

Nachshon and the Jump Heard around the World

The climactic point of the Exodus, or the “shot heard round the world” is the splitting of the Yam Suf. If one were to take a survey about how the splitting of the sea occurred, the likely narrative is that Moshe was standing at the sea while b’nei Yisrael were waiting for something to occur, remaining doubtful of anything possibly transpiring. Afraid to go into the sea, Nachshon Ben Aminadav forged ahead and jumped into the sea to show his *emunah*, or belief, in Hashem. Finally, as the waters rose to his neck, Hashem split the sea. However, if we were to look at the Torah, none of these details are mentioned. There is no mention of Nachshon in the story of the Exodus. What merely occurred was that Moshe raised his staff, the sea split, and b’nei Yisrael entered the dry land. In this article, we will explore Nachshon’s “jump” and its purpose, and in doing so, we will gain a greater appreciation of the miracle of the splitting of the sea.

The source for Nachshon jumping into the sea before it was split can be found in the Gemara:

אמר לו רבי יהודה לא כך היה מעשה אלא זה אומר אין אני יורד תחילה לים וזה אומר אין אני יורד תחילה לים קפץ נחשון בן עמינדב ירד לים תחילה...באותה שעה היה משה מאריך בתפלה אמר לו הקב"ה ידידי טובעים בים ואתה מאריך בתפלה לפני אמר לפני רבונו של עולם ומה בידי לעשות אמר לו דבר



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אל בני ישראל ויסעו ואתה הרם את מטך ונטה את ידך וגו'

R. Yehuda said to [R. Meir]: That is not what happened; but each tribe was unwilling to be the first to enter the sea. Then sprang forward Nachshon the son of Amminadav and jumped first into the sea ... At that time Moshe was prolonging his prayer; so the Holy One, blessed be He, said to him, "My beloved ones are drowning in the sea and you prolong your prayer to Me?" (Moshe) said to Him, "L-rd of the Universe, what is there in my power to do?" He replied to him, "Speak unto the children of Israel that they go forward. And lift thou up thy rod, and stretch out thy hand etc."

Sotah 37a

The Gemara seems to put missing information into the text of the Torah and elaborates on our story. Nachshon jumps into the sea and is close to death; at that point Hashem tells Moshe to raise his staff so that He can split the sea. There must have been something in the text that led Chazal to elaborate on what is written in the Torah.

Perhaps one way to answer this question would be to attempt to unravel the primary motive of the

added narrative: Why did Nachshon jump? What was the motive of Nachshon that placed him in such a vastly vaunted role, as Chazal attributes to him the reason for the splitting of the sea? The common answer given, that I am certain many have heard and would probably answer to this question, is that Nachshon jumped in to show his *emunah* in Hashem. However, as I will show, such a claim would run counter to the evidence in the Torah.

Let's attempt to examine the impact of Nachshon's jump. In the description of our Gemara, Nachshon jumps into the sea and Moshe lifts his staff, the sea gets split by Hashem and everyone goes home happy. But what happens if Nachshon doesn't jump in or if Moshe does not raise his staff? If neither Nachshon jump in nor Moshe raises his staff, according to all accounts, the sea does not split. What would have happened if Moshe didn't lift his staff after Nachshon jumped in? The midrash seems to indicate that Nachshon would have drowned. If the jump was to show his *emunah* in Hashem, it seems fruitless. If it were not for Moshe lifting his staff, Nachshon would have been

unsuccessful. Additionally, if Moshe had lifted his staff and Nachshon did not hurdle into the sea, according to the Torah, everything would have gone off without a hitch. So what was Nachshon adding by jumping in?

Furthermore, with a close reading of the Torah, it seems that there was a causative relationship between Moshe lifting his staff and the splitting of the sea.

וְאַתָּה הָרַם אֶת־מִטְּךָ וַיִּנְטֶה אֶת־יָדְךָ עַל־הַיָּם
וּבְקַעֲתוֹ וַיָּבֵאוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּתוֹךְ הַיָּם בַּיַּבֵּשָׁה:
And you lift up your staff and hold out your arm over the sea and split it, so that the Israelites may march into the sea on dry ground.

Shemot 14:16

The Torah is directing our attention to the singular cause of Hashem splitting the sea by explaining that it must be immediately preceded by Moshe raising his staff. The *Ohr Hachaim* likewise points out this fundamental point:

ויש לדעת אימתי היתה נטית ידו של משה
אם בתחלת הלילה אם בסופו, והנה משטח
הכתוב מוכח כי קודם הבוקר היתה, וקשה
דאם כן אין היכר לקריעת ים סוף שהיתה על
ידי משה...

And we need to know when was the raising of the hand of Moshe, if it was at the beginning of the night or if it was at the end of the night. And it seems from the plain reading of the text that it occurred before the morning, and it is difficult, because if that is the case, there is no recognition for the splitting of the sea that it was done through the hands of Moshe...

As the *Ohr HaChaim* points out, and accepts as fundamental to understanding the narrative, there must be a connection between Moshe lifting his staff and the splitting of the sea.

If Nachshon's jump was not the immediate cause of the splitting of the sea (Moshe's lifting his staff was), and it wasn't to show his *emunah* in Hashem (it would have been futile had Moshe not lifted his staff), what was its purpose? A comment of Ramban helps connect these sources and provides us an answer.

If Moshe had lifted his staff and Nachshon did not hurdle into the sea, according to the Torah, everything would have gone off without a hitch. So what was Nachshon adding by jumping in?

The Ramban, in his commentary on our verses, writes:

וייראו מאד ויצעקו בני ישראל אל ה', ויאמרו
אל משה המבלי אין קברים במצרים... כי היו
העם מאמינים בה' ומתפללים אליו להצילם,
אבל במשה נכנס ספק בלבם פן יוציאם למשול
עליהם. ואע"ף שראו האותות והמופתים חשבו
שעשה אותם בדרך חכמה או שהשם הביא
עליהם המכות ברשעת הגויים, כי אלו חפץ
השם ביציאתם לא היה פרעה רודף אחריהם.

"They were very frightened, and the children of Israel cried out to the L-rd. They said to Moses, Is it because there are no graves in Egypt?" (Exodus 10,11) For the nation believed in Hashem and were praying to Him to save them, but in Moshe a doubt entered their hearts, perhaps he took them out to rule over them. And even though they saw the signs and wonders, they thought that

he (Moshe) did them through wisdom or that Hashem was bringing plagues due to the wickedness of the nations, for if Hashem desired that they would be leaving (Egypt), Pharaoh would not be chasing after them.

Ramban on Exodus 14:10

The Ramban shows us that really there was no doubt in the minds of the people that Hashem controlled the universe. This is a group of people that had just witnessed the ten plagues. The Torah repeatedly stated the purpose of these plagues was *למען תדע כי אני ה'*—in order that you know that I am Hashem. How did He accomplish this task? Hashem showed the people that there weren't many different powers that controlled different aspects of the universe, rather, He controlled everything, from the ground, to the skies, to the people—everything. As such, b'nei Yisrael had just witnessed the power of G-d, so they had no doubt. However, they did have a doubt; it was in Moshe.

In fact, if we look to the two verses the Ramban quoted, it is clear that the anger of b'nei Yisrael was directed toward Moshe and the fear was directed towards Hashem. They prayed to Hashem out of fear, as it says 'ה'—and the children of Israel cried out to the L-rd." Then, in a separate verse (since the one to whom they were speaking had changed), they turned to Moshe and blamed "him" for their seemingly impending death, as the verse states, "They said to Moses, is it because there are no graves in Egypt?"

They felt that perhaps Moshe was in the right place at the right time. Perhaps due to the evil nature of the Egyptians, Hashem brought plagues, or perhaps due to the merit of their forefathers Hashem brought these

plagues, and perhaps through trickery Moshe associated himself as the messenger of G-d. As a result of these doubts, Hashem had to authenticate the authority of Moshe. How could He do that? By coordinating a situation where the focus of the entire nation will be on Moshe and Moshe's actions will be directly attributed to Hashem's miracle.

With this idea in mind, we could explain Nachshon's jump. The people had turned to Moshe in anger and blamed him for their situation. As the leader they had chosen to follow, they were expecting him to resolve the situation. However, b'nei Yisrael lacked confidence in Moshe. Nachshon, through showing his confidence and *emunah* in Moshe as the true messenger of Hashem, dove into the sea with full faith in Moshe's ability to save the people. With a now almost certain immediate death of Nachshon looming, the people were unwaveringly focused on what Moshe could do to save both Nachshon, and quite shortly, the rest of the people. So Moshe raised his staff and the sea split. By jumping in, Nachshon became a partner in helping b'nei Yisrael understand that Moshe was the true messenger of Hashem. And what was the result? The very last verse that leads into *Az Yashir* shows us that, in fact, they did trust in Moshe:

וַיֵּרָא יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת הַיָּד הַגְּדוֹלָה אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה ה' בְּמִצְרַיִם וַיִּירָאוּ הָעָם אֶת ה' וַיֹּאמְרוּ בְּה' וּבְמֹשֶׁה עֲבָדוּ.

And Israel saw the great hand, which the L-rd had used upon the Egyptians, and the people feared the L-rd, and they believed in the L-rd and in Moshe, His servant.

We see here that upon seeing the incident of the splitting of the sea, that not only did they verify their trust in Hashem, but they also trusted in Moshe as the true messenger of Hashem. Yes, it is true that their belief in Moshe is a function of their belief in Hashem. They did not believe Moshe performed these wonders. However, to associate Moshe as the leader was a separate, and necessary, step.

Why did this *emunah* only take place after the splitting of the sea? We can gain insight by looking at a comment of Rashi that gives us a definition of *emunah*. In *Parshat Miketz*, before Yoseph reveals himself to his brothers, he tells them to bring Binyamin, the youngest brother down to Egypt, to verify what they have said earlier:

וְאֵת אַחֵיכֶם הַקָּטָן תָּבִיאוּ אֵלַי וַיֹּאמְרוּ דְבַרְיָכֶם וְלֹא תָמוּתוּ וַיַּעֲשׂוּ כֵן.

“And bring your youngest brother to me, so that I will have emunah in your words, and you will not die.” And they did so.

Genesis 42:20

On that verse, Rashi explains what

exactly *emunah* is:

וַיֹּאמְרוּ דְבַרְיָכֶם: יתאמתו ויתקיימו, כמו (במדבר ה כב) אמון אמון, וכמו (מ"א ח כו) יאמון נא דבריך.

Heb. וַיֹּאמְרוּ, let them be confirmed and fulfilled, like “Amen, amen (אָמֵן)” (Num. 5:22), and like “may Your word now be verified (וַיֹּאמְרוּ)” (I Kings 8:26).

We see that *emunah* really means to accept verification. With regards to the splitting of the sea, in order for the people to follow Hashem, through Moshe, the people needed to verify the claims of Moshe. As a result, Hashem needed to connect the splitting of the sea to the lifting of the staff by Moshe. Had that not been done, there would have been no reason to follow Moshe.

Chazal, through a close reading of the text, showed us the proper attention that must be paid to Moshe as the messenger of Hashem. The credibility of Moshe as the leader is crucial to every aspect of our lives. Every mitzvah we have, every aspect of both our Oral and Written Torah, stems from the authenticity Hashem placed upon Moshe. If we realize how central the leadership of Moshe is in the world of the Torah, and recognize the great care and depth Hashem gave to establish his veracity, we can begin to understand how an entire nation accepted the word of Moshe as true, and continued to pass on his legacy for countless generations.

