This haftarah begins with an account of the last days of King David (c. 965 B.C.E.), which yield anything but a harvest of honor. It records the power struggle for seizing the crown of the king, even as his blood is turning cold (1:1–4). It seems that David never could escape the plots of his advisers and of his sons, in this case the scheming of his son Adonijah, who wanted to be king, versus the advisers who backed his son Solomon, the intended heir to the throne.

The narrative is structured and developed around pairs: David and Abishag (in the prologue), Nathan and Bathsheba, and Nathan and David (in the middle sections), and David and Bathsheba (in the epilogue). The pivotal scene of the narrative is the encounter between David and Bathsheba, with Abishag present (vv. 15–21). The text initially states that the king “did not know,” Abishag the Shunammite maiden (v. 4). Bathsheba must now tell her husband what he “does not know”—that Adonijah has claimed the throne (v. 18).

The narrator, clearly a master of thematic intonation, connects and counterpoises various other episodes as well, with consummate skill. Another example of the subtle texture of this haftarah is provided by the threads linking the verb shava (to swear an oath) with the name Bathsheba (Hebrew: Batsheva) (as in 1:28–29).

RELATION OF THE HAFTARAH TO THE PARASHAH

The parashah and the haftarah are linked by the expression “old; advanced in years” (zaken ba ba-yamim) found in both Gen. 24:1 and 1 Kings 1:1, and by the theme of old age. Abraham and David represent two distinct models of aging. The Abrahamic type enters old age with all the religious and moral integrity of his life intact.

Thus we see that Abraham, after the death of Sarah and the purchase of a family tomb (Gen. 23), “became old” and prepared for succession in his family. He directed his servant to “swear” (v'asher-yakha) that he would not allow Isaac to marry one of the Canaanite women but, rather, would procure a wife for him from Abraham’s homeland (Gen. 24:1–4). The patriarch was active in securing a future that would continue the past. Being blessed by God with “all things” (ba-kol; 24:1), Abraham passed on to Isaac “all” (kol) he had (25:5). This was his deposition before death, along with “gifts” to the children of his concubines (v. 6). Eliminating contention over the inheritance and preparing for new generations, Abraham died “in good ripe age” (zeituah), “old and contented” (savi-a). The harmony between a good old age and contentment (v. 8) suggests an integrated aging, a balance between his physical person and his spiritual self.

David entered old age in the atmosphere of a catastrophe. He spoke too soon when he boasted, in a poetic testament, “Is not my House established before God? / For He has granted me an eternal pact, / Drawn up in full (ba-kol) and secured. / Will He not cause all (kol) my success / And [my] every desire to blossom?” (2 Sam. 23:5) The story of David’s aging focuses on his physical debility and on the schemes of his dependents for securing their own stake in the future. Succumbing to infirmity, he did not “know” what was going on. His courtiers seem self-serving, and he himself represents all the frustrations of defunct power. David was a manipulator for most of his life, but his memory and pride were manipulated in his old age. Stung by the disclosures of Nathan and of Bathsheba, David “swears” (va-yishava) that he will fulfill his “former” oath (1 Kings 1:29). Something of the old David has thus returned. Giving final vent to
1 Kings 1:1 Haftarah for Hayyei Sarah

1 King David was now old, advanced in years; and though they covered him with bedclothes, he never felt warm. 2 His courtiers said to him, “Let a young virgin be sought for my lord the king, to wait upon Your Majesty and be his attendant; and let her lie in your bosom, and my lord the king will be warm.” 3 So they looked for a beautiful girl throughout the territory of Israel. They found Abishag the Shunammite and brought her to the king. 4 The girl was exceedingly beautiful. She became the king’s attendant and waited upon him; but the king was not intimate with her.

5 Now Adonijah son of Haggith went about boasting, “I will be king!” He provided himself with chariots and horses, and an escort of fifty outrunners. 6 His father had never scolded him: “Why did you do that?” He was the one born after Absalom and, like him, was very handsome.

7 He conferred with Joab son of Zeruiah and with the priest Abiathar, and they supported Adonijah; but the priest Zadok, Benaiiah son of Jehoiada, the prophet Nathan, Shimei and Rei, and David’s own fighting men did not side with Adonijah.

1 Kings 1:2. wait upon Your Majesty Literally, “stand before (am’dah lifnei) [the king].” In royal contexts, the idiom means to “serve at court” (cf. 1 Kings 12:8).

7–8. Joab, who was David’s long-time faithful commander-in-chief (2 Sam. 8:16), now becomes a follower of the rebel Adonijah. Benaijah, who had served David as head of the elite guard (8:18), becomes the new commander-in-chief (1 Kings 4:4) with the succession of Solomon, who instructs him to kill Joab (2:28–34), in fulfillment of David’s wishes.

The priests Zadok and Abiathar were descended from Aaron, although they were not brothers. Both served David and were frequently paired (cf. 2 Sam. 15:29,35; 20:25); but Abiathar supported Adonijah, and Zadok sided with the supporters of Solomon. After Solomon’s succession, Zadok replaced Abiathar (1 Kings 2:35), who was dismissed from his office and banished to Anathoth. He was not killed, however, because of his past loyal service to David (2:26–27).
with Adonijah. 9 Adonijah made a sacrificial feast of sheep, oxen, and fatlings at the Zoheth stone which is near En-rogel; he invited all his brother princes and all the king's courtiers of the tribe of Judah; 10 but he did not invite the prophet Nathan, or Benaiah, or the fighting men, or his brother Solomon.

9 Then Nathan said to Bathsheba, Solomon's mother, "You must have heard that Adonijah son of Haggith has assumed the kingship without the knowledge of our lord David.

10 Now take my advice, so that you may save your life and the life of your son Solomon.

11 Go immediately to King David and say to him, 'Did not you, O lord king, swear to your maidservant: "Your son Solomon shall succeed me as king, and he shall sit upon my throne"? Then why has Adonijah become king?' 12 While you are still there talking with the king, I will come in after you and confirm your words."

13 So Bathsheba went to the king in his chamber.— The king was very old, and Abishag the Shunammite was waiting on the king.—

14 Bathsheba bowed low in homage to the king; and the king asked, "What troubles you?"

15 She answered him, "My lord, you yourself swore to your maidservant by the LORD your God: 'Your son Solomon shall succeed me as king, and he shall sit upon my throne.' 16 Yet now Adonijah has become king, and you, my lord the king, know nothing about it. 17 He has prepared a sacrificial feast of a great many oxen, fatlings, and sheep, and he has invited all the king's sons and Abiathar the priest and Joab commander of the army; but he has not invited your servant Solomon. 18 And so the eyes of all Israel are upon you, O lord king, to tell them who shall succeed by lord the king on the
thronethor. 21 Otherwise, when my lord the king lies down with his fathers, my son Solomon and I will be regarded as traitors.”

22 She was still talking to the king when the prophet Nathan arrived. 23 They announced to the king, “The prophet Nathan is here,” and he entered the king’s presence. Bowing low to the king with his face to the ground, 24 Nathan said, “O lord king, you must have said, ‘Adonijah shall succeed me as king and he shall sit upon my throne.’ 25 For he has gone down today and prepared a sacrificial feast of a great many oxen, fatlings, and sheep. He invited all the king’s sons and the army officers and Abiathar the priest. At this very moment they are eating and drinking with him, and they are shouting, ‘Long live King Adonijah!’ 26 But he did not invite me your servant, or the priest Zadok, or Benaiah son of Jehoiada, or your servant Solomon. 27 Can this decision have come from my lord the king, without your telling your servant who is to succeed to the throne of my lord the king? 28 King David’s response was: “Summon Bathsheba!” She entered the king’s presence and stood before the king. 29 And the king took an oath, saying, “As the LORD lives, who has rescued me from every trouble: 30 The oath I swore to you by the LORD, the God of Israel, that your son Solomon should succeed me as king and that he should sit upon my throne in my stead, I will fulfill this very day!” 31 Bathsheba bowed low in homage to the king with her face to the ground, and she said, “May my lord King David live forever!”