

Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Chayei Sarah

- Gidon Rothstein

Haftarah No. 5: Parshat Chayye Sara, I Book of Kings, 1:1—1:31

Preparing for the Inevitable

My dad passed away suddenly when he was fifty and I was twenty-four, so there was never the classic deathbed scene, when the family patriarch has the opportunity to share with his loved ones his final words of wisdom, his hopes for them, and the share of his heritage he hopes his offspring will carry into the coming generations.

That vision of the Good Death has some roots in the Torah reading and haftarah for Vayechi, as we will see there. What we have in this week's selections seems to me the more common occurrence in Scripture, a person taking steps to insure the continuity of his legacy long before he passes away.

If Isaac gets married at forty, Abraham sends Eliezer to find Rivkah when he is about 139, with thirty-six more years to live. Jacob gets to Laban at the age of 77, meaning that (depending on whether one accepts the Midrashic view that he stopped along the way to study at the academy of Shem and Ever), Isaac blessed his sons at about the age of 120, when he had another sixty years to live.

By the time we meet him again at the beginning of the Book of Kings, King David had also made some moves in that direction, although not ones that established Solomon as his successor as firmly as Solomon's mother Bathsheba would have liked. As she sees Adonijah build up allies and assume the kingship was his to inherit, she gets nervous. Attaching this selection to the Torah reading of Chayye Sarah perhaps draws our attention to Abraham's greater success in defining his successor.

Abraham worries about continuity, and through Isaac. He sends Eliezer to find Isaac a wife, the necessary first step in providing for a continuous chain of the Abrahamic family. The references to Eliezer here are all to "the slave" or "Abraham's slave," perhaps to stress his status. Despite Abraham's once having worried Eliezer would be his heir, the verse stresses he will never be more to Abraham than his faithful servant.

David Moves More Gently

David had made gestures in a similar direction, but Adonijah had not gotten the point. Bathsheba and Nathan knew Solomon was the chosen successor, but Adonijah apparently thought he could circumvent that. Watching this son of privilege buck his father's wishes in what can only be seen as self-interest reminds us of how much we mess up in life by trying to fight battles that are better left alone. Adonijah might have lived out a productive and happy life, had he been willing to accept that one of his younger brothers would rule; instead, he attempted to get the throne himself, with disastrous results (at least for him).

Our selections of Scripture this week, then, highlight the difference between valuing the deathbed scene and valuing a well-defined succession. The former emphasizes the leave-taking aspect of death, while the latter focuses on insuring the proper formation of the future. The Torah reading and הרטפה seem to be reminding us that our time on earth is limited (with all the lessons that implies). That knowledge should lead us to prepare for that eventuality in our broader legacies as well.

One challenge these selections do not help us navigate is how to balance the two, planning for after one's death while also focusing on continuing to contribute to the here and now. Some people work to the moment they die without stopping to prepare a successor; others retire early, leaving not only a particular job, but the sense of productive contribution to the world that characterized their working years.

Abraham lives for many years, and even allows Isaac to reach his late thirties, before setting him up with a wife. David reaches seemingly advanced old age before he makes his view of the future fully known. When we speak here of recognizing one's mortality, then, we do not mean to be fatalistic nor to dispense with a concern with this life; it is only to include in one's considerations the reality that time is limited, and to make some arrangements for the time after.

Having done so, the person can then enjoy the rest of his or her time on earth, however long that may be, secure in having done his or her own best to see that whatever contributions they have made will be carried into the next generation.

The Vision of Death As a Spur to Contemplating Eternity

In the first verse of the הרטפה, we are told that David was old and could not be warmed. R. Saadya Gaon, in *Emunot ve-Deot*, suggests that just before a person passes away, they see the Angel of Death, and it causes fear and a chill. He argues that David saw the Angel of Death in II Samuel 24:1-17, where Scripture told us the king saw the Jewish people being killed in a plague his own misdeeds had caused.

R. Saadya assumes that from that day forward, David was left shaking and chilled. In light of our discussion, R. Saadya's idea suggests that the ability to ignore Death is essential to live a warmed and placid life. When King David was confronted by Death so starkly, he had no way to return to his equanimity of old (this might explain, also, why he does not take advantage of Avishag—his cold was from knowledge of Death, and knowing that precludes getting caught up in the ephemeral pleasures of the flesh). Most of us do not achieve that realization until we reach our deathbeds.

As a last interesting piece, Nathan the Prophet suggests to Bathsheba that she go in first to speak to the king, raise her issues with her husband, and that he, Nathan, will follow, promising to fill in her words. Several medieval scholars cite a dictum of the Jerusalem Talmud in Peah that infers from this that it is permissible to speak ill of those who cause strife in the Jewish people.

This is especially surprising for one of the works that does so, *Sefer Hasidim*, written by rabbis known as German pietists, who were advocates of extreme forms of piety. Their accepting this

statement shows that they saw the damage caused by fomenting splits among the Jewish people as so problematic that the ordinary proscription of slander is removed.

In summary, then, the story of Bathsheba and Nathan safeguarding Solomon's succession highlights the human need to make plans for after one is gone, while yet continuing to work in the here and now.

Shabbat Shalom