Stepping into the Sea

Shabbat Yom Tov Sh'vi'i shel Pesach

April 18, 2025 Rabbi Barry H. Block

"The Israelites walked into the sea on dry land."[i] If you think about it, that sentence makes no sense. If they walked into the sea, that would be into the water, not onto dry land. Our rabbinic sages offer several theories about how to resolve the problem, but the best known is in the Talmud,[ii] which tells of an Israelite named Nachshon, who saw Moses raising his staff, declaring that the sea would part, and telling the people to march into the sea, while nobody budged. Nachshon took it upon himself to charge into the water. One may even say that the sea parted on account of his brave and potentially sacrificial act.

The Torah and the Passover Haggadah want us to understand that God—not any human, not Nachshon, and not even Moses—frees the Israelites from Egyptian bondage. History, though, teaches a different lesson: No oppressed people is ever liberated without taking potentially perilous steps to secure their own freedom.

Perhaps despite itself, the Torah conveys this message powerfully in the central act of the first Passover. The Israelites are commanded to sacrifice lambs, to put the lambs' blood on their doorposts and lintels, so that the Angel of Death will pass over their homes while carrying out the tenth plague, slaying the firstborn of the Egyptians. Surely, God knew where the Israelites lived, information the Holy One could have conveyed to the Angel of Death. Instead, God wants the Hebrews to play an active role in securing their own liberation through their own action.

Rivka Anapolle sums up the timeless importance of Nachshon's act beautifully: "Sometimes an outcome appears to be uncertain. With the proper level of belief, one can gain clarity and forge on successfully. [The Children of Israel] saw the [sea] as a[n]…impossible impasse, a roadblock in their journey, while Nachshon … allowed the misty and confusing details of the moment to fade away. Initially, it may feel as though stating one's thoughts in the midst of a crowd would be too polarizing and that it would be better to silence any beliefs which go against popular opinion. A person just has to have faith, believe in [their] self-worth, take the plunge, proclaim [their] beliefs for the world to hear, and equip [themself] with the knowledge that [God] created us to be unique; it only takes one person with clarity to elucidate the situation to everyone else."[iii]

Kerri Greenridge's book, *The Grimkes*, is not the first biography of two sisters, Angelina and Sarah Grimke, who left their home in antebellum South Carolina and settled in Philadelphia to take up the abolitionist cause. The Grimke

sisters came from a slaveholding family of planters, and they became abolitionist celebrities. Previous biographies had described their heroism as emanating solely from their own faith and fortitude. Greenridge, though, complicates that narrative. The sisters did come to understand slavery as sinful on their own, but they did not begin to comprehend white supremacy or the magnitude of slavery's cruelty until they learned from their Black relatives and other Black abolitionists. Angelina and Sarah Grimke are not quite household names, but they are far better known than Lottie Forten Grimke or Angelina Weld Grimke, Black family members who stepped into the raging waters of racial oppression at risk of drowning, hoping that their activism might bring liberation to their own people.[iv]

The story of the Grimke sisters is only one example of a tendency to overstate the role of white people in American racial justice movements. One need not diminish the roles of Abraham Lincoln, John Brown, or William Lloyd Garrison, for example, to celebrate the transformational heroism of Harriet Tubman, Nat Turner, Frederick Douglass, and countless other Black abolitionists and slavery resisters, many of their names lost to history.

The Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, known as the RAC, was founded in the early 1960s, and it was a significant institutional partner in the Civil Rights Movement. Rabbi Jonah Pesner, the RAC's current director, has begun speaking about Reform Jewish leaders' longstanding history of boasting that the Voting Rights Act was written at the RAC. While that may be true, Rabbi Pesner notes, Black Civil Rights leaders did the heavy lifting, including the primary work of drafting the legislation—and, more importantly, putting their lives on the line in a hostile environment to force the hands of white Americans in power. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Justice Thurgood Marshall, Rosa Parks, Diane Nash, Bayard Rustin, Daisy Gaston Bates, and many others plunged into treacherous seas without knowing that the waters would part.

Another potent example is the gay rights movement, sparked when the New York City Police raided the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar, arresting patrons and employees. The movement gained greater momentum when, in the midst of the HIV/AIDS crisis, closeted gay men who were otherwise privileged—that is, white and wealthy—determined that they would need to come out of the closet, plunging into waters that could have drowned them. Their lives and especially the lives of less privileged gay men depended on their own action. Allies could be supportive, but despised and persecuted people themselves had to play the key roles, paving the way for a lesbian, Edie Windsor, of blessed memory, and a gay man, Jim Obergefell, to file lawsuits that changed history.

Today, so many people who know degradation and oppression in America are dashing into dangerous waters, seeking to save their people.

My friend and colleague, Rabbi Daniel Bogard, continues to place himself at the center of the struggle for the rights of transgender Americans, and he does so at his own peril. You see, Rabbi Bogard's minor son is transgender, and both Rabbis Bogard, Daniel and his wife. Rabbi Karen Bogard, have been threatened with having their children taken away, even being arrested for supposed child abuse, because they facilitate their child's life as the boy he was created to be.

This week, autistic Americans and their loved ones have found themselves needing to speak out, and they are doing so loudly, to protest the Secretary of Health and Human Services, who claimed that they would never have jobs, never pay taxes, and never have families, making them more vulnerable than ever to stigma and discrimination. Identifying themselves as autistic now may make them even more vulnerable, but they are jumping into that raging sea of danger, as the only hope for what we pray will be liberation.

When Nachshon goes into the sea, it parts. The story goes that the miracle comes only when the water reaches his throat, preparing to drown him. Still, it's all relatively quick—after four hundred thirty years of slavery, that is.

Oppressed people often suffer a very long time and struggle for freedom for a good part of that long time, before they find freedom. Like Nachshon before us, when we jump into the waters, we cannot know that they will part.

At the end of the Book of Ruth, though, we meet Nachshon once again—this time, in the middle of a family tree leading from Ruth to King David.[v] Nachshon is a link in the chain that our tradition teaches us will lead to messianic redemption and a perfect world one day. The lesson is clear: Freedom from tyranny, from all that ails humanity and the planet we share, passes through treacherous waters and requires taking the plunge. We must jump into the water, even at our peril, if we are to reach the Promised Land.

Amen.

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[i] Exodus 14:22.
[ii] Sotah 37a.
[iii] Rivka Anapolle, "Nachshon ben Amminadav: Who?" *Sefaria* Sheet, https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/52970.1?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en.
[iv] Kerri K. Greenridge, *The Grimkes*, Liveright, 2022.
[v] Ruth 4:18-22.