

---

# EZRA-NECHEMIAH NECHEMIAH CHAPTER 1: MEETING OUR HERO

---

*R' Yair Lichtman*



MARCH 27, 2023  
CONGREGATION OR TORAH

פרשת צו תשפ"ד



(5) SANHEDRIN 93B

מפדי כל מילי דעזרא נחמיה בן חכליה אמרינהו ונחמיה בן חכליה מאי טעמא לא איקרי סיפרא על שמייה אמר רבי ירמיה בר אבא מפני שהחזיק טובה לעצמו שנאמר {נחמיה ה':י"ט} זכרה לי אלהי לטובה דוד נמי מימר אמר {תהלים ק"ו:ד'} זכרני ה' ברצון עמה פקדני בישועתך דוד רחמי הוא דקבעי.

רב יוסף אמר מפני שסיפר בגנותו של ראשונים שנאמר {נחמיה ה':ט"ו} והפחות הראשונים אשר לפני הכבידו על העם ויקחו מהם בלחם ויין אחד כסף שקלים ארבעים וגו' ואף על דניאל שגדול ממנו סיפר.

Now with regard to **all the matters of the book of Ezra, Nehemiah, son of Hacaliah, said them** and wrote most of them; **and with regard to Nehemiah, son of Hacaliah, what is the reason that a book was not called by his name? Rabbi Yirmeya bar Abba says:** The book was not named for Nehemiah **because he took credit for himself** and boasted about his good deeds, **as it is stated: “Remember me, God, for good”** (Nehemiah 13:31). The Gemara asks: Is that a shortcoming? King David also said: **“Remember me, Lord, when You show favor to Your people; visit me with Your salvation”** (Psalms 106:4). The Gemara answers: **David was asking for compassion** and formulated his words as a prayer. Nehemiah stated them as a fact and a demand.

**Rav Yosef says:** Nehemiah was punished **because he spoke in denigration of his predecessors, as it is stated: “But the former governors who were before me placed burdens upon the people, and took from them for bread and wine beyond forty shekels of silver; even their servants ruled over the people; but I did not do so, due to the fear of God”** (Nehemiah 5:15). **And he related** these disparaging statements **even about Daniel, who was greater than he** was.

(6) R' DOV ZAKHEIM, NEHEMIAH: STATESMAN AND SAGE, PP. 39

The fact that he mentions no intermediary – in fact throughout his memoir he never mentions having consulted any powerful ally or even assistant before deciding upon a policy or course of action – indicates that from the very start he was determined to receive all the credit for any actions he might take on behalf of his people.

(7) CHOMAT ANAKH NEHEMIAH 1:1

וזה כמה מאות שנים בהגלות נגלות הדפוס בעולם, מדפ"ס ועולה ספר נחמיה לחוד... ועוד אפשר לומר דמה שאמר "זכרה לי אלקי לטובה" אי נמי במה שספר בגנותן של ראשונים ברוב הימים נתכפר... ולכן בדורות אחרונים נקרא הספר נחמיה על שמו. ואינו מקרה ח"ו רק הכל בדקדוק גמור.

It has been centuries since the revelation of the printing press, and the “Book of Nechemiah” ascends and is printed alone... One could also suggest that he atoned for “Remember me, Gd, for the good,” or speaking poorly of predecessors over the course of time... And therefore in recent generations the Book of Nechemiah has been called by his name. It is not coincidence, Gd forbid; all is calculated precisely.

## HEARING THE NEWS

### (8) NECHEMIAH 1:1-3

(1) The words of Nechemyah the son of Hacaliah. Now it happened in the month Chislev, in the twentieth year, as I was in Shushan the palace, (2) that Hanani, one of my brothers, came, he and certain men out of Judah; and I asked them concerning the Jews who had escaped, who were left of the captivity, and concerning Jerusalem. (3) They said to me, "The remnant who are left of the captivity there in the province are in great affliction and reproach. The wall of Jerusalem also is broken down, and its gates are burned with fire."

(א) דברי נחמיה בן חכליה נהי בהודש כסלו שנת עשרים ואני הייתי בשושן הבירה. (ב) ויבא חנני אחי מאחי הוא ואנשים מיהודה ואשאלם על היהודים הפליטה אשר נשארו מן השבי ועל ירושלים. (ג) ויאמרו לי הנשארם אשר נשארו מן השבי שם במדינה ברעה גדלה ובחרפה וחומת ירושלים מפרצת ושעריה נצתו באש.

### (9) METZUDAT DAVID NECHEMIAH 1:1

דברי נחמיה – ר"ל נחמיה כתב ספר זה.

“The words of Nechemiah” – this means that Nechemiah wrote this book.

### (10) BAVA BATRA 15A

עזרא כתב ספרו ויחסי של דברי הימים עד לו.

**Ezra wrote his own book and the genealogy of the book of Chronicles until his period.**

### (11) R' TZVI SINENSKY, “AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHET”

First and foremost, none of the trappings we saw in the case of Ezra are present for Nechemia. Only one generation of the latter’s lineage is outlined, not seventeen. Whereas Ezra was introduced as an accomplished scholar who had diligently prepared himself, Nechemia arrives on the scene with little fanfare.

The significance of this distinction is unclear. Possibly, it is merely a function of the respective literary characters of each work. Nechemia writes in first-person narrative, and so is perhaps appropriately hesitant to shower himself with appellations. If so, it is worth contrasting Nechemia’s early humility with his later self-promotion. As we will explore later in our series, on numerous occasions Nechemia asks God for recognition of his achievements. Indeed, the rabbis viewed this as arrogant, and they criticized Nechemia. It is possible that the rabbis felt that Nechemia allowed his success to go to his head, suggesting that his early modesty gave way to later hubris.

## (12) RASHI NECHEMIAH 1:2

אחד מאחי – אחד מחברי.

“One of my brethren” – one of my companions.

## (13) DA'AT MIKRA NECHEMIAH 1:2

(ב) וַיָּבֵא חֲנַנִי אֶחָד מֵאֲחָי – מִכָּאֵן שֶׁאֲחָיו יָשְׁבוּ  
כְּכֹר בִּירוּשָׁלַם לְפָנָיו<sup>6</sup>, וַיִּתְכַּן שֶׁהוּא עֲצָמוּ הָיָה לְפָנָי  
זֶה בִירוּשָׁלַם וְשָׁב אַחַר קֶדֶף לְפָרָס. וְאוּלַי יֵשׁ לְהַכִּין  
מִתּוֹךְ ב ג שָׁנָם אֲבוֹתָיו (אָבִיו וְאִמּוֹ) נִקְבְּרוּ שָׁם. עַל-

From here, we learn that his brothers already dwelled in Yerushalayim before him. It may be that he himself had been in Yerushalayim and returned to Persia afterwards. Perhaps we can infer from Nechemiah 2:3 that his parents (his father and mother) were buried there.

## (14) JOSEPHUS, ANTIQUITIES OF THE JEWS, 11:5:6

Now there was one of those Jews that had been carried captive who was cup-bearer to king Xerxes; his name was Nehemiah. As this man was walking before Susa, the metropolis of the Persians, he heard some strangers that were entering the city, after a long journey, speaking to one another in the Hebrew tongue; so he went to them, and asked them whence they came. And when their answer was, that they came from Judea, he began to inquire of them again in what state the multitude was, and in what condition Jerusalem was; and when they replied that they were in a bad state...

## (15) METZUDAT DAVID NECHEMIAH 1:2

נשארו – על כי רוב הגולה ישבו בבבל בשבי ומעט עלו לזה אמר בהם ל' שארית.

“Who remained” – for most of the exiles remained in Bavel, and only a few went up, therefore they use the language of “remainder.”

## (16) MALBIM NECHEMIAH 1:2

נראה שהיהודים ששבו ברשות כורש, ואח"כ ברשות ארתחששתא היה להם פחה מיוחד, [עזרא ה' י"ד], רק היהודים שהיו שם מקודם שהיו תחת פקודת פחוות עבר הנהר [כמו שנראה לקמן ג' ז'] עליהם שאל, והם היו ברעה ובחפרה, שהפחות היו נוגשים אותם, ועז"א אשר נשארו, אבל היהודים אשר באו לשם מן השבי היה להם הפחה שלהם למגן ומחסה:

It appears that the Jews who had returned with the permission of Cyrus, and then with the permission of Artachshasta, had a special pacha (Ezra 5:14). Only the Jews who had been there from before, who were under the authority of the pacha of the other side of the river (as seen in Nechemiah 3:7), he asked about

them, and they were in a bad and shameful state for their pachas oppressed them. Thus it said “who remained”. But the pacha protected the Jews who had come back from captivity.

**(17) RALBAG NECHEMIAH 1:3**

וחומת ירושלים מפרצת ושעריה נצתו באש – אחשב שזה נעשה בעת חורבן בית ראשון כי לא בנו עדיין חומה לעיר ירושלים השבים מהגולה כי לא נתן להם רשות רק לבנות ביהמ"ק.

“The wall of Jerusalem also is broken down, and its gates are burned with fire.” – I think that this happened at the time of the destruction of the first Beit HaMikdash, for the returnees from exile had not yet built the wall of Yerushalayim, for they had only gotten permission to build the Beit HaMikdash.

**(18) DA'AT MIKRA NECHEMIAH 1:2**

מתוך ב ג שגם אבותיו (אביו ואמו) נקברו שם. על-  
היהודים – והם הפליטה מן השבי; ושבי זה לא  
ידענו מי לקחו, ועל כרחנו ארע דבר זה בימי  
ארתחששתא או אחשורוש אביו.

We don't know who took this captivity. However, we must say that this happened during the days of Artachshasta or Achashverosh his father.

**NECHEMIAH'S PRAYER**

**(19) NECHEMIAH 1:4-11**

(4) It happened, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned several days; and I fasted and prayed before the God of heaven, (5) and said, "I beg You, Hashem, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps covenant and loving kindness with those who love Him and keep His commandments. (6) Let Your ear now be attentive, and Your eyes open, that You may listen to the prayer of Your servant, which I pray before You at this time, day and night, for the children of Israel Your servants while I confess the sins of the children of Israel, which we have sinned against You. Yes, I and my father's house have sinned. (7) We have dealt very corruptly against You, and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the ordinances, which You commanded Your servant Moses. (8) Remember, I beg You, the word that You commanded Your servant Moses, saying, 'If you trespass, I will scatter you abroad among the peoples, (9) but if you return to Me, and keep My

(ד) ויהי כשמעתי את הדברים האלה ישבתי ואבכה ואתאבלה ימים ונאחי צם ומתפלל לפני אלהי השמים. (ה) ואמר אבא יי אלהי השמים האל הגדול והנורא שמר הברית וחסד לאהביו ולשמרי מצותיו. (ו) תהי נא אזנה קשבת ועיניך פתוחות לשמע אל תפלת עבדך אשר אנכי מתפלל לפניך היום ויום ולילה על בני ישראל עבדך ומתנדב על חטאות בני ישראל אשר חטאנו לך נאני ובית אבי חטאנו. (ז) תבל חבלנו לך ולא שמרנו את המצות ואת החקים ואת המשפטים אשר צוית את משה עבדך. (ח) וזכר נא את הדבר אשר צוית את משה עבדך לאמר אתם תמעלו אני אפיץ אתכם בעמים. (ט) ושבתם אלי

commandments and do them, though your outcasts were in the uttermost part of the heavens, yet will I gather them from there, and will bring them to the place that I have chosen, to cause My name to dwell there.' (10) Now these are Your servants and Your people, whom You have redeemed by Your great power, and by Your strong hand. (11) Adonai, I beg You, let now Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant, and to the prayer of Your servants, who delight to fear Your name; and please prosper Your servant this day, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man." Now I was cup bearer to the king.

וְשִׁמְרֵתֶם מִצְוֹתַי וַעֲשִׂיתֶם אֹתָם אִם יִהְיֶה גִדְחֵכֶם בְּקִצְצֵה הַשָּׁמַיִם מִשָּׁם אֶקְבְּצֵם [וְהִבֵּיאֹתִים] (וְהִבֵּיאֹתִים) אֶל הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר בְּחַרְתִּי לְשֹׁכֵן אֶת שְׁמִי שָׁם. (י) וְהֵם עֲבָדַי וְעַמִּי אֲשֶׁר פָּדִיתִי בְּכֹחַ הַגְּדוּל וּבְיָדְךָ הַחֲזָקָה. (יא) אֲנֹא אֲדַנִּי תְהִי נָא אֲזִנְךָ קֹשֶׁת אֶל תְּפִלַּת עַבְדְּךָ וְאֶל תְּפִלַּת עֲבָדֶיךָ הַחֲפָצִים לִירְאָה אֶת שְׁמִי וְהַצְּלִיחָה נָא לְעַבְדְּךָ הַיּוֹם וּתְנֶהוּ לְרַחֲמִים לִפְנֵי הָאִישׁ הַזֶּה וְאֲנִי הֵייתִי מִשְׁקָה לְמֶלֶךְ.

## (20) R' TZVI SINENSKY, "AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHET"

Ezra refers to God as "*Hashem Elokei*," "Hashem my God"; Nechemia, by contrast, invokes "*Elokei hashamayim*," "God of the heavens," the same language used by Cyrus in his call for the Jews to return to Israel.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Also of note is the fact that Nechemia seems to count the months beginning with Tishrei, as evident from a close reading of the beginning of his first two chapters. Ezra, by contrast, considers Nissan the first month of the year. Regarding the calendar, too, Nechemia seems to follow the Babylonian/Persian convention, whereas Ezra does not.

## (21) YOMA 69B

אמר רבי יהושע בן לוי למה נקרא שמו אנשי כנסת הגדולה שהחזירו עטרה ליושנה אמתא משה אמר {דברים י:י"ז} האל הגדול הגבור והנורא אמתא ירמיה ואמר גוים מקרקרין בהיכלו איה נוראותיו לא אמר נורא אמתא דניאל אמר גוים משתעבדים בכניו איה גבורותיו לא אמר גבור.

**Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: Why are the Sages of those generations called the members of the Great Assembly? It is because they returned the crown of the Holy One, Blessed be He, to its former glory. How so? Moses came and said in his prayer: "The great, the mighty, and the awesome God"** (Deuteronomy 10:17). **Jeremiah the prophet came and said: Gentiles, i.e., the minions of Nebuchadnezzar, are carousing in His sanctuary; where is His awesomeness? Therefore, he did not say awesome in his prayer: "The great God, the mighty Lord of Hosts, is His name"** (Jeremiah 32:18). **Daniel came and said: Gentiles are enslaving His children; where is His might? Therefore he did not say mighty in his prayer: "The great and awesome God"** (Daniel 9:4).

## (22) BEREISHIT 18:27

(כז) ויען אברהם ויאמר הנה נא הואלתי לדבר אל אדני ואנכי עפר ואפר.

(27) Avraham replied and said, "Behold, please, I have resolved to speak to my Master, though I am but dust and ashes.

---

### (23) TEHILLIM 51:17

---

(יז) אֲדֹנָי שְׁפֹתַי תִּפְתָּח וּפִי יגִיד תְּהִלָּתְךָ.

(17) Adonai, open my lips and my mouth shall declare our praise.

---

### (24) DA'AT MIKRA NECHEMIAH 1:4

---

(ד) יָמִים – זְמַן מָהֹ. וּמִתְפַּלֵּל וְגו' – תְּסַלֵּה זֶה  
מִרְכֶּכֶת מְפֹסְקִים מִתּוֹךְ סֵפֶר דְּבָרִים וּמִתְסַלֵּת  
שְׁלֵמָה.

This prayer is composed of verses from Devarim and from Shlomo's prayer [in Melakhim].

---

### (25) R' TZVI SINENSKY, "AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHET"

---

Many explanations might be offered for Nechemia's extensive reliance on Biblical precedent. Possibly, in light of Ezra's unique scholarship, Nechemia sought to establish his bona fides as a serious scholar in his own right, lest anyone think he was merely a politician. In this respect, Nechemia followed the models of figures such as Yosef, Mordekhai, and Esther, who were deeply religious Court Jews. Alternatively, perhaps Nechemia felt that due to his limitations as a scholar, as least relative to Ezra, it was only appropriate for him to entreat God by relying on his Biblical forerunners.

Most likely, though, Nechemia recognized just how dire the situation was. The scenario described by Chanani and the others was calamitous. The Jewish community was rudderless, lacking in leadership and direction, and unable to provide basic security for its residents. In addressing the king, Nechemia feared that he was not worthy of the formidable challenges that lay ahead. The only way he would feel secure in making his request from the king was by first invoking some of his outstanding predecessors throughout Jewish history: Moshe, Aaron, David, and Shlomo. Of course, some combination of all of the above is highly plausible.

---

### (26) R' JOSEPH B. SOLOVEITCHIK, "BLESSINGS AND THANKSGIVING: REFLECTIONS ON THE SIDDUR AND SYNAGOGUE," P. 3

---

How can we say which prayer is appropriate and which prayer inadequate? It is one of the greatest mysteries in the history of the God-man relationship. Hence, we must not rely too much on our own talents and ingenuity in composing prayers and petitions. We are ignorant as to what pleases God and what is sheer impudence. Therefore, our sages were careful with regard to the composition and formulation of new prayers.



### (27) RALBAG NECHEMIAH 1:7

חבול חבלנו לך – ראוי שתדע כי לא יזיק האדם ל"י ית' בחטאו ובהשחיתו דרכו אך רשעו הוא לו לבדו והנה הטעם באמרו חבול חבלנו לך... וכן ההשחחה תהיה ל"י כאשר יחטא בה ל"י כמו ההשחחה שתהיה בענין ע"ז

“We have dealt very corruptly against You” – It is good to know that man does not harm God with his sins and by corrupting his ways. His wickedness is only for him. Behold, the meaning of saying “we have ‘wounded’ you”... is that destruction is related to God when one sins against Hashem, like one who sins in idolatry.

### (28) MALBIM NECHEMIAH 1:7

הוא מענין משכון... שישראל התחייבו לשמור תורת ד', ובעת שאין משלמים חוב זה יקח ד' כל מחמדיהם [שהוא המקדש וארץ הקדושה] למשכון בעד עונותיהם עד ישלמו את חובתם, ויחזיר להם את המקדש...

This means collateral... Israel obligated themselves to observe God's Torah, and when they fail to fulfill this obligation then God takes their treasures [the Beit haMikdash and the holy land] as collateral for their sins until they fulfill their obligation. Then He will return the Beit haMikdash...

### (29) RASHI NECHEMIAH 2:1

ואנכי נשאתי את כוס היין ונתתיה למלך וכך הוא המנהג שהמביא יין בחצר המלך אינו נושא ונותנו למלך אבל שר המשקים מקבל כוס היין מיד המביא והוא נושא ונותנו למלך.

And I carried the cup of wine and gave it to the king, and so is the custom, that the one who brings wine into the king's court does not carry it and give it to the king, but the chief butler receives it from the hand of the one who brings it, and carries it and gives it to the king.

### (30) R' BINYAMIN B'RABBI YEHUDA NECHEMIAH 2:1

שדרך משקים למלך לטעום הכוס קודם מפני חשד סם המות וזה היה יהודי ולא שתה והכיר המלך ונשתנו פניו כי נעשה כשונא למלך ואז מיהר ושתה ולכך נקרא נחמיה התרשאת שהתיר סתם יינן של גויים לשתיה לפני המלכים [בשעת סכנה] מפני החשד ומפני סכנת נפשות ועל שנשתנו פניו לפיכך אמ' המלך מדוע פניך רעים.

The manner of cupbearers was to taste the wine first, because of the concern of poison. He was a Jew and did not drink, and the king noticed and his face changed, because he appeared as one who hates the king. Then he quickly drank (which is why Nechemiah is called “Hatirshata,” because gentile wine was permitted to drink before kings in a time of danger because of suspicion and danger to life). Because his face changed, the king asked him why his face was bad.

### (31) R' DOV ZAKHEIM, NEHEMIAH: STATESMAN AND SAGE, PP. 27-8

The cupbearer to the Persian emperor was an extremely powerful courtier. Like the biblical Joseph, and, for that matter, the Persian cupbearer Ahikar – whom the author of the apocryphal Book of Tobit describes as

“keeper of the royal seal, calculator of the accounts” – Nehemiah was virtually a second-in-command to the emperor.

## FURTHER READING

---

<https://etzion.org.il/en/tanakh/ketuvim/sefer-nechemia/nechemia-chapter-1-introduction-prophet>

## OUTLINE

---