

Courage and Risk

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“The paradox is that man must be a little
careless of his life in order to keep it.”

[Chesterton]

The Midrash about Nachshon Ben Aminadav is well known. Standing at the Reed Sea, chased by Pharaoh and the Egyptian army, Nachshon ben Aminadav made his decision and then jumped into the waters, nearly losing his life. Only at the last split second did God interfere and split the sea after which the Jews were able to enter the waters, thus saved from Pharaoh's assault. All the other Jews, standing by, did not have the courage to take this unprecedented step. They waited until the waters were split before they entered. Presumably, they thought that Nachshon was scared to death by the approaching Egyptian army, preferring to commit suicide rather than fall into the hands of Pharaoh and face cruel torture. Only afterwards did they realize that it was *he* who showed great courage, saving all of them, and that it was *they* who were the cowards.

Still, objectively, they were right. Jumping into the sea made little sense; it would have ended in tragedy, and nothing would have been accomplished. Better to wait and see what happens, they thought, and not take action which had nearly no chance of succeeding. But Nachshon won the day.

Looking at history, one has to realize that the greatest accomplishments of mankind were achieved by the Nachshons of every generation. Those who were prepared to jump into the sea, taking huge risks, were responsible for magnificent scientific discoveries, space travel, grand business deals, daring political decisions and waging war on evil. Very often, they were declared by others to be insane and irresponsible. People with courage and strong character are often looked at as sinister.

No doubt, such bold and heroic actions often failed, bringing with them havoc and much pain, but without such attempts the world would not only stagnate, but in fact, disintegrate. There can be no future without hope and risk. Life is the art of drawing sufficient conclusions from insufficient premises. A reasonable probability is the only certainty we have. Aristotle maintained that probable impossibilities are to be preferred to improbable possibilities. (*Poetics*) Surely, risks must be calculated and carefully planned, but without an element of uncertainty nothing can be accomplished. There is no authentic life choice which is risk-free.

Even Nachshon's deed was not based on rampant imprudence. After the great miracles which took place, and God's repeated statements that He would bring the Jews to Sinai and Israel, Nachshon felt that his decision to jump had a good chance of succeeding. Indeed, against everyone's expectations, he was right. We can be sure that he had doubts about whether he would succeed, but he realized that this very uncertainty would impel him to reveal his power. After all, the quest for certainty blocks the heroic and liberating deed. The reluctance to take risks has often killed opportunities to create a better world. By closing the door to all error, we must realize that we are shutting out any possibility to discover the new and the better.

Judaism, throughout its long history, has always taken risks. In fact, it is built on the foundations of uncertainty. From Avraham Avinu standing up to the injustices of his world and proclaiming ethical monotheism against all odds, to his unprecedented courage in challenging the Lord of the Universe concerning His treatment of the people in Sedom and Amora, at the risk of incurring His wrath, to Nachshon ben Aminadav's heroic jump into the sea, to Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai's daring demand of Vespasian to hand over the sages of Yavne before he would surrender to the Roman empire, to the Zionist movement in our own days - all of them took risks which could very well have led to failure while endangering themselves and others. Some, like Bar Kochba, did indeed suffer that fate; his courageous revolt against the Romans ended in total defeat.

Still, today we no longer encounter religious leaders who act like Nachshon, prepared to jump into the sea, saving what needs to be saved and creating what needs to be created. Instead, we experience a constant desire to stay with the old and not rock the boat, to look over one's shoulder fearing possible failure.

Judaism's predicament is one of great urgency; it would be no exaggeration to speak of an emergency situation. Too many people marry out, are no longer connected with their Jewish souls or lack any interest in developing a bond with Judaism. This is true not only in many communities in the USA or Europe, but also in Israel. Merely a small percentage of Jews around the world are deeply connected with their Jewishness.

Judaism is about new ideas. It is dependent on fresh concepts deeply rooted in its tradition. We must be aware that if we do not apply new remedies we should expect new evils because time is the greatest innovator. Sticking to the old is contrary to nature, and those who do so are buried long before they die. Too often, people object to novel ideas and try to kill them before these ideas have a chance to prove themselves and actually succeed. After all, it is important to remind ourselves that new ideas are delicate. They can be easily destroyed by a sneer or a yawn, abolished by a frown. It is for this reason that we must nurture and protect them, carefully considering them however outrageous they may seem. When ideas are born, they struggle and have to fight for their place in this world. They need to be transformed until they flourish. If they are truly worthy, they will survive and become a great blessing. If not, they will disappear and die the death of the infirm.

Let us, however, not forget that new ideas may sometimes fail and even be counter-productive. Novelty may sometimes best be served when staying with the old. One does

not discover new lands without consenting to lose sight of the shore from which one embarked on his journey. Still, we need to produce ideas and see where they will take us. Innovative thinking is the call of the hour. It is time for religious thinkers, halachic authorities and rabbis to take notice of the immense changes which have taken place in our days. Never has the world gone through so many adjustments in so short a time. Never have the Jewish people been confronted with so many challenges. Not only is the security of the State of Israel at stake, but even more so, its very spirit and spiritual future.

Judaism must respond with the courage of Nachshon ben Aminadav.

We are in desperate need of him before we drown in the very sea from which he saved our forefathers