

David and Abraham: Images of Old Age

Parshat Chaye Sara

Genesis 23:1 – 25:18 / 1 Kings 1:1 – 31



*Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt
in memory of their grandson, Oren Jacob Brandt-Rauf.
"He was the perfect child."*

This week's Torah and Haftarah contain very different images of old age. In the Torah reading we find Abraham approaching the end of his life, still vital and very much in charge. After arranging for the burial of his wife, Sarah, Abraham sees to it that Isaac is properly married to an appropriate partner. The Bible says that though he was old, Abraham was blessed "with everything." In contrast to this image, David is feeble and powerless at the end of his life. The once powerful king is no longer able to care for himself and is unaware that his sons are warring over his throne. Adonijah with the support of some of David's former advisors seize the throne even before the old king has died. It is only through the political intervention of Bathsheba and the prophet Nathan that Solomon is able to ascend to the throne.

1 Kings 1:1-4 (for adults only!)

King David was now old, advanced in years; and though they covered him with bed clothes he never felt warm. His courtiers said to him, "Let a young virgin be sought for my lord the king to be his attendant; and let her lie in your bosom, and my lord the king will be warm." So they looked for a beautiful girl throughout the territory of Israel. They found Abishag the Shunamite and brought her to the king. The girl was exceedingly beautiful. She became the king's attendant and waited upon him; but the king was not intimate with her.

Genesis Chapter 24:1

Abraham was now old, advanced in years, and the Lord had blessed Abraham in all things.

Malbim's Commentary Meir Loeb Ben Yehiel Michel 1809 - 1879

This episode was not included in the Book of Samuel even though that book contains the entire story of King David because the Book of Kings is concerned with the anointing of Solomon and other matters regarding Solomon, this story was included here as well. The anointing of Solomon and the controversy of Adonijah are really part of Solomon's story (and not David's story.)

Rashi's Commentary

Our sages said that anyone who shows contempt for garments will not derive benefit from them (Berachot 62b). Because David cut the corner of Saul's garment (he could no longer find warmth wearing garments). The Midrash says: Rabbi Shemuel bar Nahmani said: Because David saw an angel standing over Jerusalem with its sword drawn, his blood ran cold from fear. (Pirke D'rebbi Eliezer 43) (*These two comments both are references to events in the life of David. 1. When David was pursued by Saul he cut off the corner of Saul's robe while he was sleeping rather than harm the king. 2. Because he conducted a census when he wasn't supposed to God caused a plague on the land – the sword was a symbol of the plague.*)

Interview with Robert Pinsky, author of The Life of David

[Ruth](#), [Abigail](#), [Michal](#), [Morag](#), [Bathsheba](#), [Abishag](#), the nameless concubines of David who are violated by Absalom to defy his father - particularly striking are the women in this list who exert power. Bathsheba leads the aged David to make her son king, though he is not the senior heir. Michal rescues David from her father - David and Michal perhaps a richer, more disturbing story than David and Bathsheba. Michal loves David, they come together and are parted again in some spectacular ways, and when he is ready to become king of Israel and Judah his first request is about her, in the end they appear to hate one another profoundly.

Robert Alter, The David Story

The young woman was very beautiful....but the king knew her not: David, lying in bed with a desirable virgin, but now beyond any thought or capacity of sexual consummation, is of course a sad image of infirm old age. At the same time, this vignette of geriatric impotence is a pointed reversal of the Bathsheba story that brought down God's curse on the house of David, triggering all subsequent troubles of dynastic succession. There, too, David was lying on his bed or couch (Mishkav, as in verse 47 here) and there, too, he sent out emissaries to bring back a beautiful young woman to lie with him though to antithetical purposes.

Questions to Ponder

1. This chapter is hardly something to which one would want to expose younger children. There are many such "X" rated passage in the Bible. How should we teach the Bible to children – when doing so should we skip such passages? Do you think this is an appropriate passage to include in the Bible or *is* the reference to David sleeping with Abishag gratuitous sex? Why do you think the biblical authors chose to include this fact as part of this story? How would you explain this story to an elementary age child?
2. Women seem to play an important role in the life of David. They have a profound influence on his destiny. What do the presence of both Abishag and Bathsheba teach us about King David in this story? What is the relationship between David and Bathsheba like at this point in their life?
3. Compare the story of David with Abraham in the final years in his life. How are they different from one another? Do you think the way each man fared in old age is a product of how he lived or was it simply a matter of good or bad luck? Why do some people seem to have blessed old age while other people live the final years of their life in ways that are less than happy or comfortable?
4. What is the connection between the adulterous story of David and Bathsheba and the events which take place at the end of David's life? Do you think that the conditions in his final years are a reflection on David's youthful indiscretions as Robert Alter suggests in his commentary?

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