

Parashat Pinchas 5779, 2019:

Who Should Lead the Jewish People?

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof and Pittsburgh, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Both our *parasha* and *Parashat Korach* contain an expression that refers to Hashem's unique knowledge of mankind:

They [Moshe and Aharon] fell on their faces and said, "O G-d, the G-d of the spirits of all flesh, if one man sins, shall You be angry with the whole congregation?" (*Sefer Bamidbar* 16:22)

"Let the L-rd, the G-d of spirits of all flesh, appoint a man over the congregation" (*Sefer Bamidbar* 27:16, these, and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

The original Hebrew for "the G-d of the spirits of all flesh" is "*Elokei haruchot l'kol basar.*" In the course of his commentary on Parashat Korach, Rashi (1040-1105) bases himself upon *Midrash Tanchuma, Parashat Korach* 7, and explains our phrase as "He who knows the innermost thoughts of man" ("*yoday'ah machshavot*"):

...But You know the thoughts of man; You know who has committed a sin and who has not committed a sin. You know who has rebelled and who has not rebelled. You know the spirit [i.e. nature] of each one of them. Therefore, the Torah utilizes the expression: "*Elokei haruchot l'kol basar*" ("the G-d of the spirits of all flesh," translation my own).

In our *parasha*, Rashi explicates this expression in a different manner: "...the unique nature of every living person (*da'ato shel kol echad v'echad*) is manifestly evident before

You, O' Ruler of the world, and [You know] that they are not similar to one another..." (27:16) In contrast to his first explanation of *Elokei haruchot l'kol basar*, focusing upon people's thought processes and behaviors, here Rashi emphasizes the *mahut adam* — Hashem's knowledge of the fundamental essence of each person and every detail of their being. Taken in tandem, he is teaching us that the Master of the Universe knows all aspects of mankind, including our thoughts, motivations and intentions. In short, He knows the spirit of each of us.

In contrast to Rashi's comments, the beloved Chasidic *rebbe*, Rav Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev *zatzal* (1740-1810), one of the greatest advocates of the Jewish people, simultaneously emphasizes and reinterprets the words "*l'kol basar*" ("all flesh") that conclude our phrase, "*Elokei haruchot l'kol basar*:"

A human being is, after all, comprised of flesh and blood. As a result, he has numerous needs that must be fulfilled in pursuit of his livelihood (*parnassah*). [They are, in fact, so diverse in nature,] that, on occasion, they may very well cause one to be unable to serve Hashem at all times (*b'tamidut*). (*Kedushat Levi*, Parashat Pinchas, s.v. *yivkode Hashem*, this and the following translations my own)

Rav Levi Yitzchak recognizes that mankind is imperfect; as such, there will inevitably be times when the pursuit of *parnassah* will negatively impact our service of Hashem. Based upon his boundless love for the Jewish people, Rav Levi Yitzchak presents this observation in a non-pejorative manner, and intimates that this fundamental human failing should never drive a wedge between the Almighty and His people.

Rav Levi Yitzchak extends this notion, suggesting that the ideal Jewish leader, like Hashem Himself, should not only accept man's inherently flawed nature, but be willing

and able to be *melamade zechut* (find merit) in our actions:

This, then, is the meaning of: “Let the L-rd, the G-d of spirits of all flesh, appoint a man over the congregation,” that is, a judge and a leader who will continuously be *melamade zechut* on the Jewish people — just like You, Hashem, are *melamade zechut* on an individual who does not continuously serve You [due to the daily demands of making a living].

In Rav Levi Yitzchak’s view, Moshe was beseeching Hashem to choose his successor based upon the capacity to find the good in the Jewish people — even when their actions would eventually fall far short of what they ideally should be. In this sense, a true leader of the Jewish people is one who focuses upon the possibilities and promise of our nation, rather than upon our pitfalls. Hashem found this crucial quality in Yehoshua, about whom the Torah states:

The L-rd said to Moses, “Take for yourself Joshua the son of Nun, a man of **spirit** (*ish asher ruach bo*), and you shall lay your hand upon him. And you shall present him before Eleazar the kohen and before the entire congregation, and you shall command him in their presence. You shall bestow some of your majesty upon him so that all the congregation of the children of Israel will take heed.” (27:18-20)

Like our teacher *Moshe Rabbeinu*, Yehoshua was blessed with the capacity to be *melamade zechut* upon the entire Jewish people. This, I believe, is the meaning of the phrase, “*ish asher ruach bo*,” that Hashem used when He presented Yehoshua as the next leader of *klal Yisrael* (the Jewish people). Significantly, “*ruach*” is the very same word used to describe the Almighty as “*Elokei haruchot l’kol basar*.”

May Hashem continue to be *melamade zechut* upon us and bring the *Masiach* (Messiah), the “*ish asher ruach bo*,” speedily and in our time. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>
They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org> using the search criteria Etengoff and the *parasha*'s name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: [**http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpd**](http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpd)

*** I have posted 164 of [**Rabbi Soloveitchik's English language audio**](#) *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.