

Hashem said to Moshe, “Why do you cry out to me? Speak to Bnei Yisrael and let them journey forth.” (14:15)

The *Talmud Sotah* 36 quotes Rabbi Meir who relates that when the tribes stood at the banks of the Red Sea, a debate arose among them concerning who would enter the waters first. Each one vied for the honor of being the *rosh*, head, leader, who would set the example for the rest of the nation to follow. Rabbi Yehudah disputed this interpretation, asserting that being first was the last thing on their minds. On the contrary, they each eschewed being first, leaving the “honors” for the other tribe. They both agree that it was Nachshon *ben* Aminadav of the tribe of Yehudah who took the first plunge. As reward for this heroic endeavor, his *Shevet*, tribe, Yehudah, merited *memshalah/malchus*, monarchy. This is alluded to by the *pasuk* in *Tehillim* (114:2), “Yehudah was His sanctuary and Yisrael his dominion.” Why did Yehudah merit monarchy? “The sea saw it and fled.” In other words: When Nachshon of *Shevet Yehudah* entered the water, the sea responded by “fleeing.” Literally – it “split” and *Klal Yisrael* walked through on dry land.

We notice a textual discrepancy that we need to address. *Haysah Yehudah l'kodsho*, “Yehudah was his sanctuary.” *Haysah* is written in the feminine form. If the *pasuk* is referring to Yehudah, it should have written *hayah*, in the masculine form. *Horav Yosef Tzvi HaLevi Dunner*, explains that, while we know that Nachshon was the one who went into the water, it is important to discern why he did and who motivated him to do it. Nachshon was a great man, and he was willing to sacrifice his life to glorify Hashem, but from where, from whom, did he garner the strength of conviction to act with such courage and commitment? He had a grandmother, Tamar, wife of Yehudah, who imbued him with the superhuman strength to act so decisively. She was confronted with the choice of her own painful death or saving herself by implicating Yehudah, who would be publicly humiliated. Rather than hurt Yehudah, she chose self-sacrifice. This heroic act became part of the DNA of her descendants. Life at the expense of another Jew’s pain and embarrassment is not a life worth living. Nachshon was her reward.

Mersiras nefesh, self-sacrifice, for the sake of a *mitzvah*, is a powerful indication of one’s love and devotion to Hashem. In his twilight years, the holy *Baba Sali, zl*, was physically very weak. Nonetheless, he maintained his overriding commitment to fulfilling *mitzvos* in accordance with every *halachic* stringency. He fulfilled certain *mitzvos* only by manifesting incredible self-sacrifice. One such *mitzvah* was *Kiddush Levanah*, Blessing the New Moon. One month, the sky remained overcast for days, not allowing a clear view of the moon. On the last possible night for reciting the blessing, the sky was once again heavily overcast. The *Baba Sali* went outdoors, accompanied by a group of his close followers. He waited for hours, and the moon still did not appear. Finally, almost as if out of desperation, he took his walking stick, raised it towards the sky, and waved it back and forth. Suddenly, the clouds spread, and the moon appeared in all of its brilliance. The group immediately recited the blessing. Upon conclusion, the clouds returned, and the sky was once again overcast.

Horav Meir Abuchatzera, zl, son of the *Baba Sali*, turned to his father and asked, "Do not *Chazal* say that, when one is the beneficiary of a *neis*, miracle, he pays for it with his accumulated merits? (In other words, by having a miracle made in his merit, the *Baba Sali* was diminishing his own *z'chusim*, merits.) His father replied, "It was not a miracle that you saw; rather, it was the force generated by an act of *mesiras nefesh*. When I was younger and living in Morocco during the World War, the government issued a proclamation prohibiting all citizens from leaving their homes at night. This arduous curfew took its toll on all of the citizens. Many who chanced going out at night became victim to the bombs and gunfire that were common fare during the war. It was the night for *Kiddush Levanah*, and I felt obligated to take a chance. I went out and recited *Kiddush Levanah* – despite the curfew."

Horav Yeshayah Pinto, Shlita, sums it up. When a person risks his life (sincerely – not just for attention) for a *mitzvah*, that *mitzvah* becomes a part of the cosmic fiber that surrounds him. The *mitzvah* becomes an eternal deposit in his cache of merits; it not only sustains him in *Olam Habba*, the World to Come, but protects him even in this world. Thus, we understand how Tamar's *mesiras nefesh* inspired the behavior of her descendants throughout the generations.