

Bnei Yisrael came within the sea on dry land. (14:22)

Did all of the people immediately enter the Red Sea? Nachshon ben Aminadov made the first move. Everybody followed his lead. *Chazal* (*Sotah* 36b) quote a debate that takes place between Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Yehudah. Rabbi Meir teaches that when the Jewish People stood at the banks of the Red Sea the tribes began to contend with one another, each one declaring, "I am going in first!" Rabbi Yehudah disagrees. He claims it was the opposite, with each tribe giving the "honor" of entering the water first to the other tribe. In the end, it was Nachshon ben Aminadov who took the plunge and walked in until the water reached his mouth. He then cried out to Hashem: "Save me, G-d, for the waters have reached until my soul" (*Tehillim* 69:2).

In his *Dudaei Reuven*, *Horav Reuven Katz, zl*, explains that Rabbi Yehudah and Rabbi Meir are really not in disagreement. In fact, this apparent disagreement actually represents the foibles of human nature. Anyone who has ever been party to a meeting convened to discuss a pressing issue, and to devise a plan for addressing the problem, has been privy to such debate. The assembled people come to a unanimous decision that they must establish an institution/organization that will officially deal with the issue at hand. Once they all heard the problem and were inspired by the passionate speeches, the decision was unanimous. Now, however, when it comes to actually volunteering to support the institution – everyone volunteers his neighbor. They are willing to be "on call" whenever necessary, as long as it is not during the day or night, weekend, etc. In other words, as long as the institutions are in the theoretical stage, everyone wants to participate. Once action must be taken, they casually move to the back of the line.

It was no different when our ancestors stood at the banks of the Red Sea. Moshe *Rabbeinu* declared, "Let us move forward into the water!" Everyone excitedly cried out, "I am first!" This is Rabbi Meir's opinion. Rabbi Yehudah interjects, "Perhaps that was their original reaction, but, when they came to the water, they each encouraged the 'other one' to enter. How fortunate are we that Nachshon ben Aminadov took the initiative. Otherwise, who knows?"

Let me follow this up with an anecdotal vignette that underscores Nachshon's eternal contribution and what we should derive from his action. It was *Chol Hamoed Pesach*; a young *kollel* fellow entered a *shul* between *Minchah* and *Maariv*. The congregants who were assembled took notice.

Since he appeared to be a scholar, they asked him to deliver a short *dvar Torah*. He demurred, claiming that he was not a speaker. The congregants were relentless, asking him again and again, until he acceded to their request.

"*Rabbosai!*" he began. "In two days, we will be celebrating *Shvii shel Pesach*, when we will read a description of the Splitting of the Red Sea from the Torah. Everyone knows (or at least can imagine) what went through the people's minds at that moment. Hundreds of thousands of men, women and children were all standing between the waters of the Red Sea and the approaching

Egyptian army. The fear and trepidation that enveloped them must have been overwhelming. After over two centuries of misery, pain, persecution and murder, they were finally liberated, only to meet their deaths either by drowning or at the hands of their oppressors. What should they do?

“During those moments of fear and hesitation, one man – by the name of Gershon ben Aminadov – moved forward.” Suddenly the congregants, realizing that the speaker had erred, “quietly” corrected him: “Nachshon,” not Gershon. The speaker ignored their correction and continued speaking: “Gershon hesitated. On the one hand, he felt it was the correct and proper action to take, but, on the other hand, he thought, ‘What about my wife and children who would be left alone (if the water does not split and I die)?’”

During this time the congregants were getting upset. How could he, a learned scholar, continue to make the same mistake over and over again? It was Nachshon, not Gershon!

“Therefore,” continued the speaker, “seeing that unless someone made a move and jumped into the water, nothing would happen (clearly an act of *mesiras nefesh*, self-sacrifice, was critical at this point), Gershon ben Aminadov finally decided that he was going to take the plunge. Suddenly, out of nowhere, Nachshon ben Aminadov ran forward and jumped in! He beat his brother by a few seconds. Indeed, had Nachshon not run forward, history would have recorded Gershon as the one who had catalyzed the miracle. The entire miracle is identified with Nachshon ben Aminadov. Why? Was not Gershon the one who was about to jump in? But he did not. It was Nachshon. Thus, he receives the credit.”

A similar idea applies to so many *mitzvos*. Let us take *minyan*, for example. It takes ten Jews to complete a *minyan*. Everyone else *davens with* a *minyan*. The first ten, however, comprise the *minyan*. They receive the bonus reward for providing a *minyan* for the others. It is all about who arrives first. That is the way concerning all *mitzvos*.