Ezra 7:11

The following is the text of the letter which King Artaxerxes gave Ezra the priest-scribe, a scholar in matters concerning the commandments of the LORD and His laws to Israel:

Ezra 7:12 [Aramaic begins here]

“Artaxerxes king of kings, to Ezra the priest, scholar in the law of the God of heaven, and so forth. And now, 13 I hereby issue an order that anyone in my kingdom who is of the people of Israel and its priests and Levites who feels impelled to go to Jerusalem may go with you. 14 For you are commissioned by the king and his seven advisers to regulate Judah and Jerusalem according to the law of your God, which is in your care, 15 and to bring the freewill offering of silver and gold, which the king and his advisers made to the God of Israel, whose dwelling is in Jerusalem, 16 and whatever silver and gold that you find throughout the province of Babylon, together with the freewill offerings that the people and the priests will give for the House of their God, which is in Jerusalem. 17 You shall, therefore, with dispatch acquire with this money bulls, rams, and lambs, with their meal offerings and libations, and offer them on the altar of the House of your God in Jerusalem. 18 And whatever you wish to do with the leftover silver and gold, you and your kinsmen may do … 23 Whatever is by order of the God of Heaven must be carried out diligently for the House of the God of Heaven, else wrath will come upon the king and his sons. 24 We further advise you that it is not permissible to impose tribute, poll tax, or land tax on any priest, Levite, singer, gatekeeper, temple servant, or other servant of this House of God …”

b. Nedarim 62b

Raba said: A rabbinical scholar may declare, I will not pay poll-tax, for it is written, “[also we certify to you, that touching any of the priests . . . or ministers of this house of God,] it shall not be lawful to impose mindah [tribute,] belo [custom,] or halak [toll,] upon them” [Ezra 7:24]… Raba also said: A Rabbinical scholar may assert, “I am a servant of fire, and will not pay poll-tax.” 6 What is the reason? Because it is [only] said in order to drive away a lion. 7 R. Ashi owned a forest, which he sold to a fire-temple. Said Rabina to R. Ashi: But there is [the injunction], “Thou shalt not put a tumbling-block before the blind!” [Lev 19:14]. — He replied: Most wood is used for [ordinary] heating.

(6) To the Persian it would suggest a fire worshipper, who was free from poll-tax. But the scholar making [his assertion should mean that he worships the Lord, who is designated ‘consuming fire’ in Deut. IV, 24. (Under Chapter II, fire worship became the national and state-aided religion of the Persians, and in order to win converts to that religion fire worshippers enjoyed exemption from poll-tax: v. Funk, S. Die Juden in Babylonien II. p. 3.)

(7) I.e., in self-defence, against irregular extortion. Ran states that Raba's dictum means that even a Rabbinical student may act thus, and it is not regarded as an untruth; the ordinary person may certainly do so.


“In Iranian belief, fire was the purest element and belonged especially to the supreme god; the maintenance of it was a cosmic necessity and a duty laid upon believers.”
Again, the official religion of the Persian Empire, Zoroastrianism, was comfortable and even familiar to the Jews, with its theological doctrines of creation by the benevolent and omniscient Ohrmazd, reward and punishment, heaven and hell, judgment, creation, the fight against evil, the coming of the messiah, the ultimate defeat of evil, the renewal of creation, and the resurrection of the dead. This was true of its ethical system as well, with its emphasis of right thought, right speech, and right action, and its ritual system with the stress on the avoidance of idolatry, its hatred of sorcery, sodomy, and contact with menstruant women and dead bodies, as well as its valorization of such rabbinic doctrines as the importance of oral transmission and the authority of the rabbis.

True, the operation of the sociological/psychological principle of the narcissism of small differences would have meant that leaders of both religions would have stressed their differences rather than similarities, but as the evidence preserved in the Babylonian Talmud indicates, Jewish acculturation to Persian religion, mores and culture was high.
2 Maccabees – Daniel R. Schwartz, *Outside the Bible* [originally Greek, not Hebrew]

10 Those in Jerusalem and those in Judea and the senate and Judas, To Aristobulus, who is of the family of the anointed priests, teacher of Ptolemy the king, and to the Jews in Egypt,

Greeting, and good health ...

18 Since on the twenty-fifth day of Chislev we shall celebrate the purification of the temple, we thought it necessary to notify you, in order that you also may celebrate the feast of booths and the feast of the fire given when Nehemiah, who built the temple and the altar, offered sacrifices. 19 For when our fathers were being led captive to Persia, the pious priests of that time took some of the fire of the altar and secretly hid it in the hollow of a dry cistern, where they took such precautions that the place was unknown to any one.

22 But after many years had passed, when it pleased God, Nehemiah, having been commissioned by the king of [p. 2839] Persia, sent the descendants of the priests who had hidden the fire to get it. And when they reported to us that they had not found fire but thick liquid, he ordered them to dip it out and bring it. 21 And when the materials for the sacrifices were presented, Nehemiah ordered the priests to sprinkle the liquid on the wood and what was laid upon it.

21 When this was done and some time had passed and the sun, which had been clouded over, shone out, a great fire blazed up, so that all marveled.

... 31 And when the materials of the sacrifice were consumed, Nehemiah ordered that the liquid that was left should be poured upon large stones. 32 When this was done, a flame blazed up; but when the light from the altar shone back, it went out. 33 When this matter became known, and it was reported to the king of the Persians that, in the place where the exiled priests had hidden the fire, the liquid had appeared with which Nehemiah and his associates had burned the materials of the sacrifice, 34 the king investigated the matter, and enclosed the place and made it sacred. 35 And with those persons whom the king favored he exchanged many excellent gifts.

36 Nehemiah and his associates called this “nephthar,” which means purification, but by most people it is called naphtha.

Deut. 4:11
You came forward and stood at the foot of the mountain. The mountain was ablaze with flames to the very skies, dark with densest clouds. 12 The LORD spoke to you out of the fire; you heard the sound of words but perceived no shape—nothing but a voice.

Deut. 4:15
For your own sake, therefore, be most careful—since you saw no shape when the LORD your God spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire—

Deut. 4:24
For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, an impassioned God.

Deut. 4:33
Has any people heard the voice of a god speaking out of a fire, as you have, and survived?

Deut. 4:36
From the heavens He let you hear His voice to discipline you; on earth He let you see His great fire; and from amidst that fire you heard His words.