YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Understanding the haftarot**

**By Harav Yaakov Medan**

**PARASHAT CHAYEI SARA**

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Dedicated in memory of Rabbi Jack Sable *z”l* and Ambassador Yehuda Avner *z”l*,
by Debbie and David Sable

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**“And the Lord Loved Him”**

King David was old, advanced in years, and though they covered him with bedclothes, he never felt warm. His servants said to him, "Let a young virgin be sought out for our lord the king, to wait upon the king and become his companion; when she lies in your embrace, our lord the king will feel warm." They searched throughout Israel’s borders for a beautiful girl, found Avishag the Shunamite, and brought her to the king. The girl was most beautiful, and she became the king’s companion and served him, but the king was not intimate with her. Meanwhile, Adoniya son of Chagit promoted himself, declaring, "I will become king," and he procured a chariot and riders and fifty men to run before him. Now his father had never disciplined him, saying, "Why have you acted like that?" He was born after Avshalom, and he too was devastatingly handsome. He conspired with Yoav son of Tzeruya and Evyatar the priest, and they lent their support to Adoniya. But Tzadok the priest, Benayahu son of Yehoyada, Natan the prophet, Shimi and Rei, and David's warriors were not on Adoniyahu's side. Adoniyahu sacrificed sheep, oxen, and fatlings by the Zochelet Stone near the Rogel Spring, and he invited all his brothers – the king's sons – and all the men of Yehuda, the king’s subjects. But he did not invite the prophet Natan or Benayahu or the warriors, or his brother Shlomo. And Natan said to Batsheva, Shlomo's mother, "Have you heard? Adoniyahu the son of Chagit has become king without our lord David's knowledge. Come now, let me give you advice – to save your own life and the life of your son Shlomo. Go to King David at once and say to him, 'My lord the king, did you not swear to your handmaid, "Your son Shlomo will rule after me, and he will sit on my throne"? Why, then, has Adoniyahu become king?' And while you are still speaking there with the king, I will come in after you and confirm your words." So Batsheva went to the king in the inner chamber – the king had aged severely, and Avishag the Shunamite was tending to him – and Batsheva bowed down low in homage to the king. "What is the matter?" asked the king. "My lord," she said to him, "you swore by the Lord your God to your handmaid, 'Your son Shlomo will rule after me, and he will sit on my throne.' But now, look – Adoniya has become king – and you, my lord the king, did not even know! He has sacrificed a wealth of oxen and fatlings and sheep and invited all the king’s sons, the priest Evyatar, and the army commander Yoav, but he did not invite your servant Shlomo. But all the eyes of Israel look to you, my lord the king, to tell them who will succeed my lord the king on his throne. Otherwise, when my lord the king lies with his ancestors, my son Shlomo and I will be considered offenders." And as she was still speaking with the king, Natan the prophet arrived. "Here is Natan the prophet," they announced to the king, and he came before the king and bowed to him with his face to the ground. "My lord the king," said Natan, "Did you yourself say, 'Adoniyahu will be king after me, and he will sit on my throne'? For he went down today and sacrificed a wealth of oxen, fatlings, and sheep and invited all the king’s sons, the army officers, and Evyatar the priest. And now they are feasting before him and toasting him and declaring, 'Long live King Adoniyahu!' But he did not invite me, your servant, or the priest Tzadok, or Benayahu son of Yehoyada, or your servant Shlomo. Could it be that my lord the king has decided this without informing your servant who will succeed my lord the king on his throne?" "Summon Batsheva to me," King David said in response, and she came before the king and stood in the king’s presence. And the king swore an oath. "As the Lord lives," he said, "who has rescued me from every danger, what I swore to you by the Lord, God of Israel – that Shlomo your son will rule after me, and that he will sit on my throne in my place – I shall fulfill this very day." And Batsheva bowed her face to the ground in royal homage and said, "May my lord, King David, live forever!" (I *Melakhim* 1:1-31)

**I. The Connection Between the *Parasha* and the *Haftara***

The initial and obvious connection between the *haftara* and the *parasha* is a purely formal one: the *haftara* opens with the words "King David was old, advanced in years," which are similar to the words in the *parasha* – "Avraham was old, advanced in years" (*Bereishit* 24:1). However, this external connection is not very satisfying, and I would like to flesh it out.

Avraham's advanced age brings him to seek a young woman as a partner and wife for his son Yitzchak, and his servant (Eliezer) brings Rivka. David's advanced age also brings his servants to seek a young woman to be with him, and they bring him Avishag. However, the two events differ in two ways that seem to unravel the similarity between them:

a. Avishag was not sought as a spouse for David, but as a servant/companion to make him feel warm.

b. Avraham asked his servant to bring a partner for his son Yitzchak, whereas David's servants bring Avishag to the elderly father.

Despite these two differences, similarities persist between the two episodes:

a. As will be argued at length below, Avishag was sought as a spouse for David, and not as a servant.

b. At the end of the episode (after our *haftara* and after the death of David), David's son (who sees himself as his father's designated heir), Adoniyahu son of Chagit, asks to marry Avishag, just as Yitzchak son of Avraham married Rivka.

Another formal similarity (with no real content) is evident in the repetition of actions in the *parasha* and in the *haftara*. The encounter between Avraham's servant and Rivka, the test involving giving the man and his camels to drink, and more, are related in the Torah twice – once when they happened, and a second time when Avraham's servant tells the story to Rivka's family. So too, the story of the feast prepared by Adoniya for the king's servants and the residents of Jerusalem in recounted in detail in our *haftara*, repeated when Batsheva speaks to David, and included once again in the story told by Natan the prophet to David.

**II. The Story of Avishag**

The proposal of David's servants, to secure him a young woman who will keep him warm by lying next to him, as a substitute for a hearth or some other reasonable heater, is unacceptable and cannot be understood according to its plain sense.

When a person gets old and his body heat does not suffice to keep him warm, this is due to a slowing down of his blood's circulation and other factors, which indicate, among other things, a gradual loss of his reproductive powers. David's servants suggest to him at the last moment, in a most respectful formulation, to take another wife, perhaps as a concubine, so that she may bear him a son who will inherit his kingdom after his death. Let us remember that this was the first time an heir was to rule over Israel in place of his father, and there was great cause for concern: Both Amnon the firstborn and Avshalom – who seemed the most suitable to lead – had already died, and the other sons probably did not seem suitable for the kingship, or their mothers did not have a strong enough relationship with David. Let us take as an example the next candidate in line – Adoniyahu son of Chagit. The way he is described clearly illustrates how unfit he was for royalty. David had indeed designated Shlomo, son of Batsheva, to reign in his place, but this would not have been viewed favorably by his top officials, because of David's grave sin with Batsheva. Shlomo's very presence was a reminder of the sin that everyone wanted to forget or obscure. Presumably, Batsheva was also not a favorite among David's advisors and servants, for the same reason. The idea behind their proposal was that the son of the young woman who would be taken to the king would rule when he grew up, after David's death.

David, already bedbound, received Avishag as someone who would nurse him in his old age, but in no way as a wife or a concubine. Scripture emphasizes: "But the king was not intimate with her." Why? *Chazal* (*Sanhedrin* 22a) suggest that he refrained from marrying her due to the prohibition, "he [the king] must not accumulate wives" (*Devarim* 17:17) – because he had already married the number of wives allowed to a king. I wish to offer another explanation: David could not accept the idea of an heir other than Shlomo. This was his solemn oath to Batsheva, that her son would reign after him, and this was his plan for additional reasons, which will be discussed below.

Outside David's room, things were probably interpreted differently, with the fact that Avishag did not conceive understood as a sign that the aged David had already lost his potency, and that the royal house would be left without a suitable heir.

**III. Adoniyahu’s Rebellion**

Adoniyahu son of Chagit took advantage of the opportunity created by the presentation of David as one who was no longer capable of fathering a child. Later, after Shlomo was made king and pardoned Adoniyahu from being executed for his sin, the latter asked Batsheva to intercede on his behalf and help get him permission to marry Avishag the Shunamite. Batsheva agreed; knowing David, she saw Avishag as a nurse, and in the terms of the Bible in our *haftara* – a servant. She saw nothing wrong with Adoniyahu taking a servant as his wife. However, King Shlomo understood the depth of Adoniyahu's scheme: he knew that Adoniyahu was exploiting the rumor that David was supposed to marry Avishag, and perhaps did marry her, but was unable to produce a son from her. From his point of view and from the point of view of the popular consciousness, if Adoniyahu had married Avishag, he would have been marrying David's wife or concubine (as his predecessor Avshalom had done, sleeping with his father's concubines as part of his rebellion). Adoniyahu saw this as a means by which to advance himself to the kingship.

Adoniyahu also knew that Shlomo was not accepted by David's advisors, and that he was not necessarily a more suitable heir than he, Adoniyahu, was. His beauty gave him some advantage, and he saw an opportunity to seize the kingship during David's lifetime, or at least to prepare the way to reign after him. He behaved in his rebellion like Avshalom, about whom it is stated:

It was after this that Avshalom procured for himself a chariot and horses and fifty men to run before him. (II *Shmuel* 15:1)

Both for Avshalom and for Adoniyahu, this was a preliminary stage in rebellion. When his father did not raise an objection, Adoniyahu moved on to the next stage – consulting with Evyatar the priest and with Yoav the army commander.

It is not clear what brought Evyatar to support Adoniyahu, against King David's position, even when it seemed that his opinion was shaky and infirm. It is possible that tensions prevailed between the two senior priests – Tzadok (from the house of Elazar son of Aharon) and Evyatar (from the house of Itamar). This tension may have already manifested when the Ark was returned to Jerusalem during Avshalom's rebellion (II *Shmuel* 15:24; and see *Yoma* 73b). David had a blood covenant with Evyatar following the killing of Evyatar's entire family in Nov, the city of the priests, which to a certain degree was David's fault (see I *Shmuel* 22:22-23). Against this covenant stood the prophecy of the man of God to Eli regarding the destruction of his house due to the sins of his sons, Chofni and Pinchas. Perhaps Evyatar hoped Adoniyahu would appoint him as high priest if he helped him, through his role as a priest and representative of the world of holiness, to secure the kingship. In the end, when King Shlomo ruled as king and Adoniyahu was killed, Evyatar was expelled from the priesthood, and the Bible emphasizes that all this unfolded from God following the aforementioned prophecy:

As for Evyatar the priest, the king said, "Go to your fields in Anatot. Though you deserve to die, I will not have you killed at this time because you bore the Ark of the Lord God before my father David and because you suffered along with my father throughout all his suffering." And Shlomo dismissed Evyatar from the role of priest to the Lord, fulfilling what the Lord had pronounced for the house of Eli at Shilo. (I *Melakhim* 2:26-27)

As mentioned, Yoav, commander of the army, also supported Adoniyahu. He probably thought that Shlomo would appoint a different commander, and the valor of Benayahu son of Yehoyada was already recognized in David's court. Let us remember the history of Yoav’s standing: David had removed Yoav from his position as commander after he killed Avshalom against orders, and replaced him with Amasa the son of Yeter, who had been Avshalom's commander-in-chief. Yoav killed Amasa on grounds that seem more like an excuse, took command of the army of warriors from his brother Avishai, and personally managed the pursuit of Sheva son of Bikhri and the negotiations that led to his extradition. Following his successes in the war against Avshalom's army and in the rebellion of Sheva son of Bikhri, Yoav reappointed himself commander of David's army, largely against David's will. On the eve of the change of regime, he decided to support Adoniyahu so he could continue his term as commander-in-chief.

In the third stage, after David raised no objections in the first two stages, Adoniyahu hosted a large and opulent feast for all his friends and for the people of Jerusalem near Ein Rogel (further along the Kidron stream, southeast of the Shiloach spring). There, according to the account in our *haftara*, the feasters, their hearts filled with wine, proclaimed, still in David's lifetime, "Long live King Adoniyahu!" We do not find any kings in Israel who ascended the throne through a feast, as was the practice of the kings of other nations, until the days of Hoshea the son of Ela, the last king of Israel, who brought the final destruction upon the kingdom of Shomron. Regarding his ascent to the throne, the prophet Hoshea said:

On the day of our king, officials make themselves ill from drinking skins of wine; he too joins his hand with scoffers. (*Hoshea* 7:5)

**IV. Natan the Prophet and Batsheva the Mother of Shlomo**

At first glance, it is difficult to understand what brought the prophet of God to intervene in such an active way in the internal politics of the royal house and to do everything he could to thwart Adoniyahu's coronation as king in favor of Shlomo. Let us first discuss the complicated path that Natan chose to follow: He sent Batsheva to David, and told her what to say to convince David to react harshly to Adoniyahu’s actions. It seems that David’s response, which in the end came late, had to be firm and unequivocal, and to result in David not only protesting against Adoniyahu and his people, but making Shlomo king on that very day, already in his lifetime, and thereby establishing a reality that could no longer be disputed.

According to Natan's plan, after Batsheva said her piece, Natan would go in to see David – not in Batsheva's presence (see verse 28) – and say things similar to what Batsheva had said to him.[[1]](#footnote-1) What is the meaning of this doubling?

Batsheva demands of David that he act to save her and her son Shlomo from future harassment by Adoniyahu. She also demands of him that he uphold his oath to her not only by refraining from intimacy with Avishag, but also by crowning her son as king, as he had sworn to her in their difficult days. Let us remember that the first child born by Batsheva to David died, in accordance with Natan's prophecy, when he was only seven days old, despite David's prayer. In my opinion, Batsheva's next three sons died as well – Shamoa, Natan, and Shovav – thus she lost four sons because of what she did with David, in accordance with Natan's prophecy: "As for the lamb, he must pay for it four times over" (II *Shmuel* 12:6).[[2]](#footnote-2) She remained with David while he was afflicted with leprosy, according to *Chazal* (*Yoma* 22b), and became ostracized to a degree because of his sin. Then David swore to her that her next son, Shlomo, would rule as king after him. Shlomo was born after David's repentance and acceptance of his punishment. God loved him, and Natan the prophet saw him as the chosen son:

And she bore a son. She named him Shlomo, and the Lord loved him. And He sent a message through the prophet Natan, naming him Yedidya, for the Lord's sake. (II *Shmuel* 12:24-25)

From Batsheva's point of view, David's loyalty and his oath were now being put to the test.

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For this, Batsheva's coming to David would have been enough, but Natan's arrival completes an important point. Giving Shlomo a special name "for the Lord's sake" expresses the prophet's expectations for the new-born son as part of the process of David's repentance for his sin and acceptance of God's punishment. Remember that Natan had made a promise to David before his sin with Batsheva:

For when your days are done and you lie with your ancestors, I will raise up your own seed after you – the issue of your own loins – and I will establish his kingdom. He will build a house in My name, and I will firmly establish his royal throne forever. I will be a father to him, and he will be a son to Me… (II *Shmuel* 7:12-14)

 This future son was Shlomo-Yedidya, and he was tasked with building a House for God. David took upon himself the mission of educating Shlomo and preparing him for his assigned role:

"My son Shlomo is young and inexperienced," said David, "and the House to be built for the Lord must be incomparably magnificent, of fame and glory throughout all lands – I will now make preparations for it." And so David made many preparations before his death, and he summoned his son Shlomo and commanded him to build a House for the Lord, God of Israel. "My son," David said to Shlomo, "I set my heart upon building a House for the name of the Lord my God. But the word of the Lord came to me, saying, 'You have shed much blood and waged mighty wars – you will not build a House for My name, for you have shed too much blood upon the earth before Me. Now a son has been born to you; he will be a man of peace. I will give him rest from all his surrounding enemies, for Shlomo will be his name, and I will grant peace and calm to Israel in his time. He will build a House in My name; he will be a son to Me, and I a Father to him, and I will establish his royal throne over Israel forever.' Now, my son, may the Lord be with you so that you may succeed in building the House of the Lord your God, as He spoke of you. But may the Lord grant you wisdom and understanding and appoint you over Israel in order to keep the Torah of the Lord your God. You will prosper if you take care to keep the laws and rulings that the Lord commanded Moshe for Israel. Be strong and brave; do not quake or cower. (I *Divrei Ha-Yamim* 22:5-13)

*Divrei Ha-Yamim* includes many other verses that describe David teaching Shlomo how to build God's Temple and explaining to him the magnitude of the task. Furthermore, David educates his son to love God, to fear Him, and to keep His commandments, so that he can succeed in fulfilling God's desire that a Temple be built. It goes without saying that the Temple could not be built by one without these qualities and values at the forefront, and it is clear to Natan the prophet that Adoniyahu, with all the elements of his personality, is in no way the right person for the task of building the House of God. Even if God would allow Adoniyahu’s kingdom to succeed, on the political side and in terms of Israel’s standing among the surrounding nations – and even that is highly doubtful – he certainly would not be able to lead the people along the right spiritual path, to the world of holiness necessary for construction and maintenance of the desired Temple. Natan embarks on a determined struggle to fulfil the prophecy about building the House of God, a resting place for the *Shekhina,* according to the vision he delivered to David (I *Shmuel* 7).

Natan the prophet's reason for addressing the king after Batsheva was not necessarily to add more details about Adoniyahu's rebellion. It was intended to illustrate to David the urgency of the matter and the need for his immediate response to Adoniyahu's act in order to maintain two things – his loyalty and oath to Batsheva, and his loyalty to his desire to build the Temple of God in Jerusalem.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Rabbi Yitzchak Abravanel explained the need for this duplication based on the slight changes between Batsheva’s wording and that of Natan. I have not related to these minor differences, and leave it to the reader to decide between the two explanations. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I expanded on this in my book *David u-Batsheva – ha-Chet, ha-Onesh ve-ha-Tikkun*, Alon Shvut 5762, in the chapter, "*Ve-et ha-Kivsa Yeshalem Arba'atayim*," pp. 130-136. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)