

Ira Rosenberg

Physical Midrash - Ezra Nehemiah

Facilitator will ask everyone to close their eyes and then share:

The year is 538 BCE. You are a Jew living in the great city of Babylon. You have just received word, from the great Persian King Cyrus, that you will be moving to the land of Judah, to a city called Jerusalem. You have heard of this city of Jerusalem from your parents and your grandparents, but you have never been there yourself. You only hear about the “glory days” of this city. That it was taken from you by the Babylonians. And that you were sent here to live, far away from your home. That this is where “your people” are from. But for you, Babylon, is “your people. It is all that you know. And honestly, it is great! You think, “why would I want to leave this wonderful, booming city to go to a new, far off place.” You’ll miss the modernity and wealth of the city and you will long for the diversity of cultures and peoples. And you’ll certainly miss the Ishtar Gate in all of its glory. But, you were ordered by the Great Cyrus to “return” to Jerusalem and to build for him a “house in Jerusalem.” So... you go. You pack up all of your things, and you make your Journey to the land of Judah.

Instruct the participants to stand up and begin to walk. Say as walking:

As we made our journey to Judah, you could not help but think about a story your parents told you when you were a boy. You remember the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt. That Moses led the Jewish people out of Egypt and to the Promised Land. You can’t help but think that now, you too are on an Exodus. You are returning to the land that was promised. As you’re walking, you are hot, and you are tired, and you are sick of carrying your possessions on your back. You miss your home, Babylon, but you continue to trek on. You have with you silver, and gold, and livestock, and goods, and you are told that this will all be used to build the greatest temple that one can imagine. But all you think about is that Ishtar Gate. Perhaps you can create something just as glorious, but wouldn’t it be nicer to stay in Babylon. As you get closer, you hear the elders talk about the terrible days of Nebedchunazzar, and how he kicked you out of your land. How grateful they sound that Cyrus is letting them return. You, too, begin to get angry at Nebedchunazzar. You, too, begin to feel a sense of community and pride in “returning to your land”

Stop the group and continue to talk:

Finally, you get to Jerusalem! It is a bit underwhelming. You return to old homes and tents and you all gather at the center of town. You begin to get comfortable with these people. You begin to feel as one. Finally, you are put to work. You were instructed to build the foundation of the temple.

Activity: Build temple with feet

In groups of 2-3, participants will build a temple out of 12 (or however many we have) cups. They can only use their feet to build this pyramid. The goal is to make them work

as one community to build the foundation of this temple. We will build the foundation in a pyramid structure, stacking cups 4-3-2-1.

After the activity, continue the narration:

Now that we have laid the foundation for the temple, we begin to settle into our new home. After working on the foundation stone, I became friendlier with my fellow “yehudim”. I realized that we are more alike than I thought. We all have the same stories of our older family once living in this land. We all speak the same language, have shared memories and history, and the same religious belief. Yes, there might be other neighbors who have joined us along the way, but we are all working towards the same goal... to make Jerusalem a holy city. Ezra keeps encouraging us to work together, to get together for meals and get to know each other better. Each day we continue working on the foundation of the temple, but it also seems that only small progress was being made on its construction. But every day, as we get closer to completion, we begin to feel closer to God.

As we become more organized, Nehemiah, the governor of Judah, tells us that we need to rebuild the wall surrounding Jerusalem. He is very bureaucratic in nature and has a whole plan telling us what to do. He tells us to fill in the gaps, to make our boundaries complete. This will truly separate us from our neighbors, but it will also unify us as yehudim. We're excited about the possibility of being a known people. A wall will certainly help. A wall will allow us to control who comes in and out. So... we start building.

Activity -- build the wall

Using recycled large boxes, students will physically build a surrounding wall enclosing them in their space. The wall should also be built around the foundation stone of the temple.

Once the activity is complete, continue the narration:

The wall is now built and Nehemiah has led the city of Jerusalem to become a real, modern city. We have boundaries and we have a temple, but something still feels off. Frankly, we did not come here to build, we came to Judah to return to our roots, to re-take our land and heritage that was taken away from us. We came here to live as the Jewish people. Soon later, Ezra instructs all of us to meet him at the Water Gate. Here, he is going to make a big announcement. Rumor has it that they are bringing the word of God. That these stories that have been passed down for generations are going to be read from, from a scroll. We all gather at the Water Gate. Hundreds of us are gathered here as 1. As we are gathered, Ezra begins to read!

Ezra (to be acted out by someone) stands up on a “wooden tower” and holds up the Torah scroll for everyone to see. He then reads a blessing for God:

בְּרוּךְ יְיָ הַמְּבָרֵךְ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד.
בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר בָּחַר בָּנוּ מִכָּל
הָעַמִּים וְנָתַן לָנוּ אֶת תּוֹרָתוֹ. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, נוֹתֵן הַתּוֹרָה.

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the universe, who has chosen us from among the peoples, and given us the Torah. Blessed are You, Adonai, who gives the Torah.

People start crying in joy and amazement. They are so overcome. Nehemiah declares this a holy moment. We go and celebrate, eating the best foods and the best wines. We then return to hear Ezra read the next day, we are amazed at what we hear! We are instructed to celebrate sukkot and to live in huts.

Activity: Build Sukkahs!

Using recycled goods, students will go around the area looking for “olive trees”, “pine trees”, and “myrtle trees” and other materials to build the sukkah. They will learn the way to have a kosher sukkah along the way.

Continue narration: As time goes on in Jerusalem, we find ourselves reading from and listening to the words of Torah every day. It guides our life! We are inspired and have a feeling of awe. And WE are doing it now. We, the people, are fully in control, as yehudim! Ezra, who so wonderfully got us to this point, has taken a step back and has become one of us. I often think back to what life was like in Babylon. I am amazed at how close and bonded we all are, how we now live an inspired, holy life and bask in the teachings of the Torah. This city, Jerusalem, truly is a holy city. There is holiness in all of us.