

Nachshon: A Midrash on a Midrash

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Many of us are familiar with the midrashic account (SOTAH 37a) of what happened when the Children of Israel stood on the shoreline of the Sea of Reeds. No tribe was brave enough to be the first into the sea. Then, suddenly, Nachshon ben Amidav jumped into the water. Seeing this, Moses stopped praying and raised his staff to part the waters, as God had commanded him.

This is one version of the story, and there are others (SOTAH 36b; BA-MIDBAR RABBAH 13:4). But none explains how it happened that Nachshon took this bold step. I believe that it happened the following way. Simply put, Nachshon was pushed! Picture it: the Children of Israel huddled on the shore with Pharaoh and the Egyptians in hot pursuit. The people, frightened with nowhere left to go, trapped and sensing their doom, crowding as close as possible to the edge of the water as the Egyptians thundered closer and closer with their mighty chariots.

And then it happened: Nachshon was pushed into the water. It was no one's fault and we don't know who pushed him in. Perhaps he wasn't even pushed, but rather the force of the people pressing against the shoreline left no more room, and into the water Nachshon fell.

At that moment there were several possibilities. Nachshon could begin swimming back to the shore, or he could start swimming to the other side, or he could begin to flounder and drown. I believe that one of two

things happened. Either he began to drown and the people jumped in to save him, and once in the water they continued to the other side. Or, Nachshon began to swim towards the other side and when the people saw him succeeding, they followed. In either case, the sheer force of all the people in the water caused the waters to part.

We learn a number of lessons from this reading of the midrashic incident.

First, the paradigm reflects what sometimes happens in our lives. We are pushed into situations that we do not want to be in in the first place. This is what happened to Nachshon when he entered the water. Once we are in a situation not of our choosing, we face the question of what to do next.

The first scenario reminds us that when we find ourselves in circumstances where we feel like we are drowning, there are others who can help us, as it says, "Israel will be redeemed only when it forms one single band: when all are united, they will receive the presence of the Shekhinah." (MIDRASH TANCHUMA, NITZAVIM) The second scenario teaches that even in difficult situations, if we don't allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by what has happened, we can overcome obstacles or even take advantage of what has happened to us and go forward.

Like Nachshon, we are the ones who cross over to the other side. Our name *Ivrim* (Hebrews) comes from the three letter root *ayin-vet-resh* which means to cross. It is both a name as well as an existential description of who we are—constantly reaching for new shores, new lands, new realities. But how to get from here to there can be a hard question. With our past chasing us and our future on the other side, we find ourselves pushed into situations that we had never imagined. But we can get to that opposite shore either by seeking help from others, or by digging within for strength and guidance. As it is said, *Then the Lord said to Moshe, 'Why do you cry out to Me? Tell the Israelites to go forward.'* (EXODUS 14:15)