



## ACTIVITY

# Israel Calls Me!

### Materials and Equipment Needed

- Copy of Nechemia text
- Copy of articles about Volunteers in Israeli Army (see below)
- Paper and pens/ pencils

### Time Needed

45 minutes-1 hour

### Goal

To consider what compels us to help other Jews in need through a close reading of a text from Nechemia and from the experience of American Jews who volunteer for the Israeli army.

## Before You Get Started

Look at the list of enduring understandings. Which one would you like to emphasize through this activity?

- The relationship between the Land of Israel and the People of Israel is longstanding, going back to ancient times and finding expression in Jewish Biblical and Rabbinic texts.
- In modern times, Israel is the vision and venture of the Jewish People. The Jewish People's central project in modern times is the building of a sovereign Jewish State in the Land of Israel.
- Being an active participant in the Jewish People implies an ongoing relationship with the State of Israel and a concern for the way it conducts its social, ethical and humanistic affairs and its contribution to global Jewry.
- Even if they don't live in Israel, all Jewish People are "owners" of the State of Israel and have a part to play in contributing to, supporting and being in an ongoing relationship with the State.
- Contemporary Israel boasts a diverse and rich culture that is the product of the varied and diverse immigrant Jewish communities who build and contribute to the State of Israel. Encountering Israeli culture, in all its diversity, is an excellent way to encounter the Jewish People in its various manifestations.

## Directions for Activity

1. Ask participants to share a time when they have been "called" to do something that was outside of their comfort zone?
2. Introduce the text from Nechemiah using the explanation of the text:

The story of Nehemiah which appears in the Biblical book that bears his name is fascinating. The book itself is unique. It appears to represent the only autobiographical story told in the entire Tanach. Nehemiah, introduced in the above passage from the very beginning of the book, is a Persian Jew living in Susa (or Shushan) the capital city of the ancient Persian Empire.

His family had got to the area as part of the forced exile of Jews to Babylon (present day Iraq) after the destruction of the first Temple in 586 B.C.E. Babylon itself had been defeated fifty years later and had been taken over by the expanding Persian empire. The Persians, more liberal in their imperial policy than the Babylonians, had allowed those among the Jews who so wished to return to Jerusalem and to rebuild their Temple as part of the Persian Empire.

Most had chosen to stay in Babylon or Persia. Those who chose to return indeed succeeded after some twenty more years to build what was to become known as the Second Temple.

Nehemiah was a high official in the Persian court a couple of generations after these events. From his book we understand that he was a faithful and religious Jew – a good Diaspora Jew, loyal to his king and to his empire, intending to live out his life as a Jew within the Persian Empire.

The event that changed his life is described in the opening verses. A chance meeting with one Hanani, either a blood brother or a fellow Jew, who had just returned from a visit to Judah and Jerusalem, caused Nehemiah to understand that, contrary to his expectations, the community over there and the Jews of Jerusalem were in trouble. The questions that then become clear to him are whether this new knowledge demands anything of him, personally and if so, what?

In that one moment his previous life path dissolves together with the tears, the mourning and the fasting which he describes as his immediate reaction and indeed in the continuation we hear of his decision to ask for leave of office from the Persian king and for authority to go on a journey of thousands of miles to start reorganizing the communities of Jerusalem and Judah, working in the king's name but on behalf of his own people, the Jews.

It is these reactions that we wish to highlight here: this faithful Jew and loyal servant of the Persian Empire, living a Diaspora Jewish life with no necessary feeling of contradiction between conflicting loyalties, feels the call of his own People and has to decide how to react. And then he acts. How do we react to this story today? What does a story like this say to us today?

3. Pass out the text from Nechemia and ask participants to read the text in small groups. What is the basic meaning of the text? How did Nechamia react to hearing bad news of fellow Jews in Jerusalem?
4. After a brief discussion, divide the group into three smaller groups:
  - The first group has to prepare a drama piece describing the scene before the beginning of the book showing something of Nehemiah's daily activity.
  - The second group should illustrate the scene from the text.
  - The third group should illustrate what they think happens next.

5. Having presented these three drama pieces each participant should write an inner monologue for Nehemiah just after the meeting with Hanani and the others and share these with the group.
6. Widen the conversation to try to understand Nehemiah's mindset. What would make a person react in the way that he did? What is their explanation for such an extreme reaction to the point that it would literally be a life-changing event?
7. Have they or anyone in their family or community ever experienced such an extreme reaction on hearing news from modern Israel? If so, how do they explain that? Is such a connection strange to them or is it obvious? Why? Why not?
8. Have the group look at one of these three articles about volunteers from abroad who came to Israel to be part of the Israeli army
  - American Jews don military uniforms for volunteer service (<http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/1,7340,L-3923944,00.html>)
  - Israeli Army welcomes North American volunteers (<http://www.dw.com/en/israeli-army-welcomes-north-american-volunteers/a-16195059>)
  - A Fallen Soldier, Max Steinberg found his purpose in Israel ([http://www.jewishjournal.com/israel/article/a\\_fallen\\_soldier\\_max\\_steinberg\\_found\\_his\\_purpose\\_in\\_israel](http://www.jewishjournal.com/israel/article/a_fallen_soldier_max_steinberg_found_his_purpose_in_israel))
9. How do they explain the phenomenon? What reactions do they have to people who appear to have such a strong connection that they would join the Israeli Army as a volunteer?

### Note to Educator

Did the enduring understandings that you set out to teach surface during this activity?