill University, Montreal, Canada

Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb, VP Emeritus of the OU, Monsey, NY and Jerusalem, Israel

Miriam Wielgus, Chairman of History Department, Yeshiva of Flatbush, Brooklyn, NY, USA

Rabbi Reuven Ziegler, Editorial Director, Koren/Maggid, Jerusalem, Israel

Tuvia Book

THE LEVART EDITION

JEWISH  
**JOURNEYS**

---

The Second Temple Period  
to the Bar Kokhba Revolt

Maggid Books

*Jewish Journeys* ••  
*The Second Temple Period to the Bar Kokhba Revolt:*  
536 BCE–136 CE

First Edition, 2021

Maggid Books  
An imprint of Koren Publishers Jerusalem Ltd.

POB 8531, New Milford, CT 06776-8531, USA  
& POB 4044, Jerusalem 9104001, Israel  
[www.maggidbooks.com](http://www.maggidbooks.com)

© Tuvia Book, 2021

Cover art (left to right):

© Tuvia Book;

© Metropolitan Museum of Art / Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1954;

Illustrations © Tuvia and Ayelet Book, 2021

Back cover images: © CNG coins

The publication of this book was made possible  
through the generous support of *The Jewish Book Trust*.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,  
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by  
any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, or otherwise,  
without the prior permission of the publisher, except in the case  
of brief quotations embedded in critical articles or reviews.

ISBN 978-1-59264-590-9, paperback

Printed and bound in the United States

Dedicated with love to our children

*Jeremy and Carli*

*Corey and Gemma*

*Zach and Jessie*

*Max and Jolie*

“This, then, is our story, our gift to the next generation. I received it from my parents and they from theirs across great expanses of space and time. There is nothing quite like it...

“I want to say to my children: Take it, cherish it, learn to understand and to love it. Carry it and it will carry you. And may you in turn pass it on to your children. For you are a member of an eternal people, a letter in their scroll. Let their eternity live on in you.”

– Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks *zt”l*,  
*A Letter in the Scroll*

Tim and Ria Levart



# Contents

Publisher's Preface ix

Introduction xi

Chapter One:

Return to Zion: The Persian Period (536–332 BCE) 3

Chapter Two:

From the Advent of Hellenism to Hanukkah (332–164 BCE) 19

Chapter Three:

The Hasmoneans (164–63 BCE) 39

Chapter Four:

Roman Rule: Herod and the Procurators (63 BCE–66 CE) 63

Chapter Five:

The Great Revolt (66–73 CE) 85

Chapter Six:

The Yavneh Revolution (70–132 CE) 117

Chapter Seven:

The Bar Kokhba Revolt (132–135/36 CE) 133

Site Focus Map 154

Bibliography 155

Image Credits 161

Index 165





# Publisher's Preface

“...דַּע מֵאֵין בָּאתָ, וּלְאֵן אַתָּה הוֹלֵךְ...”

*“Know where you came from, and where you are going...”*

(Ethics of the Fathers 3:1)

*There is nothing inevitable about the crisis of Jewish identity in the Diaspora. It is the result of a century of bad, if understandable, decisions – one above all: we neglected Jewish education. The result is that we know little about Judaism or Jewish history, and our children know less. They know about the Holocaust – about how Jews died, not how they live. They know about Israel, but that is somewhere else, not here. Today's young Diaspora Jews are the most secularly educated and Jewishly illiterate of all time.*

(Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt"l)

We are pleased to present Maggid Books' *Jewish Journeys: The Second Temple Period to the Bar Kokhba Revolt, 536 BCE–136 CE*, which is the first volume to be published in a planned six-volume series directed at Jewish young adults. It is noteworthy that this inaugural volume tells the story of Jews returning to the Land of Israel, while the Diaspora continues to thrive in a world of superpowers which clash and cooperate – a period not unlike our own. We hope that this series will go some way to rectify the ignorance of our unique, long, and complex history, and to enable future Jewish adults to understand both their past and ground their future in a changing and evolving world.

Despite the explosion of Jewish studies at the university level, there is a severe gap in the teaching of Jewish history to high school students. By the time our children reach college, they are not armed with the foundational knowledge that can perpetuate their Jewish

heritage, help them find commonality with Jews from other walks of life, and defend themselves against prevailing anti-Semitism whatever its source. Arming our youth with knowledge is of supreme importance. We have, therefore, created an accessible, attractive Jewish history textbook that forms an outstanding and innovative high school level curriculum.

I have the honor of thanking many people who were instrumental in its creation:

- Dr. Tuvia Book, a friend and colleague of great enthusiasm, conceived the project and is the author of this book, and several forthcoming volumes.
- Ria and Tim Levart, whose names grace these editions, understood the problem we encountered, share our vision of the project, and continue to help us with its implementation and dissemination. On behalf of my colleagues, we thank you for enabling this program; for the many, many readers of this volume and future volumes, we are deeply in your debt.
- Dr. Joshua Schwartz, Professor Emeritus of Historical Geography of Ancient Israel at Bar-Ilan University, served as academic advisor.
- Editors Rabbi Reuven Ziegler, Ashirah Firszt, and Caryn Meltz have overseen the project from start to production. Art director Tani Bayer and typographer Tomi Mager created the excellent aesthetics of the book.

We hope that future generations will be better educated in their Jewish identity, and that *Jewish Journeys* will have played some part in that formation.

Matthew Miller, Publisher  
Koren Publishers Jerusalem  
5781 (2021)

# Introduction

*Jewish Journeys: The Second Temple Period to the Bar Kokhba Revolt, 536 BCE–136 CE* is an accessible and student-friendly Jewish history curriculum. It is also suited to the layperson interested in a concise record of important events and key figures in the history of the Jewish people. This volume is lavishly illustrated with photographs, illustrations, and maps. It is part of an integrated curriculum, combining elements of knowledge of related sites in Israel and source material. The multifaceted approach of Wiggins and McTighe, as expounded in their work *Understanding by Design*, is the inspiration of the concluding section of each chapter.

This volume traces Jewish history from the Persian period in 536 BCE to the conclusion of the Bar Kokhba Revolt in 136 CE. In doing so, the interaction of Jewish history with world history is always noted. The time period covered in this volume was an extremely formative era in Jewish history – one that in many ways laid the foundation of the Jews' survival as a people without a land, and most importantly gave them hope that, against all the odds, they would one day return to that land.

Many key features of Judaism, and indeed Jewish continuity, were introduced during these important six centuries. Many events in this period also served as an inspiration for the modern Zionist movement and the construction of an Israeli national tradition. During the Persian period Ezra and Nehemiah, while implementing a widespread program of universal Jewish education, introduced the concept of the exclusivity of the Jewish people. As the Jews in Judea developed a form of self-government and were ruled by a theocracy of priests, the Diaspora expanded considerably. Jerusalem and the Temple become the focus of Jewish life for the expanding Jewish communities.

In the entire period examined in this volume, the Jews in Judea were independent for just under a century. The Hasmonean dynasty's self-rule started in 142 BCE and lasted until the Roman conquest in 63 BCE. Seen in historical perspective, the Hasmonean period left an indelible mark on Jewish history. It preserved and carried forward the biblical heritage of the Jewish people and its distinctive identity, faith, and culture. Without the Maccabean

revolt and the liberation it achieved, Judaism might have withered away in the Hellenistic world.

The year 66 CE was a seminal year in Jewish history. The heavy economic burden, insults to national pride, and malicious humiliation of the Jewish faith were more than the Jews could bear. Thus began what would become known as the Great Jewish Revolt against Rome. In 70 CE, after a protracted siege, the Second Temple fell to the Romans, followed in 73 CE by the fall of Masada, the last bastion of independent Judea.

During the siege of Jerusalem a leader of the Pharisees, Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai, obtained permission from the Romans to establish a non-political academy in the southern coastal town of Yavneh. The academy replaced the Sanhedrin as the body responsible for administering Jewish law and as the center of Jewish life over the next two generations. It produced some of the most famous rabbis in Jewish history. The main preoccupation of the leadership was to keep Judaism alive without the political entity of the state and without control of Jerusalem or a Temple, and to consolidate their national life on new foundations. The belief in a return to Jerusalem, the future renewal of the Temple, and a return to independent Jewish life in the Land of Israel, coupled with a yearning for the imminent coming of the Messiah, became central features in the lives of Jews everywhere.

The period covered in this volume, starting with the Persian period and concluding with the Bar Kokhba Revolt, presents a remarkable story of resilience, courage, and adaptation. The early Zionists eagerly seized on the Bar Kokhba Revolt as proof that Jews, when faced with persecution, were capable of fighting for their dignity and self-respect. This became a symbol of national revival.

### **Acknowledgments**

It is with deep gratitude that I would like to thank Matthew Miller and all at Koren Publishers for their support and the opportunity to work on this wonderful project. I am grateful to Ilana Sobel and Carolyn Budow Ben-David for their fine-tuning of the text. A special thank you to Tomi Mager and Tani Bayer for the beautiful typesetting and aesthetic of this volume, and to Caryn Meltz for her support in overseeing the project.

Many academics have been invaluable to me by proofreading early drafts of the manuscript and offering helpful suggestions. I would like to thank Dr. Carolina Di Tella for her invaluable assistance, and Margaret Book, Dr. Hanan Eshel z"l, Dr. Martin Gilbert z"l, Dr. Daniel Goldstein, Dr. Yoram Hazony, Dr. Barry Holtz, Rabbi Dr. Binyamin Lau, Dr. Daniel Rose, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks z"l, Dr. Ruth Sandler, Dr. Joshua Schwartz, Dr. Richard Sidlow, Dr. Gil Troy, and Shmuel Shantall, for their advice and teaching me so much.

This book is dedicated to my parents, Rabbi Dr. Leonard and Margaret Book, who raised me to be a proud and strong Jew and Zionist, and encouraged the aliya of their children; and to my own darling children: Ayelet Yehudit (who contributed some of the original illustrations to this volume), Aaron Amichai, Aden Menachem, and Aviv Leor. Our children are the future of the Jewish people. This book is also dedicated to the "Modern Maccabees," the courageous men and women of the IDF, who selflessly and tirelessly keep the Zionist dream alive and keep our homeland Israel safe for future generations.

Tuvia Book  
Modiin, Israel  
5781 (2021)





**The Second Temple Period to  
the Bar Kokhba Revolt  
536 BCE–136 CE**



➤ Frieze from Persepolis, fifth century BCE

### PERSIAN PERIOD: CHRONOLOGY

<b>Edict of Cyrus: Return to Zion</b>	<b>536 BCE</b>
<b>Second Temple completed</b>	<b>c. 516 BCE</b>
<b>Ezra comes to Jerusalem</b>	<b>c. 458 BCE</b>
<b>Nehemiah appointed governor of Judea</b>	<b>c. 445 BCE</b>
<b>Nehemiah's second visit</b>	<b>c. 432 BCE</b>
<b>Alexander the Great conquers Judea</b>	<b>332 BCE</b>





# Chapter One

## Return to Zion: The Persian Period (536–332 BCE)

- End of Exile
- The Samaritans
- The Edict of Cyrus
- Ezra the Scribe
- The Scribe
- Portrait of Courage: Nehemiah
- Rebuilding the Wall
- Restoring Financial Parity
- Religious Revival and Education
- Intermarriage
- Conclusion

### BROAD OUTLINE OF THE PERIOD

- Ezra and Nehemiah introduced the concept of the exclusivity of the Jewish people.
- Ezra and Nehemiah implemented a widespread program of universal Jewish education.
- The Jews in Judea developed a form of self-government and were ruled by a theocracy of priests.
- The Diaspora expanded considerably.
- Jerusalem and the Temple became the focus of Jewish life for the expanded Jewish communities.

### End of Exile

In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfil the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and to put it in writing: "This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: 'The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and He has appointed me to build a temple for Him at Jerusalem in Judah. Anyone of His people among you – may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the Lord, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem.'"

(Ezra 1:1–4)

Picture a large, established, prosperous, and well-integrated Jewish community living outside the Land of Israel. Suddenly they are offered an opportunity to leave all that they had built up to go to a completely underdeveloped and unknown homeland. Today, when the Jewish state has been a reality since 1948, many Jews choose not to reside in Israel. Jews prayed,

✦ Iraqi Jews arriving in Israel during "Operation Ezra and Nehemiah," 1951



dreamed, and earnestly hoped for the establishment of a Jewish state to call home, and yet now that the dream has become a reality many stay in a self-imposed exile. Thus, it is easy to understand the comparable Jewish situation in the sixth century BCE.

After Cyrus II conquered Babylonia in 539 BCE, he offered the Jews the opportunity to return to their ancestral homeland and rebuild their holy Temple. This was a reversal of the policy of his Babylonian predecessors.<sup>1</sup> Yet the vast majority declined the generous offer, comfortable remaining where they were. “Life in Babylonia was good, and so most of the exiles’ interest in returning was only theoretical.”<sup>2</sup> They had adopted the Babylonian language, dress, and customs, even as they proudly retained their Jewish identity and religion. Many were economically comfortable, having heeded Jeremiah’s advice:

This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: “Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.”

(Jeremiah 29:4–7)

The Jews had displayed both the resilience and remarkable degree of adaptability that would later mark the two millennia of the Roman exile.<sup>3</sup> They had quickly begun to assimilate to their new surroundings, and they had prospered. In fact, the Babylonian Jewish community, later to become the center of world Jewry from the fifth to the tenth century CE, would remain in place for almost 2,500 years, until it was forced to flee after the establishment of the next Jewish commonwealth, in the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> (Between 1951 and 1952 over 130,000 Iraqi Jews were brought to Israel in a dramatic emergency airlift named “Operation Ezra and Nehemiah.” The Iraqi Jewish population was forced to leave almost all of their money and property behind.)

So who did return to the Land of Israel in the sixth century BCE? The few Jews who made the arduous trek back to their ancestral homeland were a mixture of the idealistically and religiously motivated, together with those who had not been successful at starting a new life in Babylonia. While some tens of thousands moved back to the Land of Israel, the vast majority stayed in Babylonia.<sup>5</sup> The immigrants, led by Zerubbabel and Joshua the High Priest, consisted of different groups, including many people of unclear family background. Another significant group consisted of those who were intermarried. Upon their arrival, the returnees were met with the sight of Jerusalem ruined and without walls, and of a largely devastated land sparsely inhabited by a population of poor Jews who had not been exiled. They also encountered the Samaritans, some of whom were hostile to the returning Jews.



Tel Lakhish with the remains of the Persian governor's palace

## The Samaritans

The Samaritans were people who had been brought to Samaria from the Assyrian Empire after the destruction of the Kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians in 721 BCE. There they joined members of the ten tribes of Israel who had not been exiled. They adopted a syncretistic approach and occasionally married into the indigenous non-Jewish population. Eventually they formed their own breakaway sect of Judaism centered on Mount Gerizim in Samaria. The Samaritans worshiped the God of Israel and, according to later rabbinic interpretation, they also served idols. They claimed descent from the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh and viewed themselves as the true people of Israel. When the Jews first returned to the Land of Israel, the Samaritans offered

their help in rebuilding the Temple. But fearing the introduction of idol worship, the Jews rejected their offer.<sup>6</sup> The Judeans considered the Samaritans as schismatic, and despite (or perhaps because of) the Samaritans being closely related, the two groups became bitter enemies.



➤ Above: Illustration of Persian stone lotus flower, symbolizing the Persian Empire, crumbling because of "Alpha," symbolizing Alexander the Great, is destroying it to its roots

➤ Right: Plaque with horned lion-griffins, c. sixth to fourth century BCE

## THE PERSIAN PERIOD: THE RETURN TO ZION

Although Persian-period remains have been found...archaeologically this is one of the least-known periods in the country's long history.

(Magness)<sup>7</sup>

The Persian period lasted for almost two centuries. It began c. 536 BCE with the Edict of Cyrus, which allowed the Jews to return to their homeland and rebuild the Temple, and continued until Judea came under the control of Alexander the Great in 332 BCE. There is a paucity of sources and archaeological evidence from this period. However, it would seem to have been a quiet period in Jewish history, as evidenced by the lack of prominent events and dates. The few notable dates are typically commemorations of tragic events. It appears that the Jews who initially returned to Judea lived lackluster lives in fear and built a poorly appointed Temple. All that changed with the arrival of Ezra and Nehemiah almost a century after the initial return to Zion, around 440 BCE. This marks the beginning of what we know as the period of the "Men of the Great Assembly" and the time of the last three prophets, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.<sup>8</sup>





✦ Map of Persian Empire, fifth century BCE

## The Edict of Cyrus

**It is I, the Lord, who made everything,...  
Who says of Cyrus, "He is My shepherd:  
He shall fulfill all My purposes.  
He shall say of Jerusalem, 'She shall be rebuilt,'  
And to the Temple: 'You shall be founded  
again.'"**

(Isaiah 44:24, 28)

**[The] Persian king Cyrus, in keeping with the Persian policy of returning deportees and restoring local cults, hoping to bind their allegiance with that favour, authorised the Israelite return to Yahud.**

(Schama)<sup>9</sup>

The biblical books of Ezra, Isaiah, and Chronicles relate a Jewish interpretation<sup>10</sup> of the Edict of Cyrus, the edict that allowed the Jews to return to their ancestral homeland to rebuild their Temple. "It is entirely possible that Ezra and his contemporaries were in possession of a copy."<sup>11</sup> Prior to the Edict, the

Temple was in ruins, destroyed in 586 BCE by the Babylonian conqueror Nebuchadnezzar II. The Persian king Cyrus II secured the loyalty of his innumerable subject-peoples, not by terror and deportation like his predecessors, but by returning them to their ancestral lands, allowing them to restore their native cults and temples, and extending to them a measure of autonomy.<sup>12</sup> Thus, in 539 BCE he issued his edict granting the exiled Judeans permission to return to their homeland and rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. It is likely that Cyrus's motives were purely pragmatic. However, in the poetic depiction of the book of Chronicles, Cyrus almost sounds like a believer in the God of Israel:

This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: "The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and He has appointed me to build a temple for Him at Jerusalem in Judah. Anyone of His people among you, may the Lord his God be with him, and let him go up."

(II Chronicles 36:23)

The biblical account was dramatically confirmed when an actual copy of the Edict of Cyrus was discovered in 1878 in an excavation of the site of the city of Babylon. The discovery served as the centerpiece of the 2,500-year celebrations of Persia in 1971, just a few years before that regime collapsed following the Islamic revolution of the Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979. (When the Shah was overthrown there were one hundred thousand Jews in Iran. Today about twelve thousand to fifteen thousand remain.)<sup>13</sup> The baked-clay cuneiform cylinder on which the Edict is recorded is on display in the British Museum.<sup>14</sup> The Edict is a dramatic record of Cyrus's proclamation, which applied to all the subject people of the former Babylonian Empire, including the Jews. As a result of this policy of repatriation and toleration, the peoples of the Persian Empire coexisted peacefully for hundreds of years, with no native rebellions, aside from the Ionian revolt. The Cyrus Cylinder reads, in part:

I am Cyrus, king of the world, great king, legitimate king, king of Babylon, king of Sumer and Akkad, king of the four rims (of the earth).... I returned to (these) sacred cities on the other side of the Tigris, the sanctuaries of which have been ruins for a long time, the images which (used) to live therein, and established for them permanent sanctuaries. I (also) gathered all their (former) inhabitants and returned (them to) their homes.... Daily, may all the gods whom I have brought back to their holy sites speak on my behalf for long life and plead my favor before Bel and Nebo.<sup>15</sup>



Cyrus Cylinder, 539 BCE ➤



➤ Tomb of Cyrus the Great, c. 600–530 BCE

## Ezra the Scribe

**Ezra son of Seraia, the scribe and scholar, is a towering figure in Jewish history.**

(Zakheim)<sup>16</sup>

The first few decades of the Jews' return to Zion are shrouded in mystery.<sup>17</sup> We have only a vague knowledge of the sixty years between Cyrus's proclamation and Ezra's arrival. The paucity of archaeological remains from this period suggests that the buildings were small and decayed quickly. Despite the fact that imperial permission and even financial support were secured to build the Temple on its sacred site, the prophet Haggai still had to cajole the reluctant Jews into rebuilding their Temple. A small structure was built as a Temple only in 515 BCE, during the reign of Darius I (c. 558–486):

In the second year of King Darius, on the first day of the sixth month, the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai. . . . This is what the Lord Almighty says: "These people say, 'The time has not yet come for the Lord's house to be built.'" Then the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai: "Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?" Now this is what the Lord Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways. You have planted much, but have harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it." This is what the Lord Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways. Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build the House, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored," says the Lord.

(Haggai 1:1–8)

In addition, the descendants of Sheshbezzar and Zerubbabel of the Davidic dynasty, who were among the returnees from Babylonia, mysteriously vanished from the records. The written record of the Jews in Persian Judea picks up its thread again with the arrival of Ezra the Scribe [*haSofer*] from Babylonia in c. 458 BCE, almost sixty years after the original returnees arrived.

## The Scribe

**They came in the wake of the prophets but lacked the force of prophetic revelation.**

(Lau)<sup>18</sup>

The scribe was the title of the new Jewish communal leader in Babylonia, replacing the hereditary positions that the kings and priests of Judea had previously enjoyed. The scribes attained leadership positions among the Jews based solely on their ability to learn, teach, and inspire. This was the first time in history that leadership was based on ability rather than hereditary rights or miraculous divine inspiration.

**The scribes attained leadership positions among the Jews based solely on their ability to learn, teach, and inspire.**

Ezra returned with a paltry fifteen hundred people in his entourage to supplement the small Jewish population already living in Judea. He had received a charter from the king of Persia, Artaxerxes I (464–425 BCE), allowing him to reconstruct the walls of Jerusalem, appoint officials, and help to reinspire and reeducate the Jews about their religion. After the Samaritans' request to help with the rebuilding of the Temple was rejected by the Jews, who were concerned with the weakening of their Jewish bloodline through intermarriage, there was general tension between the immigrants and the locals, Jews and Samaritans. The Samaritans became implacable foes of the Jews, and some claim they forcefully objected to the rebuilding of the walls, resulting in the halting of the project.

The walls remained unfinished until the arrival of Nehemiah c. 445 BCE. The local Jews were lukewarm about Ezra's proposed religious reforms, and his mission ended in failure. Ezra inexplicably disappears from the sources for fourteen years, and resurfaces only during the time of Nehemiah. His partnership with Nehemiah would prove to be far more successful than his initial solo efforts.

## PORTRAIT OF COURAGE: NEHEMIAH

**In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem. They said to me, “Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire.”**

(Nehemiah 1:1–3)

**Nehemiah, so his book says, rides by moonlight. He can’t sleep. The broken walls of Jerusalem, to which he has returned, make a desolation in his heart.**

(Schama)<sup>19</sup>

**Nehemiah did not merely seek to restore the values of the Torah or the identity of the nation. He was an innovator in both the religious and national and social realm. Indeed, with respect to some of his reforms, it might be said that he was literally millennia ahead of his time.**

(Zakheim)<sup>20</sup>

Nehemiah is described in the Bible as a “cupbearer for the king” in the Persian royal court. The cupbearer was an extremely powerful courtier, like the biblical Joseph, and possibly akin to the Secretary of State of the United States. As Nehemiah was a trusted advisor to the king, he was in a position to help his coreligionists.

Nehemiah’s life seems to have been on track until he heard a report from his brother Hanani who had just returned from a pilgrimage to Judea. Hanani’s first-person account shattered his perception that conditions in the Jewish homeland were tolerable. Hanani told of a land steeped in abject poverty and ruin, with its weakened inhabitants living in a perpetual state of fear from the Samaritans.

Nehemiah’s reaction is described in his autobiographical book in the Bible:

When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.

(Nehemiah 1:4)

After a period of self-reflection and soul-searching Nehemiah approached his monarch with a request:

In the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was brought for him, I took the wine and gave it to the king. I had not been sad in his presence before, so the king asked me, “Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart.” I was very much afraid, but I said to the king, “May the king live forever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my fathers are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?” The king said to me, “What is it you want?” Then I prayed to the God of heaven, and I answered the king, “If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my fathers are buried so that I can rebuild it.”

(Nehemiah 2:1–5)

The king consented to Nehemiah’s request and appointed him governor of Judea with all the privileges pertaining to that rank. Nehemiah could have continued to serve the Persian king in his exalted post and let the Jews in Judea fend for themselves, yet he chose to use his position in order to help his brothers in the Jewish homeland to the utmost of his ability.<sup>21</sup>

Upon his arrival in Jerusalem, Nehemiah was confronted with several major issues that required his immediate attention. The order and method in which he dealt with these concerns reveals his clear-sighted vision. As Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz notes, “The arrival of Nehemiah was crucial. Not only was he a man of great spiritual and intellectual powers, but he was also a brilliant man of action.”<sup>22</sup> First, Nehemiah tackled the physical security of the Jews by overseeing the building of the walls. Next he addressed one of the most pressing social issues: The rich enslaving the poor. He then focused on the prevalent religious ignorance by arranging public assemblies to teach the Torah. Finally, Nehemiah turned to the socio-religious issue of intermarriage. “The book of Nehemiah, short but exceptionally vivid, is called a ‘memoir’ even by the most sober scholars. It was almost certainly written close to the time of the events it describes.”<sup>23</sup>



## Rebuilding the Wall

**Those who were rebuilding the wall and those who carried burdens took their load with one hand doing the work and the other holding a weapon.**

(Nehemiah 4:11)

**The walls signified much more than security for the city, or indeed, for the Jewish population of the province...the walls represented a symbol of resurgent nationalism as well as religious revival.**

(Zakheim)<sup>24</sup>

Nehemiah managed to rebuild the wall in only fifty-two days by organizing the entire population, of every rank or station. He divided the community into volunteer teams to rebuild and guard the walls during their construction. Some people, namely local Jerusalem residents, built opposite their homes, whereas other people he recruited from outside Jerusalem.

This organizational drive enabled him to circumvent the stalling tactics that the Samaritans and the Tobiads (a wealthy and influential family of mixed Jewish and Ammonite heritage) had successfully used to oppose the rebuilding of the wall. In addition to physically protecting the city, Nehemiah forcibly enlarged the population of Jerusalem by requiring ten percent of the population to settle there. However, even after these measures, the city's population remained small.<sup>25</sup> Only once the inhabitants felt physically secure could Nehemiah begin his socio-religious reforms.

So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of the month Elul, in fifty-two days. When all our enemies heard of it, and all the nations surrounding us saw it, they lost their confidence; for they recognized that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God.

(Nehemiah 6:15–16)

## Restoring Financial Parity

In the intervening years between the Jews' return to Zion and Nehemiah's arrival, the society had become polarized. A small minority of Jews controlled most of the land and assets. Most of the other Jews were indebted to these elites, who charged interest on the loans, despite the biblical injunction against this practice of usury: "If you lend money to My people, to the poor among you, you are not to act as a creditor to him; you shall not charge him interest" (Exodus 22:24).

When the debtor was unable to repay, he forfeited his land. In extreme cases he was reduced to such destitution that he had to sell himself or his family into slavery. Nehemiah realized that the Jews felt physically safe living in a walled city, and now made social justice his top priority. He used radical measures to accomplish his goals.



✦ Locally minted Persian silver coin, with images of a lily and a falcon, fourth century BCE. The inscription in Paleo-Hebrew bears the Aramaic name of the Persian province, "Yahud."

Nehemiah organized a public assembly of the entire populace and strongly suggested that they vote on a proposal. The proposal stated that the rich would cancel the debts of the poor, restore land previously owned



✦ Contemporary one shekel coin, based on the Persian design

by the poor, and desist from charging interest on loans. The majority, made up of the poor peasants, carried the vote, and Nehemiah successfully compelled the rich to declare a public oath to uphold their promise.

"Please, give back to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive groves, and their houses, also the hundredth part of the money and of the

grain, the new wine, and the oil that you are exacting from them." Then they said, "We will give it back and will require nothing from them; we will do exactly as you say." So I called the priests and took an oath from them that they would do according to this promise. (Nehemiah 5:11–12)

## Religious Revival and Education

**When the Torah was forgotten from Israel, Ezra came up from Babylon and established it.**

(Sukka 20a)

**The greatest innovation of the leaders in this period was transferring the divine service from the Temple to the home and community.**

(Lau)<sup>26</sup>

Due to the extremely fragile security situation and the struggle to scratch out an existence, the vast majority of the population had little time to read the Torah and to study Jewish tradition and laws. As a result, the Torah was the domain of the priests.

**Nehemiah reclaimed the Torah from this oligarchy and restored it to the people.<sup>27</sup> In the ancient world, and indeed until relatively recent times, the idea of making education available to all classes was unique to the Jews. He enlisted the help of Ezra the Scribe, and together they organized public readings and Torah-teaching sessions on market days.**

This was a major innovation. The instituting of public reading of the Torah was a key moment in Jewish history, one that is ceremonially reenacted in synagogues on Mondays and Thursdays, the former market days, in remembrance of this event.<sup>28</sup>

Nehemiah stated: "Ezra the Priest brought the Teaching before the congregation, men and women and all who could listen with understanding" (Nehemiah 8:2). In this passage, women are specifically included in Ezra's educational program. Universal female literacy was also unique to the Jews.

In addition, Nehemiah attempted to enforce the observance of Shabbat by closing the gates of Jerusalem on Shabbat and banning commerce:

And it came to pass that, when the gates of Jerusalem began to be dark before the Sabbath, I commanded that the doors should be shut, and commanded that they should not be opened till after the Sabbath; and some of my servants I set over the gates, that there should be no burden brought in on the Sabbath day.

(Nehemiah 13:19)

## Intermarriage

**Now when these things had been completed, the princes approached me, saying, "The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands.... For they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has intermingled with the peoples of the lands; indeed, the hands of the princes and the rulers have been foremost in this unfaithfulness." When I heard about this matter, I tore my garment and my robe, and pulled some of the hair from my head and my beard, and sat down appalled.**

(Ezra 9:1–3)

In those days I also saw that the Jews had married women from Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. As for their children, half spoke in the language of Ashdod, and none of them was able to speak the language of Judah, but the language of his own people. So I contended with them, and cursed them, and struck some of them, and pulled out their hair, and made them swear by God, "You

**shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor take of their daughters for your sons, or for yourselves.”**

(Nehemiah 13:23–25)

The issue of intermarriage was a major concern during both Ezra and Nehemiah’s tenures. Intermarriage, which had reached grave proportions, was one of the most serious problems facing the emerging second commonwealth. In order to protect the holiness of God’s chosen people, Nehemiah wanted the community to embrace endogamy (marriage only within the group). Given that considerable intermarriage had already taken place both among the common people and among the priestly families, Nehemiah risked alienating large segments of the population. Nevertheless, he felt that intermarriage was a threat to the very survival of the Jewish people and could substantially weaken the community. Foreign wives were seen as a particular problem, possibly because in ancient times the wife was allowed to bring her household gods into her husband’s home.<sup>29</sup> (It may be that the later Orthodox definition of a Jew as being the child of a Jewish mother originated from this time.)

The strength of Nehemiah and Ezra’s conviction is cited as one of the driving forces behind the extreme measures taken to combat intermarriage. Both convened public assemblies with the express purpose of promulgating edicts to force men in mixed marriages to divorce their wives. Ezra was largely unsuccessful in his attempts. The community delayed the assemblies, complaining of bad weather and the fact that the entire community could not attend. Nehemiah, who arrived many years after Ezra’s initial appeal, was faced with many cases of mixed marriages throughout society, a further testament to Ezra’s failure. Although the mass-divorce strategy was unsuccessful by most measures, both Nehemiah and Ezra managed to extract a half-hearted promise that the Jews would not marry foreigners in the future. Many Jews ignored this promise (Nehemiah 13:23), and this policy of Ezra and Nehemiah’s was largely a failure.

Despite considerable initial opposition, both Ezra and Nehemiah introduced the idea of Jewish exclusivity. This

principle was later extended, so that, for example, Jews were even forbidden to eat with non-Jews. By erecting a cultural fence around Jews, Ezra and Nehemiah fortified the Jews’ survival as a people. This figurative fence, however, led to resentment in those excluded by it.

Throughout the public debate about intermarriage during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, conversion to Judaism was a viable option, and it remains so today. Even Judaism’s most famous king, David, who is traditionally believed to be the ancestor of the one who will establish the Messianic Age, was descended from Ruth the Moabite, who converted to Judaism, memorialized in her words, “Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God” (Ruth 1:16).

## Conclusion

**Nehemiah’s memorial is great; he who raised up for us the walls that were fallen and set up the gates and bars, and raised up our homes again.**

(The Wisdom of Ben Sirah 49:13)

**Senior official, governor, statesman, legislator, religious enforcer, national leader, social reformer – Nehemiah was a man of many roles and excelled in them all.**

(Zakheim)<sup>30</sup>

**Perhaps the main long-term effect of the return to Zion was something that did not happen: the majority of exiles in Persia, who left Judah less than half a century earlier, did not return when the opportunity presented itself....The longing for restoration did not translate into a rush to actualize it; already at this early date, life in exile had become an acceptable alternative.**

(Rosenstein)<sup>31</sup>

Nehemiah’s equanimity under pressure was noteworthy. He faced external threats, including the intimidating behavior of Israel’s enemies, such as Sanballat the Horonite, the governor of Samaria; Tobiah the Ammonite; and Geshem king of the Kedarites, and he also encountered considerable discontent from within.

Despite these challenges, Nehemiah built a strong foundation for the Jews of the second commonwealth. With Ezra's assistance, Nehemiah established aspects of Judaism that are still prevalent in modern Judaism.

Ezra and Nehemiah established the primacy of the Torah as the guide for the entire Jewish people and forged decisions by public assembly of the people in important facets of Judaism. Additionally, the entire Jewish population of Judea supported the renewal of the covenant by publicly promising to obey the Torah, refrain from intermarriage, keep Shabbat, and support the Temple. At these public meetings, the Great Assembly [*Knesset HaGedolah*] of 120 members (a symbolic number constituting ten members from each of the twelve tribes) was chosen that ultimately developed into the Sanhedrin. In addition, the scribes became the leaders of the Jewish people.

The hundred years following Nehemiah are another historical black hole, with scant written or archaeological records. Judea was a kind of theocracy ruled by the High Priest and a Persian-appointed governor.<sup>32</sup> It no longer found itself sandwiched between the warring powers of Babylonia, Assyria, and Egypt as before, as the major conflict of this period was between Persia and Greece. This brought a long period of peace to Judea, which allowed the teachings of Ezra and Nehemiah to take root. Just as Ezra restored the Torah to the Jewish people, so did Nehemiah restore their sense of identity and nationhood. In the year 333 BCE, Persia, until then the greatest empire the world had ever known, fell into the hands of the twenty-three-year-old Macedonian king Alexander the Great, at the epic Battle of Issus. The ensuing history of the world and of the Jewish people was forever changed with the advent of Hellenism.

- ▶ Alexander the Great defeating Darius III of Persia at the Battle of Issus in 333 BCE. Second-century BCE
- ▶ Roman mosaic floor from Pompeii believed to be a copy of an early third-century BCE Hellenistic painting.



## CHAPTER ONE STUDY GUIDE

### Enduring Understandings

1. This period of the Jewish return to the Land of Israel was of critical importance to the Jewish people, as it established the principle that the Land of Israel itself is the focal point of Judaism coexistent with a large, prosperous Jewish community in the Diaspora.
2. The Persian period illustrates that Jews are able to live in harmony with a tolerant and understanding foreign power.
3. The life stories of both Ezra and Nehemiah illustrate the power of individuals to affect the course of Jewish history.
4. Both in the Persian period and today, intermarriage is one of the greatest challenges to Jewish continuity.

### Essential Questions

1. In your opinion, was the large community that remained in Persian-occupied Babylonia of their own free will still considered as living in exile? Should all Jews live in Israel?
2. Why did the majority of Jews voluntarily stay in Babylonia, rather than return to the Jewish homeland? Are there any modern-day parallels?
3. Why is the old adage, “no news is good news” particularly applicable to Jewish history in this period?
4. What would cause you, like Nehemiah, to risk position and wealth to help your people?
5. Why were Ezra and Nehemiah so opposed to intermarriage?
6. How do you feel about intermarriage or about dating outside the religion? Is it a threat to Judaism?
7. What new institutions and developments in the Jewish community did Ezra and Nehemiah introduce?
8. Why is it necessary to have a program of universal, widespread, religious education?

### Knowledge

1. The primacy of the Land of Israel is vital to ensure our continued survival as Jews.
2. Why Judaism is so insistent on marriage within our religion in order to ensure our survival.
3. The importance of universal religious education to retain our knowledge of our faith, in order to pass it on to the next generation.
4. How the principle of exclusivity helped ensure the survival of the Jews as a people.

### Skills

1. Analyze archaeological evidence (the Edict of Cyrus) in order to substantiate the biblical book of Ezra.
2. Study biblical texts and come to an understanding regarding the development of contemporary Jewish practice.
3. Understand, by studying biographies of famous people, how the lives of individual Jews can change the direction of our entire history.
4. Identify a problem (as did Ezra and Nehemiah) and recommend solutions.

## Endnotes

1. David Englander, *The Jewish Enigma: An Enduring People* (Milton Keynes, UK: The Open University, 1992), p. 3.
2. Marc J. Rosenstein, *Turning Points in Jewish History* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2018), p.87.
3. Dov S. Zakheim, *Nehemiah: Statesman and Sage* (Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2016), p. 15.
4. Martin Gilbert, *The Routledge Atlas of Jewish History*, 8th edition (New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 10.
5. Binyamin Lau, *The Sages*, volume I: *The Second Temple Period* (Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2010), p. 6.
6. Ezra 4:4–5.
7. Jodi Magness, *The Archaeology of the Holy Land, from the Destruction of Solomon's Temple to the Muslim Conquest* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 55.
8. Lau, *The Sages*, volume I, p. 7.
9. Simon Schama, *The Story of the Jews, Finding the Words, 1000 BC–1492 AD* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013), p. 28.
10. Englander, *Jewish Enigma*, p. 3.
11. Schama, *Story of the Jews*, p. 29.
12. Lau, *The Sages*, volume I, p. 6.
13. Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Jerusalem, the Biography* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012), p. 5.
14. T. C. Mitchell *The Bible in the British Museum, Interpreting the Evidence* (London: British Museum Press, 2004), p. 83.
15. William Hallo, David Ruderman, and Michael Stanislawski, *Source Reader: Heritage, Civilization, and the Jews* (New York: Praeger, 1984), p. 46.
16. Zakheim, *Nehemiah: Statesman and Sage*, p. 11.
17. Lau, *The Sages*, volume I, p. 7.
18. *The Sages*, volume I, p. 8.
19. Schama, *Story of the Jews*, p. 28.
20. Zakheim, *Nehemiah: Statesman and Sage*, p. 227.
21. He chose, in the thought-provoking words of the American poet Robert Frost (1874–1963), the road “less traveled by,” and “that is what made all the difference.”
22. Adin Steinsaltz, *Biblical Images: Men and Women of the Book* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), p. 208.
23. Schama, *Story of the Jews*, p. 30.
24. Zakheim, *Nehemiah: Statesman and Sage*, p. 199.
25. Dan Bahat, *The Carta Jerusalem Atlas* (Jerusalem: Carta, 2011), p. 36.
26. Lau, *The Sages*, volume I, p. 10.
27. Lau, *The Sages*, volume I, p. 10.
28. Raymond P. Scheindlin, *A Short History of the Jewish People: From Legendary Times to Modern Statehood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 32.
29. Englander, *Jewish Enigma*, p. 4.
30. Zakheim, *Nehemiah: Statesman and Sage*, p. 227.
31. Rosenstein, *Turning Points in Jewish History*, p. 94.
32. Scheindlin, *A Short History*, p. 33.

In 586 BCE the Jews of Judea were exiled by Nebukhadnetzar II, king of Babylon.

“By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion. We hung our harps upon the willows in its midst.” (Psalms 137:1–2)

In 536 BCE, the Persian king, Cyrus, allowed the Jews to return, where once again they could play their harps in Jerusalem.