For Shabbat July 19--Parashat Pinehas

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Thoughts on Parashat Pinehas

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

In this week's Torah reading, God tells Moses to ascend the mountain and look at the promised land. Although Moses is granted this view, he is told that he will not be allowed to enter the land. He will die outside the land, while the people he led will go ahead without him.

Moses responds: "God, Lord of spirits of all flesh, appoint someone to lead the people." Moses does not want the Israelites to be like a flock without a shepherd. When referring to God, Moses used an unusual description, Elo-hei ha-ruhot le-khol basar, Lord of spirits of all flesh. What exactly does this phrase mean?

Some commentators explain that Moses was indicating how complex it was to lead the people of Israel. They were a large group, with many ideas and many predilections. God, who is the Lord of spirits of all flesh, understands the uniqueness of each Israelite--knows each of their spirits. Thus, He is able to know the right person to assume leadership for the nation. Other commentators suggest that since God is the Lord of spirits of all flesh, He will know which individual's spirit is suitable for the task of leadership at this juncture in Israelite history.

I would like to suggest another explanation. Moses himself was a complex character, made up of conflicting internal "spirits". He is described as being the most humble of men; yet, the Midrash notes that Moses had strong negative tendencies and he had to work very hard to keep them under control. The Torah describes Moses' remarkable patience with his people; yet, it also records his anger and bitterness at them, when they failed to live up to expectation. Moses, because of his internal conflicts and "spirits", was the ideal leader for the Israelites as they left Egypt and headed for the promised land. That generation of Israelites was also filled with internal turmoil. They had been raised as slaves, and had to adapt to the challenges of freedom. They suffered due to their misjudgments; a new generation had to be born in freedom, and that generation was the one that would enter Canaan. Yet, even the new generation was filled with internal doubts, frustrations, rebelliousness. Because Moses himself had

internal conflicts, he was able to understand and even sympathize with the internal conflicts of his people.

So Moses asked God, who Alone understood the internal conflicts of all human beings, to appoint a new leader to bring the Israelites into Canaan.

In response to Moses, God asked him to transfer his leadership to Joshua, "a man in whom is the spirit" (ish asher ruah bo). Moses had described God as "Lord of the spirits" (spirits in the plural); God described Joshua as one in whom is the spirit (spirit in the singular). Whereas Moses--the man of internal spirits and conflicts--was the right leader for the generation of the wilderness, God indicated that a new type of leadership was now required as the Israelites prepared to enter the promised land. The nation needed a leader who was not plagued with internal conflicts, but who had one clear "spirit". His responsibility was to unify the people, to prepare them to wage war on the Canaanite nations, to organize the division of the land among the Israelite tribes. Joshua was a general who knew what had to be done, and who had the single-minded personality to fulfill his duties. Indeed, Joshua was one of the most successful Israelite leaders of the biblical period.

Different leaders reflect different personalities. Some are complex and conflicted; others are single-minded and clear in their strategy. Each generation and each community need the leadership that is suitable to their own time and place.