Message from the Haftara

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Lessons from Three Biblical Marriages

CHAYEI SARA

Rabbi Levi ben Gershon, known as the Ralbag, teaches in his commentary on B'reshit that the stories of our forefathers are there to teach us how to live. From both the virtues and the failings of the biblical personalities, we learn how to conduct ourselves, especially in our closest relationships. This week, the parsha and the haftara invite us to consider three marriages, each offering a different perspective on what makes a relationship thrive, endure, or falter. The question is just as urgent in our own homes as it was in the tents and palaces of Tanach.

It is no coincidence that so many of the laws governing marriage are derived from Avraham's efforts to secure a proper burial place for Sara. The care that Avraham shows his beloved wife, both during her lifetime and after her death, illustrates how love and commitment can be expressed through concrete actions. That care runs through their whole life together.

Even his request that Sara present herself as his sister on their journey to Egypt was interpreted by biblical scholar Ephraim A. Speiser as a strategy for protecting her, as he explains in his well-known article "The Wife-Sister Motif in the Patriarchal Narratives."

The haftara offers a very different picture, taking us inside the palace of David, where his relationship with Bat Sheva began, as is well known, in sin and tragedy.

As the haftara opens, their bond is challenged by the arrival of a young woman, Avishag the Shunamite, brought to attend the ailing king. Meanwhile, outside the palace and unknown to David, a violent rivalry for the throne is unfolding among David's sons and would-be heirs, threatening to tear the royal family apart. Bat Sheva's response is to conspire with Natan the prophet to stage an audience with the king that will secure the throne for her son Shlomo. Shlomo's claim is rightful, but the distance between David and Bat Sheva requires some manipulation and concealment.

Yet even Parshat Chayei Sara, while it seems to celebrate the model marriage of Avraham and Sara, also holds a cautionary tale about the next

generation. Avraham's servant chooses Rivka as a wife for Yitzchak without the groom having any part in the decision. The first time Rivka sees Yitzchak, she covers herself with a veil, and that veil can be seen as a symbol of the communication barriers that will come to characterize their relationship. While there is love between them, the Torah records only one conversation between Yitzchak and Rivka. It comes at the end of Parshat Toldot, when Rivka is trying to save one of their sons, Yaakov, from the murderous anger of the other, Eisav. Even then she does not speak openly. She offers Yitzchak a pretext and hides the real reason that Yaakov must leave. One can only imagine what their shared home might have been had it been built on ongoing and forthright communication.

In this light, David and Bat Sheva fall somewhere in the middle. Their relationship is far from simple, and the haftara does not hide its flaws. Yet David's final words to Bat Sheva mark an important moment of honest communication and commitment: "'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'" (Melachim Alef 1:29–30). After all the intrigue and silence, the king speaks to his wife directly, binds himself by oath, and keeps his word. His promise does not erase the troubled backdrop to their relationship, but it underscores the importance of honoring one's promises, especially when the future of the family is at stake.

Avraham and Sara, the first of these three couples, offer a model of partnership and devoted care. The second couple, David and Bat Sheva, navigate a relationship shaped by a flawed past and political intrigue, yet ultimately, their communication finds honest words and commitment. The third couple, Yitzchak and Rivka, share a bond marked by love and family loyalty, but also by silence and concealed intentions. They live out their marriage with a veil between them, a barrier whose consequences reverberate through the next generation.

These are not just portraits from the distant past. They are possibilities that every home holds. A marriage can become a partnership of mutual care, or a relationship that survives its crises through honest words - or a life lived side by side behind a veil. The difference often lies less in grand gestures than in the daily choice to make time, to speak and to listen.

As we enter the winter months and settle back into our regular routines, may we always make time for our

families and for the relationships that sustain us. May our homes be built, like the tent of Avraham and Sara, on care and partnership, and may we have the wisdom, like David at the end of his days, to recognize that strong relationships require more than love: they need honest communication, care, and a mutual commitment to shared values that hold our families together. 