

Haftarat Vayechi: Power, Piety, and Politics: David's Charge to Shlomo²¹⁶

I. Overview

The *haftarah* records David's last will and testament to his son and successor, Shlomo (*Melakhim Aleph* 2:1–12). The dying king begins by exhorting his son to be strong, and he then instructs Shlomo regarding both religious and political matters. After this charge, the *haftarah* reports David's death and burial, and the duration of his reign. It concludes with the fact that Shlomo sat on his father's throne and that his sovereignty was firmly established.

This brief *haftarah* presents vexing challenges both textually and thematically. Modern scholars²¹⁷ note the sharp contrasts in tone, language, and content within David's charge to Shlomo. To wit, David begins (v. 2) with a brief, militaristic exhortation, "And you must be strong and be a man."²¹⁸ That is immediately followed, however, with an appeal to Torah observance filled with soaring (and elaborate) religious rhetoric (v. 3), "and keep what the Lord your God enjoins, to walk in His ways, to keep His statutes, His commandments, and His dictates and admonitions, as it is written in the Teaching of Moses, so that you may prosper in everything you do, and in everything to which you turn." David then declares (v. 4) that the Davidic dynasty's success hinges on commitment to the commandments, "So that the Lord may fulfill His word that He spoke unto me, saying: 'If your children keep their way to walk before Me in truth with their whole heart and with all their whole being, saying, no man of yours will be cut off from the throne of Israel.'" David's message and tone then shift sharply, as the rest of his charge (vv. 5–9) consists of calculated counsel regarding the need to eliminate David's personal enemies (Yoav and Shimi) while protecting past allies (Barzilai). Following on the heels of the religious exhortation, this seemingly vengeful message is particularly jarring.

Several questions emerge from a closer reading:

Why does the charge contain such abrupt shifts in tone and content?

What will ultimately secure Shlomo's kingdom: military might, Torah observance, or political proficiency?

How are we to evaluate David recalling personal grudges on his deathbed and asking his son to take care of them for him?

More generally, who is the real dying David? Is he the pious, learned man of the covenant who encourages his son to uphold the Torah's precepts, or is he the cunning military/political chieftain who encourages his son to exact revenge on long-standing enemies?²¹⁹

Not surprisingly, commentators interpret the charge and its motivations in radically different ways, thereby affirming their particular perspective on David's core character. According to some medieval and modern exegetes, David is primarily a scholarly, spiritual psalmist who addresses politics in this charge due to his keen awareness of young Shlomo's lack of both political experience and inner fortitude.²²⁰ A number of these same scholars contend that David's

²¹⁶. Translations of the *haftarah* are from Robert Alter, *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (W.W. Norton & Co. New York: 1999). Translations of other sections of the Bible are from the JPS translation.

²¹⁷. See the introduction of Alter, *ibid.* pp. xiii–xiv, and Michael A. Fishbane, *Haftarot: the Traditional Hebrew Text with the new JPS translation* (Varda Books, Illinois: 2002), 54–57.

²¹⁸. Compare to the military conquest-focused exhortation to Yehoshua, which employs parallel language (*Yehoshua* 1:6, 1:9).

²¹⁹. The dual charge mirrors the double introduction of David in *Shmuel Aleph*. In chapter 16, after he has been anointed as king, we are introduced to David as the musical soother of Shaul's spirit, while in the following chapter, David is portrayed as the brave and clever warrior who stunningly defeats Goliath. Remarkably, David the warrior is unrecognizable to Shaul when he returns from the battle.

²²⁰. According to midrashic tradition (*Seder Olam*), Shlomo was twelve years old when he became king.

political counsel was not just savvy advice, but also halakhically and ethically justified.²²¹ In support of this view, we should note that the parallel description of this succession, recorded in *Divrei Ha-Yamim Aleph* (chs. 28–29), omits any discussion of political pursuits and portrays David as singularly focused on encouraging Shlomo to observe the commandments in order to merit building the Temple. Moreover, when Shlomo himself, in an address to the people, restates David's dying charge to the people (see *Melakhim Aleph* 8:25), the dynastic guarantee is fully dependent upon the observance of the Torah, underscoring that righteousness is both a sufficient and a necessary condition of the Davidic throne.

However, modern scholars aver that the rest of the second chapter of *Melakhim* (vv. 13–46, not part of the *haftarah* reading) is devoted exclusively to a detailed account of how Shlomo carried out his father's political advice and eliminated all potential threats (Adoniyahu, Yoav, and Shimi). Shlomo's throne, we are told once again in verse 46, is secure; and tellingly, these scholars argue, religious piety plays no role in achieving this status. This supports their view that the last will and testament of David is a military/political charge and that the pietistic elements contained therein are merely supplementary. For these scholars, David's counsel reflects his lifelong preoccupation with *realpolitik* and reveals his true identity as a calculating political and military figure.²²²

A close and comprehensive examination of his entire life story and literary oeuvre, however, demonstrates that David is not a one, or even a two, dimensional character. He is a man of strength, of spirit, and of savvy; an exceedingly complex, and often times conflicted Biblical hero. As such, his final charge to Shlomo fittingly captures the multifaceted nature of David's identity; power, piety, and political savvy are all pillars of his persona which he transmits to his chosen successor. Perhaps the abrupt shifts from one type of message to another further underscore the multifarious aspects of David's legacy.

II. Evaluation

Yet, even if we have concluded that his composite charge reflects the entirety of David's complicated and variegated character, we are still left with the task of evaluating the troubling elements of David's message – his encouraging Shlomo to take revenge against his enemies. Indeed, some of the medieval commentators who have an overwhelmingly favorable view of King David, are, nevertheless, ambivalent about these dying directives. Abarbanel even suggests that by delegating Shimi's death to Shlomo, David may have broken his vow of "you shall not die" that he made to Shimi (see *Shmuel Bet* 19:24).

A full assessment of the political elements of the charge and its immediate aftermath, then, may require a broader field of vision thereby yielding a properly nuanced perspective. Surely within the narrative of *Melakhim*, the advice of David and the deeds of Shlomo are cast by the author in an entirely positive light. After Shlomo fulfills David's mandates, the end of the chapter (v. 46) reaffirms that the kingdom was secure, presumably due to Shlomo adroitly carrying out David's wise political counsel. However, a careful examination of the terminology invoked by Shlomo when he eliminates Yoav and Shimi, especially when compared and contrasted with similar language employed in other Biblical contexts, demonstrates that the short-term political gains for Shlomo may have constituted a longer-term net loss for the Jewish people.

Let us begin by analyzing the similarly suggestive language that Shlomo uses when dispatching of both Yoav and Shimi – the imagery employed is of blood/evil turning back on the head of the evildoer. With regard to Shimei, he declares (2:44): "אֶת־רָעָתְךָ, בְּרֹאשְׁךָ ה' וְהָשִׁיב" – "the Lord shall hereby turn your evil on your own head." Similarly, concerning Yoav, Shlomo declares: (2:32–33): "רֹאשׁוֹ עַל דָּמוֹ אֶת ה' וְהָשִׁיב" – "the Lord shall hereby turn his bloodguilt on his own head."²²³

The rarely employed image of blood/evil returning on the head of the evildoer²²⁴ recalls the occasion and circumstances when David utilized the exact same image, immediately following the death of Naval (*Shmuel Aleph*

²²¹. See, for example the commentaries of Radak, Ralbag, Abarbanel, and Malbim for a range of views. For the most thorough defense of David's directives, see R. Mosheh Lichtenstein (<http://www.vbm-torah.org/archive/haftara/12vayechi.htm>), who argues that David's instructions for Yoav and Shimi's deaths are justified due to both the threat they posed to the political stability of the kingdom and the spiritual danger they posed to the Davidic dynasty.

²²². See Fishbane, *ibid.*, who also notes that God's original promise for an enduring Davidic dynasty (*Shmuel Bet* 7:8–16) is unconditional. These scholars would argue that the omission in *Divrei Ha-Yamim* of the political counsel and the carrying out of those directives is due to the particular aim and agenda of that book. Indeed, according to the account in *Divrei Ha-Yamim*, David attributes his inability to build the Temple as being a result of all the blood he had shed.

²²³. See also *Shmuel Bet* 3:39 for David's comments in the aftermath of Yoav's killing of Avner, "כִּרְעוּתוֹ, יִשְׁלַם ה' לְעֶשֶׂה הָרָעָה" – "the Lord shall reward the evildoer according to his wickedness."

²²⁴. See also *Shoftim* 9:57 and *Tehillim* chapter 7.

25:39): “And when David heard that Naval was dead, he said: ‘Blessed be the Lord, that has pleaded the cause of my reproach from the hand of Naval, and has kept back His servant from evil; *and the evil-doing of Naval, the Lord has returned upon his own head.*’ And David sent and spoke concerning Avigayil, to take her to him to wife.” Indeed, throughout the entire episode with Naval and Avigayil, David displays an alarmingly vengeful attitude of aggression, which is only restrained by Avigayil.²²⁵ These two episodes – the incident with Naval and the killing of Yoav and Shimi – mark the two times when Davidic retribution against enemies is most clearly manifested.

Dr. Yitzhak Berger has recently argued that the author of the book of *Esther* seeks to favorably contrast Esther and Mordechai’s “Benjaminite retribution” with the aforementioned cases of Davidic retribution.²²⁶ In the case of *Esther*, the exact same rarely employed imagery of evil being returned upon the evildoers head is used to describe Esther’s heroic role in the remarkable turn-of-events leading to Haman’s hanging (*Esther* 9:25): “But when she came before the king, he commanded by letters that his *wicked device*, which he had devised against the Jews, *should return upon his own head.*” While one could argue that this parallel language suggests a straight analogy between the two stories, with the praiseworthy political actions of Esther and Mordechai being viewed as admirably as those of Shlomo in *Melakhim*, a crucial difference in the two stories may suggest otherwise. Esther’s retribution is exacted on an external enemy of the Jewish people, while Davidic retribution is at the expense of internal enemies (including, most prominently, Shaul’s descendants); this critical difference may indicate that the intent in *Esther* is to sharply contrast the actions of Esther from those of Shlomo, precisely through the use of parallel language.

Even more pointedly, the sharp distinction Shlomo draws between the progeny of Yoav and the house/progeny of David strengthens the argument for contrasting the retribution of Esther/Mordechai with that of Shlomo/David. Before eliminating Yoav as a threat, Shlomo declares, “זָרְעוֹ וּבְרָאשׁ יוֹאָב, בְּרָאשׁ דְּמִיָּהֶם וְשָׁבוּ” – “the blood [of Yoav’s victims] shall be turned on *his own head and on the heads of his progeny* forever; but to David and his *progeny* and his house and his throne the Lord shall grant *peace* forever...” Note that Shlomo not only has Yoav killed, he also wishes a similar fate upon the general’s future descendants while vouchsafing unending peace for descendants of the house of David. Berger penetratingly observes that we should contrast these comments with the very last line of the book of *Esther*, where the author utilizes remarkably similar terminology to that of Shlomo: “וְדָבַר לְעַמּוֹ, טוֹב אֲחִיו דָּרַשׁ לְרַב וְרָצִי לַיהוּדִים, וְגָדוֹל לְמֶלֶךְ אַחַשְׁוֵרוּשׁ, מִשְׁנֵה הַיהוּדִי, מְרַדְּכִי כִי” – “For Mordechai the Jew was King Ahasuerus’s Viceroy, great among the Jews and well accepted among the multitudes of his brethren, seeking favor for his people and advocating *peace* for all his *kindred*” (*Esther* 10:3).

The convergence of these two words – “peace” and “progeny” (“שָׁלוֹם”, “זָרְעוֹ”) – is unique to the two verses in question. This underscores the downside of David’s advice to Shlomo. In sharp contrast to David/Shlomo, who secure the Davidic dynasty while wishing for, and achieving, the downfall of rivals (Naval, Yoav, Shimi), the book of *Esther* credits Mordechai with advocating peace for all Jews – and not just for the members of his clan. Indeed, as others have noted, the meaning of “זָרְעוֹ” in the verse in *Melakhim*, where the term refers to the progeny of a particular individual, gives way to a far more inclusive meaning in *Esther*, where it refers to all the members of the Jewish people.²²⁷

III. The Connection to *Parashat Vayechi*: Yaakov’s last will and testament

Against this backdrop of a fuller assessment of David’s last will and testament, we can now more fully explore the links between the *haftarah* and the *parashah* of *Vayechi*. Both the *parashah* and the *haftarah* deal with the impending death of a leader and both contain the exact same formulation: “*va-yikrevu yemei...la-mut*” – “When the life of (Yisrael/David) was coming to a close” (*Bereishit* 47:29, *Melakhim Aleph* 2:1) and a subsequent final charge to sons introduced by the term “*va-yitzav*” – “he instructed” (49:29, 2:1).

The two charges, however, are vastly different. Whereas David’s words are addressed to only one of his sons and consist of religious and political exhortations, Yaakov’s remarks consist of a prophetic pronouncement, character trait assessment, and blessing to each of the twelve sons/tribes (*Bereishit* 49:1–28). It concludes with

²²⁵. *Midrash Rabbah* (*Bereishit* 63) notes parallels between David and Esav, especially their skin coloring. In the story of Naval, David gathers “around 400 men” (*Shmuel Aleph* 25:13) to attack Naval, the same number of men Esav prepared for his encounter with Yaakov. This is surely a suggestive number given David’s aggressive, revenge-driven posture, which conjures up the image of Esav. The Naval episode, like many of the narratives in David’s life, is extremely complex and is crucial for understanding the full moral portrait of David.

²²⁶. Yitzhak Berger, “Esther and Benjaminite Royalty: A Study in Inner-Biblical Allusion”, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 129:4 (2010), 625–644. Berger presents this contrast as the exclamation point on a larger effort by the author of *Esther* to cast the story as redemptive of Benjaminite leadership, and especially of Shaul’s failures.

²²⁷. For a comprehensive presentation of parallels between *Esther* and the beginning of *Melakhim*, see also Amos Frisch, “Between the Scroll of Esther and the Book of Kings” [Hebrew], *Mechkerei Ha-Chag* 3 (1992), 25–35.

a specific charge that he be buried in the cave of *Makhpeilah*. It would seem that the two narratives do not have a thematic link beyond the impending death of a great Biblical figure and his final will to the next generation.

If we examine the aftermath of Yaakov's death and burial, however, we may suggest a more substantive, thematic link. Following the burial of their father, the brothers of Yosef fear that he will finally exact revenge on them for their mistreatment of him. The formulation that they use to express their fear is strikingly familiar: "יִשְׁטַמְנוּ לּוֹ; יוֹסֵף, אֶת כָּל-הָרָעָה, אֲתוֹ גָּמְלוֹ אֶשֶׁר וְהָשִׁב יִשְׁבִּי, לָנוּ, אֶת כָּל-הָרָעָה," – "It may be that Yosef will hate us, and will *fully return upon us all the evil* which we did unto him (50:15)."²²⁸ The brothers are worried about Yosef returning onto them their evil, a highly suggestive term which, we have seen, characterizes Biblical retribution. The brothers then send a message ("va-yitzavu" – "they instructed" (50:16)) to Yosef that their father had issued an instruction ("tzivah") asking Yosef to forgive the brothers.

Whether or not Yosef had planned any payback (from his response in vv. 19–21 it seems clear that he had not) and whether or not Yaakov had ever delivered such an instruction (no textual evidence supports this, and Rabbinic tradition asserts that the brothers concocted this message for the sake of peace – see Rashi and *Torah Temimah Bereishit* 50:16), the brothers fear of retribution – seventeen years after they had "happily" reunited – belies a continued tension in the relationship.²²⁹ Moreover, this episode underscores that Yaakov, in his final charge to his sons, did not attempt to resolve the fissure within the family between the sons of Rachel and the sons of Leah. Tragically, even after all of these years, the brothers do not ask for forgiveness, nor do they apologize directly for what they have done. Instead, they first place the request for forgiveness in the mouth of their dying father and then offer themselves to Yosef as slaves.²³⁰

Herein, perhaps, we find a possible deeper link between the narratives of the *parashah* and the *haftarah*: two of the greatest figures in the history of the Jewish people deliver momentous final charges to their children, yet their historic and influential remarks either ignore long-standing divides within the Jewish nuclear family (in the case of Yaakov) or reinforce the divide within the national family (in the case of David).

Sefer Bereishit tells the fascinating story of the first Jewish family, and the message of its concluding passage, underscored by the *haftarah* of *Vayechi*, may very well be how important it is for all of us to foster healthy, positive relationships within our nuclear and national families.²³¹

²²⁸. A full analysis of this particular episode and the entire conflict between Yosef and his brothers obviously requires a separate study; however, it is worth noting that the phrase "*lu yistemeinu*" connotes that the brothers seemed to hope that Yosef harbored some resentment that would finally come to the fore (see Rashi, *Bereishit* 50:15). Their language also evokes Esav's intention to kill Yaakov after the death of their father Yitzchak (see *Bereishit* 27:41).

²²⁹. The tension is first explicated in the beginning of *Parashat Vayeishev* (*Bereishit* 37:2–4) when Yaakov expresses favoritism towards Yosef, and Yosef and the brothers cannot speak peaceably to one another – "*ve-lo yakhlu dabro le-shalom*." In reality, the tensions had surfaced even earlier, most prominently in the incident of the rape of Dinah (tellingly referred to in that context as the "daughter of Leah"), the silence of Yaakov in the face of the report of the rape, and the subsequent actions of the children of Leah on behalf of their sister (see *Bereishit* ch. 34).

²³⁰. See Rabbeinu Bechaye (50:17), who argues that full reconciliation was never achieved, and that Yosef did not grant full forgiveness. According to his reading, the divide in the family persists, and leads to the midrashic explanation for the death of the Ten Martyrs. It is also striking that the brothers' offering themselves as slaves, and Yosef's non-response to their offer by projecting that God is the one in charge, is followed shortly by God allowing the Israelites to become slaves in Egypt! See Yair Zakovitch, *And You Shall Tell Your Son: the Concept of the Exodus in the Bible* (Magnes Press, Hebrew University, Jerusalem: 1991), who demonstrates how the actions of Yosef and the brothers lead to the Jews being enslaved in Egypt.

²³¹. It is worth noting, if only homiletically, that the divide in the national Jewish family is only finally resolved at the end of the Bible in the book of *Esther*. After Esther, a descendant of Shaul and Binyamin, has saved herself and her family by not being silent (contrasting with Yaakov's silence in the face of Dinah's rape), she returns to Achashveirosh to request that all of the Jews (*Yehudim*) be protected from Haman's evil decree. While at this point in the narrative (ch. 8), Esther and her Benjaminite clan are safe, she nevertheless risks her life again for the sake of all the Jews, even those from the tribe of Yehudah. In fact, there are a number of literary and midrashic parallels between the selfless actions of Esther and Mordechai and the selfless sacrifice of Yehudah on behalf of Binyamin in *Parashat Vayigash*. (Compare *Bereishit* 43:14 with *Esther* 4:16 and *Bereishit* 44:34 with *Esther* 8:6, and see also *Esther Rabbah*, ch. 7 and *Sifrei De-Aggadatah* on *Esther* Version 1, ch. 1, and version 2, ch. 7, for a number of *midrashim* which portray the story of Esther as a resolution of the earlier story of Yosef and the brothers). R. David Fohrman has argued in his recent book, *The Queen You Thought You Knew: Unmasking Esther's Hidden Story* (OU Press, New York: 2011), that Esther's actions are a long-awaited reciprocation of Yehudah's efforts on behalf of Binyamin. I would take the argument one critical step further: Esther does not merely repay the debt of Binyamin to Yehudah. There is an additional element in Esther's gesture that is critical for real reconciliation. Yehudah's act is remarkable because it acknowledges the favored status of Rachel and her children, and Yehudah stoically and selflessly offers himself in place of Binyamin so as not to hurt his father. But it still perpetuates and reinforces the inequality between the children of Rachel and Leah! Yehudah heroically accepts the double standard, but his act does not resolve the underlying source of all the tension – the favored status of Rachel and her children. Esther (and Mordechai) on the other hand, is a descendent of the favored line. So when she offers herself up because she cannot bear to see the *Yehudim* destroyed, she is not just repaying Yehudah back; she is righting the original wrong of favoritism once and for all. Her act declares that Benjaminites are no more special than the *Yehudim*. This may be why Benjaminite leadership is essential to the story of *Esther*. Only Rachel's descendants can make things right,

ספר שמות

and Esther and Mordechai thus redress the initial source of the divide – the favored status of Rachel’s children. In this context, it is noteworthy that the Book of *Esther* concludes with the aforementioned phrase that Mordechai speaks peaceably of all Jews (“*dover shalom le-kol zaro*”) a fitting capstone to the saga of Yosef and his brothers who could not speak peaceably of one another (“*ve-lo yakhlu dabro le-shalom*”) (see fn. 14).