



Educator's Guide

The Return of the Jewish Temple

Ezra and Nechemia were born into a community of Jews that had been forcibly exiled from Judea and relocated to Babylon after the destruction of the First Temple. They lived in what was known as the Persian Diaspora around the year 450BCE. They both returned to Judea with a mission: Nechemia came to rebuild the ruined city of Jerusalem, and Ezra... came to rebuild the Jewish soul.

[Link to video](#)

Further Reading

1. Prof.Sara Japhet, [Survival and Revival: Megillat Esther and Ezra-Nehemiah](#)
2. Neima Novetsky, [Returning to Zion: New Faces, Old Issues – Ezra and Nehemiah](#)
3. Lawrence H. Schiffman, [Ezra and Nehemiah: Two reformers who charted a course for the future of Judaism.](#)

Review - Did the students understand the material?

1. Who was the king who originally commissioned the building of the Second Temple?
 - a. Nebuchadnezzar
 - b. Cyrus**
 - c. Ataxerxes
 - d. Darius
2. What measures did the Babylonian Jewish community take to protect themselves from assimilation?
 - a. Wore different clothes
 - b. Banned intermarriage



- c. Established separate schools
 - d. **B and C**
3. How many Jews returned to Judea to rebuild the community in Jerusalem?
- a. 100,000
 - b. 10,000
 - c. 30,000
 - d. **42,000**
4. Who were the Samaritans?
- a. A group of good citizens who guarded the walls of Jerusalem from attackers
 - b. **A group of people who moved into Israel after the exile of the Jews to Babylonia and practiced a competing form of religion**
 - c. Jewish settlers who moved to the northern region of Israel after the return from exile
 - d. Babylonian converts to Judaism
5. What were Ezra and Nechemiah's roles in Second Temple Era Judea?
- a. Ezra built the Temple and Nechemiah was a prophet
 - b. Ezra was a governor and Nechemiah was the chief rabbi
 - c. Ezra recruited new settlers and Nechemiah built houses for them
 - d. **Ezra was the spiritual leader and Nechemiah focused on social and economic improvements**

Discussion Questions

1. According to the video you just watched, "After the exile, the Jewish community in Babylon went into lockdown and isolated itself in order to preserve its identity and to keep its members from assimilating." As a group, think about the pros and cons of this approach to Judaism. Here are some questions to consider:
- a. How have strategies that separate us from other communities protected or hurt Jews throughout history? (Examples: dressing differently, preserving Jewish dialects, establishing separate schools, kashrut, laws and customs surrounding intermarriage, etc.)



- b. How do Jewish communities today reflect the degree to which their predecessors practiced (or didn't practice) any of these isolationist strategies?
 - c. To what do you attribute the continued survival of the Jewish people in the face of millennia of adversity?
- 2.** The narrator of the video states that: "Now before you think Cyrus is a really nice guy, let's keep in mind what he's getting out of this. By allowing the Jews to rebuild their temple and practice their religion in Judea, Cyrus gains their unconditional loyalty; especially since he will be paying for the project, and controlling the money. It gives him a foothold in the area without having to move a single soldier there."

This type of characterization has been made about the U.S.-Israel relationship, for good or for bad. Charles D. Freilich, a former deputy national security adviser [writes](#):

"Israel's relationship with the United States is a fundamental pillar of its national security. Militarily, diplomatically, and economically, American support has for decades been a vital strategic enabler. For consultations on emerging events, Washington is usually Israel's first and often sole port of call, almost always the foremost one, and inevitably the primary address when planning how to respond to such events. Indeed, Israel's reliance on the United States is so great today that the country's very survival is at least partly dependent on it—with, as we shall see, a variety of consequences not all of which are salutary...The truth, indeed, is nearly the opposite of what the critics contend: by now, I would argue, Israel has lost much of its own independence to the United States."

What is Freilich's approach to this criticism? What evidence can you find to either support or refute his position?

There is a certain political behaviour called "Machiavellian," which [means](#) "being or acting in accordance with the principles of government analyzed in Machiavelli's "The Prince," in which political expediency is placed above morality and deceit is used to maintain authority and carry out the policies of a ruler."



If someone supports Israel or the Jews for Machievellian reasons as did Cyrus, does this bother you?

- 3.** It seems that during the early Second Temple era the fledgling Judean society was grappling with many of the same socio-economic issues that we are still contending with today: wealth disparity, assimilation, lack of adherence to societal norms and laws, and lack of education. What are the advantages and disadvantages of looking to the distant past for solutions to modern problems?
- 4.** Ezra is credited with adding new and important elements to Judaism. His gatherings of the community to read the Torah of Moses established the practice of publicly reading the Bible every [Monday and Thursday](#) morning, and every Sabbath afternoon. (Later, the Rabbis of the Talmud added a reading to the Sabbath morning service.) Ezra is also credited with convening the first Great Assembly, a deliberative body of prophets, scholars and judges that later became the Jewish Supreme Court of the Second Temple period.

Why do you think Ezra and the Jews of that time made these enactments and innovations to Jewish life?



Learning Activities

1. Use a ready-made lesson plan on The Return of the Jewish Temple [HERE](#).

2. Immigration Then and Now

Compare and contrast the return of the Babylonian exiles to [Bilu](#) and the first wave aliyah [in the 1880s](#). What difficulties and opportunities lay ahead for each group of immigrants to the Holy Land?

3. Ezra and RBG

Shortly after the Second Temple was built, the new community in Judea was not doing very well. Ezra, a great scholar in the books of Moses and a priest in the Persian Jewish community, was sent by the king to re-establish Jewish culture and to create the local judicial system. He became the new spiritual leader of Judea. In essence, the first Chief Justice of the new nation.

When the Supreme Court of the United States opened its new session in 2019, 86-year-old Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg wore a unique collar, her signature accessory. It was created by the Jewish artist [Marcy Epstein](#), and woven with silk so that it reads, along its edge, “Tzedek.” It evokes the words “Tzedek, tzedek tirdof,” or “Justice, justice you shall pursue,” one of the most famous quotations from the Torah.

Following her death in 2020, many American Jews and Jews across the world mourned her passing with the same sadness [as if a great Rebbe had died](#).

Draw a chart showing the attributes of Ezra and RBG, comparing their similarities and differences. In your work, highlight the religious [innovations](#) made by Ezra, in contrast to the civic [innovations](#) that came from the rulings of RBG.



4. Give your students our [Kahoot](#) on The Return of the Jewish Temple!

Reflection Questions

1. The gap between the Babylonian Exile/destruction of the First Temple and the return to Eretz Yisrael, is about the same amount of time (70 years) between the Holocaust and the birth of the current generation of young Jewish adults. In other words, many of you are growing up in the equivalent generation as the Jews who returned to Judea and rebuilt the Temple. In what way do you feel like this moment in history has echoes of that time?
2. Every ancient nation has its unique coming of age ceremonies and rituals.

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How does the act of reading words from scripture feel for you and why do you think this enactment has influenced Jewish communities across the world?