

Be Like Nachshon Parashat B'shalach

By Rabbi Jason Miller

In 1991, the sports drink company [Gatorade](#) launched a multi-million dollar advertising campaign featuring basketball superstar [Michael Jordan](#). The ad's slogan was "Be Like Mike." This catchphrase was either to get us to drink [Gatorade](#) after a workout as Michael Jordan does, or it was to encourage us to perform at the superhuman level of this icon on the basketball court and to then refresh and replenish ourselves with this beverage (which by the way does not bear a Kosher symbol while its competitor [PowerAde](#) does). Try as I might, I was never able to take off from the free throw line headed for the basket, with my legs, arms and tongue extended, to then complete a perfect ballerina-like slam dunk in mid-air. I am sure I was not the only one unable to fulfill this "Be Like Mike" charge.

In Judaism, we have our own paradigm to emulate and it is more attainable than trying to be like Michael Jordan. In this week's Torah portion, we see our ancestors cross the Sea of Reeds in the pinnacle moment of the exodus from Egyptian slavery. God divides the sea so that the Israelites traverse on dry ground while the Egyptian army then drowns in defeat. As the fleeing nation is cornered into a difficult decision on the shores of the sea before it is divided, a significant moment of faith in God takes place. Our ancestors are trapped between the waters of the sea and the pursuing Egyptian army.

A midrash has Moses standing and praying at great length during this pivotal instant when the Holy One chastises him, "My beloved are on the verge of drowning in the sea, and you spin out lengthy prayers before me?" Moses was uncertain what his action should have been at this time. God explains, "Speak unto the children of Israel and tell them to go forward."

The rabbis in the Talmud explain that while Moses was off to the side praying to God for support, the different tribes were all expressing that they would not be the first to descend into the sea. Out of fear, each tribe was unwilling to enter the water first. One might imagine the many tribal leaders all staring at the fearsome waters and nervously declaring "Not it!" to each other.

It was at this point, Rabbi Yehudah explains to Rabbi Meir (Tractate Sotah 37a), that the leader of the tribe of Judah, [Nachshon ben Aminadav](#), leaped forward and descended into the sea first. Nachshon had faith in God. He had the courage and conviction to act first. Our Tradition teaches that once Nachshon entered the sea and the water was up to his neck, he began to pray to God. This demonstrates his belief in the efficacy of prayer, but also shows that he understands the primary necessity for action. It was only when Nachshon acted out of faith that God divided the walls of the sea for the rest of the nation to cross to safety.

For his courage to take action and be the first one to cross the raging sea, Judah, Nachshon's tribe, was greatly rewarded throughout Jewish history obtaining royal dominion in Israel. In Psalms, we read "Judah became God's sanctuary, Israel his dominion. The sea saw it [Nachshon] and fled."

In life, it is much simpler to be a follower. It takes less courage to wait until someone else has taken that first step to determine the outcome. It is the one who has faith and is willing to take risks who is truly emulating Nachshon.

It is common today in Israel to hear the adjective *nachshoni* describing one who is acting with great faith and conviction, and is not afraid of initiating. While being the pioneer is often risky and requires great faith, it is a virtuous characteristic. So, while trying to be like Michael Jordan is an unattainable fantasy for most of us, we do have the potential to be like Nachshon ben Aminadav. He took the leap of faith that changed the destiny of our people. Be like Nachshon!

