

## Megillat Esther, Lesson 1:

### Historical background

The four parts of this lesson trace the experience of the Jews as they go to Babylonian exile and return to Israel under the Persians. For each section, first present a frontal lesson describing the events. Then ask students to prepare the related worksheet and then follow up by reviewing the answers. You may also want to conclude this lesson with a short quiz so that students have the basic names and dates in mind and so will be prepared to understand Megillat Esther in its historical context in the next lessons.

### Objectives

Students will be familiar with the history that led to the setting of the story of Esther. In particular, this means broad (but not detailed) knowledge of Jewish History from the destruction of **בית ראשון** through Ezra and Nehemiah, and familiarity with the rise of the Persian Empire and its basic structures.

### How did the Jews wind up in Bavel?

The exile of the Jews to Bavel took place in two stages: in 597, Jehoiachin was exiled along with some 7,000 people (2 Kings 24:8-16), and then in 586, the **בית המקדש** was destroyed and many thousands more people were exiled. Soon thereafter, some of the remaining Jews killed the governor whom the Babylonian king had appointed, Gedaliah b. Ahikam, and even more of the Jews left Jerusalem and Judea. Small towns and farms survived, but the Judean cities and civic infrastructure was destroyed.

#### *Events leading to Jehoiachin's exile*

The Neo-Assyrian empire, which had directly dominated the Near East generally and the Levant specifically since the reign of Tiglath-Pileser III (745-727), rapidly crumbled and disappeared between the years 627 and 609. Attacks by the Babylonian Chaldeans, led by Nabopolassar, who were soon joined by the Medes, hastened Assyria's collapse. Nineveh itself was conquered in 612, and the last holdouts were defeated at the northern stronghold of Harran in 609.

The Babylonians did quickly consolidate their new empire, known to us as the Neo-Babylonian Empire, and in 605 Nabopolassar's son Nebuchadnezzar (Akkadian: *Nabu-kudduri-ušur*) ascended to the throne to succeed his father. For the purposes of the history of Israel, the crucial dates are 604, 597, and 586. In 601, the Judean king Jehoiakim rebelled against Bavel. It took Nebuchadnezzar a few years to make his way over to the region, but he attacked in 597. By then Jehoiakim was already dead, and had been succeeded by his son Jehoiachin, whom Nebuchadnezzar arrested and brought to Babylon.

#### *Two kings and divided loyalties*

Nebuchadrezzar appointed a third son of Josiah as king instead of Jehoiachin: Mattaniah, renamed Zedekiah. A substantial number of Judeans were in exile already, however, including especially noblemen and senior government officials.

According to Jeremiah (22:24-30), Jehoiachin was totally unacceptable: הַעֲצָב נִבְזָה נְפוּץ הָאִישׁ הַזֶּה כְּנִיָּהּ אִם-כְּלִי אֵין חֲפֶץ בּוֹ מִדּוֹעַ הוּטְלוֹ הוּא וְזָרְעוֹ וְהַשְׁלָכּוּ עַל-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יִדְעוּ...כֹּה אָמַר ה' כְּתֹבוּ אֶת-הָאִישׁ הַזֶּה עֲרִירִי גֹבֵר לֹא-יִצְלַח בְּיָמָיו כִּי לֹא יִצְלַח מִזָּרְעוֹ אִישׁ יָשֵׁב עַל-כִּסֵּא דָוִד וּמִשָּׁל עוֹד בִּיהוּדָה "Is this man Koniah a wretched broken pot, a vessel no one wants? Why are he and his offspring hurled out, and cast away in a land they knew not?... Thus said the Lord: Record this man as without succession, one who shall never be found acceptable. For no man of his offspring shall be accepted to sit on the throne of David and to rule again in Judah."

Others took a directly opposite approach: the prophet Hananiah b. Azzur is quoted in Jer 28:2-4 as saying, כֹּה-אָמַר ה' צָבָאוֹת...שְׁבִרְתִּי אֶת-עַל מֶלֶךְ בָּבֶל...וְאֶת-יְכֻנְיָה בֶן-יְהוֹיָקִים מֶלֶךְ-יְהוּדָה וְאֶת-כָּל-גָּלוֹת יְהוּדָה שְׂמַע-: הַבָּאִים בָּבֶלָה אֲנִי מְשִׁיב אֶל-הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה Jeremia responded negatively to this prophecy, however: וְאֵתָה הַבִּטַּחְתָּ אֶת-הָעָם הַזֶּה עַל-שְׁקָר! בְּנֵא חֲנַנְיָה: לֹא-שָׁלַחְדָּהּ ה' וְאֵתָה הַבִּטַּחְתָּ אֶת-הָעָם הַזֶּה עַל-שְׁקָר But though Hananiah was wrong about the imminent return of Jehoiachin to the throne, he was not alone in his assessment that Jehoiachin was the proper king of Judah. Ezekiel, who was among those exiled in 597, consistently dates his prophecies according to that exile, and refers to Zedekiah as a mere נְשִׂיא – not a king. In fact, Jehoiachin's descendants Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel b. Shealtiel held central roles in the leadership and those who returned from Babylon two and three generations later.

#### *Jehoiachin's status in Babylon*

A cuneiform tablet was found in the ruins of Babylon and published in 1939 that turned out to be a ration list – a list of supplies handed out to palace dependants, with names and quantities, dating from about 592. Jehoiachin king of Judah is mentioned by name and title there, and it turns out he was receiving about 60 times the amount of oil everyone else was getting. Since the Babylonian bureaucracy still referred to Jehoiachin as king of Judah, apparently Jehoiachin himself had a court of sorts, and was in turn distributing supplies to his entourage.

2 Kings 25:27-30 relates that when Evil-merodach (= Amel Marduk) came to the throne (i.e., in 561), he released Jehoiachin from prison and gave him a position of honor.

We have no direct testimonies as to the status of the Jews exiled with Jehoiachin. But the evidence from the book of Ezekiel seems to show that the Jews in Babylon since 597 enjoyed considerable physical and social freedom. This cannot be used to minimize the impact that the experience of exile must have had, however. The people who were formerly elites in their own land were suddenly members of a lower class in a foreign land.

#### **How did Persia replace Babel, and how did this affect the Jews?**

After consolidating his power to the east of Babylonia, stretching into central Asia, Cyrus captured Babylon in 539, and took over the territory of the Neo-Babylonian Empire. One of the most important sources for Cyrus' reign is the Cyrus Cylinder, which he composed. There he justifies his conquest of Babylonia by explaining that Nabonidus, the last of the Neo-Babylonian kings, was a impious, and

oppressed his people. Of particular importance was that Nabonidus had not been in the city of Babylon in a decade; he had spent that time in the oasis of Teima, in the Arabian Desert, in part in order to worship the god Sin, whose cult center was there. The Babylonian priests did not appreciate this, though, especially the fact that the king had not performed the New Year rituals in a decade. According to Cyrus, this led the “people of Sumer and Akkad” to appeal to Marduk, who took pity on them:

[Marduk] then found a just prince, according to his heart, and took him by the hand.  
He pronounced the name of Cyrus, king of Anšan; he then called his name to  
sovereignty over all.

Cyrus was able to depict himself in this way because of his particular foreign policy regarding the territories under his control. He believed that the best way to keep his territories loyal was to allow them nearly full autonomy.

The picture Cyrus paints of himself in the Cylinder fits precisely with the picture painted of Cyrus in Jewish literature. Deutero-Isaiah (44:24-28) quotes God:

It is I, the LORD, who made everything, Who alone stretched out the heavens and  
unaided spread out the earth...It is I who say of Jerusalem, ‘It shall be inhabited,’ and of  
the towns of Judah, ‘they shall be rebuilt, and I shall restore their ruined places.’ The  
one who said to the deep, ‘Be dry; I will dry up your floods,’ am the same 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.’

And again (cf. 45:1-8):

Thus said the Lord to Cyrus, His anointed one, whose right hand I have grasped...‘I will  
march before you and level the hills that loom up; I will shatter doors of bronze and  
cut down iron bars...I engird you, though you have not known Me.’

Clearly, the prophet here is echoing the same idea that Cyrus himself has been propagating: Cyrus was hand-picked by the god of each and every nation which he liberated. That his conquests could be seen as liberations is the result of the combination of (a) the oppressive regime of Nabonidus and (b) the foreign policy preached by Cyrus. Deutero-Isaiah merely adds a slightly polemical twist to this motif, arguing that it is the Israelite God who *exclusively* gave Cyrus his success; the attribution of assistance to any other deities is mistaken. This derives from the Judeo-centric view of history prevalent in Israel especially from the 8<sup>th</sup> century and on. But from a Persian perspective, the idea was that Cyrus, either shrewdly or devoutly, claimed that he was receiving the assistance of the god of every nation conquered.

### **The return in 538-520 and the Second Temple**

In any event, in the very beginning of Cyrus’ dominion, he issued proclamations allowing all of the exiles taken by Babylonian to return to their homelands. A Judean version of this proclamation is found in Ezra 1:2-4:

Thus said King Cyrus of Persia: 'The LORD God of Heaven has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and has charged me with building Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Anyone of you of all His people—may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem that is in Judah and build the House of the LORD God of Israel, the God that it is Jerusalem; and all who stay behind, wherever he may be living, let the people of his place assist him with silver, gold, goods, and livestock, besides the freewill offering to the House of God that is in Jerusalem.'

It is not clear whether this is an authentic copy of the actual proclamation, or a Hebrew translation of one, but it is fairly certain that there was such a proclamation, whether or not it actually singled out the Judeans and their Temple in Jerusalem.

Since Cyrus had brought the Babylonian Empire under Persian control in 539, and in one fell swoop gained control over nearly all the lands in which Jews were resident, Jews had the option of moving back to Jerusalem and its environs, all of which were now in the Persian province of Yehud. Some, as we will see in a moment, took the opportunity. For many of the Jews, however, the idea of moving "back" seemed artificial. They, after all, had never seen Yehud, or any land other than where they lived now. Their ancestors had been exiled from that land in the early sixth century, through a series of events that left an indelible imprint on their national and political consciousness. This was family lore, though, not a central part of their personal narratives.

In 538 a group of exiles (just under 50,000 according to Ezra 2:64-65) traveled to Israel from Babylonia under the leadership of Sheshbazzar. If Sheshbazzar is equated with Shenazzar of 1 Chron 3:16, as many believe, this makes him a son of Jehoiachin and a legitimate Davidic ruler. The Persians did not allow vassal kings under their regime, however, only governors. Later on, another group apparently arrived under the dual leadership of Zerubbabel b. Shealtiel and Jeshua b. Jozadak, one the political leader and the other the priest. Scholars tend to think that the list of returnees in Ezra 2, together with its totals, actually dates from a later time, or is at least a composite reflecting returnees over an extended period of time, and that these initial returns were fairly small.

In any event, they did, as promised, begin rebuilding the Temple. The chronology is very murky here, but apparently construction did not begin in earnest until 520 (Ezra 4:24). The reason for the delay is a point of dispute between biblical traditions:

1. Ezra 4 seems to tell us that the "adversaries of Judah and Benjamin" thwarted the rebuilding plans by bribing Persian officials and writing a letter to the king.
2. The obvious explanation is the miserable economic situation then prevailing in Judah, as seen, e.g., in Hag 1:6, 9-10; Zech 1:14-16; 6:12-15; to this can be added security concerns (Zech 8:10-13).
3. Some may have argued that a Davidic heir was necessary – which would have necessitated waiting until the arrival of Zerubbabel, at some point in the 520s.
4. Haggai quotes a specific argument used to procrastinate the construction project:

These people say, 'It is not time for the coming of the time for rebuilding the House of the LORD.'

The point seems to be that they are focusing on Jeremiah's prediction of 70 years. Some modern scholars take this as a round number, but it seems obvious that the ancient Israelites took it literally. One plausible view is to start the clock in 586. If we do that, 70 years brings us to 516. If we are presently located in, say, 535, Jews might have argued that building now would be an irreligious act: God had told them to suffer 70 years of exile, so they had to wait a bit longer. By 520, the question becomes touchier, though; at this point it seems prudent to begin, since the construction of the Temple itself will take time. The people did not, however, most likely because they had not been counting down the days, but had settled into normal life routines in the last 15 years. Haggai does not exactly say that the 70 years are up, but instead emphasizes that it is not right for the people to be living in houses and living normal lives before building a house for God.

Or, to sum up a different way, there were three different attitudes towards the Temple at this time:

1. Those, like Haggai and Zechariah, who thought that it should immediately be built;
2. Those who thought it should be built, but the time had not yet come;
3. Those who thought it never had to be built again.

In any event, Ezra 6:15 tells us that after starting the work in 520, they completed it "on the third of the month of Adar in the sixth year of King Darius"—516! So we can fairly confidently assume that whatever the cause of the original delay, the fact that work began again in 520 was due to the calculation that it would thus be completed by 516, and thus fulfill Jeremiah's prophecy.

### **What was life like for Jews in *galut Bavel* and Persia?**

Most of the Jews in Bavel did not "return" to Judea. ("Return" is in quotation marks because by Cyrus' time, and certainly by Ezra's time, the Jews in Bavel and Persia had never actually been in Judea; their grandparents or great-grandparents had been exiled from there.) There are two major questions, then: how did the Jews, after being exiled from their land for so long, retain such a sense of identity? And what was life like in exile for those who stayed?

The first question is how able they to preserve their ethnic, cultural, and religious identities to such an extent that tens of thousands did return. One can sharpen the question by contrasting the exiled Judeans with the experience undergone by the exiled Israelites of the Northern Kingdom 135 years earlier: their country was conquered by the Assyrians and the people were exiled, and the people as a people disappeared from the history books.

It is instructive to compare the experience of the sixth-century Judean exiles in Babylonia with better-documented exile communities from more recent times, because the essential experience of exile remains more or less the same. It is worth thinking about the experiences of, say, the Irish, the Jews, or the Hispanics in twentieth- and twenty-first century America, or any other exiled group with which one may be familiar.

There are a number of different factors which contributed to this surprising reality.

- a. Babylonian philosophy of exile

The Assyrians, who conquered Samaria in 722-720 and exiled the Northern Kingdom of Israel, had a sophisticated philosophy of exile: their goal was to obliterate all semblances of national or regional identities, so as to eliminate the possibility of revolts by vanquished peoples. In order to accomplish this, they did not rest with just relocating the conquered populations: they divided the people and scattered them across the empire, and later imported exiles from various other places into the conquered territory. Ezra 4:9 has, according to one reading, a long list of the peoples brought by Aššurbanipal into the province of Samaria.

The Babylonians, however, wanted to make use of the economic potential of the people they conquered, and so brought them towards Babylon. In order to do this, they kept communities together, bring them en bloc to new locations with no effort to encourage assimilation or integration. They also did nothing to repopulate the lands emptied.

#### b. Geographical settlement

The destination was the vicinity of Nippur, a major city in Babylonia which had been loyal to Assyria – and therefore sacked and left in ruins when the Babylonians asserted their independence over Assyria.

Exiles then (as now) tended to name their new settlements after their old homes. In the area around Nippur we find towns called *Bīt Šurayya* (Phoenicians from צֵר = Tyre), *Bīt Ḥamataya* (חמַת) and Neirab (Arameans), *Išqalunu* and *Ḥazatu* (Philistines from Ashkelon and Gaza), *Nāru ša Miširaya* (Egyptians), and *URU ša Arbaya* and <sup>uru</sup>*Qidari* (Arabs). The *Kabāru* canal ran through the city of Nippur, and Ezekiel mentions (3:15) that he came to the גִּלְהָ “exile community” which lived in Tel Abib, next to the Kebar Canal.

#### c. Political organization

To retain a sense of national identity, a exiled community must have some type of centralizing leadership, whether hereditary or charismatic, and whether officially recognized or not, to offer guidance and, perhaps more importantly, to offer focus. The Jewish community in Babylonia had different types of leadership to fulfill this role.

##### *House of David*

We already mentioned that Jehoiachin was supported by the Babylonian court, and so among the Jews it is certainly true that leadership was still identified with the Davidic dynasty. Recall that the early leaders of the Restoration were also Davidides, indicating that they had never lost their claim to be the political leaders.

##### *Priests*

Although the Temple was destroyed, the Priests retained their influence even while in exile. The evidence for this comes, again, primarily from the aftermath of this period: in the Restoration movement, priests played a prominent role.

##### *Zēqēnīm*

Finally, a group that appears prominently in the book of Ezekiel (as זקני ישראל or זקני יהודה), and is also the first addressee (זקני הגולה) on Jeremiah's letter to the exiles in Jeremiah 29. The fact that the group appears immediately in the exilic scene as leaders indicates that they were not a new entity, but had been in a similar position back in Judah, but it seems clear that their relative status rose with the loss of the Temple and the monarchy. They continued to act as the leaders after returning to Judah: the שבִּי יהוּדִיָּא are mentioned numerous times in Ezra 5 and 6.

#### d. Religious practices

In many exilic communities, and especially in the Jewish exilic community of Babylonia, religion played a central and indispensable role in preserving the community's sense of identity. Religion in this case actually played a double role. On the one hand, there are religious practices they inherited from pre-exilic life that became more significant in exile. On the other hand, religion provides a context within which to innovate new practices which mark their new identity.

For now it may suffice to single out the observance of *shabbat* and *kashrut* as inherited practices which in exile would provide powerful reminders and markers of identity. There were also some new, or newly emphasized, practices and ideologies.

##### *Four annual fasts*

Zechariah 8:18-19 mentions the "four fasts" – the fast of the fourth month, the fast of the fifth month, the fast of the seventh month, and the fast of the tenth month – which commemorated events connected with the destruction of the Temple. When observed in exile, these would have been powerful marks of identity and distinctiveness.

#### e. Names

It is clear that the adoption of local names does not indicate anything about assimilation, as the evidence from the names Sheshbazzar, Zerubbabel, Mordechai, and Esther demonstrate. We may conjecture, however, that those who chose to retain traditional names for their children did so as an act of self-identification.

#### f. Genealogical lists

One of the simpler but more powerful tools of identity-retainment among the exiles was the keeping of genealogical lists. Their existence is seen again in the Restoration, where beyond the many detailed names and families mentioned, it is also indicated that the people were returning "each to his own town" (Ezra 2:1; Neh 7:6).

##### *Life in Bavel and Persia*

There are no good sources for what life was like for Jews in exile. There are a few sources of information that give us partial pictures.

##### 1. Daniel 1

Daniel, along with his three friends, is chosen for special training in the Babylonian court system. This was obviously a very small segment of the population, but important nonetheless.

2. Ezekiel

3. Murašu archive

A lot of text, mostly contracts about Murašu's banking business. This is important because many of the names are clearly Jewish names, and the Jews seem to be like everyone else, not better or worse off.

4. The book of Esther, too, provides us with information about life in exile, but this of course is what we will be studying over the coming units.



### **Last details about the Persian empire**

The Persian Empire was larger than any polity that had been seen earlier in the world. Under Cyrus, it stretched from Iran in the east to Egypt, and what is now northern Sudan (= Kush) in the southwest.

The kings from the beginning of the empire through the middle of the fifth century were:

Cyrus the Great	550-530 BC
Cambyses II	529-522 BC
Darius Great	521-486 BC
Xerxes I	485-465 BC
Artaxerxes I	465-424 BC