

Parshat BeShalach  
Shabbat February 11  
By Jesse Cogan



## Politics vs Leadership

There was strife at the shores of *Yam Suf*, says the *Tanna*, Rabbi Meir. The tribes argued bitterly about *kovod*. Who gets to jump first?

“I’m the oldest,” claimed Reuven. “We are royalty,” said Yehuda. Yissacher claimed to be the *Talmid Chochom*. Zevulun was master of the seas.

Unexpectedly, Binyamin, the smallest and youngest, marched boldly into the sea.

The tribes were in an uproar. “How dare they!” they said. “That pugnacious left-handed Wolf,” “He isn’t even on the list of *shevotim* who get *kibuddim*,” added Levi checking his clipboard.

Yehuda threw stones.

But Binyamin had bragging rights too. God’s right hand, the only brother born in Canaan and ancestor to the first king of Israel. The Shechinah would park on his territory. The stones and the rhetoric, however, were unwarranted. They were a *Chilul Hashem*.

That’s not what happened says Rabbi Yehuda.

“They argued about who would **not** go in first” Fear held them back. They were not ready to drown in the sea.

Aharon Hakohen’s brother in law, Aminadav's boy, instinctively knew what God wanted. He walked into the water.

The sound of galloping chariots got closer. With a shared destructive goal, the Egyptians were united. *Lev echod ish ehod*, says Rashi. One Heart. One Man.

Moshe raised his voice to God. “Ribono Shel Olam. What do I do know?

Nachshon is drowning, and you sit there saying Tehillim, God said. I told you what to do. Hold up your hands over the sea and tell the people to move.

Moshe held up his hands, the sea split. Bnei Yisrael marched into the water and Nachshon became a legend, an icon of leadership.

Daredevils, however, aren't necessarily leaders. Vision makes leaders. Nachshon saw way beyond the sea. The sea was an annoyance, a frustration, a test of Jewish determination. Nachshon saw *Har Sinai, Eretz Yisroel*, a people united by God.

Yes, *Bnei Yisrael* had to cross the sea, but not to escape the Egyptians. They crossed to become a nation, to sit around Sinai waiting for the Torah. They were united, not because they shared a challenge, but because God made them so. *Ish Echod B'lev Echod*, says Rashi. One man one heart.

New *Yam Suf*s face the Jewish People every generation. Amalek. Haman. Forced conversions. The Holocaust and extremist terror. We have survived all because we realized them as obstacles; frustrations to conquer, a fly in the ointment of peace.

Too often, however, the biggest obstacle is our people themselves; their verbal abuse, politics, and anger. Whether Binyomin was on the approved list of *kibbudim* or Reuven's feelings were hurt, a *chilul Hashem* is never just an obstacle. It makes the sea rage.

Today's *Yam Suf* is a mistaken notion that all must "agree with me" to be united. Binyomin's march into the sea was hardly driven by a vision. He didn't see beyond the *kovod* he usurped.

Reb Yehuda's obstacle was fear. Not a tribe but a leader came forward and not for *kovod* but for building a nation. He did it alone and led by example. His motive was to overcome a frustration, not a sea, and let Bnei Yisroel move on.

What the Jewish people need today is leadership. Not a good fundraiser or negotiator and certainly not a *kovod* seeker, but a leader willing to stand for or against the issues that we confront, even though it might not be popular. We need someone to respect. Reb Moshe, the Chofetz Chaim, an Abe Lincoln, Martin Luther King, or a Nachson.

A Nachshon would stop the confrontation and disrespect. He would challenge the dangerous idea that everyone must agree and that the opinions of others must be drowned out. A Nachshon would approach the infighting, treating it as just one more obstacle to conquer.

Perhaps. Or is it a *chilul Hashem*?

Have a good Shabbos