

Eulogy for Haham Dr. Solomon Gaon

Memorial Services at

Hebrew University February 5, 1995

וה' נתן חכמה לשלמה כאשר דבר לו

"And the Lord gave Solomon wisdom, as He had said He would"

--I Kings 5:26

With this verse does the Haftarah of this Shabbat (*Terumah*) begin. But what does לו ("as He said He would") refer to? Where do we hear of a promise by God to Solomon?

The answer is---in I Kings Chap. 3. There we learn that young King Solomon succeeds to the throne of David. He is untried, an unknown, unfamiliar with the complicated affairs of royal politics and government administration. He has a prophetic dream in Givon in which God appears to him and asks him directly and simply, *שאל מה אֶתְּנוּ לְךָ* -- ask, and I will give it to you. In response, Solomon thanks God, and protests that he is young, callow, inexperienced--and his responsibilities are overwhelming. What he asks for fits into one verse:

ונתת לעבדך לב שומע לשפוט את עמך להבין בין טוב לרע,
כי מי יוכל לשפט את עמך הכבד הזה

"Give Thy servant an understanding (*lit., hearing*) heart
to judge Thy people, that I may discern between good and evil
for who is able to lead Thy great (*lit., heavy*) people"

--I Kings 3:9

God is enormously pleased at Solomon's request which is identified in the divine response as that of *לב נבון וחכם* and his wish is granted. Solomon's wisdom engulfs the world and becomes the stuff of song and legend.

Note what he asks for: *לב שומע* -- a *hearing heart*, not merely *אָזְנוֹ שומעת*, a hearing ear. A hearing heart (translated into English as an "understanding heart") has little to do with his auditory capacity. It has everything to do with his ability to listen, to hear, to understand--with the heart. It implies insight, instinct, sensitivity, compassion, wisdom. A hearing ear is communication over a relatively short distance--from mouth to ear. A hearing heart is far more significant, and it implies communication over longer distances and greater depth: heart to heart...

And what is the function of the "hearing heart?" – להבין בין טוב לרע, "to discern between good and evil," to understand the difference between right and wrong. But this means not merely *to understand* the difference between good and evil but, following the Hebrew which is in the causative form, *to make the difference understood* by his people, i.e., to teach and instruct them in the ways of morality and goodness and nobility and generosity of spirit.

Now, Solomon is completely aware of the enormous difficulty of the task before him. He knows his people--they are עמך הכבד הזה, literally, a "heavy" people--difficult, recalcitrant, unbending, obstinate, and demanding.

I have spoken of the namesake of our beloved Haham Solomon Gaon, Solomon the King, known as החכם מכל איש, the wisest man of all, because a curious parallel obtains between the two of them. In a sense, what we have before us is a *Tale of Two Solomons*. Haham Solomon in so very many ways relived the career of King Solomon the Wise.

* He possessed a לב שומע, a hearing, understanding heart. He looked at people as living, breathing, feeling individuals, not merely as ciphers, as indistinguishable members of some larger aggregate. His ever-present smile bespoke the language of his heart, and even his ever so rare frown was expressive of his overarching humanity and compassion. שלמה המלך החכם was thus a continuation of sorts of החכם שלמה.

* He dedicated his life to teaching Torah, the way to distinguish בין טוב לרע. For he genuinely believed that in the text of Scripture, and the vast literature of the Oral Law, was found the foundation of the moral life that was obligatory for every Jew and Jewess.

* In the course of his career which took him around the globe, he encountered many different types -- Jews who were light and Jews who were heavy; congregants who were a delight, and those who were a wearisome burden; people who were responsive, and those who were inert and indifferent--כי מי יוכל לשפוט את עמך הכבד הזה... Not always was this prince of his people understood and appreciated. Everyone had entree to his remarkably capacious heart, so sensitive to "hearing" the joys and sorrows of every Jew--but not everyone adequately acknowledged that it was there... Like Moses and Solomon and countless other greats of our history, Haham Gaon learned what every authentic Jewish leader must eventually learn: this is an עם כבד, a difficult, often rebellious, strong-willed and single-minded people. *And you must love them nevertheless--with all your heart and soul!*

I am, however, proud to say that on *this* continent, in *this* city, by organizations represented by *these* people, and especially by *this* institution of higher learning, he was held in the highest esteem, cherished, honored, and loved. At Yeshiva, indeed, he developed an embryonic Sephardic Studies Program and nourished it, nurtured it, nursed it until it came into its own maturity which obtains today. In return, we offered him our genuine gratitude and affection and respect. He told me often that his years in the United States and at Yeshiva were his happiest--and that always remain for me a source of consolation and pride.

Indeed, והי נתן חכמה לשלמה כאשר דבר . He was truly a חכם--our Haham. For while his circle of responsibility embraced the world, and while he was never narrow or parochial and he cherished Ashkenazim as well as Sephardim, we all felt a special kinship with him. He reacted to us as to family, and accepted us into the most intimate circle of his friends--with wisdom and a "hearing heart."

Our hearts go out to his beloved family, to Mrs. Gaon and his son and daughter and the grandchildren. Only they know the true extent of their loss, but all of us here would want me to tell you that עמכם אנחנו בצרה, we are with you, heart and soul, in your distress and in your grief. We too have lost very much--more than we can say.

Our Haftarah teaches us the result of this divine gift of Wisdom, of the "hearing heart" -- ויהי שלום בין חירם ובין שלמה -- there was peace in the land. Indeed, true חכמה always leads to שלום. Do we not daily, in the Sephardic ritual, recite the talmudic passage that תלמידי חכמים מרבים שלום בעולם, that scholars or the wise men of Torah increase peace in the world?

Our beloved Haham Solomon Gaon brought with him, as naturally as the sun brings along with it light and warmth, the blessings of Peace. All his life he was a peace-maker, utilizing his חכמה to effectuate peace in home and office, in family and community.

And as we gather here to bid a last and formal farewell to him in reverencing his memory, we pray that he ever rest in peace:

וינוח בשלום על משכבו ונאמר אמן