



NACHSHON, JUMPING INTO THE SEA

On the day of the consecration of the Tabernacle in the desert, the Tribe of Yehuda, represented by Nachshon ben Aminadav, was chosen to be the first of the 12 tribes to present their offering. The Torah does not offer an explanation as to why this tribe, descendants of the fourth son of Ya'akov, should now be first. In the Midrash, however, Rabbinic tradition records the backstory: the distinction of being first to consecrate the Altar was bestowed by G-d – not to the tribe of Yehuda generally, but to Nachshon personally.

Not long after the Israelites left Egypt, they discovered they were being pursued. The path ahead led straight to the sea, and there was no way out. They were trapped between the water and the mighty Egyptian military machine. While the Jews must have known that G-d, who had performed so many miracles before their eyes, could save them, they seemed paralyzed. One person, Nachshon, took initiative and leapt into the water. As the water reached his nostrils, the sea split, and the rest of the Jews followed him across the parted waters to safety.

Nachshon's story is a shining example of the importance of leadership and initiative. Often, people recognize the need for decisive action and clamor for change. Yet this cannot take the place of leadership, of the bravery of the vanguard who takes the first step – or leap. There is, however, a tragic side to this story. On the very day Nachshon was rewarded for his leadership and his display of faith in G-d, the first day of the month of Nissan, something else happened. Two of Aharon's sons, Nadav and Avihu, died while offering a "strange fire." While this tragedy most certainly marred the joy of the consecration of the Tabernacle, the day

on which Nachshon's leadership was acknowledged by the nation, there is a far deeper connection between these two events. Nadav and Avihu were Nachshon's nephews, sons of his sister Elisheva.

Elisheva is introduced not only as the daughter of Aminadav, but as the sister of Nachshon. Regarding this verse, Rashi transmits a bit of advice our Sages give about marriage: when choosing a wife, a man would do well to consider the traits of her brothers, because often the children take after their maternal uncles.

This insight into human nature may help us reconstruct what happened on the 1st of Nissan, when the Tabernacle became operational. On that day, Nachshon was rewarded for his bravery. He was chosen to be the first, just as he had been the first to take action on that fateful day at the sea, when the Israelites were being pursued by the Egyptians.

Nadav and Avihu, who took after their uncle, had similar gumption. They too took initiative. They offered a "strange fire" they had not been commanded to offer. Perhaps they saw themselves as being like their uncle – who was lauded by G-d and the entire nation on that very day. Why, we might ask, were the results of the nephews' initiative so tragically different to the results of the uncle's brave leap forward?

Nachshon leapt when there was no choice; there could have been only two outcomes. Either G-d would accept his gesture as an expression of faith and split the sea, or the Jews would be slaughtered. His heroism was rewarded because he took action on what amounted to a battlefield. On the other hand, there was no need for Nadav and Avihu's gesture. The fire they brought seems to have had no other purpose than self-aggrandizement. For the sake

of "making their mark," they performed an unnecessary ritual. Their behavior was apparently motivated by the desire to be important, to be famous, to bask in the spotlight on that important day – just like their uncle.

Rabbinic tradition criticizes Nadav and Avihu for failing to consult another of their uncles regarding their desire to bring an unsanctioned offering – their uncle Moshe, who certainly knew a thing or two about Divine service.

The contrast between Nachshon on the one hand and Nadav and Avihu on the other, provides an excellent example of real leadership in times of crisis, as opposed to opportunism or shallow attempts to generate headlines or make the evening news. Nachshon was rewarded for his bravery, for his bold step toward freedom and his leap of faith, whereas Nadav and Avihu were punished for their self-serving public relations initiative.¹

¹ For more on Nadav, Avihu, and Nachshon, see *Echoes of Eden: Vayikra* (2013: Gefen Publishing House and OU Press), pp. 53–65.

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