



Hayei Sarah

Vol. 8, Issue 8 • 26 Cheshvan 5784 / November 10, 2023

CONTENTS: Jotkowitz (Page 1); Lifshitz (Page 6)

Amidst the war unfolding in Israel, we have decided to go forward and continue publishing articles that were previously scheduled. In this way, we hope to provide meaningful opportunities for our readership to engage in Torah during these difficult times.

Sponsorships for future editions of Lehrhaus over Shabbat are available at

<https://thelehrhaus.com/sponsor-lehrhaus-shabbos/>

THOUGHTS ON ALIYAH AND THE AKEIDAH FROM ISRAEL AT WAR

Alan Jotkowitz is Professor of Medicine, Director of the Medical School for International Health.

Written in honor of the thousands of young men and women protecting our homeland and with the fervent prayer that they soon return safely to their homes.

We were all part of a “blessed” generation. Having grown up after the euphoria of the Six Day War and the trauma of the Yom Kippur War, we were a part of the first generation of American Jews to go en masse to Israel for a year or two of intense Torah study after high school. We fell in

love with the country and its people. In our year in Israel we grew exponentially in our Torah knowledge and enjoyed almost unlimited personal freedom. Many of us found a calling and purpose in life: to eventually return to Israel and build our lives there. We were exposed to tremendous role models and teachers, people who almost fifty years later remain beacons of light and inspiration to us and our families. We were lucky to mostly study in institutions that did not cater exclusively to Americans and to live side by side with our Israeli peers. We hitchhiked without fear and explored every inch of this beautiful country. We had long conversations into the night and made lifelong friends. It was an innocent time, before the constant bombardment of social media and the internet. Admittedly, we

were politically naïve. Israel had yet to become a divisive issue on college campuses and one could openly support Israel with pride, not fear. Many of us eventually heeded the ancient call of God to Avram, "Go forth from your land" (Genesis 12:1), and made *aliyah*. Many of us joyfully celebrate our *aliyah* day as one does a milestone birthday or a wedding anniversary. Our *aliyah* experience was not particularly difficult, especially when you compare our experience with those pioneers from the 1950's and 70's. We didn't have to wait years for a phone or car, and we built beautiful communities in Efrat, Rannana, and Bet Shemesh. We hiked the country with our families, sat dumbfounded and mute at endlessly long school assemblies, and tearfully sent our children to the army. Without meaning to detract from any of this, the experiences of the past three weeks feel very different.

The experiences of the last three weeks relate more to the second *lekh lekha* (go forth) command in the story of Avraham:

And He said, "Please take your son, your only one, whom you love, Isaac, and go away to the land of Moriah, and bring him up there for a burnt offering on one of the mountains, of which I will tell you (Genesis 22:2).¹

God tells Avraham to sacrifice his beloved son, Isaac. In the past few weeks this ancient story of sacrifice, devotion, and ultimately salvation has

become too real for many of us living in Israel. We have sent our sons and daughters off to battle. And in this war our daughters are playing an equal role, either as actual combatants or working around the clock in various crucially important positions. Some of us have reacted with Avraham's stoicism in simply following God's decree without questions, but I imagine more of us have reacted with Sarah's tears.² We have not slept for the past three weeks and have a constant ache in our hearts worrying about our children on the front lines. We are terrified that this will be our last phone call or last whatsapp message from our child. We are not alone. I look around in *shul*; almost everyone I know has a child serving somewhere. The looks of worry and pain are obvious on everyone's faces. Of course, our anguish in no way compares to those who have already lost loved ones, either in the larger Israeli society or tragically in our small immigrant community, and to those whose life has been upended and suspended in time due to the horrific kidnapping of those closest to them. Last week, in the space of 24 hours, I was at four funerals, some of people close to me, others just to honor the *kedoshim* (martyrs) with my presence.

The story of the *akeidah* (binding of Isaac) has perplexed scholars for generations. Many have been bothered by the apparent immorality of God's command, of how an all good and just God could command Avraham to sacrifice his son. In our current situation, we have no qualms about the morality of our actions. We were attacked by

¹ Biblical translations taken from https://www.chabad.org/library/bible_cdo/aid/63255/jewish/The-Bible-with-Rashi.htm.

² See Genesis Rabbah 58:5.

a barbaric and inhumane enemy. Notwithstanding the desire for revenge, *Tzahal* (Israel Defense Forces) is doing everything it can to avoid harming civilians while fighting an enemy who intentionally uses civilians as human shields. What we cannot understand is the reaction of the world to the immorality of our enemy. Why is the world not screaming about the murder and kidnapping of Jewish babies, the raping of Jewish women, the burning alive of Jewish women and children, and the killing of elderly Jews? Looking at some modern interpretations of the *akeidah* narrative may provide us with a measure of inspiration for the current situation.

Rav Shagar had a distinct perspective on the *akeidah* which is closely related to his life-long concern with the challenge of post-modernism to halakhic Judaism. The title of his essay on the subject is “Uncertainty as the Trial of the Akeda,”³ which aptly summarizes his unique perspective. His interpretation will highlight an important contrast between the *akeidah* and our current situation, while other interpretations will relate more directly.

The heart of the dilemma for Rav Shagar is as follows: the conflict between the ethical-religious imperative forbidding murder and God’s commandment to slaughter Isaac, and the uncertainty as to the nature of the trial. Could it be that Avraham was tested not regarding his ability to obey God’s commandment, but rather regarding his ability to disobey? What if Satan assumed the voice of God to deceive Avraham?

The argument here is that even if it truly is God’s voice demanding the slaughter of Isaac, it is open to multiple interpretations. Avraham has no way of determining whether God truly wants him to sacrifice his son or whether His commandment is a ploy.

From Avraham's perspective, the primary challenge of the *akeidah* was that it was impossible for him to know what God really wanted him to do.

In this interpretation, our current situation is very different from the *akeidah*. There is no ambiguity in our current situation. The *akeidah* is correctly named Akeidat Yitzhak, not Akeidat Avraham and Sarah. For all the tears and anguish Avraham and Sarah must have gone through, it was Yitzhak who went willingly and put his life on the line. Likewise, it is our children who are putting their lives on the line to protect the State of Israel. Three times in the *akeidah* narrative it says *hineini* (“here I am”), and our children have answered that call. I know of no soldier in our community who has refused to serve. On the contrary, I know of many who are fighting to return to active service after having been released from reserve duty.

In his attempt to grapple with the narrative, Rabbi Yoel Bin-Nun quotes his wife’s interpretation (whom he does not name) that the test of the *akeidah* was neither theological, ethical, nor emotional, but one of faith. Avraham, in her understanding, had complete faith that God did not want him to sacrifice his son. Thus, Avraham

³ Rav Shagar, “Uncertainty as the Trial of the Akeda” in *A Collection of Essays in Memory of Eli, Claudine, Uri and*

Chaim Pal z”l, A.Witzman, ed. (Jerusalem: self-published, 1998).

spoke in complete truth when he told Yitzhak that God will provide an animal to be sacrificed.⁴

Similarly, Yehuda Gellman quotes Rabbi Elimelech of Lyzhansk (1717-1787) who writes:

It seems we should explain that in truth Abraham and Isaac knew that God did not intend that he be slaughtered. And Abraham, whose attribute was "kindness" went with confidence that the two of them would return.

The test, in this interpretation, was whether Avraham could work up the same passion for God as if he were really going to sacrifice his son even though he knew it was not really going to happen. Gellman connects this to Rabbi Elimelech's general contention that a good intention is accepted by God as if the person had actually acted, which reflects his preference for pure and holy states of mind over action.⁵

Rabbi Bin-Nun raises textual and theological objections to his wife's approach. His primary one is that the Torah explicitly tells us that the test centered on Avraham's willingness to sacrifice his son to God. Additionally, from a theological and historical perspective, there have been too many instances where this complete faith in the justice of God has not been realized. In a moving

exchange about a parent sending his or her child to the Israeli army, Rabbi Bin-Nun writes:

And on this I disagree with my wife who says I send my children to Tzahal with a complete belief that they will return in peace. And I am in no way sending them to an Akedah. An accident can happen at any time or place but my children, the soldiers are leaving on the condition they will return home safely. And I say they leave with the hope and prayers that they will return safely but with the knowledge of the dangers. We do not run from danger and we do not hold back our children from the army because of the great privilege we have to live as a free and sovereign nation in our land. And with this we are following the tradition of Abraham and Yitzchak.⁶

Some of us have the powerful faith of Mrs. Bin-Nun and others have the grim reality of Rabbi Bin-Nun.

The great religious humanist Rabbi Yehudah Amital has another perspective on the *akeidah* which is relevant to our current situation. He

⁴ Available at <https://www.hatanakh.com/es/node/42654>.

⁵ There is a slight but important difference between Rabbi Elimelech's approach and that of Mrs. Bin-Nun. In his understanding, Avraham knew by prophecy that Yitzhak was not to be sacrificed, whereas in her approach it was

only known through faith, and that certainty was precisely the test of the *akeidah*.

⁶ Ibid.

teaches:

On the surface, Abraham seems to accept the divine decree with silent submission. He is commanded to slaughter his son and, recognizing that nothing can stand in the way of a divine command, he nullifies his own will before the will of God. It appears that he suspends his feelings, his fatherly love, mercy, moral considerations. Everything stops, freezes, disappears before the divine command. "My heart is empty within me" (Ps. 109:22). I think this interpretation is entirely mistaken. I believe that Abraham's love for his son neither disappeared nor dissipated. On the contrary, its intensity was a necessary condition for the Akeda itself...the essence of the Akeda lies precisely in that special loving relationship between father and son...In Hazal's teaching, and between the lines of the text itself, we find a further message: the patriarchs, the forefathers of the Jewish nation, are not angels. They are not depicted as performing miracles and working wonders. On the contrary, they are presented to us as human characters, in the loftiest sense: characters who are

full of hesitations, emotions, and mixed feelings.⁷

R. Amital brings proof for this contention from the Mishnah in *Ta'anit* (2:4), which teaches that on public fast days it was customary to add an extra blessing to the *Amidah*:

In the first [extra] blessing, he concludes, "He who answered Avraham at Mt. Moriah – may He answer you and listen to your cry on this day. Blessed are You, Lord, Redeemer of Israel."⁸

It is evident from this *mishnah* that Avraham prayed fervently that God would cancel His decree. Another *midrash* describes the prayer in detail:

"And he placed him on the altar." Avraham's eyes gazed on Yitzhak and Yitzhak's eyes gazed at the heavens. Tears welled and fell from Avraham's eyes until the pool of tears was as tall as he. He said to him, "My son, since you have already expressed your readiness to relinquish your blood, your Creator will find a different sacrifice in your place." At that moment his mouth opened with a great weeping and he sighed a great sigh and his eyes wandered, seeking out the Shekhina. He lifted

⁷ Rabbi Yehuda Amital, *When God is Near: On the High Holidays* (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2015), 161-162.

⁸ All non-biblical translations are my own.

his voice and said, "I lift my eyes to the mountains; from where shall my help come? My help is from the Lord, Maker of the heavens and earth" (Ps. 121:1-2).⁹

What we can do as parents is to follow in the footsteps of our great ancestor Avraham and pray for the same answer given to him at *Har Ha-Moriah*:

And he [the angel] said, "Do not stretch forth your hand to the lad, nor do the slightest thing to him, for now I know that you are a God-fearing man, and you did not withhold your son, your only one, from Me" (Bereishit 22:12).

In times of crisis, though, prayer alone is not enough. As Rambam taught (*Hilkhos Ta'anivot* 1:2), *teshuvah* (repentance) is also required: *teshuvah* as an individual and *teshuvah* as part of the community. And *teshuvah* requires *heshbon ha-nefesh* (introspection). As we pray and await divine salvation, every community has to do its own particular *heshbon ha-nefesh*. I am certainly not qualified to say what my particular community has to atone for. Nevertheless, the effort certainly needs to be made.

Three times in the *akeidah* story we read "and they both went together" (Bereishit 22:6, 22:8, and 22:19). Avraham and Yitzhak went together,

sacrificed together, and left together. Togetherness seems to be a vital condition for the salvation of the *akeidah*. Are we together as a Jewish People? It is ironic that the day before the massacre the Israeli media were consumed with the question of whether there would be *mehitzot* in the Simchat Torah *hakafot* in Tel Aviv. I understand the halakhic necessity of *mehitzot*, but the irony and tragedy of the debate is telling. I am worried about the war with Hamas, but also worried about the day after. Will the war ultimately unite us or just magnify our differences? I end simply with the same prayer which with we end all of our *tefilot*: "Bestow peace, goodness, and blessing, life, graciousness, kindness, and mercy, upon us and upon all Your people Israel."¹⁰

I would like to thank my friend Ari Ferziger for his advice and encouragement and David Fried for his usual expert editing.

Editor's Note: The following article was originally published in November 2019.

A RIPE OLD AGE: ABRAHAM, GIDEON AND DAVID

*Daniel Lifshitz is the author of *Pachim Ketanim*, a collection of brief essays on the weekly Torah portion.*

And Abraham breathed his last, dying at a good ripe age, old and

⁹ *Yalkut Shimoni* 1:101

¹⁰ These are just the personal musings of one simple parent and should not at all be generalized to what others may be

feeling or experiencing. Written on Thursday, October 26, 2023.

contented; and he was gathered to his kin. ([Genesis 25:8](#))

Gideon son of Joash died at a ripe old age and was buried in the tomb of his father Joash at Ophrah of the Abiezrites. ([Judges 8:32](#))

He [David] died at a ripe old age, having enjoyed long life, riches and honor, and his son Solomon reigned in his stead. ([I Chronicles 29:28](#))

Resh Lakish said, “It was said of three people ‘ripe age’: Abraham, and it was fitting for him; David, and it was fitting for him; Gideon, and it was not fitting for him. Why? ‘And Gideon made it into an ephod’ for idolatry.” ([Genesis Rabbah 62:1](#))

Abraham, Gideon and David seem like an odd trio. The Bible describes their deaths with the word *seivah*/ripe age to contrast the ambiguous Gideon with the unequivocally heroic Abraham and David. But of all biblical heroes, why these two in particular? A careful reading of the three narratives may provide an answer.

Abraham and Gideon

Many ([R’ Amnon Bazak](#), [R’ Yaakov Medan](#), [R’ Nathaniel Helfgot](#), et al.) have noted the connections between Abraham and Gideon. Beyond the semantic link identified by Resh Lakish, there are several remarkable parallels between the two narratives. Abraham and Gidon both fight a coalition of armies whose leaders are identified by name ([Genesis 14:1](#); [Judges 7:12](#),

[7:25](#), [8:5](#)). Abraham takes three hundred eighteen soldiers with him ([Genesis 14:14](#)), while Gideon takes three hundred ([Judges 7:8](#)). Abraham and Gideon both attack at night and divide their forces ([Genesis 14:15](#); [Judges 7:16-19](#)). Both characters have angels appear to them, and provide the angels with food as they sit under a tree ([Genesis 18:2-8](#); [Judges 6:11-19](#)). In addition to the narrative similarities, there are also semantic similarities between the two stories. When Abraham is promised the land of Israel, he asks, “*ba-ma eda*,” how can I know ([Genesis 15:8](#))? When Gideon is told he is to be God’s messenger, he uses similar wording, “*ba-mah oshi’a*,” how can I deliver ([Judges 6:15](#))? When Abraham argues with God to save Sodom, he says, “*al na yihar la-Adonai, va-adabra akh ha-pa’am*,” let not my Lord be angry if I speak just once more ([Genesis 18:32](#)). When Gideon asks God for a sign that he will be the savior of the Jews, he similarly says, “*al yihar apekha bi, va-adabra akh ha-pa’am*,” do not be angry with me if I speak just once more ([Judges 6:39](#)).

Such extensive textual links between the two figures cannot be coincidental, but the conceptual connection is not apparent. Abraham is a paragon of faith and generosity; Gideon is not particularly distinguished in either of these areas. Abraham is the founder of the chosen nation; Gideon becomes a historical footnote. The thematic relation between them becomes clearer when we look beyond the biblical text and in one of the most well-known midrashim about Abraham.

[Genesis Rabbah 38:13](#) tells us that that Terah, Abraham’s father, operates an idol shop. He travels out of town one day and leaves his son to

mind the store. Abraham, who has already recognized the folly of idolatry, begins his iconoclasm gently, by discouraging his father's customers from purchasing the merchandise. Eventually, he smashes all but the largest statue, into whose hand he places a hammer. When his father returns and inquires about the damage, Abraham explains that the idols had had an argument and the largest idol destroyed the others. Terah takes the bait, rejecting the story as impossible - "Do idols know anything?" - and Abraham springs his trap: "Let your ears hear what your mouth is saying!" Abraham is then put on trial for heresy, thrown into a fiery furnace, and miraculously survives due to his faith in God.

This midrash fills in a crucial gap in the narrative of the Book of Genesis, which begins Abraham's story *in medias res*. God tells a man named Abram to leave his homeland, and promises him a great future, but we have no idea why He selected this particular man. The tale of Terah's idols provides the needed backstory, revealing Abraham's faith and courage. The scholars mentioned above posit that this story **does** in fact appear in the Bible itself, only it appears in Judges, not Genesis. The Sages, they argue, understood the textual parallels as an indication that Abraham's backstory was similar. Abraham smashes his father's idols, just as Gideon destroys the altar of Ba'al and the Ashera of his father ([Judges 6:25-27](#)). In both stories, townspeople want to kill the iconoclast ([Judges 6:30](#)). Abraham mocks the impotence of idols who cannot defend themselves, just as Gideon's father does ([Judges 6:31](#)). In the words of R' Bazak, "The nature of the explicit choice of Gideon is, according to the

midrash, the same as the nature of the mysterious choice of Abraham."

This approach compellingly explains where the Sages got the story of Abraham smashing the idols. (Depending on one's preferred understanding of midrash, this can be expressed in two different ways. Either the textual parallels are an allusion to a pre-existing tradition about Abraham, or they inspired the Sages to suggest what his origin story might be.) What remains to be explained is how David fits into the puzzle.

David

There are quite a few obvious parallels between Gideon and David. They are both mighty warriors who protect their people from powerful enemies (the Midianites and Philistines respectively.) The Bible uses similar language to describe them:

Gideon:

The angel of the LORD appeared to him and said to him, "**The LORD is with you, valiant warrior!**" ([Judges 6:12](#))

David:

One of the attendants spoke up, "I have observed a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite who is skilled in music; **he is a valiant warrior** and a man of war, sensible in speech, and handsome in appearance, and **the LORD is with him.**" ([1 Samuel 16:18](#))

They couple their martial exploits with religious faith, attributing their success not to their own power, but to God:

Gideon:

Returning to the camp of Israel, he shouted, “Come on! The LORD has delivered the Midianite camp into your hands!” ([7:15](#))

David:

David replied to the Philistine, “You come against me with sword and spear and javelin; but I come against you in the name of the LORD of Hosts, the God of the ranks of Israel, whom you have defied.” ([17:45](#))

Both leaders win great victories that usher in years of peace.

They are also unlikely heroes. When given his mission by God, Gideon demurs: “My clan is the humblest in Menashe and I am the youngest in my family” ([Judges 6:15](#)). Likewise, David is the youngest of his brothers, and Jesse does not even bother to invite him to the feast with Samuel and the rest of the family ([I Samuel 16:10-11](#)).

In another parallel, both men are offered the kingship:

Then the men of Israel said to

Gideon, “Rule over us—you, your son, and your grandson as well; for you have saved us from the Midianites.” ([Judges 8:22](#))

All the tribes of Israel came to David at Hebron and said, “We are your own flesh and blood. Long before now, when Saul was king over us, it was you who led Israel in war; and the LORD said to you: You shall shepherd My people Israel; you shall be ruler of Israel.” ([II Samuel 5:1-2](#))

A big difference is that David accepts the offer whereas Gideon does not:

But Gideon replied, “I will not rule over you myself, nor shall my son rule over you; the LORD alone shall rule over you.” ([8:23](#))

All the elders of Israel came to the king at Hebron, and King David made a pact with them in Hebron before the LORD. And they anointed David king over Israel. ([5:3](#))

In short, Gideon can be seen as a “proto-David,” a young man plucked from obscurity due to his courage in standing up to Israel’s enemies in the name of God. A grateful nation offers him the throne. However, unlike David, who had been anointed as king by the prophet Samuel, Gideon

lacks a divine imprimatur and therefore correctly refuses the crown.¹

Turning to the connection between David and Abraham, we find some clear clues in chapter thirty of Samuel I. Once again, the parallels are striking. Abraham's relative (Lot) is taken as prisoner of war and property is looted ([Genesis 14:11-12](#)). David's relatives (wives) are taken as prisoners of war and property is looted ([I Samuel 30:5](#)). Both Abraham and David set out with a small band of soldiers ([Genesis 14:14](#); [I Samuel 30:9](#)). They then both defeat the enemy and rescue the captives and the spoils ([Genesis 14:15-16](#); [I Samuel 30:17-19](#)). When dividing the spoils, they both insist that the non-combat soldiers should share in the spoils as well ([Genesis 14:24](#); [I Samuel 30:24](#)). [Genesis Rabbah \(43:9\)](#) explicitly connects these last two verses. After David's victory, some of his men suggest that only the combat troops get a share in the booty. David rejects the idea out of hand. Based on linguistic irregularities in the verses, the midrash gives the source of his strong conviction: "From whom did he learn [this principle]? From his forefather Abraham."

This blatant link between the two figures illuminates some other connections between them. In many ways, David represents a culmination of God's covenant with Abraham, elevating it from a familial and tribal plane to a truly national level.

Abraham:

I will make you exceedingly fertile and make nations of you; and kings shall come forth from you. I will maintain My covenant between Me and you, and your offspring to come, as an everlasting covenant throughout the ages, to be God to you and to your offspring to come. ([Genesis 17:6-7](#))

For I have singled him out, that he may instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is **just and right**, in order that the LORD may bring about for Abraham what He has promised him. ([Genesis 18:19](#))

David:

When your days are done and you lie with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, one of your own issue, and I will establish his kingship. ([II Samuel 7:12](#))

Your house and your kingship shall ever be secure before you; your throne shall be established forever. ([7:16](#))

¹ Interestingly, the Sages describe a similar incident in Abraham's career. After he defeats the Mesopotamian kings, he is met by the local nobility in a place called "the

Vale of Kings" (Genesis 14:17). Genesis Rabbah (43:5) explains that the Canaanite tribes built him a throne and offered to make him their king, but Abraham refused.

David reigned over all Israel, and David did what was **right and just** among all his people. ([II Samuel 8:15](#))

Abraham is promised a dynasty of kings in an everlasting covenant. David is the first king in this eternal line. Abraham is chosen to teach his descendants to act in a righteous and just manner. When David reigns as king, he does just that. These allusions tell us that Abraham, like Gideon, should be viewed as a predecessor to David. Going back to our initial question, it is not arbitrary that the Bible and midrash contrast Gideon to Abraham and David as opposed to any other biblical protagonists; the three share a clear thematic connection.

Haftarat Hayei Sarah

The next question is what this thematic connection comes to teach us. Perhaps we can find an answer if we look at the Torah portion that includes Abraham's death and the haftarah about David's death that goes with it.

In Hayei Sarah, we read:

Abraham willed all that he owned to Isaac; but to Abraham's sons by concubines Abraham gave gifts while he was still living, and he sent them away from his son Isaac eastward, to the land of the East.

This was the total span of Abraham's life: one hundred and seventy-five years.

And Abraham breathed his last, dying at a good ripe age, old and contented; and he was gathered to his kin. ([Genesis 25:5-8](#))

Abraham is a man of great wealth and social stature with many children. He is wise enough to realize that without clear guidance, his family would fight over his material and spiritual legacy; thus he is very explicit. The sons of the concubines receive gifts, presumably generous ones, but Isaac is the undisputed heir. To avoid doubt, they are also sent away, leaving Isaac as the only child of Abraham in the land that God had promised him.

Gideon also has many offspring:

Gideon had seventy sons of his own issue, for he had many wives. A son was also born to him by his concubine in Shekhem, and he named him Abimelech. Gideon, son of Joash, died at a ripe old age and was buried in the tomb of his father Joash at Ophrah of the Abiezrites. ([Judges 8:30-32](#))

However, unlike Abraham, he does not think about succession planning. The result is horrific:

Then he [Abimelech] went to his father's house in Ophrah and killed his brothers, the sons of Jerubbaal [Gideon], seventy men on one stone. Only Jotham, the youngest son of Jerubbaal, survived,

because he went into hiding. All the citizens of Shekhem and all Beth-millo convened, and they proclaimed Abimelech king at the terebinth of the pillar at Shechem. [\(9:5-6\)](#)

Gideon dies at a ripe old age, giving him plenty of time to set his affairs in order. His failure to do so leads to fratricide and the extermination of his family. The contrast with Abraham could not be more extreme.

The haftarah for Parshat Hayei Sarah ([I Kings 1:1-31](#)) begins with David an old, tired man. We immediately see a superficial parallel to the parsha: David is “old, advanced in years” just like Abraham in Hayei Sarah ([Genesis 24:1](#)). However, the connection runs deeper than this single verse. Unlike Abraham, who had made clear who would inherit his legacy, David has not yet announced a successor. His sons start jockeying for advantage, and his oldest surviving son, Adonijah, assembles a group of supporters and proclaims himself the heir apparent. David wants another son, Solomon, to be the next king, but has done nothing to further this objective. The prophet Nathan recognizes that Adonijah wants the throne badly enough to kill for it.

David has two contrasting paths from which to choose. Without decisive action, his family would end up like that of Gideon, with brother killing brother. But there is another option, the path of Abraham. To avoid tragedy, David has to seize control of his legacy. Nathan, with the assistance of Solomon’s mother, Bathsheba, steers David

onto the right track:

The king said to them, “Take my loyal soldiers, and have my son Solomon ride on my mule and bring him down to Gihon. Let the priest Zadok and the prophet Nathan anoint him there king over Israel, whereupon you shall sound the horn and shout, ‘Long live King Solomon!’ Then march up after him and let him come in and sit on my throne. For he shall succeed me as king; him I designate to be ruler of Israel and Judah.”

With David’s will made known, Adonijah’s support melts away and Solomon is able to consolidate power. Mass bloodshed is averted. Unfortunately, Adonijah fails to understand the new situation and continues scheming. Solomon eventually is forced to have him executed, but David’s line survives. David’s delay in acting costs him, but his eventual decision allows him to avoid the catastrophic outcome suffered by Gideon’s family and instead achieve the continuity of Abraham.

“Gideon, and it was not fitting for him”

Now that we have shown the connection and contrasts between Abraham, Gideon, and David, we can explain the final section of Genesis Rabbah 62:1 quoted at the beginning of the article. The midrash had concluded that unlike Abraham and David, the phrase “ripe age” was unfitting for Gideon, because of the verse “And Gideon made it into an ephod,” which is considered an act of idolatry.

The verse cited by the midrash refers to Gideon's final act. After he turns down the kingship, he requests his soldiers give him the golden earrings they captured as booty. This they gladly do. But the jewelry is not put to good use: "Gideon made an ephod of this gold and set it up in his own town of Ophrah. There all Israel went astray after it, and it became a snare to Gideon and his household" ([Judges 8:27](#)).

The nation had a bit of a history with donating golden earrings. The first incident, and the most obvious association, was the sin of the Golden Calf, wherein the men give their golden earrings to Aaron to make an idol ([Exodus 32:2](#)). The second incident was forty years later, when after the war with Midian, the officers give the gold jewelry they captured as an offering to God ([Numbers 31:50](#)). The intent in these two cases was unambiguous. In Exodus, the people want the gold to make a god; in Numbers they give the gold as an offering to God.

[Exodus 32:1](#):

Come, make us a god who shall go before us, for that man Moses, who brought us from the land of Egypt—we do not know what has happened to him.

[Numbers 31:50](#):

So we have brought as an offering to the LORD such articles of gold as each of us came upon: armlets, bracelets, signet rings, earrings, and pendants, that expiation may

be made for our persons before the LORD.

Gideon's motivation is much less clear. The Sages understand that he means the ephod as a monument to God's salvation, but there is no evidence in the verse pointing in either direction. Gideon's contemporaries may have known the ephod's purpose, but the ambiguous verse suggests it was unclear to them as well. This monument ends up the object of idol worship, but the Book of Judges does not explain why.

David also wants to build a monument for God in the form of a sanctuary. Unlike Gideon, he makes his intent clear:

Then he summoned his son Solomon and charged him with building the House for the LORD God of Israel. David said to Solomon, "My son, I wanted to build a House for the name of the LORD my God." ([I Chronicles 22:6](#))

Now, my son, may the LORD be with you, and may you succeed in building the House of the LORD your God as He promised you would. ([I Chronicles 22:11](#))

David's son Solomon ends up building the Temple in Jerusalem, which serves as a central house of worship for four centuries. Gideon's project was much less ambitious than David's, yet it still failed. Perhaps it was for the same reason Gideon's line ended in tragedy. Just as Gideon fails to put his family affairs in order, he also sets up his shrine

without making its purpose clear. For a leader to be successful, those who follow him must understand the program. Gideon is a competent wartime commander, but when it comes to long-term plans, he does not communicate well, and such an approach results in disaster.

This, then, is the message of the midrash. It puts the career of David into the larger biblical context of two precursors, Abraham and Gideon. Abraham understands that serving God and passing his legacy on to future generations requires a certain amount of managerial skill. It does not happen by itself. Gideon tragically lacks this awareness. David, with some help from the prophet Nathan, is able to follow in the footsteps of Abraham and establish an eternal dynasty of servants of God.

Managing Editor:

Davida Kollmar

Editors:

David Fried

Chesky Kopel

Yosef Lindell

Chaya Sara Oppenheim

Tzvi Sinensky

Miriam Zami

Consulting Editors:

Miriam Krupka Berger

Elli Fischer

Miriam Gedwiser

Chaim Saiman

Jeffrey Saks

Jacob J. Schacter

Sara Tillinger Wolkenfeld

Shlomo Zuckier

Please contact us at editors@thelehrhaus.com