

2:1-9 Royal permission

1. R' Dov Zakheim, Nehemiah, pg. 56

It is possible that Nehemiah deliberately chose this moment to drop the jovial mask he had been wearing since receiving Hanani's report. The date of the events appears to have been the first of Nisan, the beginning of the new year for the Persians (and the first Jewish month) at which a feast may have been held. Herodotus reports that the king granted requests that were made to him at his birthday feast. The same custom may also have been practiced at other feasts.

2. Wikipedia, Nowruz

Nowruz is the day of the vernal equinox, and marks the beginning of spring in the Northern Hemisphere. It marks the first day of the first month (Farvardin) in the Iranian calendar. It usually occurs on March 21 or the previous or following day, depending on where it is observed. The moment the sun crosses the celestial equator and equalizes night and day is calculated exactly every year, and families gather together to observe the rituals.

3. Ibn Ezra to Nehemiah 2:1

ולא הייתי רע לפניו - כי חפץ שרותי:

"I was not bad before him" – he desired my service.

4. Rashi to Nehemiah 2:1

ואני לא הייתי רגיל להיות רע לפניו ברוע פנים כי אם שמח וטוב לב ועתה הייתי זועף ברוע פנים:

I was not usually upset before him, with an upset expression, but happy and of good heart. Now, I was agitated, with an upset expression.

5. Malbim to Nehemiah 2:1

המלך היה מקפיד שמשרתיו לא יתראו לפניו ברוע פנים, שאז נחשדו בעיניו כי לבם רע, ונחמיה ידע טבע המלך ולשמור שבבואו לפני המלך יעמוד בפנים שוחקות

The king insisted that his servants not appear before him with a 'bad' face, for then he suspected that their heart was bad. And Nehemiah knew the king's nature, and [knew] to guard himself such that he would have a happy face when coming before the king.

6. Prof. Mordechai Zer-Kavod, Daat Mikra edition, Comment to Nehemiah 2:1

מלכי בית אחמנש לא היו מסובים יחד עם אורחיהם, כי אם פרגוד מפריד בינם ובין היושבים לפניהם.

The Achaemenid kings did not recline with their guests, but a curtain separated them from those sitting before them.

7. Malbim to Nehemiah 2:2

והיה זה אם שנכרו על פניו אותות העינוי והצום של הימים האלה, או שהיה בהשגחה שעי"כ ישאלנו המלך...

This was either because the signs of suffering and fasting during this time were visible on his face, or because of Divine supervision such that the king would inquire of him...

8. Rashi to Nehemiah 2:2

אין המעשה הזה כי אם רוע לב שיש בלבבך עלי להמיתני בסם המות בשתיית כוס זה:

This behaviour is only because of your bad heart toward me, intending to kill me with poison when I drink this cup!

9. Rashi to Nehemiah 2:4

ואמרתני לפני המלך בתפילתי "כן יהיה רצון מלפני אלקי השמים שתמלא שאלתי ובקשתי."

And I said in my prayer before the king, "So may it be the will of the Gd of Heaven, that you fulfill my request."

10. Metzudat David to Nehemiah 2:4

עד שלא השיב אמריו התפלל לד' תפלה קצרה בעמדו לפני המלך והתפלה היה שימשוך עליו חסד לפני המלך:

Before he responded, Nechemiah recited a short prayer to Gd while standing before the king. The prayer was to give him favour before the king.

11. Malbim to Nechemiah 2:4

בתשובה שהשיב אל המלך היה בלבו הדבור אל ד' בדרך תפלה

His respond to the king was, in his heart, speech to Gd in the manner of prayer.

12. R' Dov Zakheim, Nehemiah, pg. 54

The queen, Damasias (or Damaspia), was Artaxerxes' "first" wife, that is to say, she was the chief member of his harem... Nehemiah does not give Damasias a speaking part in his memoir, but he notes her presence... And, as will be shown, she may have been a supporter when he entreated the king for permission to leave the court and travel to Judah.

13. R' Dov Zakheim, Nehemiah, pg. 33

The encounter with Nehemiah took place against a backdrop of instability in the Persian Empire. Artaxerxes had been forced to agree to a humiliating peace with the Greeks in 449 BCE ("the peace of Callias"). He had finally quelled a long-standing rebellion in Egypt the very year that Nehemiah received his report from Jerusalem. The Persian emperor must have had things on his mind other than affairs in the putative capital of a tiny subprovince...

14. Talmud, Arachin 5b-6a

אמר רבא משום רפיון ידיים הוא... מתיב רב יוסף: "ואיגרת אל אסף שומר הפרדס אשר למלך וגו'"! אמר ליה אביי, שאני מלכותא דלא הדרא ביה...

Rava said: [We don't accept gifts] lest they weaken our hands... Rav Yosef asked from 2:8; Abbaye replied: The government is different, for they do not recant...

15. Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews (Whiston translation) 11:5:7

Now when he was come to Babylon, and had taken with him many of his countrymen, who voluntarily followed him, he came to Jerusalem in the twenty and fifth year of the reign of Xerxes.

2:10-18 Starting the process

16. The Elephantine Papyri <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3155577?seq=1>

17. Rabbeinu Gershom to Arachin 5b

דכתיב "לא לכם ולנו לבנות בית" כלומר הנהו סנבלט וטוביה דהוו עובדי כוכבים לא הניחום לבנות ולהקדיש לצורך בדק הבית:
As it is written, "It is not for you and us to build a house" – meaning, they did not permit Sanballat and Toviah, who were idolaters, to build and to dedicate for the upkeep of the building.

18. Talmud, Kiddushin 70a

"ממזרי" מנלן דכתיב "וישמע סנבלט החרוני וטוביה העבד העמוני" וכתיב "כי רבים ביהודה בעלי שבועה לו כי חתן הוא לשכניה בן ארח ויהוהגן בנו לקח את בת משלם בן ברכיה." קסבר עובד כוכבים ועבד הבא על בת ישראל הולד ממזר

There were *mamzerim* – How do we know? It is written, "And Sanballat the Choroni and Toviah, the Ammonite slave, heard" and "For many in Judea had sworn loyalty to [Toviah], for he was the son-in-law of Shechaniah ben Arach, and his son Yehochanan had taken the daughter of Meshulam ben Berechiah. [6:18]" The author believes that if an idolater or *eved* lives with a Jewish woman, the child is a *mamzer*.

19. R' Dov Zakheim, Nehemiah, pp. 67-68

The term "servant" in this context indicates that he was a servant of the king, or a royal official... That Tobiah did not approach the king directly appears to indicate that he was a Jew with no formal office or that he was a non-Jewish aristocrat and governor who, through marriage, had undergone a form of conversion and had aligned himself with the Judean upper classes... In contemptuously labelling Tobiah a servant, Nehemiah was indicating that he was a renegade who practice a syncretic form of Judaism that incorporated idolatrous practices.