

Worksheet: The Partial Return to Zion

“For nearly two thousand years, Jews prayed many times every day for the return to Zion. Finally, in 1948, a Jewish country was born, and all Jews from around the world, except for those who were physically unable to, moved to the land. The population grew from half a million to well over ten million Jews in just two years, and has since grown to 15 million. Meanwhile, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, there are virtually no Jews left anywhere else in the world; all have either moved to Israel or long since assimilated.”

This alternative version of history never did, of course, take place. But why not? It is true that Jews pray many times every day for a return to Zion, and it is true that there is a Jewish state that would gladly welcome them. Why, then, are there still Jews around the world?

What are some reasons that Jews do not move to Israel today? Are these good reasons, in your opinion?

The number of people who returned with Sheshbazzar, 42,000, is probably somewhat less than half of the number of Jews who then lived in Babylonia. That means that more than half decided not to “return.” Why not?

Some possibilities:

1. Remember that by Cyrus’ time, and certainly by Ezra’s time, the Jews living in Bavel and Persia had never actually been in Judea; their grandparents or great-grandparents had been exiled from there.
2. They had jobs and lives in Babylonia, and no secure economic future in Judah.
3. In fact, the economic situation in Jerusalem and Judah was quite bad (#6 above).
4. Some people felt that it was not the right time to build the **מקדש**, as Haggai quotes (#5 above: **לֹא עַתָּה בָּא עֵת-בְּיַת ה' לְהַבְנֹת**).

Additional thinking:

Is it possible that there were some people who argued that if God brought the people *into* exile, only He could bring them out?

In the twentieth century, religious Jews argued about that very question. Although it now seems natural for Orthodox Jews to be Zionists, this was not the case early on. And even today, there are some who oppose the state of Israel on religious grounds. Let us look at the view of the Satmar Rav, and of R. Joseph Dov Soloveitchik, a religious Zionist.

1. According to a midrash, God had the Jews swear that “they would not return collectively to the Land of Israel by the exertion of physical force, nor rebel against the nations of the world, nor hasten the End.” Instead, the Jews had to wait for a supernatural *ge’ula*, and they waited for this for over two thousand years. The Satmar rebbe, R. Yoel Teitelbaum, wrote: “even if the members of the Knesset were righteous and holy, it is a terrible and awful criminal iniquity to seize redemption and rule before the time has come.”
2. Rabbi Soloveitchik, in an essay called **קול דודי דופק**, on the other hand, wrote that the nation of Israel needs to support the state of Israel:

The Jewish community is obliged to utilize its free will in all areas of life in general, but in particular on behalf of the welfare of the State of Israel. ... Our historic obligation, today, is to raise ourselves from a people to a holy nation, from the covenant of Egypt to the covenant at Sinai, from an existence of necessity to an authentic way of life suffused with eternal ethical and religious values, from a camp to a congregation. The task confronting the religious *shivat ziyon* movement is to achieve that great union of the two covenants – Egypt and Sinai, fate and destiny, aloneness and loneliness. This task embraces utilizing our afflictions to improve ourselves, and it involves spinning a web of *chesed* that will bind together all the parts of the people and blend them into one congregation, “one nation in the land”; and the readiness to pray for one’s fellow, and empathy with his joy and grief. As the end result of this self-improvement we will achieve the holiness conferred by an existence of destiny and will ascend the mountain of the Lord.

Certainly *nevi'im* had prophesied that the Babylonian exile would end in miraculous ways. For example, the *navi* in Isaiah 43 says:

טז כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה הַנּוֹתֵן בַּיָּם דֶּרֶךְ וּבַמַּיִם עֲזִים נִתְיַבֶּה. יז הַמּוֹצִיא רֶכֶב-וְסוּס חֵיל וְעִזּוֹ יִחְדָּו
יִשְׁכְּבוּ בַל-יִקוּמוּ דָּעֲכוּ כִּפְשֵׁתָהּ כָּבוֹ. יח אֶל-תִּזְכְּרוּ רֵאשִׁנוֹת וְקִדְמֹנִיּוֹת אֶל-תִּתְבַּנְּנוּ. יט הַנְּגִי
עֲשֵׂה חֲדָשָׁה עִתָּה תִצְמַח הַלְוָא תִדְעוּהָ אִף אֲשֵׁים בְּמִדְבַּר דֶּרֶךְ בִּישְׁמוֹן נְהָרוֹת.

Thus says the Lord, who made a road through the sea and a path through mighty waters, who removes chariots and horses, mighty and strong together: “They lay down; they will rise no more; they were extinguished, snuffed out like flax. Do not recall the earlier events, and do not contemplate what happened long ago. Look, I am doing something new, it will happen now, and you will know it: I will make a road in the desert and rivers in the wilderness!”

Later, the *navi* calls on the people to tell the world about the miraculous ways in which God will rescue them:

צֵאוּ מִבָּבֶל בְּרַחוּ מִכַּשְׁדִּים בְּקוֹל רִנָּה הִגִּידוּ הַשְּׁמִיעוּ זֹאת הוֹצִיאוּהָ עַד-קֶצֶה הָאָרֶץ אָמְרוּ גֹאֵל
יְהוָה עֲבָדוֹ יַעֲקֹב. כֹּה וְלֹא צִמְאוּ בְּחַרְבֹת הוֹלִיכֵם מִיַּם מִצֹּר הִזִּיל לָמוֹ וַיִּבְקַע-צֹר וַיִּזְבּוּ מִיַּם.
Go out of Babylon, flee from the Chaldeans! Tell it with loud shouting, make it known;
bring it out to the ends of the land, say: "The Lord has redeemed His servant Jacob!"
They have not thirsted in the dry places: He brought water for them from a rock, made
it flow for them; he cleaved a rock and water gushed.

And the *navi* calls to God to act (51:9-11):

ט עוֹרֵי עוֹרֵי לְבָשִׁי-עַז זְרוּעַ יְהוָה עוֹרֵי כַיִּמִּי קָדָם דְּרוֹת עוֹלָמִים הֲלוֹא אֶת-הִיא הַמַּחְצֶבֶת רַהַב
מְחוֹלְלֵת תַּנִּין. י הֲלוֹא אֶת-הִיא הַמַּחְרַבֶת יָם מִי תְהוֹם רַבָּה הַשְּׁמָה מְעַמְקֵי-יָם דָּרָךְ לַעֲבֹר
גְּאוּלִים. יֵא וּפְדוּיֵי יְהוָה יִשׁוּבוּן וּבָאוּ צִיּוֹן בְּרִנָּה וְשִׂמְחַת עוֹלָם עַל-רֵאשִׁים שִׁשׁוֹן וְשִׂמְחָה יִשְׁיִגוּן
נָסוּ יְגוֹן וְאַנְחָה.
Awake, awake, garb yourself in strength, O arm of the Lord! Awake as in days of old,
generations long gone. Was it not You who hacked Rahab into pieces, who pierced the
Dragon? Was it not You who dried up the sea, the waters of the Great Deep, who made
the depths of the sea a path for redeemed ones to pass through? So let those liberated
by the Lord return, and come to Zion with shouting, eternal joy on their head. Let
them attain happiness and joy, since agony and groaning have fled.

It is certainly possible that there were Jews who said, in light of these *nevu'ot*, that it was not for them to go to Jerusalem without miracles, signs from God. The *navi* himself does not share this belief, calling Cyrus "God's anointed one," but others certainly may have.