

Parshiot Chukat - Balak 5780, 2020:

*In the Very Same Manner a Man Speaks to His Friend*

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 Yecheiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The Torah has many poetic passages that engage our minds and cause our hearts to soar. Quite paradoxically, a number of these sections were uttered by none other than Bilaam, the evil prophet from the nations of the world whom we meet in Parashat Balak. My *rebbe* and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as “the Rav” by his students and followers, described Bilaam’s spiritually inspiring language in the following manner:

The prophecy of Bilaam differs from that of Moshe Rabbenu in terms of the mellifluous language, use of metaphor and panoramic visions of the end of days. Who can compare to Bilaam in his polished and elegant speech? ... When a Jew enters the synagogue each morning, he recites a verse of Bilaam’s prophecy: “How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places O Israel.” (*Sefer Bamidbar* 24:5, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Darosh Darash Yosef: Discourses of Rav Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik on the Weekly Parashah*, Rabbi Avishai C. David, editor, page 358.)

As the Rav notes, Bilaam’s prophetic language and its motifs differ widely from that of Moshe Rabbenu. In addition, *Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah* (Vilna) *Parashat Naso* 14:20 lists a variety of factors that differentiate their prophecies, including three qualities that characterized Moshe’s encounters with Hashem:

Moshe had three attributes regarding his prophetic experiences with the Almighty that were not shared by Bilaam: Moshe spoke with Him while standing at his full height...whereas

Bilaam spoke with G-d only once he had fallen to the ground... Moshe spoke with Hashem *peh el peh* — in a direct manner — whereas Bilaam did not. Moshe spoke with Hashem *panim el panim* — “face to face” [that is, in a clear and direct fashion], whereas Bilaam only spoke with the Almighty through *mashalim* (parables). (This and the following translations my own.)

In my estimation, Moshe’s communications with Hashem “while standing at his full height” indicate the esteem the Almighty had for him, and the sense of equality with which Moshe was treated by the Master of the Universe. We must remember that these prophetic dialogues were the most profound existential encounters that finite humankind could ever achieve with the Infinite Other. As such, the greatest prophet of all time spoke to the Creator while standing at his full height, rather than in abject obeisance.

Moreover, I believe the unique manner in which these prophetic encounters were conducted, *peh el peh* and *panim el panim*, underscore the passionate desire of Hashem to communicate with Moshe on the deepest possible level. This idea is given powerful voice in the following passage from *Pesikta Zutarta, Bamidbar, Parashat Beha’alotecha*, 12:6:

Even though I [Hashem] have chosen many prophets, I speak with them in visions [of physical manifestations] and dreams. This is not the case regarding Moshe with whom I speak *peh el peh*. Moreover, the Torah states: “And Hashem spoke to Moshe *panim el panim* — in the very same manner that a man speaks to his friend...” (*Sefer Shemot* 33:11) And how is this to be explained? This means that Hashem spoke to him neither while he was in a trance nor in a dream, but rather, in a vision [of absolute verbal clarity (Rashi)].

In my view, the phrase, “in the very same manner that a man speaks to his friend,” encapsulates the nature and purpose of Hashem’s communications with Moshe. For just as Hashem was surely Moshe’s *Yedid Nefesh* — Beloved of the Soul, so, too, was Moshe the one and only human being with whom the Holy One blessed be He could share His deepest prophecies. Herein, an idea that the Rav utilized regarding *Avraham Avinu*’s unique relationship with Hashem comes to mind: The Almighty was lonesome and anxious to find

a companion. (Rabbi Joseph b. Soloveitchik, *The Emergence of Ethical Man*, Michael S. Berger editor, page 155) When it came to the nature and manner of the prophetic revelations Moshe received from Hashem, he, too, appears to be precisely such a companion.

With Hashem's help and our fervent desire, may we, too, seek His friendship, and ever reach out to Him as our *Yedid Nefesh*. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom, and may Hashem in His great mercy remove the *magafah* from *klal Yisrael* and from all the nations of the world.

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* 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.