

A Lesson for Leaders

On the day that Moses had finished setting up the tabernacle... the leaders of Israel, heads of their ancestral houses, the leaders of the tribes, who were over those who were enrolled, made offerings. (Numbers 7:1-2; NRSV)

In the Book of Exodus we read about the people freely contributing to the building of the Tabernacle. By the time we reach chapter 7 of the Book of Numbers the Tabernacle is completed, furnished, anointed, consecrated.

Suddenly the twelve tribal leaders of Israel appear, obviously intent on making some serious offerings. Read about these offerings in Numbers 7. This is a challenging passage in its apparent tedious repetition. Be patient! Settle into the text. Read aloud, perhaps taking turns with a friend. What do you notice?

The high rank of the leaders is certainly stressed. The offerings of each individual leader are identical. And why does Moses have to be instructed by the Lord to accept their offerings (7:4-5)? Ponder these questions... what is God trying to teach us here? To stimulate our reflections, we can turn to the insights of traditional Jewish interpreters:

The sudden appearance of the tribal leaders at this point in the story certainly bothered the rabbis whose voices speak to us through the midrash (Jewish storytelling traditions). They recall the backdrop to this passage: the story of the building of the tabernacle in Exodus 35. Why, they wonder, were these leaders nowhere to be seen when Moses called for the tabernacle to be built? Why did they appear only after the tabernacle was built, contributing just a few precious stones to the making of the priestly vestments (Ex 35:27)? They were the heads of ancestral houses, the ones whom you might expect to be actively setting an example of generous giving; yet they were the last to give.

The midrash imagines that when Moses issued the call “to all the congregation of the Israelites” (35:4), the leaders were offended. “Moses should

have spoken to us before giving a general directive to the people,” they said. Displeased, they withheld their offerings until later, thinking that the people would not be responsive and that they would then emerge to ‘save the day’ with a grandiose show of their own offerings.

But they had underestimated the generosity of the people, “everyone whose spirit was willing” (35:21). The Israelites gave and gave until the tabernacle was built, and Moses had to call a halt: That’s enough! No more! (36:6).

So the tribal leaders realized there was nothing left to contribute. All they had given were a few precious stones for the priestly garments.

In the Exodus story the leaders were taught a bitter lesson. Now here in the Book of Numbers, says the midrash, they hurry to make amends. As the story unfolds, Nethanel comes up with the bright idea that wagons and oxen are required since the tabernacle is to be transported. This accounts for the sudden appearance of the leaders, and their particular choice of gifts.

Another delightful detail of the midrash focuses on the Hebrew title of the leaders: *hanesi'im*. In Exodus 35:27 it appears with the letter *yod* omitted. Since the letter *yod* represents the name of God, the midrash interprets this as divine disapproval of the leaders’ behavior. Moses is fully aware of this, which is why in Numbers 7:4-5 he awaits the Lord’s instruction before being willing to accept their gifts. •

Reflection:

How do you respond to this midrashic interpretation? What important moral lesson/s does it hold, and how does it speak to the human complexities of your own family/parish/faith community?

Sources: *Midrash Rabbah: Numbers Vol II*, edited by Freedman and Simon (London/New York: Soncino Press, 1983); Schorsch, *Canon Without Closure* (New York, 2007). Scripture: NRSV.

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