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A Binding Agreement

Nehemiah 9:38 to 10:39

A binding agreement DIG: From verses 1-29, what significance do you see in the listing of specific names? Where else have you seen most of these names? Do you suppose the original agreement contained all the names of those summarized in verse 28? Why or why not? What subjects are covered by the provisions of this covenant? What rationale do you see for the prohibition in verse 30 (see Exodus 34:16)? For the prohibition and duties in verses 31-33 (see Exodus 20:8-11 and 30:11-16)? For the duties in verses 35-36 (see Deuteronomy 26:1-11)? Is Nehemiah prescribing tighter or more lenient restrictions than the Torah required? Why might that be? In verses 37-39, how did the Jews demonstrate they were good stewards? What had neglecting the house of God taught them in the past tense (see Nehemiah 13:11 and Haggai 1:4-11)?

REFLECT: For the believer, is there any similar covenant that reflects the values or principles of this chapter? Immersion? New members classes? Communion? What part does putting it in writing play? How could this become legalistic? Is personal stewardship a reliable index of commitment to God and His work? Why or why not? What else might serve that purpose for you? In your messianic synagogue or church, what seems most neglected, or in need of repair? God's house? God's Word? God's people? God's leaders? Why do you think so? What will you do about it this next week as a direct result of renewing your covenant vows?

458 BC During the ministry of Nehemiah (to see link click [Bt](#) - The Third Return).
Compiled by: The Chronicler from the Nehemiah memoirs
(see [Ac](#) - Ezra-Nehemiah From a Jewish Perspective: **The Nehemiah Memoirs**).

Following the public confession of **sin** that took place on **the twenty-fourth day of the seventh month**, Isra'el entered into a written **binding agreement**. The Hebrew verb *karat*, used many times in the TaNaKh to *make* or *cut* (Hebrew: *berit*), is used here with **binding agreement** (Hebrew: *anana*). **The Chronicler** may have used it here because in **Nehemiah 9:7-8** he remembered Abraham's faithfulness (the same Hebrew root *aman*) and **ADONAI's** covenant with him (see the commentary on **Genesis**, to see link click [Eg](#) - I

am the LORD, Who Brought You Out of Ur of the Chaldeans to Give You This Land). Just as Abraham was faithful, the exiles from the Babylonian Captivity must be faithful to **God.**¹⁷³

Collectively, **they** were convicted by the demands of Scripture. Corporate and personal sin had been exposed. Wearing sackcloth with dust on **their** heads, **they** expressed **their** sorrow for **their** failure to obey **the Torah**. But it was not enough to say **they** were sorry; **they** needed to express the sincerity of **their** desire to serve **ADONAI** wholeheartedly and passionately. Repentance, after all, includes both a turning from sin, and a turning to **God.**¹⁷⁴

The life of a believer is a series of new beginnings. **The Lord is able to keep us from stumbling (Jude 24)**, but if we do stumble, He is able to lift us up again. **From ADONAI our steps are made firm, when He delights in our way. Though we stumble, we will not fall headlong, for ADONAI is holding our hand (Psalm 37:23-24).** The nation had sinned, but now it was taking new steps of dedication and obedience.¹⁷⁵

As we consider the story of **Nehemiah**, we find **people** who were anxious to change **their** lives. In short, **they** were determined to do things in the order of importance. First things were to come first. It was as if **they** were saying, “Because of all these things we have brought before **You, ADONAI**, we want to establish some priorities. We are **making a binding agreement in writing.**” **Nehemiah Chapter 9** dealt with those priorities (see **Bp - The Israelites Confess Their Sins**). **They** poured out **their** souls to **God**. **They** declared **their** dependence on **Him**.

In the third example of leadership in the life of Nehemiah, effective leaders establish clear priorities and use their time wisely (see **Bt - The Third Return**). Under the leadership of **Nehemiah**, **the people of God** decided to put first things first, regardless of the situation. This action, this document, was a crucial choice in the life of **Isra’el**. **They** drove a literal stake into the ground that day, which became part of **their** rallying point. **They** drafted and ratified **their** declaration of dependence and distinction – **their** constitution. It established their purpose and values. It was as if **the righteous of the TaNaKh** were saying, “We don’t care if anyone else in the world lives by this. **We** will live by it. It will be **our** guide. **Our** homes will be distinct. Our philosophy of life will not be like that of those who live outside our walls – or even some who live within the walls of **the City**. This is something, **ADONAI**, that we want to live out before **You.**¹⁷⁶

Seventh, a solemn, climatic oath and recommitment by way of a covenant: Now because of all this (see **Bp - The Israelites Confess Their Sins**), the Israelites made a

binding agreement in writing. Covenants need to be signed in order to take effect. Think of a marriage certificate and the signing ritual after public vows have been made. The thousands present in **Jerusalem** in **Nehemiah's** day could not all have signed the document, so representatives performed the signing ritual: **The names of their leaders, their Levites and their cohanim** agreed to **affix their seals on** a written **document** that they would obey the stipulations of **the Torah (Nehemiah 9:38). On the sealed document were:**

The chief leaders and priests who signed (see [Ac](#) - **Ezra-Nehemiah From a Jewish Perspective: This commentary is based on several premises**). Putting a seal on this document was a serious matter because it meant making a solemn oath before **the LORD** (Deuteronomy 29:10-13). Zedekiah; Seraiah, Azariah, Jeremiah, Pashhur, Amariah, Malchijah, Hattush, Shebaniah, Malluch, Harim, Meremot, Obadiah, Dani'el, Ginnethon, Baruch, Meshullam, Abijah, Mijamin, Maaziah, Bilgai, and Shemaiah. These were the cohanim (Nehemiah 10:1-8).

The Levites who signed: And the Levites were:

Jeshua son of Azaniah, Binnui from the sons of Henadad, Kadmiel (Nehemiah 10:9),

and their associates Shebaniah, Hodiah, Kelita, Pelaiah, Hanan (Nehemiah 10:10),

Mica, Rehob, Hashabiah (Nehemiah 10:11),

Zaccur, Sherebiah, Shebaniah (Nehemiah 10:12),

Hodiah, Bani, and Beninu (Nehemiah 10:13).

The other leaders who signed: The leaders of the people (most of these names represent the heads of leading lay families):

Parosh, Pahat-Moab, Elam, Zattu, Bani (Nehemiah 10:14),

Bunni, Azgad, Bebai (Nehemiah 10:15),

Adonijah, Bigvai, Adin (Nehemiah 10:16),

Ater, Hezekiah, Azzur (Nehemiah 10:17),

Hodiah, Hashum, Bezai (Nehemiah 10:18),

Hariph, Anathoth, Nebai (Nehemiah 10:19),

Magpiash, Meshullam, Hezir (Nehemiah 10:20),

Meshezabel, Zadok, Jaddua (Nehemiah 10:21),

Pelatiah, Hanan, Anaiah (Nehemiah 10:22),

Hoshea, Hananiah, Hasshub (Nehemiah 10:23),

Hallohesh, Pilha, Shobek (Nehemiah 10:24),

Rehum, Hashabnah, Maaseiah (Nehemiah 10:25),

and Ahiah, Hanan, Anan (Nehemiah 10:26),

Malluch, Harim, and Baanah (Nehemiah 10:27).

The solemn promises: Now the rest of the people - the cohanim, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the Temple servants, and all who had separated themselves from the peoples of the lands for the sake of the Torah of God, along with their wives, their sons and their daughters who were able to understand - did not place **their seals** into the written agreement, but **they did join their brothers the nobles, and enter into a curse (Deuteronomy 28:15-68) and an oath to walk in the Torah of God given through Moses the servant of God, and to keep and do all the mitzvot of Adonai our Lord, along with His ordinances and His statutes (Nehemiah 10:28-29).** It was made completely clear that everyone, down to the youngest children who could **understand**, shared in this **oath**.

Should believers today bind themselves with **oaths** as we seek to walk with **the Lord** and serve **Him**? Probably not. Our relationship with **ADONAI** is like that of children to a father, and our **Father** wants our obedience to be based on love. I don't know of any examples in the B'rit Chadashah of believers taking **oaths** of obedience to **God**. Our obedience should be a joyful response to all that **He** has done for us in **Messiah (Colossians 3:1ff)**. We don't succeed as believers because we make promises to **YHVH**, but because we believe the promises of **God** and act upon them.¹⁷⁷



Mixed marriages: In **Nehemiah 10:29** there was a general promise to obey what **God** had declared. But in **Nehemiah 10:30**, the people specifically said that **they** would obey **Him** in **their** homes. Furthermore, we will not give our daughters to non-believers, the peoples of the land, and we will not take their daughters for our sons. They took marrying idol-worshippers very seriously. Divorce was permitted in the TaNaKh (**Deuteronomy 24:1**), although it was considered a serious matter and one which **God** hated (**Malachi 2:6**). The issue here was not marriages that were racially mixed, but marrying unbelievers (**Second Corinthians 6:14-7:1**). Bo'az, a descendant of **David**, married **Ruth**, a Moabitess (see the commentary on **Ruth Bd - Coda: The Genealogy of David**), but **she** became a proselyte of the Covenant (see the commentary on **Ruth An - Your People Will Be My People and Your God My God**). Therefore, **theirs** was not a mixed marriage. However, the marriages **Ezra** was addressing were **Jews** marrying unbelievers, or the **people of the land** around **them**. This became a big issue as the next file will detail (see **Bs - Those Guilty of Intermarriage**).

Believers marrying unbelievers, what I call “missionary dating,” is still a problem in **the congregations of God** today. “As long as we love each other, it will work out!” is the argument many messianic rabbis and pastors hear from believers who want to marry unbelievers. But the question is not, “Will this marriage work out?” but, “Will this marriage enjoy **God’s** best blessing and fulfill **His** will?” It’s difficult to see how **Ha’Shem** can bless and use people who deliberately disobey **His Word** (**Second Corinthians 6:14 to 7:1; First Corinthians 7:39**).¹⁷⁸ Becoming a believer after being married, however, is an entirely different matter altogether. **For the unbelieving husband is made holy through the wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy through her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy (First Corinthians 7:14).**

The Sabbath: When the people of the land bring merchandise or any kind of grain on Shabbat, we will not buy from them on Shabbat or on a holy day. The mitzvot

regarding Shabbat and the Sabbatical Year are based on **the Torah**, but they define new cases. **The Jews** would not have bought and sold among **themselves**. However, living so close to non-Jews who brought merchandise to sell on the Sabbath presented a new situation. The people could now see that the tone and spirit of the day were being threatened. **Also every seventh year we will forego working the land and the debt of every hand (Nehemiah 10:31)**. The poor would be protected. **The land** would lie fallow in **the seventh year**. During **the seventh year**, when **the land** was not cultivated or planted, **the poor** could help **themselves** to whatever grew on it, **the vineyards and olive groves (Exodus 23:11)**.¹⁷⁹

The Support for the House of God: The phrase **the House of our God** is used nine times in this section and refers to the restored **Temple**. The people were promising **ADONAI** that they would obey **His mitzvot** and provide what was needed for the ministry at **the Temple**. To be sure, **the restored Temple** didn't have the magnificence of **the Temple** built by **Solomon (Ezra 3:8-13; Haggai 2:1-9)**, but it was **God's House** just the same and deserved the support of **God's people**. **The promised support was specific and involved four different areas of ministry.**

First, the Temple tax: During the time of Moshe, everyone over **twenty** was charged **half a shekel** as a ransom for **himself**, and this money was used **for the service of the tent of meeting** (see the commentary on **Exodus Eu - The Atonement Money for the Tabernacle**). But it was levied only when a census was held, whereas, the present passage promises a slightly small but annual sum.¹⁸⁰ **We also assume responsibility for the mitzvot to give a third of a shekel each year for the work of the House of our God: for the bread of the Presence** (see the commentary on **Exodus Fo - The Bread of the Presence in the Sanctuary: Christ, the Bread of Life**), **the regular grain offering and regular burnt offering, the Shabbatot, the New Moons, for the moadim, for the holy things, for the sin offerings to atone for Isra'el, and for all the service of the House of our God (Nehemiah 10:32-33).**

Today we don't have to provide animals, grain, and other materials in order for the Church, made up of **Jews and Gentiles (Ephesians 3:14)**, to worship **the Lord**, but we do have to help maintain the work of the ministry. This means paying salaries (**Luke 10:7**), sharing with the needy (**First Corinthians 16:1-3**), and being good stewards of all that **ADONAI** gives us (**Second Corinthians Chapters 8 and 9**), so that the gospel may be sent to the whole world. **For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Matthew 6:21)**.¹⁸¹

Second, the wood offering: We - the cohanim, the Levites and the people - have cast lots concerning the offering of wood, to bring it into the House of our God according to our ancestral house at the appointed times year by year to burn on the altar of ADONAI, our God, as it is written in the Torah (Nehemiah 10:34). The work of supplying the wood necessary for the altar fires was a part of the task assigned to the Temple servants, or the *Nethinim* (see [An - Priests, Levites and Temple Servants Who Returned with Zerubbabel](#)). As a result of the Babylonian captivity, their organization was broken up, and though some returned to Jerusalem, they were probably not so numerous as before. Therefore, it became necessary for all classes of Jews to attend to this work, and this was regulated by the casting of lots. This work was called the offering of wood in the text and can also be seen in the final verse of Nehemiah (13:31). The rabbis teach that different families had different times of the year assigned to them for their share in the work. This was the origin of a great festival that was known by the name of “the feast of the wood-carrying,” and was celebrated annually on a certain day in Av (corresponding to the months of July-August). This was the last day of the year that wood could be cut for this purpose, and all the people without the distinction of being part of a Jewish tribe, like the Temple servants, brought wood to the Temple on that day. The festival was universally and joyously kept; no fasting or mourning was permitted.¹⁸² The Oral Law (Ta’an. 4.5) records that this happened nine times a year.

Third, the firstfruits: The list of firstfruit offerings here appears to take a maximum view of what the Torah required. There were basically five kinds of fruits: Also to bring the firstfruits of our land (Exodus 23:19) and (1) the firstfruits of all fruit trees year by year to the House of Adonai, and the firstborn of our sons. These were to be redeemed and the money given to the priests (Exodus 8:13; Numbers 18:15ff), and (2) our livestock as written in the Torah (Exodus 13:11-13). If they belonged to the species not offered on the altar, they had to be redeemed by being exchanged for a lamb; the firstborn of our cattle and our sheep to the House of our God - (3) to the cohanim ministering in the House of our God (Deuteronomy 26:2) was responsible for the payment of the tithe; and the first of our coarse meal, (4) along with our offerings - the fruit from every kind of tree, new wine and oil - to the cohanim at the store rooms of the House of our God, as well as (5) a tenth of the crop of our land to the Levites (Nehemiah 10:35-37a). The various commandments and offerings in the Torah leave a considerable amount of leeway - especially to the generations removed from the original practices - about how they all related to each other. Leaving nothing to chance, Ezra’s community combined them all together. The gathering of the tithe became systematic, with the Levite, the chief beneficiary, permitted to take the

initiative rather than leaving it to the donor.¹⁸³

Fourth, the tithes: The word tithe means *a tenth*. **The Jews** were to bring **a tenth of their produce to the LORD** each year for the support of **the Levites**. **The Levites** then were to give **a tenth of the tithes they received to the priests (Numbers 18:25-32)**. **The Israelites** were to tithe the other ninety percent that was left over and take it to **the Temple** for the annual feasts (**Deuteronomy 26:1-11**). To those **tithes** was added **a third tithe**, received every third year for the poor (**Nehemiah 14:28-29**).

Chambers in the outer courts of **the Temple** were used as **storerooms** for the silver, gold, and other objects. **Also, the cohen, a descendant of Aaron, will be with the Levites when the Levites receive the tithe, and the Levites will bring a tenth of the tithes up to the House of our God, to the storerooms of the treasury (Nehemiah 10:37b-38).**

For Bnei-Yisrael and the sons of Levi will bring the grain offering, new wine, and oil to the storerooms where the utensils for the Sanctuary, and for the ministering cohanim, the gatekeepers, and the singers are kept. The people's pledge, then, was not merely lip-service. **They** meant it (at the time). It was accepted as a heavy burden, saying: **We will not forsake the House of our God (Nehemiah 10:39).**¹⁸⁴

While there is no express command in the B'rit Chadashah that believers should tithe today (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ [Do](#) - When You Give to the Needy, Do Not Do It to be Honored by Others**), proportionate giving is certainly suggested (**First Corinthians 16:1-3**). We are stewards of **God's** wealth and must make wise use of what He shares with us. If people who lived before the cross (see the commentary on **Exodus [Da](#) - The Dispensation of the Torah**) could bring three tithes, how much more should we give today who live under the New Covenant of **God's** abundant grace?¹⁸⁵

In this binding agreement, though given in summary form, the details and extent of the commitment and sacrifice of the people of **Isra'el** are breathtaking. **They** made promises - oaths - that **they** were of the most serious nature. Religion to **them** was not a trifling matter. It was not something to be engaged in on **the Sabbath** and then quickly forgotten. It was life-changing and total in its scope.¹⁸⁶

Those **tithes and offerings** given to **ADONAI**, were responses to **His** grace. **They** follow a distinctive pattern of gospel logic: obedience is offered by way of gratitude of grace received - *never the other way around*. Nothing is more vital to appreciate than this! Get this wrong, and everything goes wrong! We dare not confuse the priority of grace in the

promise of obedience, or else we sow the seeds of legalism. But equally important, we dare not so emphasize the beauty of grace that we ignore the need for gratitude expressed in will and devoted obedience from the heart to live unreservedly for **the Lord**. For the pools of grace received comes the echo of a willing heart, nowhere better expressed than the prayer: "My heart I offer to You, **O Lord**, promptly and sincerely."

Is this your response?¹⁸⁷