Generosity of Spirit: Thoughts for Parashat Pinehas

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Pinehas

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

As Moses's life draws to a close, he asks the Almighty to appoint a successor who will lead the people into the Promised Land. God tells him to place his hand (singular) on Joshua's head as a means of transferring authority to him in the presence of the people. But the Torah states (Bemidbar 27:23): "He laid his hands (plural) upon him."

In his book, "An Adventure in Torah," Rabbi Isaac Sassoon draws our attention to a midrash, quoted by Rashi: "Moses showed generosity; God had said lay one hand but he laid both." Although it is generally forbidden to add or subtract from God's commandments, Rabbi Sassoon notes that Moses "had no compunction allowing his generous impulse to broaden the one-hand command into a two-handed gesture" (p. 335).

What exactly is the difference between laying one or both hands on Joshua? In either case, the public understood that leadership was being transferred. Why does the midrash view Moses's action as reflecting generosity?

The issue revolves around how we understand fulfilling our duties.

A person can meet an obligation in an accurate way but without necessarily feeling any special feeling about it. One does what one is supposed to do and no more is required. On the other hand, a person might fulfill an obligation not merely as a duty but as a meaningful gesture. If Moses had laid one hand

on Joshua, that would have been fine. The deed would have been accomplished appropriately. But Moses went beyond duty; he demonstrated generosity of soul. He overflowed with a spirit of love and selflessness.

People can go through life performing correctly but perfunctorily. They say “good morning” from habit and good manners, not because their heart prods them to reach out in friendship. They do their work honestly, day by day, but without any particular enthusiasm. They “lay one hand” on their labors, not “both hands.” Even in religious life, they perform the mitzvoth precisely but without “generosity of spirit.” They do what they have to do but no more. They pay their dues, write their charitable checks simply as duties and not as expressions of real emotional commitment.

We show “generosity” when we go beyond what is merely expected of us, when we put heart into our deeds.

And that is what Moses taught us when he laid both hands on Joshua. He truly wanted Joshua to succeed. He loved and respected his successor. He spontaneously went beyond what God had required of him.

Our lives are enriched and enlivened when we live with generosity of spirit. This is a blessing…and a challenge.