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## A Listening Heart: A Citizen's Reflection

Rabbi Josh Feigelson, PhD

One of my very favorite moments in the entire Bible comes in the third chapter of the Book of Kings. Solomon, still a young man, has just succeeded his father David as King of Israel. God comes to him in a dream and offers Solomon power, riches--whatever he wants. Solomon responds that all he really wants is a *lev shomeah*, a listening heart. God is so impressed with this answer that God tells Solomon,

הִנֵּה | נִתְּנִי לְךָ לֵב חָכָם וְנָבוֹן אֲשֶׁר כָּמוֹךָ לֹא־הָיָה לְפָנָיִךָ וְאִחֲרָיִךָ לֹא־יָקוּם כָּמוֹךָ

"I will grant you a wise and discerning heart. No one has ever been like you before, and no one will arise like you again." (I Kings 3:12)

This is a powerful moment. We can observe just how powerful it is when we contrast Solomon with another great king of the Bible: Pharaoh.

Over and over the Book of Exodus describes Pharaoh both as not listening--*v'lo shamah*--and as having a hard heart. The Hebrew phrase to describe Pharaoh's hardening heart stems from the root K-B-D, *kaved*, which means heavy or weighty. In other contexts it connotes honor, because of the weightiness of ceremony or station. In her book *Exodus: The Particulars of Rapture*, Avivah Zornberg writes that Pharaoh is the "king of heaviness, whose heart continually grows heavier."

Solomon's prayer, and the striking contrast between Pharaoh and Solomon, has been on my mind for several years now, not only because I yearn for leadership with Solomon's wisdom and his profound capacity for listening. Even more than this, my sense is that, in a democracy in which none of us is a monarch and all citizens are sovereign, each of us must live our civic life between these polar exemplars: the listening and wise heart of Solomon, or the closed-off and cruel heart of Pharaoh.

Our Jewish spiritual practice is indispensable for becoming more like Solomon, and thus for more fully inhabiting our citizenship. The beginning and end of our spiritual work is, to quote Solomon's *Song of Songs*, to awaken our hearts (Song of Songs 5:2).



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One might say that, rooted in that awakening, our aim is to sustain not only an awakened heart, but a *lev shomeah*, a listening heart as well—to listen with wisdom, patience, and compassion so that, like Solomon, we can ultimately make good judgments.

The Book of I Kings (5:9-14) goes on to describe how Solomon's listening heart manifests in the world:

וְהָרַב חֲכָמַת שְׁלֹמֹה מִחֲכָמַת כָּל־בְּנֵי־קֵדָם וּמִכָּל חֲכָמַת מִצְרָיִם  
וַיִּחְפֹּם מִכָּל־הָאֲדָם מֵאֵתֵנוּ הָאֲזָרָחִי וְהַיִּמִּי וְכָל־כָּל וְדָרְזַע בְּנֵי מַחֹל וַיְהִי־שִׁמּוֹ בְּכָל־הַגּוֹיִם סָבִיב  
וַיִּדְבֹּר שְׁלֹשֶׁת אֲלָפִים מְשָׁל וַיְהִי שִׁירוֹ חֲמֵשֶׁה וְאַלְף  
וַיִּדְבֹּר עַל־הָעֵצִים מִן־הָאֲרָז אֲשֶׁר בְּלִבְנוֹן וְעַד הָאֲזֹב אֲשֶׁר לְצֵאן בְּקִיר וַיִּדְבֹּר עַל־הַבְּהֵמָה וְעַל־הָעוֹף וְעַל־הַרְמֹשׁ וְעַל־  
הַדְּגָיִם

God endowed Solomon with wisdom and discernment in great measure, with understanding as vast as the sands on the seashore.

Solomon's wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the Kedemites and than all the wisdom of the Egyptians.

He was the wisest of all people... His fame spread among all the surrounding nations.

He composed three thousand proverbs, and his songs numbered one thousand and five.

He discoursed about trees, from the cedar in Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of the wall; and he discoursed about beasts, birds, creeping things, and fishes.

People came from all over to hear Solomon's wisdom, [sent] by all the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom.

To transpose this vision into a more democratic register: Solomon's listening heart becomes a broad and expansive heart as well. He listens not only to the voices we



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normally hear, but even and especially to those we don't. His heart enables and even calls him to be in relationship with all of Creation, with the full diversity of human beings and the plants and creatures of the earth. His listening heart becomes the heart of a listening sovereign.

This, I would suggest, is not only a vision of wisdom, but an aspiration for fully-engaged citizenship in a democracy--and including people of every racial, religious, gender and sexual identity, not only the [white, male, religious majority] ones we might instinctively conjure when we imagine a sovereign. For, as mentioned above, in a democracy every one of us is a part of the sovereign power. As political philosopher Danielle Allen puts it, "The ability to adopt equitable self-interest in one's interactions with strangers is the only mark of a truly democratic citizen."<sup>1</sup> That is, when we can live in right relationship with our fellow citizens--particularly and especially those we do not know personally but only know as images of God who exist out there in our shared polity--then we both fully claim our citizenship and help to bring about a more perfect union.

As I write these words, I feel my own heart and the hearts of my fellow citizens and residents of America heavy with fear and laden with distrust of real and imagined others. Yet I remind myself that the Baal Shem Tov (d. 1760), the founder of Hasidism, was a contemporary of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and George Washington and that, by extension, the teachings that undergird our Jewish spiritual practices have their roots in the soil of a common democratic impulse. The work we do, to expand our hearts, to listen more deeply, to live with the simultaneous and paradoxical awareness that 'the world was created for me' and that 'I am but dust and ashes'--all of this is so that we may become more like Solomon and less like Pharaoh, that we may cultivate a *lev shomeah* and not a *lev kaved*.

And that brings me to this: My practice--our practice--is vital for the present and future of democratic life (a finding recently reinforced by a major research [study](#) from The Fetzer Institute). The question now, as always, is: How can we live together? How can we make space for one another? How do we cultivate the capacity to sacrifice for each other? And how do we ensure that sacrifice is distributed evenly? A vital part of the

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<sup>1</sup> Danielle Allen, *Talking to Strangers; Anxieties of Citizenship Since Brown v. Board of Education*, University of Chicago Press, 2006, p. 165.



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answer to all of these questions is spiritual practice, which deepens our ability to recognize the divinity within and between each of us and empowers us to respond to one another with kindness, compassion, and wisdom.

May you be blessed with a listening and expansive heart this election season. And may we be blessed with leaders whose listening hearts enable them to govern with fairness and justice to bring about peace.