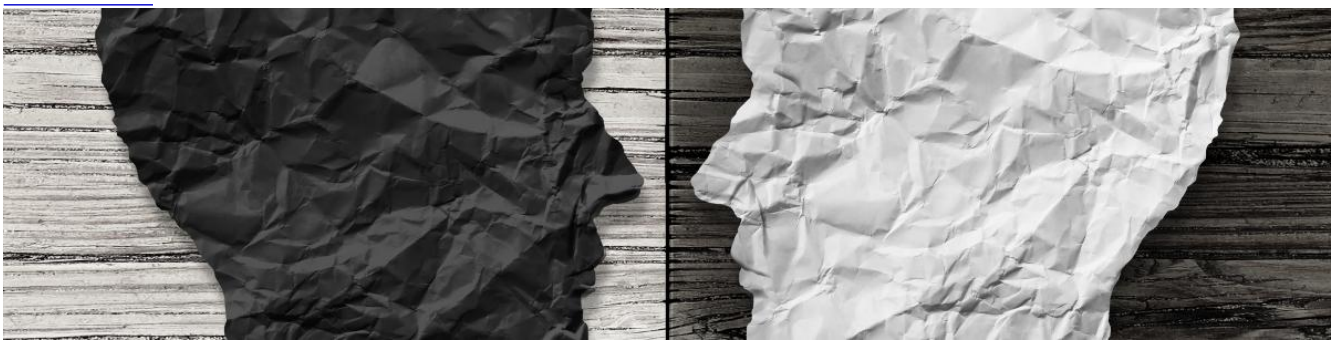
The Contrasting Leadership Roles of Ezra and Nehemiah

View PDF



Rabbi Hayyim Angel is National Scholar of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals and teaches advanced Tanakh courses at Yeshiva University. This article appears in issue 3 of Conversations.

The book of Ezra-Nehemiah (viewed by Jewish tradition as a single book, to be called EN) chronicles some of the final episodes of the biblical era. The Return to Zion and the rebuilding of the Temple lie at the heart of the first period in EN (538–516 b.c.e.). Zerubbabel, the political leader, and Jeshua, the High Priest, lead the community in tandem. These men are generally mentioned together, and they both work closely with the people.

In contrast, the two great leaders of EN's second period (458–432 b.c.e.)—Ezra, the priest-sage; and Nehemiah, the political leader—model distinct leadership typologies in their attempts to guide their community to a more committed religious life.

EN introduces Ezra with an extended pedigree tracing all the way back to Aaron the Priest (Ezra 7:1–5). Ezra emigrates from Babylonia to Israel in 458 b.c.e., bearing a document from King Artaxerxes of Persia according him virtually unlimited halakhic authority over the people (Ezra 7:11–26). Given this remarkable introduction, one may expect Ezra to dominate the narrative and exert power over the people, both as a priest and as a sage. Yet, the opposite proves to be the case.

The first half of Ezra 8 lists those who returned to Israel along with Ezra. Ezra involves others and gives them credit for their participation. At the conclusion of the roster, Ezra invites others to help bring Levites to Israel (Ezra 8:15–20). A certain Levite named Sherebiah is a particular success story for Ezra. He remains prominent throughout EN after having been empowered by Ezra (see Ezra 8:18, 24; Neh. 8:7; 9:4–5; 10:13; 12:8, 24). Ezra similarly appoints twelve other priests—though he is one himself—to care for the Temple treasures (Ezra 8:24–30). Despite the immense power and authority granted to him by King Artaxerxes, Ezra involves others and is surrounded by name lists. These features of Ezra's leadership set the tone for his transferring most of his authority to the people.

Ezra's reaction to the scourge of intermarriage follows the same pattern. Upon learning of the problem, Ezra pulls his hair in grief and prays on behalf of his people. Members of the community spontaneously join him:

When I heard this, I rent my garment and robe, I tore hair out of my head and beard, and I sat desolate. Around me gathered all who were concerned over the words of the God of Israel because of the returning exiles' trespass…. (Ezra 9:3–4. All biblical quotations are NJPS translations.)

While Ezra was praying and making confession…a very great crowd of Israelites gathered about him…the people were weeping bitterly. (Ezra 10:1)
After the completion of this prayer, the people propose and implement the solution, with Ezra simply endorsing their plan (Ezra 10:2–4).

According to Ralbag on Ezra 10:44, Ezra was a brilliant strategist. He realized that confrontational top-down rebuke would not be effective, and he therefore contrived an alternate plan to bring members of his community into the process. However, one could argue that Ezra believed in this model of leadership as the ideal. He was not an authoritarian leader. He wanted others to take active leadership and participatory roles. He also wanted to create a leadership that could perpetuate itself, rather than forcing the community to become entirely dependent on him. Ezra is an exemplar of the dictum attributed to the Men of the Great Assembly in the first Mishnah in Avot: *Ve-ha'amidu talmidim harbeh*— raise up many disciples.

Nehemiah also is a strong God-fearing leader, but he is characterized differently from Ezra. When Nehemiah comes from Babylonia to Israel in 445 b.c.e., no other names are listed with him. Nehemiah dominates the narrative and forcefully exerts his own power and authority.

When Ezra had come to Israel thirteen years earlier, he declined a military escort, since he wanted to sanctify God's Name to the King of Persia:
I proclaimed a fast there by the Ahava River to afflict ourselves before our God to beseech Him for a smooth journey for us and for our children and for all our possessions; for I was ashamed to ask the king for soldiers and horsemen to protect us against any enemy on the way, since we had told the king, "The benevolent care of our God is for all who seek Him, while His fierce anger is against all who forsake Him." So we fasted and besought our God for this, and He responded to our plea. (Ezra 8:21–23)
In contrast, Nehemiah accepted a military escort:
The king also sent army officers and cavalry with me. (Neh. 2:9)

> We have seen that Ezra pulled his hair in sorrow upon learning of the intermarriage in his community. In contrast, Nehemiah threatens and uses physical force against the people:

Also at that time, I saw that Jews had married Ashdodite, Ammonite, and Moabite women; a good number of their children spoke the language of Ashdod and the language of those various peoples, and did not know how to speak Judean. I censured them, cursed them, flogged them, tore out their hair, and adjured them by God, saying, "You shall not give your daughters in marriage to their sons, or take any of their daughters for your sons or yourselves. (Neh. 13:23–25)

Ezra tears out his own hair; Nehemiah tears out others' hair.

Another significant contrast between the two leaders arises during the one occasion they are seen together: the religious revival and covenant recorded in Nehemiah 8–10. The people gather together and invite Ezra—their accepted teacher—to read from the Torah. Ezra is not the one who initiates the ceremony. Ezra is flanked by thirteen other people (Neh. 8:4), again highlighting his allowing others to initiate and share center stage in every aspect of his leadership. The people voluntarily turn to Ezra because they respect him as a teacher, not because he exerts his authority over them.

Despite the narrator's assertion that the people initiated the reformation and covenant (Neh. 8–10; cf. 12:44–47; 13:1–3), Nehemiah casts himself differently in his first-person report (Neh. 13). He repeatedly gives himself credit, almost as a poetic refrain:
O my God, remember me favorably for this, and do not blot out the devotion I showed toward the House of my God and its attendants. (v. 14)

This too, O my God, remember to my credit, and spare me in accord with your abundant faithfulness. (v. 22)

O my God, remember it to my credit! (v. 31)

And also:

O my God, remember to my credit all that I have done for this people! (Neh. 5:19)

Nehemiah's repeated stress on his personal accomplishments stands out starkly, especially after the narrative in EN, which credits the people for their initiatives. Additionally, Nehemiah makes it appear that the religious state of the people was entirely dependent on him. He attributes the spiritual decline and other woes on the fact that he had left the community and returned to Babylonia (Neh. 13:6).

To summarize, Ezra was given immense authority—but deliberately moderated it. Instead, he raised new leaders and engaged the members of the community to take active roles in their spiritual development. He surrounded himself with people and shared or transferred authority to others. He raised many disciples, thereby broadening the base of the leadership and also ensuring continuity rather than dependence on him. In turn, the people voluntarily gravitated to him for guidance and teaching. Nehemiah, on the other hand, tended to occupy center stage. He gave orders to others, and often threatened them and used physical force to implement his goals. He credited himself for his accomplishments, even though the narrator credits the people for their initiatives. He portrayed himself as an indispensable leader whose community failed as soon as he left them.

Both Ezra and Nehemiah were God-fearing individuals dedicated to rebuilding Israel physically and spiritually, and both were effective to a large degree. There are no explicit evaluations of either Ezra or Nehemiah by the narrator, typical of biblical narrative. Several rabbinic traditions give clear preference to Ezra, while showing ambivalence toward Nehemiah.

> Rabbi Yosei said: Had Moses not preceded him, Ezra would have been worthy of receiving the Torah for Israel. (Sanhedrin 21b)
>
> ?When [Hillel] died, they lamented over him, "Alas, the pious man! Alas, the humble man! Disciple of Ezra!" (Sotah 48b; cf. Sanhedrin 11a, Sukkah 20a)

By likening Ezra to Moses and by using Ezra as a paradigm for their beloved Hillel, these Sages enshrine Ezra as one of the greatest biblical figures.
Working on the assumption that Ezra and Nehemiah co-authored EN, the Sages wondered why the book was called only "Ezra" (as they referred to it). One responded that Nehemiah was penalized for his self-aggrandizement by having his name excluded from the title of the book:
The whole subject matter of [the book of] Ezra was narrated by Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah; why then was the book not called by his name? R. Jeremiah b. Abba said: Because he claimed merit for

himself, as it is written (Neh. 5:19), “O my God, remember to my credit.” (Sanhedrin 93b)

Another believed that Nehemiah viewed himself as indispensible, while denigrating all other leaders as ineffective, though some of his predecessors certainly were righteous and competent:

?R. Joseph said: Because he spoke disparagingly of his predecessors, as it is written (Neh. 5:15), “The former governors who preceded me laid heavy burdens on the people, and took from them bread and wine more than forty shekels of silver, etc.” (Sanhedrin 93b)

It appears that the aforementioned Sages have balanced Nehemiah’s positive and negative traits when compared and contrasted with Ezra. These exceptional individuals from the biblical period, as interpreted in traditional rabbinic sources, have much to teach contemporary Jewish leaders about leadership.

For further study, see my article, “The Literary Significance of the Name Lists in Ezra-Nehemiah,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 35:3 (2007), pp. 143–152; and Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, *In an Age of Prose: A Literary Approach to Ezra-Nehemiah* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988).