



5 ways to be generous

The tribal leaders in our reflection (overleaf) are depicted in the midrash as succumbing to a moment of petty jealousy and small-mindedness. It is through the example set by the people that they unleash their spirit of generosity and a capacity to give. We are led to think about the highs and lows of our own generosity and community spirit. Here are five ways to be generous...

Time. Time is precious, because life is precious. When we give of our time we give of our lives, our presence. How we spend our time says a lot about who we are, our priorities and values.

Talent. The skill of a craft, the gift of an artist, the training of a profession, the empowerment of knowledge, the fruit of a work.. these are gifts to be offered and used for the common good.

Relationship. The gift of self, of personal presence, warmth, affection, conversation, friendship, intimacy, prayer. Our circles of love fuel our efforts to reach out in love

and to include others in our circle.

Enthusiasm. Praise, encouragement, smiles, affirmation, applause. Giving generously in this way, as appropriately deserved and needed, can mean all the difference between good people pursuing the lifegiving path...or giving up through discouragement.

Funds. Life isn't about money, but the gift of financial resources can surely transform a situation and unleash possibility. Need we say more.

Continue to discuss ways of generosity that give glory to God and make a real difference in the world.

Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.

Why reflect on Torah?

Light of Torah encourages Christians to reflect on the Hebrew scriptures, with attention to the methods and insights of Jewish tradition. There are a number of reasons for this ministry. One very practical reason is that this approach can help parish audiences to appreciate bible passages which ordinarily appear too difficult, tedious, or confusing to the lay reader. How often, for instance, do Christians run from a slab of cultic detail in Leviticus and take refuge in the more 'palatable' stories of the Gospels. Some have even given up trying to read their Old Testament. Yet the Church calls us to embrace both Testaments as the Word of God.

Enter the Jewish midrash: one traditional interpretative approach. Delightful and compelling stories abound from the fertile minds of the rabbis as they 'read between the lines' of the sacred text, illuminating and enlarging its meaning. These are not fanciful wanderings but sustained, creative insights, grounded in the soil of prayer, community, tradition. With their help, parishioners discover fresh energy, fascination and joy in pondering their Scriptures. An example follows.



Numbers 4:21—7:89

Naso: 'lift up'



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Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Numbers 4:21—7:89

Some weeks ago in the Book of Exodus we read about how the people freely contributed to the building of the Tabernacle. In today's Torah portion the Tabernacle is completed, furnished, anointed, consecrated. Suddenly the 12 tribal leaders of Israel appear, obviously intent on making some serious offerings. Read about these offerings in Chapter 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 treasured insights can we unearth in God's Word?

Tasting Torah

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)

Having read the whole of this passage about the offerings of the leaders in Chapter 7, 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 your observations and questions with a friend.

Touching Torah

The sudden appearance of the tribal leaders at this point in the story bothers the rabbis whose voices speak to us through the midrash. They recall the backdrop to this passage: the story of the building of the tabernacle in Exodus 35. Why, they wonder, were these leaders no where 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.

How do these observations and links made between texts stimulate your creative listening to God's Word? Continue to discuss with a friend in havrutah.

Depthing Torah

Creatively, yet staying attentive to the text, 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.

Doing Torah

From your own reflections, 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?



More from the midrash

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.

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