

PTDT

PhiloTorah D'var Torah

Elul's 5th Sedra

The title follows last week's PTDT and the IYH BN statement that I'd complete the 5-sedras-of-Elul theme. The first title that came to mind when I decided what to write about was Damage Control. A few other titles also came to mind - let's leave it at this one.

It is well-known (by people who know it well) that the cycle of Torah readings is organized so that Nitzavim is always the sedra that brings us into Rosh HaShana - alone or with Vayeilech (this year, alone). Nitzavim and Vayeilech are combined when there is no Shabbat between Yom Kippur and Sukkot and read separately, when there is.

Part of this arrangement is to keep Ki Tavo from being the sedra which brings us into Rosh HaShana. The heavy Tochacha warnings/prophecies would be too frightening to be read right before Yom HaDin - Judgment Day.

Sounds okay, except look what it says in D'varim (29:17-27):

Today, there must not be among you any man, woman, family or tribe, whose heart strays from God, and who goes and worships the gods of those nations. There must not be among you a root whose fruit is gall and wormwood.

...God will not agree to forgive such a person. God's anger and demand for exclusive worship will be directed like smoke against that person and the entire dread curse written in this book will lie [at his door], so that God will blot out his name from under the heavens. God will separate him so that he will have more evil than any of the Israelite tribes, and he will be subject to all the dread curses of the covenant, which are written in this Torah scroll. A future generation, consisting of your descendants, who rise up after you, along with the foreigner from a distant land, shall see the punishment directed against that land, and the plague with which God has struck it, and they will say, 'Sulphur and salt has burned all its soil. Nothing can be planted and nothing can grow - not even grass can grow on it. It is like the destruction of S'dom, Amora, Adma and Tzevoyim, [the cities] that God overturned in His anger and rage.' All the nations will ask, 'Why did God do this to the land? What was the reason for this great display of anger?' They shall answer, 'It is because they abandoned the covenant that God, Lord of their fathers, made with them when He brought them out of Egypt. They went and served foreign gods, bowing down to them. These were gods alien to them, something that was not their portion. God displayed anger against this nation, bringing upon it the entire curse written in this book. God drove them from their land with anger, rage and great fury, and He exiled them to

another land, where they remain even today.'

Doesn't look and feel any less frightening than the Tochacha. It actually feels like the Tochacha coming to pass rather than just be a series of threats.

What makes Nitzavim a better candidate for the pre-Rosh HaShana Torah reading?

Perhaps, it is these p'sukim that follow the above quoted ones (apologies for how long the quote was). D'varim 30:2-10 -

You will then return to God your Lord, and you will obey Him, doing everything that I am commanding you today. You and your children [will repent] with all your heart and with all your soul. God will then bring back your remnants and have mercy on you. God your Lord will once again gather you from among all the nations where He scattered you. Even if your Diaspora is at the ends of the heavens, God your Lord will gather you up from there and He will take you back. God your Lord will then bring you to the land that your ancestors occupied, and you too will occupy it. God will be good to you and make you flourish even more than your ancestors. God will remove the barriers from your hearts and from the hearts of your descendants, so that you will love God your Lord with all your heart and soul. Thus will you survive. God will then direct all these curses against your enemies and against the foes who

pursued you. You will repent and obey God, keeping all His commandments, as I prescribe them to you today. God will then grant you a good surplus in all the work of your hands, in the fruit of your womb, the fruit of your livestock, and the fruit of your land. God will once again rejoice in you for good, just as He rejoiced in your fathers. All this will happen when you obey God your Lord, keeping all His commandments and decrees, as they are written in this book of the Torah, and when you return to God your Lord with all your heart and soul.

That's the answer. The Tochacha in last week's sedra ended with a statement that it is a covenant with G-d, aside from the one made at Sinai.

No hope. Just a devastating description of what will happen if we turn away from G-d.

But the Tochacha-like p'sukim in Nitzavim are filled with hope and promise. Good hope and good promise.

Bottom line: T'SHUVA, repentance - literally, RETURN. Return to G-d and to Eretz Yisrael. And G-d will help greatly on both counts: Circumcise our hearts (to help us onto the pathway to T'shuva) and He will gather us from wherever we have been scattered.

Now that's the way to lead into Rosh HaShana.

K'tiva VaChatima Tova