

Jewish Attitudes Toward the Jerusalem Temple in Antiquity

Dr. Malka Z. Simkovich
Hadran Siyum on Mesechet Zevachim
January 11, 2026

I. Pilgrimage: The Biblical Command

1. שמות כג:יז-יז; Exodus 23:14–17

שְׁלֹשׁ רְגָלִים תַּחֲגֹ לִי בְּשָׁנָה: אַתְּ חָגַת הַמֵּצָה תִּשְׁמַר שְׁבַעַת יְמִים תָּאכַל מֵאַשְׁר אָשָׁר אָיוֹתָךְ לְמַעַד קָרְבָּן הָאָבֵב כִּי־בָּוּ יְאַתָּה מִפְּנֵיכֶם וְלֹא־יָרָאָו פְּנֵי רַיִם: וְתַגֵּן קָצִיר בְּכָוְרִים מֵעַשְׂרֵה אֲשֶׁר תַּגְּעַר בְּשָׁנָה וְתַגֵּן הַאֲסָל בְּאַסְפָּרָה בְּשָׁנָה אֲתָה־מִעְשִׂיךְ מִרְמְשָׂהָה: שְׁלֹשׁ פָּעָם בְּשָׁנָה יְרָאָה כָּל־זְכָרָה אֶל־פְּנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים יְהוָה:

Three times in the year you shall hold a festival for me. ¹⁵You shall observe the festival of unleavened bread; as I commanded you, you shall eat unleavened bread for seven days at the appointed time in the month of Abib, for in it you came out of Egypt. No one shall appear before me empty-handed. ¹⁶You shall observe the festival of harvest, of the first fruits of your labour, of what you sow in the field. You shall observe the festival of ingathering at the end of the year, when you gather in from the field the fruit of your labour. ¹⁷Three times in the year all your males shall appear before the Lord GOD.

2. דברים טז:יז-יז; Deut 16:16–17:

שְׁלֹשׁ פָּעָם | בְּשָׁנָה יְרָאָה כָּל־זְכָרָה אֶל־פְּנֵי | יְהוָה אֱלֹהִיךְ בְּתַחַת הַמֵּצָה וּבְתַחַת הַשְׁבָּעוֹת וּבְתַחַת הַפָּקֹדֶת וְלֹא יְרָאָה אֶת־פְּנֵי יְהוָה רַיִם: אִישׁ בְּמִתְנַתְּךְ תַּזְהִיר אֶל־לִפְנֵיךְ אֲשֶׁר נִמְוָדָה: {ס}

Three times a year all your males shall appear before the LORD your God at the place that he will choose: at the festival of unleavened bread, at the festival of weeks, and at the festival of booths. They shall not appear before the LORD empty-handed; ¹⁷all shall give as they are able, according to the blessing of the LORD your God that he has given you.

II. Jewish Pilgrimage to the Jerusalem Temple in the Hellenistic Era

1. Tobit 1:3–9

This book tells the story of Tobit son of Tobiel son of Hananiel son of Aduel son of Gabael son of Raphael of the descendants of Asiel, of the tribe of Naphtali, ²who in the days of King Shalmaneser of the Assyrians was taken into captivity from Thisbe, which is to the south of Kedesh Naphtali in Upper Galilee... ³I, Tobit, walked in the ways of truth and righteousness all the days of my life. I performed many acts of charity for my kindred and my people who had gone with me in exile to Nineveh in the land of the Assyrians. ⁴When I was in my own country, in the land of Israel, while I was still a young man, the whole tribe of my ancestor Naphtali deserted the house of David and Jerusalem. This city had been chosen from among all the tribes of Israel, where all the tribes of Israel should offer sacrifice and where the temple, the dwelling of God, had been consecrated and established for all generations for ever.

⁵ All my kindred and our ancestral house of Naphtali sacrificed to the calf that King Jeroboam of Israel had erected in Dan and on all the mountains of Galilee. But I alone went often to Jerusalem for the festivals, as it is prescribed for all Israel by an everlasting decree. I would hurry off to Jerusalem with the first fruits of the crops and the firstlings of the flock, the tithes of the cattle, and the first shearings of the sheep. I would give these to the priests, the sons of Aaron, at the altar; likewise the tenth of the grain, wine, olive oil, pomegranates, figs, and the rest of the fruits to the sons of Levi who ministered at Jerusalem. Also, for six years I would save up a second tenth in money and go and distribute it in Jerusalem. ⁸ A third tenth I would give to the orphans and widows and to the converts who had attached

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themselves to Israel. I would bring it and give it to them in the third year, and we would eat it according to the ordinance decreed concerning it in the law of Moses and according to the instructions of Deborah, the mother of my father Tobiol, for my father had died and left me an orphan.

2. Philo of Alexandria

The Special Laws, 1.67, 70

[Moses] provided that there should not be temples built either in many places or many in the same place, for he judged that since God is one, there should be also only one temple. Further, he does not consent to those who wish to perform the rites in their houses, but bids them rise up from the ends of the earth and come to this temple. In this way he also applies the severest test to their dispositions. For one who is not going to sacrifice in a religious spirit would never bring himself to leave his country and his friends and kinsfolk and sojourn in a strange land, but clearly it must be the stronger attraction of piety which leads him to endure separation from his most familiar and dearest friends who form as it were a single whole with himself...

Countless multitudes from countless cities come, some over land, others by sea, from east and west and north and south at every feast. They take the temple for their port as a general haven and safe refuge from the bustle and great turmoil of life, and there they seek to find calm weather, and, released from the cares whose yoke has been heavy upon them from their earliest years, to enjoy a brief breathing space in scenes of genial cheerfulness. Thus filled with comfortable hopes they devote their leisure, as is their bounded duty, to holiness and the honoring of God. Friendships are formed between those who hitherto knew not each other, and the sacrifices and libations are the occasion of reciprocity of feeling and constitute the surest pledge that all are of one mind.

Cf. Philo, *The Special Laws*, 2.146

3. Flavius Josephus

Antiquities of the Jews, 3.9–10

I will now, however, make mention of a few of our laws which belong to purifications, and the like sacred offices, since I am accidentally come to this matter of sacrifices. These sacrifices were of two sorts; of those sorts one was offered for private persons, and the other for the people in general; and they are done in two different ways. In the one case, what is slain is burnt, as a whole burnt-offering, whence that name is given to it; but the other is a thank-offering, and is designed for feasting those that sacrifice. I will speak of the former. Suppose a private man offer a burnt-offering, he must slay either a bull, a lamb, or a kid of the goats, and the two latter of the first year, though of bulls he is permitted to sacrifice those of a greater age; but all burnt-offerings are to be of males. When they are slain, the priests sprinkle the blood round about the altar; they then cleanse the bodies, and divide them into parts, and salt them with salt, and lay them upon the altar, while the pieces of wood are piled one upon another, and the fire is burning; they next cleanse the feet of the sacrifices, and the inwards, in an accurate manner and so lay them to the rest to be purged by the fire, while the priests receive the hides. This is the way of offering a burnt-offering.

But those that offer thank-offerings do indeed sacrifice the same creatures, but such as are unblemished, and above a year old; however, they may take either males or females. They also sprinkle the altar with

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their blood; but they lay upon the altar the kidneys and the caul, and all the fat, and the lobe of the liver, together with the rump of the lamb; then, giving the breast and the right shoulder to the priests, the offerers feast upon the remainder of the flesh for two days; and what remains they burn.

The sacrifices for sins are offered in the same manner as is the thank-offering. But those who are unable to purchase complete sacrifices, offer two pigeons, or turtle doves; the one of which is made a burnt-offering to God, the other they give as food to the priests. But we shall treat more accurately about the oblation of these creatures in our discourse concerning sacrifices. But if a person fall into sin by ignorance, he offers an ewe lamb, or a female kid of the goats, of the same age; and the priests sprinkle the blood at the altar, not after the former manner, but at the corners of it. They also bring the kidneys and the rest of the fat, together with the lobe of the liver, to the altar, while the priests bear away the hides and the flesh, and spend it in the holy place, on the same day; ¹ for the law does not permit them to leave of it until the morning. But if any one sin, and is conscious of it himself, but hath nobody that can prove it upon him, he offers a ram, the law enjoining him so to do; the flesh of which the priests eat, as before, in the holy place, on the same day. And if the rulers offer sacrifices for their sins, they bring the same oblations that private men do; only they so far differ, that they are to bring for sacrifices a bull or a kid of the goats, both males.

Now the law requires, both in private and public sacrifices, that the finest flour be also brought; for a lamb the measure of one tenth deal, - for a ram two, - and for a bull three. This they consecrate upon the altar, when it is mingled with oil; for oil is also brought by those that sacrifice; for a bull the half of an hin, and for a ram the third part of the same measure, and one quarter of it for a lamb. This hin is an ancient Hebrew measure, and is equivalent to two Athenian choas (or congiuses). They bring the same quantity of oil which they do of wine, and they pour the wine about the altar; but if any one does not offer a complete sacrifice of animals, but brings fine flour only for a vow, he throws a handful upon the altar as its first-fruits, while the priests take the rest for their food, either boiled or mingled with oil, but made into cakes of bread. But whatsoever it be that a priest himself offers, it must of necessity be all burnt. Now the law forbids us to sacrifice any animal at the same time with its dam; and, in other cases, not till the eighth day after its birth. Other sacrifices there are also appointed for escaping distempers, or for other occasions, in which meat-offerings are consumed, together with the animals that are sacrificed; of which it is not lawful to leave any part till the next day, only the priests are to take their own share.

THE law requires, that out of the public expenses a lamb of the first year be killed every day, at the beginning and at the ending of the day; but on the seventh day, which is called the Sabbath, they kill two, and sacrifice them in the same manner. At the new moon, they both perform the daily sacrifices, and slay two bulls, with seven lambs of the first year, and a kid of the goats also, for the expiation of sins; that is, if they have sinned through ignorance. But on the seventh month, which the Macedonians call Hyperberetaeus, they make an addition to those already mentioned, and sacrifice a bull, a ram, and seven lambs, and a kid of the goats, for sins.

On the tenth day of the same lunar month, they fast till the evening; and this day they sacrifice a bull, and two rams, and seven lambs, and a kid of the goats, for sins. And, besides these, they bring two kids of the goats; the one of which is sent alive out of the limits of the camp into the wilderness for the scapegoat, and to be an expiation for the sins of the whole multitude; but the other is brought into a place of great cleanliness, within the limits of the camp, and is there burnt, with its skin, without any sort of cleansing. With this goat was burnt a bull, not brought by the people, but by the high priest, at his own charges; which, when it was slain, he brought of the blood into the holy place, together with the blood of the kid of the goats, and sprinkled the ceiling with his finger seven times, as also its pavement, and again as often

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toward the most holy place, and about the golden altar: he also at last brings it into the open court, and sprinkles it about the great altar. Besides this, they set the extremities, and the kidneys, and the fat, with the lobe of the liver, upon the altar. The high priest likewise presents a ram to God as a burnt-offering.

Upon the fifteenth day of the same month, when the season of the year is changing for winter, the law enjoins us to pitch tabernacles in every one of our houses, so that we preserve ourselves from the cold of that time of the year; as also that when we should arrive at our own country, and come to that city which we should have then for our metropolis, because of the temple therein to be built, and keep a festival for eight days, and offer burnt-offerings, and sacrifice thank-offerings, that we should then carry in our hands a branch of myrtle, and willow, and a bough of the palm-tree, with the addition of the pome citron: That the burnt-offering on the first of those days was to be a sacrifice of thirteen bulls, and fourteen lambs, and fifteen rams, with the addition of a kid of the goats, as an expiation for sins; and on the following days the same number of lambs, and of rams, with the kids of the goats; but abating one of the bulls every day till they amounted to seven only. On the eighth day all work was laid aside, and then, as we said before, they sacrificed to God a bullock, a ram, and seven lambs, with a kid of the goats, for an expiation of sins. And this is the accustomed solemnity of the Hebrews, when they pitch their tabernacles.

In the month of Xanthicus, which is by us called Nisan, and is the beginning of our year, on the fourteenth day of the lunar month, when the sun is in Aries, (for in this month it was that we were delivered from bondage under the Egyptians,) the law ordained that we should every year slay that sacrifice which I before told you we slew when we came out of Egypt, and which was called the Passover; and so we do celebrate this passover in companies, leaving nothing of what we sacrifice till the day following. The feast of unleavened bread succeeds that of the passover, and falls on the fifteenth day of the month, and continues seven days, wherein they feed on unleavened bread; on every one of which days two bulls are killed, and one ram, and seven lambs. Now these lambs are entirely burnt, besides the kid of the goats which is added to all the rest, for sins; for it is intended as a feast for the priest on every one of those days. But on the second day of unleavened bread, which is the sixteenth day of the month, they first partake of the fruits of the earth, for before that day they do not touch them. And while they suppose it proper to honor God, from whom they obtain this plentiful provision, in the first place, they offer the first-fruits of their barley, and that in the manner following: They take a handful of the ears, and dry them, then beat them small, and purge the barley from the bran; they then bring one tenth deal to the altar, to God; and, casting one handful of it upon the fire, they leave the rest for the use of the priest. And after this it is that they may publicly or privately reap their harvest. They also at this participation of the first-fruits of the earth, sacrifice a lamb, as a burnt-offering to God.

When a week of weeks has passed over after this sacrifice, (which weeks contain forty and nine days,) on the fiftieth day, which is Pentecost, but is called by the Hebrews Asartha, which signifies Pentecost, they bring to God a loaf, made of wheat flour, of two tenth deals, with leaven; and for sacrifices they bring two lambs; and when they have only presented them to God, they are made ready for supper for the priests; nor is it permitted to leave any thing of them till the day following. They also slay three bullocks for a burnt-offering, and two rams; and fourteen lambs, with two kids of the goats, for sins; nor is there anyone of the festivals but in it they offer burnt-offerings; they also allow themselves to rest on every one of them. Accordingly, the law prescribes in them all what kinds they are to sacrifice, and how they are to rest entirely, and must slay sacrifices, in order to feast upon them.

However, out of the common charges, baked bread [was set on the table of shew-bread], without leaven, of twenty-four tenth deals of flour, for so much is spent upon this bread; two heaps of these were baked, they were baked the day before the sabbath, but were brought into the holy place on the morning of the

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sabbath, and set upon the holy table, six on a heap, one loaf still standing over against another; where two golden cups full of frankincense were also set upon them, and there they remained till another sabbath, and then other loaves were brought in their stead, while the loaves were given to the priests for their food, and the frankincense was burnt in that sacred fire wherein all their offerings were burnt also; and so other frankincense was set upon the loaves instead of what was there before. The [high priest also, of his own charges, offered a sacrifice, and that twice every day. It was made of flour mingled with oil, and gently baked by the fire; the quantity was one tenth deal of flour; he brought the half of it to the fire in the morning, and the other half at night. The account of these sacrifices I shall give more accurately hereafter; but I think I have premised what for the present may be sufficient concerning them.

Antiquities of the Jews, 4.8.7

Let those that live even as remote as the bounds of the land which the Hebrews shall possess come to that city where the Temple shall be, three times in the year, that they may give thanks to God for his benefits and may entreat him for what they shall want in the future; and let them, by these meetings and feastings together, maintain an affectionate connection with one another. For it is a good thing for those that are of the same stock, and under the same institution of laws, not to be unacquainted with each other; which acquaintance will be maintained by thus conversing together, and by seeing and talking with one another, and so renewing the memories of this union; for if they do not thus converse together continually, they will appear like mere strangers of one another.

The Jewish War, 6.9.3

Now the number of those that were carried captive during this whole war was collected to be ninety-seven thousand; as was the number of those that perished during the whole siege eleven hundred thousand, the greater part of whom were indeed of the same nation [with the citizens of Jerusalem], but not belonging to the city itself; for they were come up from all the country to the feast of unleavened bread, and were on a sudden shut up by an army, which, at the very first, occasioned so great a straitness among them, that there came a pestilential destruction upon them, and soon afterward such a famine, as destroyed them more suddenly. And that this city could contain so many people in it, is manifest by that number of them which was taken under Cestius, who being desirous of informing Nero of the power of the city, who otherwise was disposed to contemn that nation, entreated the high priests, if the thing were possible, to take the number of their whole multitude. So these high priests, upon the coming of that feast which is called the Passover, when they slay their sacrifices, from the ninth hour till the eleventh, but so that a company not less than ten belong to every sacrifice, (for it is not lawful for them to feast singly by themselves,) and many of us are twenty in a company, found the number of sacrifices was two hundred and fifty-six thousand five hundred; which, upon the allowance of no more than ten that feast together, amounts to two millions seven hundred thousand and two hundred persons that were pure and holy; for as to those that have the leprosy, or the gonorrhea, or women that have their monthly courses, or such as are otherwise polluted, it is not lawful for them to be partakers of this sacrifice.

III. What About Those Who Stayed Home?

1. Philo, *Embassy to Gaius*, 22.155-157:

[Tiberius] knew that [the Jews] had synagogues, and that they were in the habit of visiting them, and most especially on the sacred sabbath days, when they publicly cultivate their national philosophy. He knew

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also that they were in the habit of contributing sacred sums of money from their first fruits and sending them to Jerusalem by the hands of those who were to conduct the sacrifices. But he never removed them from Rome, nor did he ever deprive them of their rights as Roman citizens, because he had a regard for Judaea

2. Cicero, *For Flaccus*, 67:

As gold, under pretense of being given to the Jews, was accustomed every year to be exported out of Italy and all the provinces to Jerusalem, Flaccus issued an edict establishing a law that it should not be lawful for gold to be exported out of Asia. And who is there, O judges, who cannot honestly praise this measure? The senate had often decided, and when I was consul it came to a most solemn resolution that gold ought not to be exported. But to resist this barbarous superstition were an act of dignity, to despise the multitude of Jews, which at times was most unruly in the assemblies in defense of the interests of the republic, was an act of the greatest wisdom.

3. Philo, *Flaccus*, 7.46–47:

For no one country can contain the whole Jewish nation, by reason of its populousness; on which account they frequent all the most prosperous and fertile countries of Europe and Asia, whether islands or continents, looking indeed upon the holy city as their metropolis in which is erected the sacred temple of the most high God, but accounting those regions which have been occupied by their fathers, and grandfathers, and great grandfathers, and still more remote ancestors, in which they have been born and brought up, as their country; and there are even some regions to which they came the very moment that they were originally settled, sending a colony of their people to do a pleasure to the founders of the colony. And there was reason to fear lest all the populace in every country, taking what was done in Egypt as a model and as an excuse, might insult those Jews who were their fellow citizens, by introducing new regulations with respect to their synagogues and their national customs.

4. Philo, *On the Confusion of Tongues*, 17.77–78:

For this reason all the wise men mentioned in the books of Moses are represented as sojourners, for their souls are sent down from heaven upon earth as to a colony; and on account of their fondness for contemplation, and their love of learning, they are accustomed to migrate to the terrestrial nature. Since therefore having taken up their abode among bodies, they behold all the mortal objects of the outward senses by their means, they then subsequently return back from thence to the place from which they set out at first, looking upon the heavenly country in which they have the rights of citizens as their native land, and as the earthly abode in which they dwell for a while as in a foreign land. For to those who are sent to be the inhabitants of a colony, the country which has received them is in place of their original mother country; but still the land which has sent them forth remains to them as the house to which they desire to return.

5. Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 14.7.2:

And let no one wonder that there was so much wealth in our temple, since all the Jews throughout the habitable earth, and those that worshipped God, nay, even those of Asia and Europe, sent their contributions to it, and this from very ancient times. Nor is the largeness of these sums without its attestation; nor is that greatness owing to our vanity, as raising it without ground to so great a height; but there are many witnesses to it, and particularly Strabo of Cappadocia, who says thus: "Mithridates sent to Cos, and took the money which queen Cleopatra had deposited there, as also eight hundred talents belonging to the Jews." Now we have no public money but only what appertains to God; and it is evident that the Asian Jews removed this money out of fear of Mithridates; for it is not probable that those of

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Judea, who had a strong city and temple, should send their money to Cos; nor is it likely that the Jews who are inhabitants of Alexandria should do so neither, since they were ill no fear of Mithridates. And Strabo himself bears witness to the same thing in another place, that at the same time that Sylla passed over into Greece, in order to fight against Mithridates, he sent Lucullus to put an end to a sedition that our nation, of whom the habitable earth is full, had raised in Cyrene; where he speaks thus: "There were four classes of men among those of Cyrene; that of citizens, that of husbandmen, the third of strangers, and the fourth of Jews. Now these Jews are already gotten into all cities; and it is hard to find a place in the habitable earth that hath not admitted this tribe of men, and is not possessed by them; and it hath come to pass that Egypt and Cyrene, as having the same governors, and a great number of other nations, imitate their way of living, and maintain great bodies of these Jews in a peculiar manner, and grow up to greater prosperity with them, and make use of the same laws with that nation also.

6. Theodotus Inscription (CIJ 2.1401)

Theodotus, the son of Vettenus, priest and *archisynagogos*, son of an *archisynagogos*, and grandson of an *archisynagogos*, built the synagogue for reading of the Law and for teaching of the commandments, and [he built] the strangers' lodging, the chambers, and the water fittings as an inn for those that need it from abroad, of which (synagogues) his fathers and the elders and Simonides did lay the foundation.

