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July 21, 2018

Listening as Leadership

This August we read the book of *Devarim*, and hear the story of the Exodus from Moses' point of view. Again we learn lessons of leadership, but now we have the opportunity to listen to the point of view of the leader. Moses begins by telling us, I cannot carry the people alone. (Deut 1:9) He praises God for the way the people have grown, yet asks, "How can I carry your contentiousness, your burdens, your quarrels. Now, you choose distinguished men, understanding, and well known, and I will designate them as your heads." And when the people agreed, Moses said, "Listen among your brothers. And judge rightly between a man and his opponent. Small and great alike shall you hear. You shall not tremble before any man. For judgment is God's." (Deut 1:15-17a). Moses gives these new judges a recipe for leadership when he tells them, "Listen!" Listening is mentioned 92 times in the book of *Devarim*.¹ Here, the judge is to listen among his brethren. Moses points out that listening is the key to being a leader. In this message, I would like to explore leadership as listening.

Indeed, *Devarim* is the text that teaches us to say the great prayer of Judaism, the *Shema Israel*, "Listen Oh Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one." Here we see both sides of listening as leadership that I wish to explore: a) listening to our fellow human beings and b) listening to God. Listening is the key to leadership and the key to spiritual practice. Today, many pose the difficulty: How does listening achieve anything? Doesn't a leader take charge, give orders, manage people, measure results, and win debates. What could possibly be achieved by mere listening? I argue that listening is the basis of the spiritual life and that one's spiritual life is a key to leadership.

After the Torah's profound example of Moses' leadership, we encounter many different leaders with different leadership styles throughout the rest of the *Nevi'im*, the Jewish prophetic and historical books. The *Tanakh*, the Jewish Bible is deeply skeptical of the kingship, the institution, par excellence, of power. Most of *Tanakh* is a litany of the failures of Israel's kings. In fact, Moses, long before that history, was deeply skeptical of kingship; and so was the prophet Samuel who oversaw the transition from the period of the judges to the kings. Samuel warned the people, the Kings will take your firstfruits, a tithe of everything, they will force you to pay taxes, they will take your sons into battle where they will be lost, and your daughters will be forced into labor. And yet when the people persisted, he gave permission, and anointed a king. Despite having permitted kingship, the Torah and the Prophets are ambivalent at best toward the role of the king. Why so much push back against the king? Because the model of leadership that the Torah suggests is not that of a king, but of a teacher. It is not the model of sovereignty but of

¹ Sacks, Jonathan. "Seven Principles of Jewish Leadership." First published in the Jewish Chronicle and Jerusalem Post. 2012. Accessed online at <http://www.rabbisacks.org/seven-principles-of-jewish-leadership-written-for-the-adam-science-foundation-leadership-programme/> on 7/20/16)

mentorship. Yet Moses sees that when the people have entered the land they will say, “I want to set a king over myself, like all the peoples around me.” But when you have such a king, “he may not take for himself too many horses, and take too many wives, and gather too much treasure for himself.” Instead “he must write for himself two copies of this Torah, taken from the storehouses of the *Kohanim* and *Levi'im*. And he will read it every day of his life so that he learns to fear God and to faithfully observe his commands. And all this he should do so that his heart does not become raised up over his brethren, and turn from the commandment, and instead his years will be prolonged.” God, through Moses, critiques the model of leadership as kingship. It is too busy with power. In the words of R. Sacks, “Power lifts the leader above the people. Influence lifts the people above their former selves.”² Instead this king is to learn from the Torah every day. He is to listen to the word of God. He is to curb his appetites instead of indulging them. In ancient Israel, this stern critique of power, relied on the institutional separation of the offices of king and priest, king and prophet. “Of paramount importance in the history of Israel was the freedom and independence enjoyed by the prophets, their ability to upbraid the kings and princes for their sins. From the beginning of the monarchy, the king was at any moment in peril of rebuke, even of rejection, by the prophets, who reminded him that the kings’ sovereignty was not unlimited, that over the kings’ *mishpat* stood the *mishpat* of *Adonai* – an idea that frequently clashed with the exigencies of government.”³ Secular power was chastised by the carriers of sacred words.

In the view of the Torah, leadership does not equal power. Instead the Torah gives us the vision of leader as teacher. Rabbi Sacks writes, the teacher who is a leader uses, “influence not power, spiritual and intellectual authority rather than coercive force.”⁴

Listening means so much more than not speaking. Nor does it mean never disagreeing, or never putting a different point of view. The judges are counselled to listen to their brethren, but also not to pervert justice. And the kings in Israel were counselled to listen every day to the Torah. What was Moses doing when during the challenges to his leadership, he fell silent, down on his face? He spoke to God. He listened. What Moses did in those moments, we do in prayer. Sometimes people ask, so what are you doing in prayer? My answer is that I am listening. I am listening to the words of the Psalm, to the prayer of the Sages. I am allowing my soul to be carried along. Alternately to soar, or to drop into deep listening. Does a particular passage catch my attention? Why? What is going on for me? Does a passage fail to capture my attention today? Why doesn’t it? I start there, with noticing my response to *Tefillah*.

Why is it worth spending time in prayer? Why is it worth spending another hour on a Sunday morning praying? Because in prayer, we listen to God. This is not an easy task, but it is the secret of a leader. The leader’s ability to listen is why we should, in turn, listen to him or her. Moses, the man who is slow of speech is ultimately the person to whom we should listen, because he has listened. What do you achieve with listening? Is it merely passive? I don’t think so. In listening,

² Ibid.

³ Heschel *Prophets*, Book 2, 259.

⁴ See <https://hbr.org/2016/07/what-great-listeners-actually-do> accessed online 7/20/2016

you both give and receive a gift. You give presence, and you receive the gift of trust. During this month of Av, the month preceding Elul, which comes before the High Holidays, I encourage you to recommit to listening to God. Will you commit to spending regular time listening in prayer? And will you commit to listening to a loved one? Ask him or her a question, and then listen. The practice of listening either to God or to a loved one should increase your ability to do so with the other. Try it this month, and let me know how it goes.

May we as a congregation find the calm to listen. May we have the love to give the gift of listening. May we enjoy receiving the gift of trust.