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Our Time in the King's Room: Thoughts on the Election

I have a story tonight that I told back in 2008 by Rabbi Edward Feinstein. If you were here and you remember it, I apologize for the repeat – the story just seemed so relevant to the season.

There was once a king who ruled his kingdom with wisdom and compassion. As he approached the end of his days, everyone in the kingdom wondered who would be the next ruler. Would it be one of his children? An adviser? A general?

To keep the contenders from fighting over the throne the king put his instructions in a letter, which was to be opened only on the day of his death. It named the person who would succeed him on the throne.

When the day arrived, the kingdom mourned its wise and caring leader. And then all eyes turned to the king's letter to see who would rule in his place. With great ceremony the prime minister opened the letter and read the instruction. Whom had the king chosen? Not one of his children, nor an adviser, nor a general. The king had chosen the jester. The jester would be crowned king!

The jester? Everyone in the kingdom thought this must be a joke. How could a fool be king? But such were the king's instructions. And so the jester was brought before the royal court. Royal retainers removed his jester costume and cloaked him in the robes of the king. They removed his jester hat and crowned him king. And they sat him on the royal throne. At first the situation was awkward- for the new king as well as his kingdom. But over time it turned out to have been a brilliant choice. The jester was every bit as wise, as compassionate and as insightful as the old king had been. He listened to everyone who came before him with respect and with kindness. He used his powers to bring peace and prosperity to his kingdom. To the amazement of all in the royal court, the jester came to be a superb ruler. And everyone in the royal court- indeed, everyone in the kingdom- came to love him.

There was a mystery surrounding the jester-king, however. Every so often he would retreat to a distant room in the palace, a room to which only he had the key. For a few hours he would lock himself in that room. And then he would return to the throne and resume his duties. Most members of the royal court assumed he went to the room to think, to meditate, or perhaps to pray. They accepted the mystery as part of their beloved king's life.

Once an ambassador came from a far-off land. The ambassador spent many hours with the king. He grew to appreciate the king's wisdom and his kindness. It was rare, he thought, for a king to listen as carefully as this king listened. It was unusual for a king to seek advice from

everyone who appeared before him. It was remarkable for a king to care as deeply and to work as hard for the good of his subjects as this king did.

When the ambassador noticed the king occasionally disappeared into his distant room, he wondered, “What does the king do in that locked room? Why does he go there? What is it in that room that helps him rule with such wisdom and kindness?” The ambassador just couldn’t let go of the mystery. So one day when the king retreated to his room, the ambassador secretly followed behind. When the king closed the door, the ambassador crouched down and peered through the keyhole. There he took in the king’s great secret.

In the privacy of the room, the king took off his crown and his royal robes and put on the costume of a jester. Around and around the room he danced, the jester’s dance, making funny faces and singing the silly songs of a jester. Then he stood before a great mirror and recited to himself: “Never forget who you are. You may look and sound and act like the king, but you are only the jester. You are only the jester pretending to be the king. Never forget who you are.”

Now the ambassador understood it all. He understood the source of the king’s deep wisdom. He understood that the king’s kindness and greatness emanated from his humility. And now he knew the secret of the king’s humility. The knowledge made the ambassador love the king even more deeply. He vowed his everlasting loyalty to the king. And he vowed to keep the king’s secret.

Over the years the king and the ambassador grew close. One day when they were alone, the ambassador confessed what he had done and what he had seen. “I promise you on my life that I will never reveal your secret,” he declared. “But there is one thing I have never been able to figure out; of all the people in the royal court who the old king could have chosen to succeed him, why did he choose you? Why did he choose the jester?”

The king smiled at this friend and replied, “And who do you think he was before he became king?” (“The Jester” as retold by Rabbi Edward Feinstein in *Capturing the Moon*, 2008)

I love this story. There’s something so charming about the jester-king, the surprising choice for a leader who becomes beloved throughout the kingdom. We feel so much suspense when the envelope is opened, when the people find out who will guide them and make such important decisions in the years to come. We are relieved that the transfer of power from one leader to the next goes so peacefully. We are comforted that a leader was chosen who is so wise, compassionate, and insightful. A leader who listens with respect and kindness, and who uses great powers to bring peace and prosperity to the people throughout the land.

It’s difficult not to see this story through the lens of our presidential election. As we continue to watch attack ads, read outrageous headlines, and scratch our heads about so many things concerning this election, we might very well yearn for our own jester-king (or queen). It’s part of why this story is so appealing.

Yet the method in which our story's new leader is chosen leaves a lot to be desired. Under this kind of envelope system things could go either way. Perhaps the king shows good judgment in choosing the next leader, but perhaps he doesn't. Maybe the next ruler has poor leadership skills or exploits his people. And maybe there's a little too much nepotism at work.

For all the flaws in our electoral system – and there are too many to list – I'm not quite ready to give up on the democratic process. So yes, of course, we should go to the polls on November 8. Or volunteer to work at the polls. Or volunteer to get out the vote.

But there's something more to the story that's worth exploring. It's what happens behind closed doors, when the king takes off his crown and royal robes and puts on his jester costume. On this Erev Rosh Hashanah, this is our time in the king's room, when we take off our robes, our disguises, the outer layers that we hide behind. We enter this communal space so that we can be our real selves. This is what we're here for.

Of course, we're curious what our candidates are like behind closed doors. But we get that kind of news all the time. Tonight we are for something else. We are here to get quiet and ask ourselves – who are we? What are the truths inside each of us? We go into that room and we look carefully at who we are. "Never forget who you are," says the jester-king.

At a time when it's unclear who will win our presidential election, and what that will mean for our country, it's worth remembering the jester-king's advice to himself. When many of us feel paralysis, or anxiety about the direction of our country, or a sense that things are not going to get better anytime fast, when we come to understand that there are real limits to what we can control, we can still refuse to forget who we are. We can remember and recommit to our values and our ideals, and we can continue to enact them in our lives as best as possible.

Because our country needs us, no matter who wins the election.

L'shanah tovah, may it be a sweet new year.