

Reading Ezra in an Age of Mass Deportations



Welcome the stranger.
Protect the refugee.

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How Ezra Speaks to Today

The biblical book of Ezra contains the Jewish legal, moral, and structural foundations that were used to justify the deportation of a portion of non-citizens fully integrated into a community. In the text, a leader proposed separating from foreigners to rebuild a broken national identity. Followers seized upon his idea leading to the expulsion of some resident foreigners. What is there to glean from the text about our historical moment? How do we respond when government, religious leaders and the culture embrace values that counter our own?

Historical Background

Ezra-Nehemiah (two separate Biblical books that were originally a singular ancient text) recounts the rebirth of the Jewish nation of Judah and its capital. The Babylonian Empire had defeated Judah, destroying its religious and cultural center – the Temple – in Jerusalem in 586 BCE. But the Persian Empire’s defeat of Babylon ended a seventy-year period of turmoil and humiliation with a decree enabling exiled elites of Judah to return and rebuild the Temple in 516 BCE.

The national project of rebuilding Jerusalem’s infrastructure was coupled with an imperative to restore a sense of national identity while still under the control of a foreign empire. **Ezra, a prominent scribe and priest, fixated on marriage with foreign women as the source of identity problems. Followers embraced his diagnosis and created bureaucracies to identify foreign women married into the community.** The process led some members of the high priest’s family to expel their wives. The Hebrew Bible leaves unsaid what happens with the rest of the identified foreign family members though a later Jewish text (included in some Christian Bibles) claims that a mass expulsion took place. We are left to wrestle with the implications of these actions in the name of rebuilding a nation.

In the larger context of Jewish tradition, Torah has provisions for those not born into the Jewish community to live and work among the Israelites. There are also cases in which non-Israelite women marry into the community and they and their offspring are fully integrated into the community (i.e. Moses’ wife Zipporah and David’s great grandmother Ruth). Still, some texts show fear over practices of resident foreigners corrupting national identity. With these competing impulses, Torah prohibits specific intermarriages but “nowhere in the Bible does God require the expulsion of foreign wives.”¹ Ezra’s declaration of the Israelite people as a *zerah hakodesh* (consecrated seed) has been interpreted by some scholars to be an immutable gene of citizenship that excludes non-natives and their offspring from integrating into the nation. Other scholars offer that Ezra wants to separate from problematic practices, not endorse mass expulsion. The questions raised in Ezra about boundaries, citizenship, and whether outsiders can be integrated find echoes in our context today.

¹ Ezra: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary by Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, p.395

Ezra's Declaration and the Communal Response

וַיָּקָם עֲזָרָא הַכֹּהֵן וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם אַתֶּם מַעֲלֵתֶם וַתְּשִׁיבוּ נָשִׁים נְכָרִיּוֹת לְהוֹסִיף עַל־אֲשַׁמַּת יִשְׂרָאֵל: וְעַתָּה תָּנוּ תוֹדָה לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵי־אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם וַעֲשׂוּ רְצוֹנִי וְהַבְּדִלוּ מֵעַמֵּי הָאָרֶץ וּמִן־הַנָּשִׁים הַנְּכָרִיּוֹת: וְנִעַנּוּ כָל־הַקָּהָל וַיֹּאמְרוּ קוֹל גָּדוֹל כִּן (כַּדְּבָרֶיךָ) [כַּדְּבָרְךָ] עָלֵינוּ לַעֲשׂוֹת: אֲבָל הָעָם רַב וְהָעֵצָה גְּשָׁמִים וְאִין כֹּחַ לַעֲמוֹד בְּחוּץ וְהַמְּלֶאכֶה לֹא־לְיוֹם אֶחָד וְלֹא לְשָׁנִים כִּי־הָרַבִּינוּ לַכָּשָׁע בַּדָּבָר הַזֶּה: גַּעֲמְדוּ־נָא שְׂרִינוּ לְכָל־הַקָּהָל וְכָל אִשָּׁר בְּעָרֵינוּ הַהִשְׁיִב נָשִׁים נְכָרִיּוֹת יָבֹא לַעֲתִים מְזֻמָּיִם וְעַמְהֶם זָקְנֵי־עִיר וְעִיר וְשַׁפְטִיָּה עַד לְהִשְׁיִב חֲרוֹן אַף־אֶלְקֵינוּ מִמֶּנּוּ עַד לְדָבָר הַזֶּה: אִךְ יוֹנָתָן בֶּן־עֲשָׂהוּאֵל וַיַּחְזִיגָה בֶן־תַּקֻּנָּה עִמָּדוּ עַל־זֹאת וּמִשְׁלֵם וְשִׁבְתִּי הַלְוִי עֲזָרָם:

Then Ezra the priest rose up and said to them, "You have committed sacrilege and settled foreign women, to add to Israel's guilt. And now make a confession/give praise to YHWH, the God of your fathers, and do his will; and separate from the peoples of the land and from the foreign women." And the whole congregation responded and said in a loud voice: "Indeed, in accordance with your words we must do. But the people are numerous and it is the season of rains, and there is no strength to stand outside; and the work is not for a day and not for two, for we greatly trespassed in this matter. Let our chiefs stand up for all the congregation, and everyone in our towns who had settled foreign women will come at the appointed time, and with them the elders of each town and its judges until the fierce anger of our God over this matter turns back from us." But only Jonathan son of Asahel and Jahzeiah son of Tikvah stood up over this and Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite helped them. (Ezra 10:10-15)

- ? What parallels do you see between the context of Ezra's historical era and our own? Do we have obligations to preserve a national culture from too much foreign influence? What crosses a line into xenophobia?
- ? Does the book of Ezra provide a nuanced vision for a people struggling to establish necessary boundaries or a roadmap for a hyper-nationalism? Both? Neither?
- ? What do you make of the community's responses? How might we respond when claims of national interests or security are used to justify depriving members of the community of rights and previous status?

Jewish Tradition's Embrace of Ezra

Rabbinic conversations in Talmud reveal admiration and reverence for Ezra. Interpretations differ slightly on whether he simply "reestablished forgotten law" (Sukkah 20b) or if he took liberties to expand upon edicts (Baba Kamma 82b) with his own additions of what was needed in the moment. Either way – Ezra is consistently lauded as a heroic figure even as Jewish tradition does not ultimately embrace all of Ezra's policies.

Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 21b: Rabbinic Approval of Ezra

תניא רבי יוסי אומר ראוי היה עזרא שתינתן תורה על ידו לישראל אילמלא (לא) קדמו משה

Rabbi Yosei says: Ezra was suitable, given his greatness, for the Torah to be given by him to the Jewish people, had Moses not come first and received the Torah already.

- ? What do we do with the fact that Ezra as Torah teacher has been embraced by Jewish tradition? Do we contextualize? Caveat? Decry? Defend? Downplay? Disown? Raise as a cautionary tale? What is our moral responsibility in how we engage with a system of which we ourselves are part – whether religious or national?

Contemporary Jewish Readings of Ezra

Ezra's Xenophobia: Rabbi Seth Goldstein

According to the theology of early Judaism, the destruction of the Temple and the Babylonian exile were seen as punishments for sin. While it may have been the Babylonians who destroyed the Temple in 586 BCE and exiled the people and the Persians who restored the community back to their ancestral home, these nations were seen as merely agents of the divine in meting out judgment for the transgressions of the Jews. And so what were the transgressions that led to the exile? While the Torah is replete with “thou shalt nots,” the primary sin of the Israelites according to the Book of Ezra was intermarriage. Upon returning to Jerusalem only to find that the practice of intermarriage continued, Ezra offered a prayer to God before addressing the people:

וְאַחֲרַי כָּל־הַבָּא עִלֵינוּ בְּמַעֲשֵׂינוּ הָרָעִים וּבְאַשְׁמֹתֵנוּ הַגְּדֹלָה כִּי אַתָּה אֱלֹהֵינוּ חָשַׁכְתָּ לְמַטָּה מֵעֹנֵנוּ וְנָתַתָּה לָנוּ פְּלִיטָה כְּזֹאת: הַנְּשׁוּבֵי לְהִפָּר מִצְוֹתֶיךָ וְלִהְתַּחַתֵּן בְּעַמֵּי הַתַּעֲבוֹת הָאֵלֶּה הֲלוֹא תִאָּנֶף־בָּנוּ עַד־כְּפֹלֵה לְאֵין שְׂאֲרִית וּפְלִיטָה:

And after all that has come upon us through our evil deeds and our great guilt – for you, our God, had held back some of our iniquities, and gave us survivors such as these – shall we return to [once again] thwart your commandments and to wed these people of abominations? Will you not rage against us and bring complete destruction, with no remnant and survivors? (Ezra 9:13-14)

And to Ezra, the issue isn't intermarriage qua intermarriage. It is the fact that the Jews have married “foreigners” who will then bring their unwanted customs, practices, influences and religion. Ezra points to the presence of outsiders who join the Jewish community as the cause for the community's decline. In other words, he makes the immigrants the scapegoat for the community's problems.

We should be troubled by this text on two levels. One, it points to the ancient roots of the persistent tendency for nations to need to blame certain groups for their issues. And two, as is often the case, those groups are immigrants. Ezra not only seeks a semblance of “national purity” by casting out immigrants, he is blaming those immigrants for all the troubles of the community, both past and possible future.

Throughout our history, we Jews have been cast as the “foreigner” and the scapegoat for the problems of communities and nations, a practice that has led to repeated expulsions and mass murder. It should shock us to see this idea present in our own sacred texts. At the same time, we can read Ezra knowing that just as our theology is different than Ezra's in that we do not tend to ascribe reward and punishment to an intervening God, so too is our attitude towards immigration different than Ezra's. Rather than a source of division and fear, it is the diversity and hope brought by immigrants that can make a country great.

Ezra's Challenge to Xenophobia: Rabbi Dr. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi

(author of *Ezra: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Yale Bible, 2023)

There's so much irony at work in the use of Ezra. Here, the author of the story is working hard to get away from the destruction mandated by Deuteronomy 7 by replacing the demand for the extinction of foreign inhabitants in the land with a call for separation from them (not expulsion or deportation, neither of which were do-able given that they lived under Persian rule). The author is trying to offer guidelines for how minorities can retain their religious, ethnic or cultural identities while living in a pluralistic society. When communities in power/with national authority especially when they are the majority, apply the same rules, they are doing something very different. The issue of boundaries continues to remain important. And the treatment of minorities remains a challenge.

Weeping for Family Separation: Rabbi Felicia Sol

וְכַתְּבֵהֶם לְעֶזְרָא וְכַתְּבוּדָתוֹ בְּכֹה וּמִתְנַפֵּל לְפָנָיו בֵּית הָאֱלֹקִים נִקְבְּצוּ אֵלָיו מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל קָהָל רַב־מְאֹד אֲנָשִׁים וְנָשִׁים וְיִלְדִים כִּי־בָכוּ הָעָם
הַרְבֵּה־בְּכָה:

And as Ezra was praying and confessing, weeping and prostrating himself before the house of God, there gathered around him from Israel a very large congregation: men, women and children, for the people wept with much weeping.
(Ezra 10:1)

Here we are in a moment in time. In Ezra's desire to rebuild the identity of his people, he sets new boundaries. In this scene the Chomat Anakh (Rabbi Hayim Yosef David Azulai, late 18th c.) describes the scene as a confessional one, for the great sins that the people have committed in marrying foreign wives. Through their prayer and weeping, they hope that God will grant them the possibility to be forgiven and the chance to return from their sins. And thus the commitment is made:

וְעַתָּה נִכְרַת־בְּרִית לְאֱלֹקֵינוּ לְהוֹצִיא כָּל־נָשִׁים וְהַנּוֹלָד מֵהֶם בְּעֶצֶת אֲדֹנָי וְהַתְּרָדִים בְּמִצְוֹת אֱלֹקֵינוּ וְכַתּוּרָה יַעֲשֶׂה:
And now, let us make a covenant with our God to send out all women and any who is born from them, with the counsel of the Lord and those trembling at the commandment of our God; and according to the torah it shall be done. (Ezra 10:3)

One might imagine that the tears shed by the men, women and children might not only be tears of shame for intermarriage with foreign wives (something that happens in other areas of the Torah without causing any upheaval as noted above), but also the bitter weeping of deep sadness and broken heartedness for the family separation that is about to ensue – “with the counsel of the Lord.” Fathers are poised to expel their families. Women, sons and daughters who once understood themselves to be a part of the community all of a sudden become outsiders.

Boundaries have consequences and law is often profoundly impersonal. For all of Ezra's desire to rebuild some form of communal purity, in doing so, there is a cost. The commentaries do not give voice to the ones that are expelled. Their weeping is not heard. No nation can live without boundaries or laws, but when those boundaries change, there are inevitable consequences. Will we be attuned to the weeping before families are separated and expelled from the only home they know and love?

The Jewish and American Rejection of Denaturalization: Rabbi Josh Whinston

Fourteenth Amendment, Section 1: *All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside. No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States...*

Torah is the foundation of the Jewish people, guiding us in every generation. Similarly, the Constitution serves as the cornerstone of American life. As Jewish Americans, we draw strength from both as we confront challenges—large and small. Scholar of Jewish studies Christine Hayes notes that the intent to send out foreign wives from Judah went beyond Torah's prohibitions, targeting nations not restricted by biblical law. While our sages didn't formally reject the expulsion decree in Ezra, their practice firmly countered its rigidity. They embraced permeable boundaries, recognizing the transformative potential of conversion (naturalization?). This principle of fairness endures, shaping a Jewish community where belonging can be earned and is irrevocable.

Today, in the face of an executive order challenging birthright citizenship, Jewish tradition offers a compelling counterpoint. For over 2,000 years, we have upheld the value of semi-porous boundaries and the unshakable fairness of belonging that cannot be rescinded. So too, for 157 years, in response to the evils of slavery, America has stood by the right of citizenship to all native-born and naturalized people. Even as echoes of Ezra reverberate today, Jewish values call us to reject and fight this kind of extremist rhetoric and affirm the enduring wisdom of inclusion.