

Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Vayechi

- Gidon Rothstein

Haftarah No. 12: Parshat Vayechi, I Book of Kings, 2:1-12

Starting with a Famous Verse

Although we generally leave a discussion of famous phrases from that week's *haftarah* for the end, one of the early phrases I wanted to focus on captures the theme of the *haftarah* so well I am leading off with it.

In the second verse, David tells Solomon that he is going “*b'derech kol ha'aretz*, in the way of all of the earth,” a euphemism for death. The particular phrasing, however, expresses an attitude towards death that is central to understanding the *haftarah*, and vital to Judaism's view in general. David here is preparing for his death by directing Solomon on how to act after his death, akin to Jacob's telling his sons how each of them will best contribute to the Jewish people.

Instead of focusing on broad themes and life lessons, of issues of character and moral development, David tells his son which people need to be killed and which rewarded, a seemingly mundane discussion, lacking in the kind of vision or uplift we would expect from such an historic figure. It is especially odd to see someone contemplating meeting his Maker by recommending tit-for-tat vengeance. Admittedly, David opens by admonishing Solomon to keep God's law, the condition on which their hold on the kingship rests, but it seems almost lost in the shuffle.

A key clue to understanding David's words lies in realizing that the *haftarah* goes beyond the end of that section, adding two verses, one summarizing David's rule, and the other telling us that Solomon took over the throne, and that his monarchy was very well established.

The Reason to Settle Scores

These last verses suggest that David's words to Solomon were more about solidifying or completing David's legacy than about how Solomon could act for himself. To insure the continuity of David's kingship—different than Solomon making sure his rule was secure--Solomon needs to strengthen himself and “be a man.” Radak understood that to mean that Solomon needed to learn to control his temptations. Serving God has to be in there as well, since God's promise was contingent on observant of *mitsvot*.

Within that rubric, David might have told Solomon about Joab, Barzilai, and Shimi because they carry some broader message about how Solomon can best tie up the loose ends of David's life. It seems unlikely that these were the only three people with whom David had accounts to balance, since Scripture tells us of many people who had helped him, and he must have had antagonists other than the two mentioned. Rather, in learning how to handle these people, Solomon will learn lasting lessons about his father's rule.

David's having left Joab alive and functioning for many years after his crimes highlights the limitations on even David's power. By asking Solomon to take care of Joab, David was both

closing a chapter and teaching Solomon that even as king he, too, would confront people he could not control but also could not excise from his life.

Barzilai: Showing Friendship Unnecessarily in Times of Need

Joab presents the complicated example of how to deal with people with whom we are close, who have provided great services, but have also caused distress and acted inexcusably. Barzilai models a different kind of friendship, where the kindnesses performed have no apparent cause other than goodwill. When Barzilai helped David, the latter was out of power; helping him could only bring trouble. David's stress on permanently welcoming his descendants at the king's table teaches Solomon the value of publicly rewarding such open-handed friendship.

Shimi is almost the reverse, in that he had no need, no personal stake, in cursing David when Absalom rebelled. In such cases, David tells Solomon, the king has to actively kill the person (in contrast to Joab, where David only recommended insuring that Joab not die peacefully).

Rather than recording the minute details David chose to waste his time with in his waning moments, the *haftarah* shows us David using those last instructions to show his son the complexities of his own life. Armed with his father's lessons, Solomon would have a good foundation to continue his father's legacy and establish his own monarchy.

The final verses of the *haftarah*, summarizing David's rule and leading into Solomon's well-established throne, show us the success of this last scene with his son. David had ruled well himself, but, as importantly, had lain the groundwork for that success to continue well into the future. We should note that for all Solomon's great wisdom, he did not match his father in this regard, and his son presides over the split of the Jewish people into the Northern and Southern Kingdoms.

Two More Verses with Resonance

Verse 5: When speaking of Joab, David speaks of him as having put "*d'mei milchama b'shalom*, the blood of war in time of peace." David was referring to Joab's having killed without need, but in later halachic literature the phrase comes to mean causing unnecessary strife or embarrassment. For example, Rashba uses it when speaking denigratingly of someone who embarrassed someone else, while Rivash applies it to nullifying an oath that was taken for someone else's benefit. Removing the promised benefit is putting "blood of war in times of peace."

Verse 9: When David wishes to broadly hint that his son needs to kill someone, he throws in "*ki ish chacham ata*, for you are a wise man." Since this is before God grants Solomon his famous wisdom, David is apparently simply expressing confidence in the future monarch's ability to handle the challenge ahead of him. In Responsa literature as well, rabbis write these words to buck up a correspondent's self-confidence.

In summary, then, David's insistence that Solomon settle his scores after his death, both by rewarding those who had treated him well and taking vengeance on those who mistreated him, suggested that continuity involves each successive generation taking on the unfinished business of the previous one, and from there adding its own touches.

Shabbat Shalom