Message from the Haftara

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Sculptor or Gardener

KORACH

The connections between Parshat Korach and its haftara - the final address of Shmuel to the people of Israel - are not difficult to find. Both center on a moment of leadership transition: Korach and his faction seek to displace Moshe, while the people ask Shmuel to step aside in favor of a king. There is even a striking verbal parallel between the two passages. Moshe defends his integrity before the people: "I have not taken a single donkey from them, nor have I wronged any one of them" (Bamidbar 16:15). Shmuel echoes him almost word for word: "Whose ox have I seized, and whose donkey have I seized? Whom have I cheated, and whom have I oppressed, and from whose hand have I taken a bribe?" (Shmuel Alef 12:3).

In both cases, a selfless leader is confronted by a public that wants something different, and in both cases, that leader insists that his motives have been honest and uncorrupted.

But beneath this parallel lies a quieter, more penetrating tension, one that first emerges earlier, when the people demand a king: "Look, you have grown old, and your sons have not followed in your path" (8:5).

This two-part complaint deserves careful attention, because each half carries a very different weight, challenging all leaders to find a balance between public and family life. This balance is crucial today as Am Yisrael faces serious fractures and threats as a nation: fractures and threats that also affect individuals and families on a personal level as we and our children all navigate war, antisemitism, uncertainty and social discord.

The first half of the people's accusation in the haftara - "you have grown old" - is, to some degree, a legitimate claim. Leadership has its seasons. A healthy community must be able to acknowledge when transition is necessary, and ensure continuity beyond any one individual. That part of the complaint, while uncomfortable, is appropriate.

But the second claim - "Your sons have not followed in your path" - cuts deeper. This is no longer about public leadership. It is a judgment on Shmuel as a father and mentor. The text itself makes the critique explicit: his sons "were bent on gain, and they took

bribes, and they perverted justice" (v. 3). Whatever potential they may have had, something essential in their formation was missing.

Shmuel, who had devoted his life to shepherding the nation through its most turbulent years, may not have been able to invest with the same intensity in his own children.

Shmuel is not alone. Hundreds of years earlier, Moshe Rabbeinu, who spoke 'face to face' with God and led the people for forty years through their most formative period, remains a strikingly distant figure in the lives of his own children. The Torah tells us almost nothing about them, and later Rabbinic sources suggest that they drifted far from the path that their father walked, even so far as to indulge in foreign forms of worship. The contrast is as sobering as it is tragic: even the greatest of leaders may struggle to bridge the distance between public mission and private sphere.

The Talmud names this tension with painful honesty, describing Torah scholars as sometimes becoming "as cruel to their children and families as ravens" (Eruvin 22a), not from malice, but because the demands of communal responsibility can be all-consuming.

What emerges is not an isolated failure, but a recurring challenge within leadership itself. There are limits to what any family can absorb when a parent is called to serve. Children who grow up waiting for a parent who is always somewhere else - answering the community's urgency, the people's crises, the nation's needs - may eventually stop waiting.

What makes Shmuel's story particularly poignant is that he himself grew up in the shadow of this same failure. He rose to leadership in the aftermath of Eli HaKohen's shortcomings as a father; his first prophetic call (Shmuel Alef 3) was a message of divine judgment against Eli's household. Raised in the Mishkan, Shmuel was shaped by priestly discipline and devotion, but not necessarily by a model of present, attentive family life. Moshe, too, grew up at a distance from his family, formed in a palace rather than a home. Perhaps neither man was given a full domestic template. They could lead a people; but they had never fully seen what it means to lead a family.

This is what makes the people's incidental complaint so stinging, and what gives our haftara enduring force. It asks a question that extends far beyond Shmuel. What are the unseen costs of leadership? And who bears them?

The Torah does not ask us to raise children in our image; that is the

sculptor's approach. A sculpture may be impressive, but it can crack and shatter under pressure.

A parent is closer to a gardener, creating the conditions in which a child can take root, grow, and turn toward the light in their own way.

Parshat Korach and its haftara together challenge both communities and those who lead them to seek leaders who are not only principled in public, but whole in private. Leaders who remember that the family waiting for them at home is not a distraction from their mission. It may be the most important expression of it.