TENTH OF TEBET: Ezra haSofer and the return of the Jews to Erets Israel

Tomorrow, Thursday January 1st, we will observe the Tenth of Tebet, a fast day which remind us of three tragic events (see here). One of the events we remember is the death of Ezra haSofer .

Seventy years after the destruction of the Bet haMiqdash, approximately by the year 516 b.c.e., the Persian Emperor Cyrus allowed the Jews to come back to Erets Israel. 42,360 Jews were led back to Israel by Zerubabel (see Ezra 2:64), and years later, more Jews came back to Israel lead by Nehemia and Ezra the Scribe.

Nehemia was the leader that persuaded the new Persian Emperor, Artahshasta, to allow more Jews to return to Zion, in order to strengthen the Jewish population in Yerushalayim (Nehemia, chapter 1-2), and Ezra had the tremendous responsibility of reeducating the Jews who lived for three or more generations in the Babylonian exile, without schools or synagogues, in the midst of the local population. Many Jews had forgotten the Tora, its laws and even its language, and adopted the values of the surrounding Babylonian culture.

In Yerushalayim, Ezra established the Anshe Keneset haGedola, the first Jewish Parliament, composed of 120 scholars and prophets. With them, Ezra issued many rulings to reclaim and revive the Tora and reeducate the Jewish people. He increased the days of public reading of the Tora, he composed the text of the Amida (main prayer) because people forgot how to pray, he adapted the names of the Hebrew months and modified the fonts of the Biblical text to facilitate the study of Tora, etc. Ezra also had to make very critical decisions, like

excluding the Samaritans, a semi-pagan mixed population living in Israel from the times of the destruction of the Bet haMiqdash, who expected to be considered part of the Jewish people, and dealing with the issue of mixed marriages. This last dramatic event is narrated in chapters 9 and 10 of the book of Ezra. Thanks to Ezra's wisdom and courage the Jewish people was able to survive and be reestablished again in Israel as the Nation of HaShem.

Ezra was considered by the Rabbis as the historical link between the written Tora and the oral Tora. The oral Tora, the rabbis said, was forgotten in the long Babylonian captivity, and it was retrieved by Ezra the Scribe. Together with Nehemia, they also completed the building of the second Bet haMiqdash and the protective walls around the city.

Ezra died on a 9th of Tebet. He was regarded by our Rabbis as second to Moshe Rabbenu.

Who is exempt from fasting?

The fast of the Tenth of Tebet begins tomorrow, January 1st, at dawn and ends at nightfall. In NY the fast will begin at **6:25am** and end at **4:59pm**.
*Minors: boys under 13 and girls under 12 years old, are completely exempted from fasting tomorrow.

*Nursing women: According to the Sephardic tradition after giving birth women are exempted from fasting for 24 months, even if they are not actually nursing their baby.

*Pregnant women, especially after the first 3 months, are exempted from fasting.

*A person who feels sick, for example, flu or fever, or a person who suffers from a chronic disease like diabetes, should not fast.

*Elders should consult with their physicians to find out if

the fast will affect their health. If it will, they are exempted from fasting.