

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 multi-faceted 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, יְשַׁלְּמֵהוּ לְעֵשֶׂה הַרְעָה" – "the Lord shall reward the evildoer according to his wickedness."

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

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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).