



Parsha Toldot
Shabbat Machar Chodesh
I Samuel 20:18-42
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This commentary is a reprint of an original written and published in 2011 by Rabbi Joel Schwab.

This week's haftarah is recited two or three times every year, every time Rosh Hodesh falls on Sunday. The ostensible reason for substituting this passage for the haftarah normally chanted with Parashat Tol'dot is that the first verse dates the conversation between King Saul's son Jonathan and the young upstart David as occurring "mahar hodesh", the day before Rosh Hodesh. And this Shabbat is, indeed, mahar hodesh.

But you have to wonder if our Sages wouldn't have found some other reason to make this story one of the regular haftarot. They clearly wished to hold up the relationship between Jonathan and David as worthy of broad imitation, the example of "unconditional love" that "will never vanish". (Pirkei Avot 5:18) Certainly that is true of Jonathan, who is so taken by his charismatic friend that he swears he will give up the throne for David. In our haftarah, Jonathan plots with David to help him escape from Saul's unjust suspicions, makes excuses for David's absence from the king's Rosh Hodesh table, stands up to his father's fury in defense of his friend, and eventually sends his friend out into the wilderness to escape certain death, never to see him again. Jonathan could have become king. Instead he protects and swears allegiance to his chief rival. How many present-day politicians would pass on a straight shot at the presidency and instead throw their support behind their chief rival? That is truly unconditional love.

But what about David? Whatever his feelings for Jonathan, he is clearly benefiting; all he has to do is stay alive and he gets to be king once Saul dies and Jonathan abdicates. Still, at the end of the haftarah, as the two friends embrace for the last time, it is David who "wept the longer". (I Sam. 20:41) In his eulogy after the deaths of Saul and Jonathan in battle, David writes, "I grieve for you, my brother Jonathan. You were most dear to me, your love was wonderful to me more than the love of women" (II Sam. 1:26), and we know how much David loved women. And when Jonathan's son Mephiboshet, a potential rival to the throne as Saul's grandson, comes before the now King David, David's response is to return to him all of his grandfather's land and to invite him to the king's table. (II Sam. 9:6-8) While David is often involved in the unemotional business of realpolitick throughout his career, this friendship seems to be above all that, truly to be unconditional.

There is a third figure in this story whose love also should be noted. King Saul's anger and actions appear rooted in his desire for his son to become king. Some of that could be his wish for the establishment of a dynasty in his name. But all of us parents know how much we want for our children, how much we want them to succeed, how much we want the best for them. One might think that chucking a spear at one's teen-age son may be an odd way to show that one cares. But then again, how many parents, in the heat of generational conflict, have let their tempers flare to the extent of at least contemplating some form of violence against those rebellious children - because, unselfishly, we wanted the best for them and they were too stubborn to recognize it. Was Saul's unconditional love? Maybe not completely. But the love of a parent for a child is as close to unconditional as its gets, as any parent can testify.

There is a tendency to think about our tradition as primarily cerebral and not emotional. That our tradition picks out this story to read as a haftarah every few months indicates the recognition we have always given to the love relationships in our lives. May all of our loves be as unconditional as these.

This week's Haftarah commentary was written by Rabbi Joel Schwab. Rabbi Schwab has served as the religious leader of Temple Sinai in Middletown, NY for 30 years.