

The Jews of Egypt

Torah in Motion, Class 4: The Relationship Between Jews of Judea and the Jews of Egypt

Dr. Malka Z. Simkovich

February 2022

1. 2 Maccabees 1:1–10 a

To our brothers the Jews of Egypt, greeting, your brothers the Jews in Jerusalem and in the land of Judah. A good peace.

May God make for you, and may He be good to you, and may He remember His covenant with His faithful servants Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. May He give you all a heart to revere Him and to do His will wholeheartedly and with a willing spirit. May He open your heart to His Torah and to His commandments. (And may He make peace). May He listen to your prayers and forgive you and not abandon you in an evil time. And now, here we continually offer prayers for you.

In the reign of Demetrius in the year 169 we Jews wrote you, “In the affliction and in the distress which came upon us in the years from the time that Jason and his followers reveled against the Holy Land and the Kingdom. And set fire to the temple gateway and shed innocent blood, we prayed to the LORD, and He heartened to us. We brought animal sacrifices and fine flour, and we kindled the lamps and laid out the showbread.”

And now we ask you to celebrate the Days of Tabernacles in the Month of Kislev. In the year 188.¹

2. 2 Maccabees 1:10b–2:18

The people in Jerusalem and in Judaea and the Council of Elders and Judas to Aristobulus, tutor of King Ptolemy and member of the stock of the anointed priests, and to the Jews in Egypt, greeting and wishes for health. Having been saved by God from great perils, we thank Him greatly as befits men who war against a king, for God Himself cast way those who made war on the Holy City.

Indeed, when the commander and the apparently irresistible army accompanying him came to Persis, they were massacred in the temple of Nanaia through the trickery of Nanaia’s priests. Antiochus came with his Friends to the shrine intending to marry the goddess and thereby acquire the money in her rich treasury as dowry. The priests of Nanaia’s temple set the money before him, and Antiochus came with a few of his men into the precinct of the shrine. As soon as Antiochus had entered, the priests locked the temple. Opening the secret trap door in the coffered ceiling, they rained stones down upon the thunderstruck commander. After dismembering and beheading the corpses they threw them out to the men outside. In every way blessed is our God, Who delivered over the evildoers!

Inasmuch as we are about to celebrate, on the twenty-fifth of Kislev, the Purification of the Temple, we thought we ought to let you know, so that you, too, might celebrate it as when Nehemiah, the builder of the temple and the altar, brought sacrifices.

When our forefathers were being carried off to Persia, the pious priests of that time secretly took some fire from the altar and hid it in a pit which was like a dry well and shut it up securely so that the place remained unknown to all. Many years went by, and then, in God’s own time, Nehemiah received his commission from the king of Persia and sent the descendants of the priests who had hidden the fire to recover it.

When they reported that ... they had found no fire but a viscous liquid, Nehemiah ordered them to draw it up and bring it to him. After the sacrificial offerings had been placed upon the altar, Nehemiah ordered the priests to sprinkle the liquid over the firewood and over the offerings laid upon it. When that had been done, after a while in the sun, which had been covered by clouds, began to shine, and a great shire blazed up, to the astonishment of all.

¹ Goldstein, *II Maccabees*, 137.

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As the sacrifice was being consumed, the priests and the whole assemblage uttered a prayer, in which Jonathan led and the rest, following Nehemiah, responded. The prayer was as follows: “LORD, LORD, God, creator of all, awesome and powerful and just and merciful, our sole good king, our sole provider, the sole just One Who is almighty and eternal, the preserver of Israel from every exile, the One Who chose and sanctified the patriarchs! Accept our sacrifice for the sake of all Your people Israel, and guard Your portion and make it holy. Gather together our dispersion. Free those who are enslaved among the nations. Look upon those who have been despised and abominated, and let the nations know that You are our God.

Put to torment the oppressors and the arrogant perpetrators of outrage. Plant Your people in Your holy Place, as Moses said.” The priests went on singing hymns to the accompaniment of lyres. When the sacrificial offerings had been consumed, Nehemiah ordered that they pour the remaining liquid too, . . . large boulders. As soon as the command was carried out, a flame blazed up, and when the fire on the altar lit up in turn, . . . was consumed. The news of the phenomenon spread. The king of the Persians received the report that the liquid had been found in the place where the priests being led into exile had hidden the fire and that by means of it Nehemiah and his followers had burned the sacrificial offerings. After verifying the phenomenon, the king had the place fenced in and declared it holy. The king took large sums of money and distributed them to Nehemiah and his followers. Nehemiah and his followers called the liquid “nephthar,” which means “purification,” but it is commonly called “nephthai.”

In our documents we find that it was Jeremiah the prophet who commanded those who were being led into exile to take some of the fire, as we have just told you. They also show that the prophet gave the Torah to those who were being led into exile and admonished them not to forget the LORD’s commandments and not to let their minds be led astray when they saw gold and silver images and the ornaments upon them.

With other words to the same effect, he exhorted them not to let the Torah depart from their hearts.

The text also said that the prophet, on receiving a divine revelation, ordered that the tabernacle and the ark should go with him. It went on to say that Jeremiah went out of the mountain which Moses ascended to see the heritage promised by God. There, Jeremiah found a cave chamber and brought into it the tabernacle and the ark and the incense altar and blocked up the entrance. Some of those who had come along when back to mark the path, but they could not find it. When Jeremiah found out, he rebuked them, saying, “the place will remain unknown until God gathers His people together in the Age of Mercy. At that time the LORD will bring these things to light again, and the glory of the LORD and the cloud will be seen, as they were over Moses and as Solomon, too, requested, in order that the Place should be greatly sanctified.”

We are also told that Solomon in his wisdom offered a sacrifice in honor of the dedication and completion of the temple. Just as Moses prayed to the LORD and fire came down from heaven and devoured the sacrifices, so Solomon prayed, and fire came down and consumed the burnt offering. . . (And Moses said, “On account of . . . the sin offering. . . was consumed.”). . . So, too, Solomon celebrated the eight days.

The same account is given also in the records and the memoirs of the time of Nehemiah, and also that Nehemiah founded a library and collected the books about the kings and those of prophets and the books of David and the letters of Persian kings on dedicatory gifts to the temple. In the same manner, Judas reassembled for us the books scattered in the course of the recent war, and we have them.

If you have need of them, send messengers to fetch them.

As we said, we write you in as much as we are about to celebrate the Purification. Please celebrate the days.

God, Who saved His entire people and restored the heritage to us all . . . also . . . the kingdom and the priesthood and the sanctification, as He promised in the Torah. For we hope in God, that He will speedily have mercy upon us and gather us together from the lands under the heavens to His holy Place, for He has indeed delivered us from great evils and has purified His Place.

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3. Baruch 1:1–2:6

These are the words of the book that Baruch son of Neriah son of Mahseiah son of Zedekiah son of Hasadiah son of Hilkiyah wrote in Babylon, ²in the fifth year, on the seventh day of the month, at the time when the Chaldeans took Jerusalem and burned it with fire. Baruch read the words of this book to Jeconiah son of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, and to all the people who came to hear the book, ⁴and to the nobles and the princes, and to the elders, and to all the people, small and great, all who lived in Babylon by the river Sud. Then they wept, and fasted, and prayed before the Lord; ⁶they collected as much money as each could give, ⁷and sent it to Jerusalem to the high priest Jehoiakim son of Hilkiyah son of Shallum, and to the priests, and to all the people who were present with him in Jerusalem. ⁸At the same time, on the tenth day of Sivan, Baruch took the vessels of the house of the Lord, which had been carried away from the temple, to return them to the land of Judah—the silver vessels that Zedekiah son of Josiah, king of Judah, had made, ⁹after King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon had carried away from Jerusalem Jeconiah and the princes and the prisoners and the nobles and the people of the land, and brought them to Babylon.

They said: Here we send you money; so buy with the money burnt-offerings and sin-offerings and incense, and prepare a grain-offering, and offer them on the altar of the Lord our God; ¹¹and pray for the life of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, and for the life of his son Belshazzar, so that their days on earth may be like the days of heaven. ¹²The Lord will give us strength, and light to our eyes; we shall live under the protection of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, and under the protection of his son Belshazzar, and we shall serve them for many days and find favour in their sight. ¹³Pray also for us to the Lord our God, for we have sinned against the Lord our God, and to this day the anger of the Lord and his wrath have not turned away from us. ¹⁴And you shall read aloud this scroll that we are sending you, to make your confession in the house of the Lord on the days of the festivals and at appointed seasons.

¹⁵And you shall say: The Lord our God is in the right, but there is open shame on us today, on the people of Judah, on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, ¹⁶and on our kings, our rulers, our priests, our prophets, and our ancestors, ¹⁷because we have sinned before the Lord. ¹⁸We have disobeyed him, and have not heeded the voice of the Lord our God, to walk in the statutes of the Lord that he set before us. ¹⁹From the time when the Lord brought our ancestors out of the land of Egypt until today, we have been disobedient to the Lord our God, and we have been negligent, in not heeding his voice. ²⁰So to this day there have clung to us the calamities and the curse that the Lord declared through his servant Moses at the time when he brought our ancestors out of the land of Egypt to give to us a land flowing with milk and honey. ²¹We did not listen to the voice of the Lord our God in all the words of the prophets whom he sent to us, ²²but all of us followed the intent of our own wicked hearts by serving other gods and doing what is evil in the sight of the Lord our God.

So the Lord carried out the threat he spoke against us: against our judges who ruled Israel, and against our kings and our rulers and the people of Israel and Judah. ²Under the whole heaven there has not been done the like of what he has done in Jerusalem, in accordance with the threats that were written in the law of Moses. ³Some of us ate the flesh of their sons and others the flesh of their daughters. ⁴He made them subject to all the kingdoms around us, to be an object of scorn and a desolation among all the surrounding peoples, where the Lord has scattered them. ⁵They were brought down and not raised up, because our nation sinned against the Lord our God, in not heeding his voice. The Lord our God is in the right, but there is open shame on us and our ancestors this very day.

4. Ben Sira, Prologue:

Many great teachings have been given to us through the Law and the Prophets and the others that followed them, and for these we should praise Israel for instruction and wisdom. Now, those who read the scriptures

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must not only themselves understand them, but must also as lovers of learning be able through the spoken and written word to help the outsiders. So my grandfather Jesus, who had devoted himself especially to the reading of the Law and the Prophets and the other books of our ancestors, and had acquired considerable proficiency in them, was himself also led to write something pertaining to instruction and wisdom, so that by becoming familiar also with his book those who love learning might make even greater progress in living according to the law.

You are invited therefore to read it with goodwill and attention, and to be indulgent in cases where, despite our diligent labour in translating, we may seem to have rendered some phrases imperfectly. For what was originally expressed in Hebrew does not have exactly the same sense when translated into another language. Not only this book, but even the Law itself, the Prophecies, and the rest of the books differ not a little when read in the original.

When I came to Egypt in the thirty-eighth year of the reign of Euergetes and stayed for some time, I found opportunity for no little instruction. It seemed highly necessary that I should myself devote some diligence and labour to the translation of this book. During that time I have applied my skill day and night to complete and publish the book for those living abroad who wished to gain learning and are disposed to live according to the law.

5. The Colophon of Esther

In the fourth year of the reign of Ptolemy and Cleopatra, Dositheus, who said that he was a priest and a Levite, and his son Ptolemy brought to Egypt the foregoing Letter about Purim, which they said was authentic and had been translated by Lysimachus son of Ptolemy, one of the residents of Jerusalem.

6. Philo of Alexandria

De Virtutibus, 117–120 (Colson, LCL):

Again, if you see an enemy's beast straying, leave the points on which you quarrel to serve as incentives for other more vindictive dispositions, and lead the animal away and restore it. You will benefit yourself more than him: he gains an irrational and possibly worthless animal, you the greatest and most precious treasure in the whole world, true goodness. And this, as surely as the shadow follows the body, will be followed by a termination of the feud. He, the receiver of a benefit which he has not willed, is drawn towards amity by the kindness which holds him in bondage. You, his helper, with a good action to assist your counsels, are predisposed to thoughts of reconciliation. This is what our most holy prophet through all his regulations especially desires to create, unanimity, neighborliness, fellowship, reciprocity of feeling, whereby houses and cities and nations and countries and the whole human race may advance to supreme happiness. Hitherto, indeed, these things live only in our prayers, but they will, I am convinced, become facts beyond all dispute, if God, even as He gives us the yearly fruits, grants that the virtues should bear abundantly.

The Special Laws, 2.167–168 (Colson, LCL)

It amazes me that some dare to charge the nation with an anti-social stance, a nation which has made such an extensive use of fellowship and goodwill toward all people everywhere that they offer up prayers and feasts and first fruits on behalf of the common race of human beings and serve the really self-existent God both on behalf

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of themselves and of others who have run from the services which they should have rendered. These are the things they do for the entire race of human beings.

7. Aristeas 41–46

Eleazar the high priest to King Ptolemy, dear friend, greeting. Good health to you and to Queen Arsinoe, your sister, and to your children; if that is so, it would be well, and as we wish. We too are in good health. On receipt of your letter we rejoiced greatly because of your purpose and noble plan; we therefore collected together the whole multitude and read it to them, that they might know your piety toward our God. We also showed them the vessels which you sent, twenty of silver and thirty of gold, five cups, and a table for offering, and for the performance of the sacrifices and the furnishing of the Temple requirements one hundred talents of silver, brought by two men highly esteemed by you, Andreas and Aristeas, gentleman of integrity, outstanding in education, worthy in every respect of your conduct and justice. They also communicated to us your messages, in reply to which they have heard from us also sentiments consist with what you wrote. Everything which is to your advantage, even if it is unnatural, we will carry out; this is a sign of friendship and love. You have also bestowed great unexpected benefits upon our citizens in many ways. We therefore offered sacrifices without delay for you, your sister, your children, and your friends. The whole multitude made supplication that it should come to pass for you entirely as you desire, and that God the ruler of all should preserve your kingdom in peace and glory, and that the translation of the sacred Law should come to pass in a manner expedient to you and in safety. In the presence of the whole assembly we selected elders, honorable men and true, six from each tribe, whom we have sent with the Law in their possession. It will be a noble deed, O Righteous King, if you command that once the translation of the books is complete these men be restored to us again in safety. Farewell.

8. 3 Maccabees 2:1–20

²Then the high priest Simon, facing the sanctuary, bending his knees and extending his hands with calm dignity, prayed as follows: ²Lord, Lord, king of the heavens, and sovereign of all creation, holy among the holy ones, the only ruler, almighty, give attention to us who are suffering grievously from an impious and profane man, puffed up in his audacity and power. ³For you, the creator of all things and the governor of all, are a just Ruler, and you judge those who have done anything in insolence and arrogance. ⁴You destroyed those who in the past committed injustice, among whom were even giants who trusted in their strength and boldness, whom you destroyed by bringing on them a boundless flood. ⁵You consumed with fire and sulphur the people of Sodom who acted arrogantly, who were notorious for their vices; and you made them an example to those who should come afterwards. ⁶You made known your mighty power by inflicting many and varied punishments on the audacious Pharaoh who had enslaved your holy people Israel. ⁷And when he pursued them with chariots and a mass of troops, you overwhelmed him in the depths of the sea, but carried through safely those who had put their confidence in you, the Ruler over the whole creation. ⁸And when they had seen works of your hands, they praised you, the Almighty. ⁹You, O King, when you had created the boundless and immeasurable earth, chose this city and sanctified this place for your name, though you have no need of anything; and when you had glorified it by your magnificent manifestation, you made it a firm foundation for the glory of your great and honoured name. ¹⁰And because you love the house of Israel, you promised that if we should have reverses, and tribulation should overtake us, you would listen to our petition when we come to this place and pray. ¹¹And indeed you are faithful and true. ¹²And because oftentimes when our fathers were oppressed you helped them in their humiliation, and rescued them from great evils, ¹³see

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now, O holy King, that because of our many and great sins we are crushed with suffering, subjected to our enemies, and overtaken by helplessness. ¹⁴In our downfall this audacious and profane man undertakes to violate the holy place on earth dedicated to your glorious name. ¹⁵For your dwelling is the heaven of heavens, unapproachable by human beings. ¹⁶But because you graciously bestowed your glory on your people Israel, you sanctified this place. ¹⁷Do not punish us for the defilement committed by these men, or call us to account for this profanation, otherwise the transgressors will boast in their wrath and exult in the arrogance of their tongue, saying, ¹⁸“We have trampled down the house of the sanctuary as the houses of the abominations are trampled down.” ¹⁹Wipe away our sins and disperse our errors, and reveal your mercy at this hour. ²⁰Speedily let your mercies overtake us, and put praises in the mouth of those who are downcast and broken in spirit, and give us peace.’

9. Talmud Yerushalmi, *Sukkah* 5:1

It has been taught, R. Judah stated, He who has not seen the double colonnade of Alexandria in Egypt has never seen the glory of Israel. It was said that it was like a huge basilica, one colonnade within the other, and it sometimes held twice the number of people that went forth from Egypt. There were in it seventy-one cathedras of gold, corresponding to the seventy-one members of the Great Sanhedrin, not one of them containing less than twenty-one talents of gold, and a wooden platform in the middle upon which the attendant of the Synagogue stood with a scarf in his hand. When the time came to answer Amen, he waved his scarf and all the congregation duly responded. They moreover did not occupy their seats promiscuously, but goldsmiths sat separately, silversmiths separately, blacksmiths separately, metalworkers separately and weavers separately, so that when a poor man entered the place he recognized the members of his craft and on applying to that quarter obtained a livelihood for himself and for the members of his family. Abaye stated, Alexander of Macedon slew them all. Why were they so punished? — Because they transgressed this verse: Ye shall henceforth return no more that way, and they did return.