

NINEVEH AND SODOM JUXTAPOSED: CONTRASTS AND PARALLELS

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In their behavior, the inhabitants of the pagan cities Sodom and Nineveh shared a common bent for wickedness and violence.¹ Nevertheless, the latter suffered no punishment whatsoever, whereas the former was totally destroyed.

In the case of Sodom, God is determined to apply the full measure of His attribute of strict justice [יָדוֹן טָהוֹר] in apparent disregard of the resulting unjust punishment inflicted upon innocents, few as they may be, along with the guilty. Man, represented by Abraham, confronts the Master of the Universe with the immortal words: ' . . . shall not the Judge of all the earth do justly?' (Gen. 18:25), and God relents at least to the extent of forgoing the destruction if there are 10 righteous men in Sodom.

However, in the Nineveh narrative, man, in the guise of the Prophet Jonah, opposes a seemingly overly generous application of the Lord's attribute of mercy [רַחֲמֵי ה']. The prophet, unlike Father Abraham, does not challenge the Lord directly; instead, he makes an a priori doomed attempt to flee rather than carry out the Divinely decreed mission of mercy. But God persists.

Thus, the contrasting stories of Sodom and Nineveh may seem to be unrelated. Nevertheless, supposedly, such biblical texts may be connected by a homiletic device in which texts contain very similar (if not identical) words or expressions. This is done in order to reveal subtly hidden messages lurking beneath the surface.

Some instances of shared words and expressions (verbal parallelisms) may be found in the texts on Sodom and Nineveh. These are presented in a table of comparison and then analyzed to determine whether they may be merely coincidental or perhaps bona fide verbal parallelisms indicating a conscious effort by the author of the Book of Jonah to connect his text to the Sodom story, and if so, why.²

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NINEVEH -- for their **wickedness** [מַטְוֵה] is come up before Me (Jon. 1:2).

SODOM -- now the men of Sodom were **wicked** and sinners [מֵרָעִים, מַטְוֵה] against the Lord exceedingly (Gen. 13:13).

NINEVEH -- and put on sackcloth **from the greatest of them even to the least of them** [מִן־הַגָּדוֹל לְהַקְטָן] (Jon. 3:5).

SODOM -- and they smote the men that were at the door of the house with blindness **both small and great** [גָּדוֹל וְקָטָן] (Gen. 19:11).

NINEVEH -- yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be **overthrown** [תִּפְּוֹשׁ] (Jon. 3:4).

SODOM -- and He **overthrew** those cities [תִּפְּוֹשׁ] (Gen. 9:25).

ANALYSIS AND COMPARISON

A. מַטְוֵה] VERSUS מֵרָעִים] [WICKEDNESS VS. WICKED]

The evil doings of Nineveh and Sodom are described by words stemming from the same root "רע", although other terms were available, such as "רעוה" (Mal. 3:19), "רעל", "רע" (Ps. 55:11), and "רע" (Deut. 25:16). Furthermore, the use of the same root here is quite ironic since the sins of the Ninevites are described as emanating from simple-minded naïveté (Jon. 4:11), while those of the Sodomites reflect conscious willfulness. Such irony is a characteristic of verbal parallelisms.³

B. מִן־הַגָּדוֹל לְהַקְטָן] VERSUS גָּדוֹל וְקָטָן] [FROM THE GREATEST OF THEM EVEN TO THE LEAST OF THEM VERSUS BOTH SMALL AND GREAT]

So common in the Bible is this expression⁴ that its use in both narratives may indeed be coincidental. On the other hand, the evident irony may indicate a possible verbal parallelism as in "A" above. In this case, the willful wickedness of the men of Sodom is ironically juxtaposed to the sincere repentance of the Ninevites using almost identical expressions. Moreover, the irony is compounded

by the youngest Sodomites being already sexually depraved and the oldest still violent. In contrast, the people of Nineveh, both young and old, are doing תְּפִלָּה [repentance] and even their cattle participate in the fasting.

C. נִפְּרָהּ] VERSUS [נִפְּרָהּ] [OVERTHROWN VERSUS OVERTHREW]

Several other roots are commonly employed in the Bible to generate expressions for destruction.⁵ The author of the Book of Jonah chose the less usual "נִפְּרָהּ" which appears for the first time in the Bible in the Sodom narrative.⁶ This archetypal usage specifically describing the annihilation of a city appears only seven times, in four of which Sodom is explicitly or implicitly mentioned.⁷ The Sodom text in Genesis 19:24-25 describes the city's destruction in vividly graphic detail simulating a volcanic eruption:

...brimstone and fire . . . from heaven: A statement reminiscent of the contamination of the atmosphere by volcanic ash.

He overthrew [נִפְּרָהּ] those cities: Here "overturned" is preferred by the writer as an apt word to describe a city previously atop the earth being buried underneath.

. . . and all the inhabitants of the cities and all that which grew upon the ground: A description of the annihilation of all life with no escape possible, unless forewarned and under Divine protection (as in the case of Lot and his two daughters).

Is it any wonder that the repentance of Nineveh was swift and spontaneous, totally sincere and complete?

CONCLUSION

In "A" and "B" the presence of bona fide verbal parallelisms may be inferred by the element of irony. In "C," however, it is the commonality of a relatively unusual root word that can lend credence to the assumption of an intentional connection.

What might have motivated the author of Jonah to hint (if indeed he did) at a connection between the two subjects? Perhaps a veiled warning is directed to those who, after reading the Book of Jonah, might presume on God's apparently unlimited capacity for mercy. Such readers might not realize that the mercy granted could be contingent on a special circumstance; to wit, the naïve innocence attributed to the people of Nineveh. Therefore, a diametrically opposite special circumstance, the willful and unrepentant evil of the Sodomites, could very well generate a diametrically opposite response in the

6. Although this narrative spanning sections Genesis 18-19 לַחַדְשֵׁי הַיָּרֵךְ, the latter is used exclusively to depict the destructive process as it is occurring.
7. Deuteronomy 29:22*; II Samuel 10:3; II Kings 21:13; Jeremiah 20:16*; Amos 4:11*; Jonah 3:4; Lamentations 4:6*. (Passages with an asterisk have references to Sodom.)
8. Commenting on Exodus 34:7, J.H. Hertz states: "Pardon is not the remission of the penalty, but the forgiveness of the guilt"
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QUESTIONS from Rabbi Hayyim Halpern's book **TORAH DIALOGUES**

1. Why does Adam respond to God's interrogation (Gen. 3:11) by saying: "The woman that You gave me..."(3:12)? After all, God knows who she is and she is the only woman there!
2. Abraham is often held up as the model Hebrew. Trace the virtues and values in *Parshat Lech Lecha* that led to this idealization of the first patriarch.
3. Find and explain the discrepancy between what Sarah says and how God reports her words to Abraham (Gen. 18:12f.).

RESPONSES ON PAGE:

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