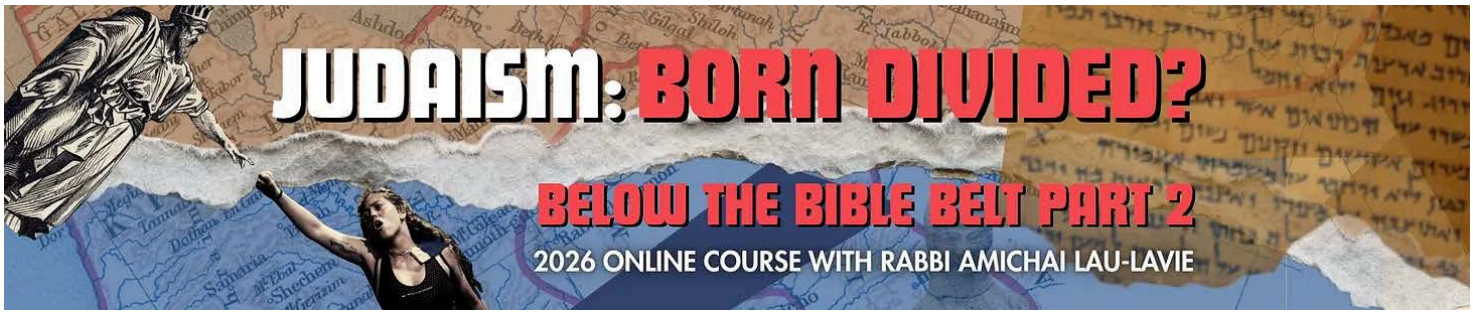


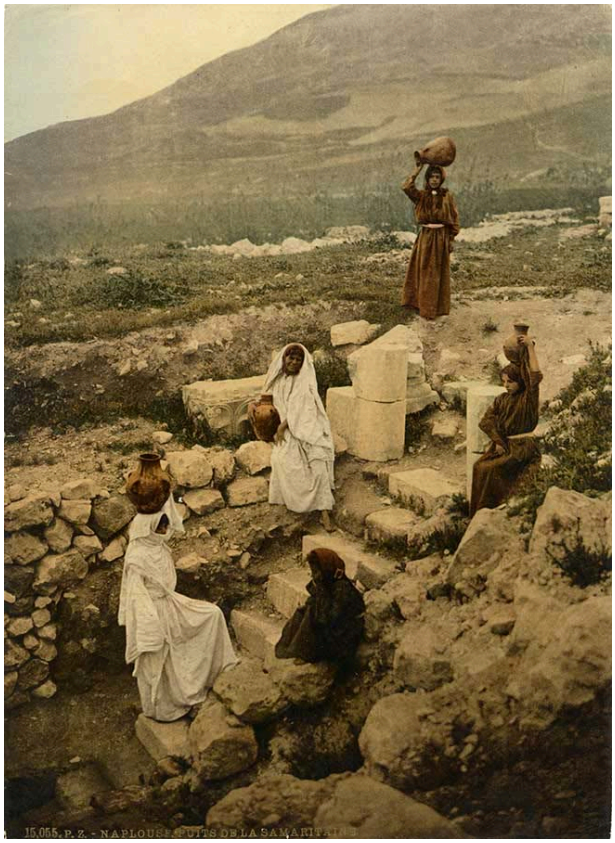
Good or bad Samaritans? Ezra's Intermarriage Decree and the Birth of the Bible

September 6, 2026

SOURCE 1

"We are not Jews; we are Israelite-Samaritans. We are the direct descendants of the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh, sons of Joseph, who stayed in our ancestral homeland."

Benyamin Tsedaka, The Israelite Samaritan Version of the Torah



SOURCE 2

"The rift between Jews and Samaritans was not a sudden split caused by a pagan influx, but the long, drawn-out continuation of an ancient rivalry between the two sister kingdoms of Israel and Judah. The northern tradition did not perish with the Assyrian conquest; it persisted at Mount Gerizim."

Gary N. Knoppers, *Jews and Samaritans: The Origins and History of Their Early Relations*

SOURCE 3

עַד אֲשֶׁר־הֵסִיר יְהוָה אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵעַל פָּנָיו כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר בְּיַד כָּל־עֲבָדָיו הַנְּבִיאִים וַיִּגֶל יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵעַל אַדְמָתוֹ אַשּׁוּרָה עַד הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה׃
וַיָּבֵא מֶלֶךְ־אַשּׁוּר מִבָּבֶל וּמִכּוּתָה וּמֵעַוָּא וּמֵחֲמָת וּסְפַרְוַיִם וַיֹּשֶׁב בְּעָרֵי שֹׁמְרוֹן תַּחַת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּרְשׁוּ אֶת־שֹׁמְרוֹן וַיֵּשְׁבוּ בְּעָרֶיהָ׃

In the end, GOD removed Israel from the divine presence, as they had been warned through all God's servants the prophets. So the Israelites were deported from their land to Assyria, as is still the case.

The king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath, and Sepharvaim, and he settled them in the towns of Samaria in place of the Israelites; they took possession of Samaria and dwelt in its towns.

II Kings.17.22-24

Samaritan Highpriest and scroll.
Samaritanischer Hoher Priester und Gesetzes-Rolle.
Grand Rabbin Samaritain et décalogue.

SOURCE 4

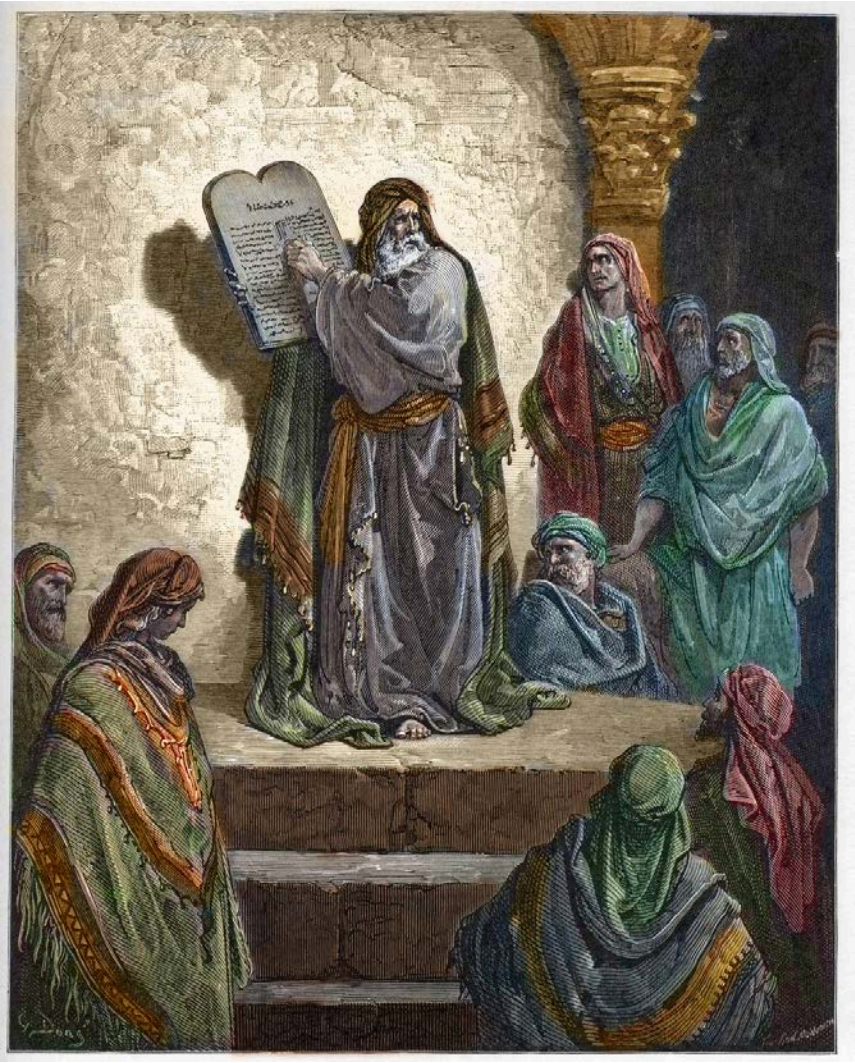
וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ צָרֵי יְהוּדָה וּבִנְיָמִן כִּי־בְנֵי הַגּוֹלָה בּוֹנִים הֵיכָל לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל׃ וַיִּגְּשׁוּ אֶל־זְרֻבָּבֶל וְאֶל־רָאשֵׁי הָאָבוֹת וַיֹּאמְרוּ לָהֶם נִבְנֶה עִמָּכֶם כִּי כָכֶם נִדְרֹושׁ לֵאלֹהֵיכֶם (ולא) [וְלוֹ ו] אֲנַחְנוּ זֹבְחִים מִימֵי אֵסַר חַדֹּן מֶלֶךְ אַשּׁוּר הַמַּעֲלֶה אֹתָנוּ פֹּה׃ וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם זְרֻבָּבֶל וְיֵשׁוּעַ וּשְׁאָר רָאשֵׁי הָאָבוֹת לְיִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא־לָכֶם וָלָנוּ לִבְנוֹת בַּיִת לֵאלֹהֵינוּ כִּי אֲנַחְנוּ יַחַד נִבְנֶה לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּנוּ הַמֶּלֶךְ כּוֹרֶשׁ מֶלֶךְ־פָּרָס׃

When the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the returned exiles were building a temple to the ETERNAL God of Israel, they approached Zerubbabel and the heads of the clans and said to them, "Let us build with you, since we too worship your God; we have been offering sacrifices since the time of King Esarhaddon of Assyria, who brought us here."

Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the rest of the heads of the clans of Israel answered them, "It is not for you and us to build a House to our God, but we alone will build it to the ETERNAL God of Israel, in accord with the charge that the king, King Cyrus of Persia, laid upon us."

Ezra 4:1-3

SOURCE 5



"All the people gathered as one at the square before the Water Gate, and they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Scroll of Moses's Teaching that Yhwh had enjoined upon Israel. "

Nehemiah 8:1

The year is 444 bce. Athens is now busy establishing an empire, and its leader Pericles has sponsored a building plan to refortify its main ports and the Long Walls that provided the city with a secure access to the sea. Meanwhile in Jerusalem, the inhabitants of Judah have just finished rebuilding the municipal fortifications of Jerusalem. Both its walls and temple had long languished in the rubble to which Babylonian armies had consigned them, but now they are standing again.

Today is the first day of the sacred seventh month, and on this occasion, the laws of Moses call for a fanfare of trumpets and ceremonious sacrifices at the central sanctuary.

Strangely, however, the crowds converging on Jerusalem have little regard for the temple and annual rituals performed there. After assembling at the plaza in front of the Water Gate, they petition a priest and scribe named Ezra to make an appearance, and what they want him to do is not perform a cultic rite at the altar, but to read from the text he brought from Babylon.

It is "the Scroll of Moses's Teaching/Torah that Yhwh had enjoined upon Israel." At the community's behest, Ezra ascends a high platform and reads aloud to all those who had gathered there – "men, women, and all who could understand." The scribes responsible for capturing – or more accurately, creating – this scene keep the attention focused on the text Ezra bears: the people's longing to hear it read; those who help Ezra read it; and the people's response to the reading. When Ezra opens the Scroll, all the people rise, and after a blessing is pronounced, they lift their hands and respond "Amen, Amen!" Then they all bow and prostrate themselves "before Yhwh." After the Torah is read and explicated, the leaders exhort the people not to mourn, "for this day

is holy to Yhwh, your god!" All are to go their ways and celebrate by "eating the fat, drinking the sweet, and sending portions to those without."

Many may find it difficult to appreciate the drama and emotion of this account. Ritual reading of a sacred text is not unusual for many of us. Jews, Christians, and Muslims have worshipped this way for millennia. But the reason why texts are central to their religious traditions is what happened 2,500 years ago. Even if more imagined than real, this moment represents a tectonic shift: a scribe, scroll, and the activity of reading usurp the place long occupied by high priest, altar, and the performance of sacrifices. The people are no longer mere spectators, looking on while priests carry out rites and rituals; they now actively participate in the proceedings. And their participation includes communal prayer (in the place of priestly sacrifice) as well as cognition and comprehension: when they celebrate at the end of the day, it is "because they understood the words that [Ezra and others] had imparted to them."

However, this moment is about more than religious history. What we witness here is nothing less than the birth of "the People of the Book" (perhaps more properly, "the People of the Scroll"), along with a new approach to education that informs this text-based identity.

Jacob Wright, Why the Bible Began

SOURCE 6

וַיִּקָּבְצוּ כָל־אַנְשֵׁי־יְהוּדָהׇ וּבִנְיָמִן ׀ יְרוּשָׁלַ͏ִם לִשְׁלֹשֶׁת הַיָּמִים הֽוּא חֹדֶשׁ הַתְּשִׁיעִי בְּעֶשְׂרִים בַּחֹדֶשׁ וַיֵּשְׁבוּ כָל־הָעָם בִּרְחוֹב בֵּית הָאֱלֹהִים
מַרְעִידִים עַל־הַדָּבָר וּמֵהַגְּשָׁמִים: וַיָּקָם עֶזְרָא הַכֹּהֵן וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם אַתֶּם מְעַלְתֶּם וַתֹּשִׁיבוּ נָשִׁים נָכְרִיּוֹת לְהוֹסִיף עַל־אַשְׁמַת יִשְׂרָאֵל: וְעַתָּה
תְּנוּ תוֹדָה לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵי־אֲבֹתֵיכֶם וַעֲשׂוּ רְצוֹנוֹ וְהִבָּדְלוּ מֵעַמֵּי הָאָרֶץ וּמִן־הַנָּשִׁים הַנָּכְרִיּוֹת:

All the citizens of Judah and Benjamin assembled in Jerusalem in three days; it was the ninth month, the twentieth of the month. All the people sat in the square of the House of God, trembling on account of the event and because of the rains. Then Ezra the priest got up and said to them, "You have trespassed by bringing home foreign women, thus aggravating the guilt of Israel. So now, make confession to the ETERNAL, God of your ancestors—and do God's will by separating yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign women."

Ezra 10:9-11

SOURCE 7

"The obsession with 'foreign women' in Ezra–Nehemiah (Ezra 9–10) was not primarily about non-Israelites from distant lands, but was a targeted, xenophobic campaign aimed at the local Yahwistic populations of the northern territories. By labeling the women of Samaria and the surrounding region as

'foreign,' Ezra effectively redefined the northern descendants of Israel as Gentiles in order to consolidate power within the returnee Jerusalem elite."

Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile* (Fortress Press)

SOURCE 8

"The prohibition against intermarriage in Ezra 9–10 served as a socio-political boundary marker designed to delegitimize the Yahwists of Samaria. By casting marriage with northern neighbors as an abominable threat equal to that of the ancient Canaanites, the Jerusalem leadership constructed an ideological wall between Judea and Samaria that transformed an internal tribal schism into an absolute ethnic divide."

Willa M. Johnson, *The Defilement of the Gentile in Early Judaism*

SOURCE 9

The strangest part of the "ten lost tribes" tradition is that the "ten tribes" of Israel were never lost. True, as we know from Assyrian documents, many Israelites were exiled to Assyria in 720 B.C.E. under Shalmaneser V and Sargon II (as were Judeans under Sennacherib in 701, but many other Israelites continued to inhabit their native homeland in what had become the Assyrian province of Samaria soon after the conquest. Their direct descendants, the Samarians, were still there in the Second Temple period.

It is time to abandon the notion that following 720 B.C.E., the population of the former Northern Kingdom played only a marginal role in the development of the YHWH traditions that are the basis of Judaism. We now know that the split between Jews and Samarians occurred centuries after the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, aggravated by the Hasmonean conquest of the north in 111 B.C.E.

The opponents of the returnees in Ezra and Nehemiah were likely fellow YHWH worshipers who included both non-*Golah* Judeans claiming their own stake in

local governance, and Samarian descendants of the northern tribes of Israel, living and worshiping God in their ancestral homeland—who, no doubt, would have been surprised to hear they were "lost." Far from vanishing into the mists of legend, the so-called "Ten Lost Tribes" were neither lost nor marginal to Israelite history. The story turns out to be not one of disappearance, but of continuity and contribution.

Prof.Mary-Joan Leith

SOURCE 10

"Purism or pragmatism?This dilemma has accompanied the Jewish people ever since.

When do walls come back and when do we dismantle them? How rigid is the cultural commitment to our ways of life vs. the immersion in our surrounding cultures?

Some will say that the purist approach has only brought disaster and ongoing destruction upon our people. Others will argue that it is precisely this approach that has preserved Jewish identity from disintegration—an identity that otherwise might have dissolved long ago, like many small peoples who did not survive the upheavals of history.

It seems there is no single answer that applies to our multiple historical dilemmas. Every era and its unique circumstances. There are times when purism is called for, lest the people's distinct identity truly be lost. And there are times when pragmatism is necessary, lest a stubborn insistence on rigid principles leads to a worse collapse than the compromises might have brought.

How do we know when one approach is right and when the other is? It's hard to tell. Superficially, it might appear that in political matters, pragmatism is more

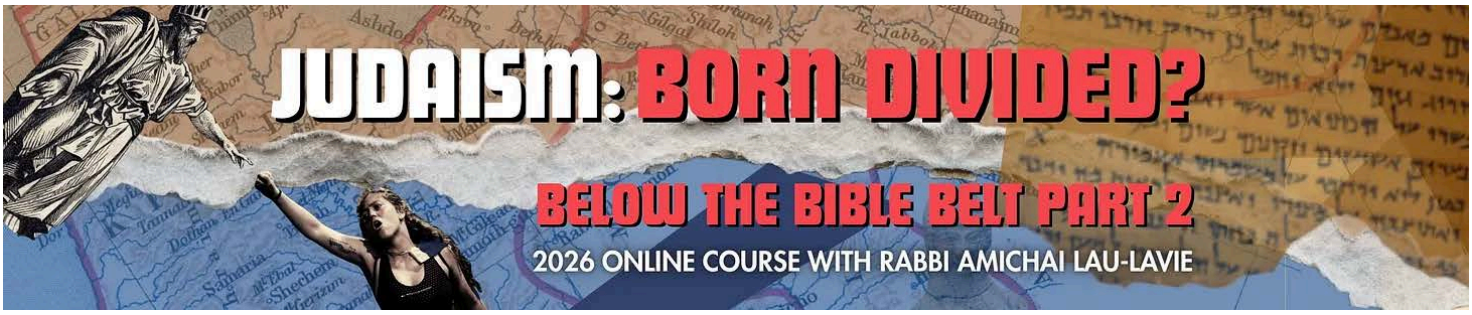
appropriate, while in spiritual matters, purism has the upper hand. But in truth, there are no absolute truths in either realm.

The most crucial need is for wise leadership—leaders who can assess the risks in every scenario, make sound decisions, and most of all, blend identity-preserving steps with collaborations that do not threaten the essence of that identity."

Yair Sheleg

SOURCE 11

"The books of Ezra and Nehemiah document an aggressive effort by the returning Golah (exilic) community to define the boundaries of 'true Israel' narrowly. By rejecting the offer of the local northern populations to help rebuild the Temple, the Judean leadership turned an internal Israelite diversity into a permanent schism."

Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, *In An Age of Prose: A Literary Approach to Ezra-Nehemiah*

Next Session: October 11