

Background

- Our exile and our return are not functions of geopolitics, but of Divine will and orchestration
 - Sin leads to destruction and exile (Kings II 20-21; Jeremiah 25)
 - G-d plans to bring us home (Isaiah 44-45; Chronicles II 36)
- The goals of the book of Ezra-Nehemiah
 - Are these history books?
 - Milestones in our national return
 - Legitimization of the second Beit haMikdash
- Key figures
 - The Persian Kings: Cyrus, Darius, Achashverosh, Artachshasta?
 - The first Jewish leaders: Sheshbatar, Zerubavel, Yehoshua Kohen Gadol

Ezra 1-2: The Return

- King Cyrus sends us home. Why?
 - A political strategy
 - A Divine plan, like the Exodus
- Name lists
 - Poetry
 - Propaganda
 - Founders
 - Lineage
 - The Exodus

Ezra 3-4: First steps in a new land

- Building an altar together
 - Not right away
 - The importance of a Succot dedication
- Beginning to build the Beit haMikdash
 - The importance of lyar
 - Joy and disappointment
- Trouble with the neighbours
 - Who are the Samaritans? (Kings II 17; Kiddushin 75a-b)
 - Why did we reject their offer?
- Diplomatic harassment by the Samaritans
 - A successful appeal to Artachshasta to halt construction
 - Unclear when this story took place

Ezra 5-6: The re-building continues

- Year 2 of King Darius; Chaggai and Zechariah catalyze construction
- Problems with Persians
 - Persian official Tattnai wants to see our permit
 - Tattnai allows construction to continue during the investigation

- An elaborate permit is found in Medea
- King Darius is very supportive. Why?
 - Is he Esther's son?
 - Is this a political strategy?
 - Is Darius honouring Cyrus?
 - Is Darius acting out of self-interest?
 - Is this another Act of Gd?
- The Beit haMikdash is dedicated in the 6th year of King Darius
 - A major dedication
 - And a Pesach celebration which seems to supersede that of King Chizkiyah

Ezra 7-8: Ezra Arrives!

- A righteous teacher of Torah in Bavel, honoured by King Artachshasta
- Ezra's public roles
 - Scribe establishing alphabet and text
 - Establishes public Torah study
 - Frames public halachah and policy with enactments
- Artachshasta gives Ezra the keys to the kingdom
 - Outsized financial support, directly and via the right to take from the local tax collection
 - Mission of teaching the law of Gd and imposing it as law, recognized by the Persians
 - Exemption for all who work in the Beit haMikdash from taxes
 - Right to carry out any punishment, including capital punishment
- Ezra brings about 9000 people to Israel
 - They gather on the 1st of Nisan
 - Ezra's Levi problem
 - Ezra's public prayer, in lieu of an armed escort
 - They arrive in the month of Av
 - They deliver gifts, and bring a new round of korbanot, including atonement offerings

Ezra 9-10: The Problem of Intermarriage

- Introduction
 - The theme also appears in Malachi 2:10-16
 - Is intermarriage with non-Canaanites prohibited biblically?
 - Where/when did this intermarriage take place?
 - Why did the leaders intermarry?
- Ezra's reaction
 - Mourning
 - Fasting
 - Prayer
 - But no exercise of his powers of punishment
- The nation gathers
 - Shechaniah ben Yechiel's declaration that they must separate from their non-Jewish spouses
 - No option of conversion?