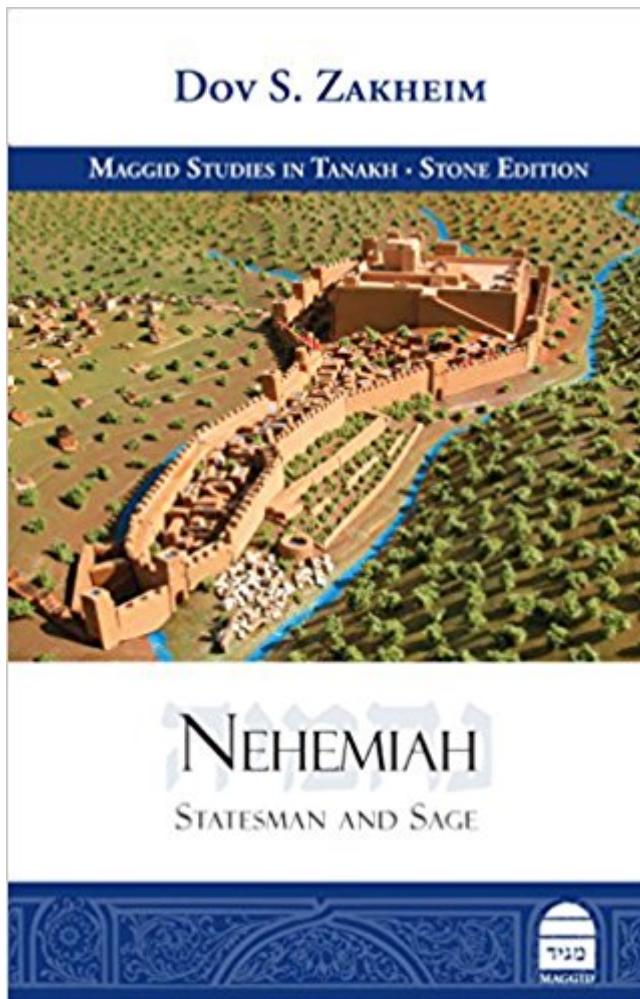


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# Nehemiah: Statesman And Sage



## **Synopsis**

Jewish history recognizes Nehemiah as one of the founding fathers of the Second Commonwealth, when the Second Temple stood in Jerusalem. A statesman, politician, and lay religious administrator, Nehemiah aimed to strengthen national security, foster diplomatic relations with neighboring states, and establish social and religious order in the ancient Jewish society. In *Nehemiah: Statesman and Sage*, Dov Zakheim, a former senior official in the US government, examines the life of the biblical figure through the lens of modern experience. Zakheim mines the biblical Book of Nehemiah to present a political biography of a man who rose to the highest levels of the Persian court, dedicating his life to the welfare of the Jewish people. Utilizing a unique collection of traditional and scholarly sources, Zakheim reveals how Nehemiah confronted fundamental issues of his day, highlighting lessons for policy-makers today.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

Dov S. Zakheim was Under Secretary of Defense (2001 2004) and Deputy Under Secretary of Defense (1985 1987) of the United States. He holds a BA from Columbia University and a D.Phil. from St. Antony's College, University of Oxford, and received rabbinic ordination from the Gaon Rabbi Shmuel Walkin. A three-time recipient of the US Department of Defense's highest civilian award, he is a Fellow of the Royal Swedish Academy of War Sciences, a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, and a member of the Royal Institute of International Affairs. He lectures internationally on American national security issues, Jewish history, and topics in Halakha.

## GREAT JEWISH HISTORY OF THAT PERIOD

Philosophically, historically superb.

excellent I highly recommend

The words of Nehemiah son of Hakaliah: In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that had survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem. They said to me, "Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire." When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days, I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. Those are the first four verses of the book of Nehemiah, found towards the end of most Hebrew Bibles, and in the religion section of your local bookstore. If it was published as an independent work, you'd find it in the autobiography section. Nehemiah was a governor of Persian Judea under King Artaxerxes I. Eventually, he became a Jewish national leader and it was on his watch that the Second Temple in Jerusalem was rebuilt. The book of Nehemiah is his story, and an important one at that. In Nehemiah: Statesman and Sage author Dov Zakheim has a written fascinating biography and a running commentary to this often-neglected biblical work. Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem and found a city in ruins, its inhabitants devastated, leaders corrupt, and the Jewish religion on the brink of annihilation. His mission was to restore the Temple, city, and people to its former grandeur. In the preface, Zakheim writes of his fascination with Nehemiah, and admired him as a man who made a lasting mark as a statesman and as a religious leader. Zakheim sees Nehemiah as an enduring example for later generations to emulate. While not a religious leader, Zakheim knows his ways around governments, having spent decades in civil service. As under-secretary of defense in the Reagan and Bush 43 administrations, he brings a unique view with his knowledge of the inner workings of government, while all the while being true to the original text. Zakheim attempts to paint an honest portrait of Nehemiah as a person and leader; but readily admits that there's simply too little material to work with to create a comprehensive account. While Ron Chernow wrote a 900 page biography of Alexander Hamilton; the archival record for biblical figures is simply far too sparse to create a similar biography. Zakheim does a good job of

describing the situation that the Jewish nation faced during Nehemiah's time. In the years after the destruction of the First Temple, many thought the destruction was the end of the Jewish nation. Nehemiah found a nation completely demoralized and in a state of spiritual lethargy. He eventually achieved the seemingly impossible task of rebuilding the nation, both in their religious and nationalistic ethos. Another task he took to was ensuring the usage of Hebrew as the national Jewish language. Zakheim writes that this was meant to create a language of Jewish identity. While Nehemiah lived about 2,600 years ago, and was a cup-bearer (officer of high rank in royal courts whose duty it was to serve the drinks at the royal table; a position of greatly valued and given to only a select few throughout history) to Artaxerxes; Zakheim writes how Nehemiah's story is still timely; relevant and cogent to this very day. Nehemiah was a complex personality living at a time of transition. He presided over one of the least known yet most critical developments in Jewish political history since the fall of the Davidic dynasty, the destruction of the Temple and the exile to Babylonia. He introduced a new constitution, the first in Jewish history, and perhaps the first of its kind anywhere. Nehemiah was a man to be reckoned with. A man of myriad roles, Zakheim paints a fascinating picture of a man who excelled at the myriad roles and tasks he undertook. Nehemiah was a visionary without being a prophet, a man who revived his demoralized people and ensured their return to their homeland. This is an interesting and compelling read, and Zakheim captures Nehemiah's story which is quite relevant to 2017 - plus a change, plus c'est la même chose. Hopefully our current leaders and their cup-bearers will act as in a fashion as wise as Nehemiah.

Very little is known about the leading biblical figure, Nehemiah, and what is known is filled with ambiguity and obscurity. We don't know when he lived. Modern Orthodox commentaries and scholars, mainstream historians, and some biblical critics date his mission from Babylonia to Judea, to serve as its governor, as 445-433 BCE, while medieval Jewish sources such as Tosaphot have the mission begin in 402 BCE. Both Ezra and Nehemiah came to Judea from Babylon, but we have no idea who came first. The first above-mentioned group state that Ezra arrived first in 458 BCE, thirteen years before Nehemiah, but the latter group asserts that Nehemiah was the first to arrive with Ezra not coming until 398, four years after Nehemiah. The dating is important because both groups agree that Ezra had a hand in creating the Torah as we have it today, although the two groups differ on what Ezra contributed to the Bible. Both Ezra and Nehemiah at different times tried and failed to force the Judeans who married or lived with non-Judean spouses to send the non-Judeans away. This intermixture and other facts of history seem to support

the view that Jews today are not a pure race, but a fusion with others. This also raises the question; why didn't the two leaders simply encourage the non-Judeans to convert? The answer to this question, in my mind, is that the idea of conversion did not exist during the days of Ezra and Nehemiah. Dr. Dov S. Zakheim, a United States Under Secretary of Defense, who is also a rabbi, a man who understands government, offers readers an excellent examination of and clarification of what can be gleaned from the thirteen chapters of Nehemiah's memoir. He writes clearly and scholarly, in a manner that non-scholars will enjoy. There are details that will surprise readers. The book is part of Koren Publishers' splendid series on the Bible. The entire series is well-worth reading because of the wealth of knowledge in the books. Zakheim's book is filled with information. Some items discussed are: The book of Nehemiah was combined with the book of Ezra until the fourteenth or fifteenth century. While Ezra seems to have had a religious function, Nehemiah acted primarily as a governor of the country. Nehemiah's origin and even his identity are shrouded in mystery. He served as governor of Judea for twelve years and returned to Babylon. He may have returned again, but the book, which is Nehemiah's own memoir, is silent on this point. Is it silent because he received an unfavorable reception? As a Judean leader, he had to cope with internal dissensions, national security, relations with regional countries and an international superpower, domestic social and economic issues, and the place of religion in the governance of the state. He found the country in great disarray, and the changes he mandated were necessary, but it is unclear whether the majority of the people appreciated his work. Some of the Judeans clearly disliked what he was doing. He was unable to rely on the loyalty of the priests, so he diluted their power and gave the Levites a stake in the temple apparatus. He was unconcerned about nepotism, and appointed his brother and another man to lead the military. The book states that the holiday of Sukkot, which was celebrated in Nehemiah 8, was not celebrated "since the days of Joshua son of Nun" (verse 17), the four species used today on Sukkot are not mentioned, but others are, and the holiday of Yom Kippur is not included in the book. Despite internal and external resistance, he built a wall around Jerusalem to protect the city, and he drafted women along with men to do the construction. He worked out a system to repopulate Jerusalem. Zakheim concludes his superb book by writing: "Nehemiah was not without flaws. He was self-centered. Nevertheless, just as Ezra restored the Torah to the Jewish people, so did Nehemiah restore the sense of identity and nationhood. For the Jewish people, Torah and nationality are intertwined and inseparable. Nehemiah, even more than Ezra, recognized this reality. For that reason, more than any other, his book remains required reading,"

and his role as a leading light of Jewish history will forever be secure.ÃƒÂ¢Ã  ¬Ã  Â•

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