

Parsha: Beshalach

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Beshalach (Exodus 13:17-17:16)

What it takes to be the first one to jump in.

Moses orchestrates a full year of plagues which completely debilitates Egyptian society. After the climactic 10th and final plague, the slaying of the First Born, Pharaoh finally agrees to let the Jews leave Egypt.

But, like any good megalomaniac, Pharaoh changes his mind and chases after them. When the Jews look in their rear-view mirrors and see the thundering Egyptian chariots fast approaching, panic spreads. The Jews feel trapped. There is no other outlet but the sea – the Red Sea.

The Jews begin to berate Moses: "Why did you have to bring us out here to die in the desert? You should have just left us alone to work for the Egyptians!" (Exodus 14:11-12)

Ludicrous! How could the Jews, after 210 years of intolerable suffering in Egypt, complain to Moses for liberating them?!

About 20 years ago, an incident occurred in Stockholm where terrorists captured and held hostages. The hostages were abused both physically and emotionally. At the news conference following their release, the hostages all spoke in complimentary, glowing terms about their captors! Psychologists have since identified the "Stockholm Syndrome," whereby prisoners develop comfort and satisfaction in captivity.

For the Jews in Egypt, life was comfortable. In slavery, the rations may be meager and the bed made of straw, but there's an up-side as well: all one's needs are provided, and there are no challenging decisions to be made. No laundry, no shopping, no deals,

no deadlines. The Hebrew word for Egypt, "Mitzrayim," means a "place of confinement." Sometimes it's the smallest box which makes us feel the most secure.

One Giant Leap

Three million Jews are standing at the shores of the Red Sea. Their options are either to go forward into the un-split sea, or back to Egypt. The sea is cold, strange and foreboding. Egypt is warm, familiar and comfortable.

The Egyptians are thundering closer. The Jews are panicked. And then Nachshon, from the tribe of Yehuda, steps foot into the sea. (The original "one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.") But the sea still does not split. Nachshon continues as the water reaches his ankles, then up to his knees. Still no split. Nachshon forges deeper: Up to his waist, his chest. Still no split.

Nachshon's mind races: Maybe we should return to Egypt. Then he reminds himself: Life is about growing ... leaving the place of confinement behind... moving forward into the unknown ... But the alternative – to stay in our small space of warmth and comfort, is to choose stagnation and, ultimately, death. Egypt, Nachshon knew, was no option at all.

By now the water has reached his neck. Nachshon is being challenged to his limit. Yet he continues into the sea. As the water reaches his nostrils, at this last possible moment... the Red Sea splits. The Jewish People all rush in after him. Finally, freedom.

Self Esteem

Although every Jew passed through on dry land, the experience of Nachshon was qualitatively different. When Nachshon walked through the sea, he was alive and invigorated. The future had issued its challenge, and Nachshon confronted it head-on. Slavery was baggage he'd left behind. He was liberated, both body and soul.

Contrast this to the experience of the rest of the Jewish People. The others, having entered only after the sea split, were in one sense disappointed in themselves for not having the bravery of Nachshon. Nachshon "entered the water first"(Exodus 14:22); the others "entered first on dry land" (14:29).

The Gaon of Vilna (18th century Europe) offers a beautiful insight: In describing the experience of Nachshon, the Torah says "and the water formed a wall" (Exodus 14:22). But for the rest of the people, the Hebrew word for wall, "choma," is spelled peculiarly – without a Vav. This can be read "Chaima," meaning anger. The Torah is reflecting each Jew's disappointment (and God's "anger") for not having had the courage to fulfill their own potential. The growth opportunity had been lost forever.

Breaking Out

The Red Sea appears in our own lives as well. Ultimately, the story of our lives comes down to a few key moments of decision. These spell the difference between a life of achievement versus one of regret. Often we procrastinate until the best option no longer remains. The door is closed and we comfort ourselves by saying, "Oh well, what could I do, things just didn't work out."

This Shabbos, as we read the portion of Beshalach, take a few minutes and ask yourself:

What negative situation am I perpetuating simply because I am not willing to make the effort to change?

Why am I afraid to change?

What is the worst thing that can possibly happen?

What is holding me back from achieving my full potential?

In 10 years from now, what decision will I regret not having made?

Sometimes the answer is just "do it." To jump into the sea.

The question was once asked of Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, the great 18th century Chassidic leader: "What if someone feels distant from God and Torah? How can he enter the 'loop' of spirituality which on one hand is so appealing, yet on the other hand is intimidating?" Rebbe Nachman answered: "Go to a Shabbos table and sing a niggun (melody). Sing it with zest and verve, with feelings from deep in your soul. That's the way to jump in."

Life's Crescendo

Unfortunately, our lives are not equipped with background music reaching its crescendo, to alert us that the "big moment" has arrived. Our only hope of escaping the confines of Egypt is to honestly confront our fears and embrace the opportunities that God gives us to grow.

Of course, we cannot always know what's waiting on the other side of the sea. But that's part of the beauty. It's our chance to become invigorated with the fullness of life.

The Torah tells us: Nachshon chose life. We must do the same. The feeling is liberating. Our self-esteem depends on it. And it is our only true option.

