THESE EXTRAORDINARY SAGES DEFINED THE ESSENCE OF JUDAISM FOR THE COMING MILLENNIA.

BY RABBI KEN SPIRO

The Men of the Great Assembly – in Hebrew, Anshei Knesset HaGedola – was an unusual group of Jewish personalities who assumed the reigns of Jewish leadership between 410 BCE and 312 BCE. They first came together in Babylon following the destruction of the First Temple, when it became apparent that the Jewish people were growing weaker spiritually, and continued in the Land of Israel during the early days of the Second Temple period.

They defined Judaism in this tumultuous time when prophecy was all but gone from the Jewish people. This group of wise leaders expanded the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Supreme Court, from 70 to 120 members, with a special aim of preserving and strengthening Judaism in the Diaspora and afterward.
Today’s Israeli Parliament, which is called the Knesset, also has 120 members in imitation of the Great Assembly, although the Knesset of today serves an entirely different function than did the Anshei Knesset HaGedola of 2,400 years ago.

Among the Great Assembly we count the last of the prophets Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, as well as the sages Mordechai, (of the Purim story), Nechemiah (the chief architect of rebuilding of Jerusalem) and Simon HaTzaddik (the High Priest).

Keep in mind that at this time the Talmud has not yet been compiled. Knowing how to live a Jewish life depends on knowing the commandments of the Torah and their interpretations and applications, which have been passed down orally – in short, knowing the Written Torah and the Oral Torah, both of which date back to Moses’ teachings at Sinai.

It is impossible to understand the Written Torah without its Oral Torah complement. For example, when the Written Torah states: “And these words which I command you today shall be upon your heart... and you shall write them upon the door-posts of your house and upon your gateways,” it is the Oral Torah that explains which “words” the Written Torah is referring to, and that these words should be penned on a small scroll and affixed to the door frame. Without the Oral Torah we wouldn’t know about the mezuzah and countless other ways of day-to-day Judaism.

The destruction of the First Temple and ensuing exile were incredibly traumatic experiences for the Jewish people. They found themselves in an alien land with none of the normative institutions fundamental to Judaism. As they struggled with the aftermath of exile, accurate transmission of this oral tradition became essential. And here is where the Men of the Great Assembly made the greatest contribution.¹

As we see in history, to the extent that the Jews stopped living according to Jewish law and Jewish tradition (i.e. that which makes them Jewish), to that

¹ Talmud, Tractates Nedarim 37b and Kiddushin 30a.
extent they assimilate and disappear. Therefore, the contributions of these men can be said to account to a large measure for Jewish survival.

The Talmud pays them great homage:

*Moses received the Torah from Sinai and conveyed it to Joshua, Joshua to the Elders, the Elders to the Prophets, and the Prophets to the Men of the Great Assembly... Simon HaTzaddik was one of the remnants of the Great Assembly. He used to say, “The world stands on three things: on the Torah, on the service of God, and on acts of loving-kindness...”*

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**Contents of the Bible**

In addition to insuring the accurate transmission of the Oral Torah, the Men of the Great Assembly decided which of the multitude of Jewish holy writings should be included in the Bible. The Jewish people had produced hundreds of thousands of prophets (both men and women). Which of their writings should be preserved for future generations and which had limited applicability?

The Men of the Great Assembly made this decision and gave us what is known as the Hebrew Bible today (i.e. the *Tanach*).

The word *Tanach* is an acronym for its three essential parts – *Torah*, *Neviim* (Prophets) and *Ketuvim* (Writings). The *Torah* includes the Five Books of Moses – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. *Neviim* include the works of the prophets such as Samuel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel etc. *Ketuvim* include other writings such as the Psalms, the Proverbs, the Book of Esther, the Book of Ruth, etc.

The Hebrew Bible is what the Christians call the “Old Testament” but traditionally Jews have never called it that. “Testament” is derived from the Latin word *testari* meaning “to testify/be a witness.” The Hebrew Bible was...

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2 *Ethics of the Fathers* 1:1.
named the Old Testament by the Christians because of their belief that God cancelled the covenant He made with the Jews and made a new covenant, or the “New Testament,” with the followers of Jesus. As Jews deny that God would ever “change His mind” after promising the Jews they would be His “eternal nation” (a promise He clearly kept), they find that term insulting.

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**Prayer**

The last thing that the Men of the Great Assembly did was formalize prayer. They actually only began a process which was not finished until the 2nd century CE, after the destruction of the Second Temple, but they laid down the key principles and basic structure of formalized prayer.³

³ Talmud, Tractate Megillah 17b. The process was completed after the destruction of the Second Temple by the Sanhedrin sitting in Yavneh. In addition to prayer, the Men of the Great Assembly also instituted the blessings said before and after food as well as Kiddush and Havdallah, the blessings before and after Shabbat.
During the First Temple period, there was no need for formalized Jewish prayer liturgy, because God’s presence was manifest. It was much easier for the individual to have a close, intense, personal relationship with God. Additionally, a great deal of what is now the object of prayer was formally accomplished through the offering of sacrifices and the Temple service. Of course, when the Second Temple was rebuilt, sacrifices resumed, but most of the Jews had not returned to the Land of Israel and, therefore, had no access to this medium of connecting to God via the Temple. In addition, as mentioned previously, even with the Temple rebuilt, the connection with God during the Second Temple period was much weaker.

Therefore, the times of the formalized prayer were designed to correspond to times when things were done in the Temple: the morning prayer corresponded to the Shacharit service in the Temple; the afternoon prayer corresponded to the Mincha service; the evening prayer, Ma’ariv corresponded to the nightly duties (as there were no sacrifices as night).

The centerpiece of each selection of prayers (repeated three times a day) was the Amidah -- the 19-blessing silent prayer said three times daily; also called Shemoneh Esrei. Each “blessing” was stated in the plural (“we”) to underscore the interdependency of the Jewish people, and each blessing was rooted in Torah and Kabbalah.

The mystical depth of this prayer – a masterpiece of writing by the Men of the Great Assembly – is astounding to this day. For example, the blessing for healing is composed of 27 words, corresponding to the 27 words in the Book of Exodus⁴ where God promises to be the healer of the Jewish people. It is said that the text of the Shemoneh Esrei is so spiritually powerful that even when recited without intention, feeling or understanding, its words have a great impact on the world.⁵

Through Divine inspiration and sheer genius, the Men of the Great Assembly were able to create, out of the ashes of a physically destroyed nation, a

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⁵ Nefesh HaChaim 2:13.
spiritually thriving people. Their work defined and anchored Jewish religious
and national identity and created focus, unity and uniformity for the Jewish
people, no matter where in the world they might be scattered.

The last surviving member of the Great Assembly was Simon HaTzaddik,
who was the High Priest in the Second Temple. Under him, according to the
ancient historian Josephus, the Jews of Israel prospered and Jewish
population in the Land of Israel reached 350,000.6

It helped the Jews physically (if not spiritually) that, during the time of the
Simon HaTzaddik, the Persians were the rulers and they were benevolent
dictators. But the picture changed when the Greek Empire took over.

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6 In his Contra Apion (1:197), Josephus numbers the male population alone at 120,000. (Josephus, The New Complete