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KI NITZAVIM: FIRE AND BRIMSTONE...AGAIN?

This guide corresponds to the video: [Fire and Brimstone... Again?](#)

SABBATH TABLE OUTLINE

1. Moshe tells the Israelites that God is formally inducting them into His covenant: He will be their God, and they will be His nation, but what happens if someone decides to *violate* the covenant?
 - a. His wrath will burn against this sinner, and terrible curses will befall him.
 - b. Now that doesn't sound so pleasant, but it also sounds a little generic.
 - c. But then, there's something in the parsha's description of these punishments that we *don't* really hear anywhere else. We're told that God will rain down fire and brimstone, bringing total destruction and desolation. Desolation, the Torah says, just like what happened to Sodom and Amarah.
 - d. There are plenty of descriptions of devastation and punishment in the Torah, but the Torah never compares any of them to Sodom. So...why does the Torah do it here?
2. The Torah begins by saying, maybe there's a person, or family, or tribe who doesn't want to follow God's covenant.
 - a. R' Shimshon Raphael Hirsch argues that the "well-watered" and the "parched" are metaphors for the righteous and the wicked, making the meaning of the verse, "The righteous will sweep along the wicked with them." And *that* means that the sinner is essentially thinking something like this: I can do whatever I want, and I won't suffer any consequences for it.
 - b. Is there anything about this guy that specifically reminds us of the story of Sodom?
3. In the midst of describing this sinner's punishment, we get this strange digression, where the Torah tells us all about these different groups of spectators. These people who witness the devastation God brings down.
 - a. Why does the Torah feel the need to tell us about these future generations and foreign nations who are going to sit and schmooze about these punishments?
 - b. Does any of *this* remind you of Sodom? Are future generations and foreign nations part of *that* story?
4. Both of the elements we saw — the sinner who expects to be treated like the righteous, and the children and foreign nations who are watching from the sidelines — are actually very reminiscent of one particular part of the Sodom story. I'm thinking of the very beginning of the story, when God first reveals to Avraham what He plans to do to the wayward city.
 - a. The story begins with God speaking to Himself. He knows He's planning on destroying Sodom. But there's one thing He doesn't seem to be sure about.
 - b. Avraham has this great destiny ahead of him, he's going to be an inspiration and a source of blessing for the world. So, yes, I'm God, and I don't *need* to explain myself to anyone. But maybe I *should*, here.
 - c. Avraham is going to teach his children to follow Me, to always do what's right. And for that to happen, God seems to be saying, I need to show him My ways. He needs to understand how I think. He needs to understand what *צְדָקָה וּמִשְׁפָּט*, what righteousness and justice, really are. And so God reveals to Avraham His plans to destroy Sodom.
 - d. God describes the role of Avraham and his descendants as *בְּכָרְכֶם* - כל גוֹי הָאָרֶץ - all of the nations of the land will be **blessed** through him. In our parsha, the sinner is described as *וְהִתְבַּרַךְ* בְּלִבּוֹ וְהִתְבַּרַךְ לִי - לאמר שלום יהיה לי - he **blesses** himself in his heart, reassuring himself he'll be fine despite his errant ways. So there's blessing in both of these stories.

- e. But there's something very different about these blessings. In Bereishit, Avraham is the source of ברכה, and through him, everyone *else* gets blessed. So the blessing moves from Avraham outward, to the rest of the world. But what about in Nitzavim? Well there, it's inward - וְהִתְבָּרַךְ בְּלִבּוֹ, he blesses himself. It almost suggests a kind of inverse relationship between Avraham in Bereishit, and the sinner in our parsha.
5. Is there anything *else* that's familiar about this section?
- How exactly are Avraham and his descendants meant to be sources of blessing to the nations of the world? How does that work?
 - Rabbi Fohrman makes the case that Avraham was actually meant to serve as a role model. He and his descendants would stand for all the right values, and the rest of the world would have the opportunity to learn from that example.
6. Now if that's true, well, then who is Avraham really responsible to teach? We know God expects him to teach אֶת-בְּיֹתוֹ בְּנָיִם, his **children** who will come **after** him. He will teach his household, and through them, the lessons will spread outward, to הָאֲרָצוֹת גּוֹיֵי כָל, the nations of the world.
- Who was the audience remarking about the devastation?
 - It's the same people!* Avraham is charged with teaching the right and the just to his *descendants* and to the *nations of the world*, and in Nitzavim, the Israelites' *descendants* and the *nations of the world* are the ones witnessing this Sodom-like punishment.
 - Then God decides to reveal His plans to Avraham, and Avraham responds with a challenge. He says that it wouldn't be right, it wouldn't be fair to destroy the city.
 - Avraham says, what a terrible, unjust thing it would be to destroy a whole city, and punish the righteous within it for the sins of the wicked. If anything, he argues, it should be the other way around: the wicked within the city should be *spared* because of the righteous!
 - The word תִּסְפָּה - will You sweep along - it's the same word as סְפוּת from our parsha!
 - The sinner in our parsha was reassuring himself he'd be safe, because he'd be swept along with the righteous. Because God doesn't punish the righteous just to get to the wicked. *It's exactly the same argument that Avraham is making!*
 - Only, it's not really the same, is it? There's a glaring difference between Abraham and the sinner. What is each one trying to accomplish? Well, Avraham is arguing on behalf of the people of Sodom. He's trying to protect others. But the sinner - he's twisting the argument to try to protect *himself*.
7. So let's stop for a minute and take stock of what we have here. We've got all these links between these two sections - ברכה, children and foreign nations, סְפוּת/תִּסְפָּה and the wicked being spared for the righteous. The reference to Sodom in Nitzavim is shaping up to be much more than just a handy image. There's something bigger going on, a deeper reason why the sinner in Nitzavim receives the punishment of Sodom. But what is it?
- What did God say He was hoping for? He wanted Avraham to become a great nation, and for that nation to serve as a beacon of inspiration, as one giant role model, for the rest of the world.
 - There's more than one way to teach the world what righteousness and justice look like. People can learn by example from those who are great and virtuous, they can be inspired by the good that others do. But people can also grow by seeing firsthand what cruelty and selfishness look like and being repulsed by them, seeing how the lives of the morally bankrupt are empty. And in that sense, the immoral can be role models too - for how *not* to live.
 - And so, in Nitzavim, as we sign on the dotted line and agree to be God's nation, God says: this covenant means you're going to be my role models - one way, or the other.
 - But there is this chance that someone won't be interested.
 - But you know what? It doesn't work. He's still going to end up being a role model. Those people he's supposed to teach, and inspire? They'll learn what they're meant to anyway. That's what it means to be part of God's nation. It'll just happen in a different way; a way that's a lot less pleasant than it could have. God invited us to be His nation, and to show the world His ways. How that happens - that's up to us.