

**Rabbi Patricia Karlin-Neumann**  
**February 1, 2004**

**Memorial Church**  
**Shabbat Shirah**

### **Entering the Waves: Leadership at the Red Sea**

There are moments which define us--unexpected moments, unplanned moments, when the decisions which we make, when the actions which we take, determine all that is to follow. Crossroads come disguised in many forms. They are not always marked by a sign which reveals what is ahead.

Ruth Herschman had established a reputation as the popular Stationmanager for KCRW, the Public Radio station in Southern California when she did something few people with name recognition would do—she changed her name to Ruth Seymour. Seymour was not her married name, it was a family name. This is how she came to recover it. Ruth had an immigrant grandfather who came to America from Eastern Europe. Her grandfather was an observant Jew, the son of a revered and knowledgeable rabbi. His brother-in-law had already settled in New York, and he had established a business making fur coats. The brother-in-law offered to hire the man's sons-- five greenhorns--who arrived with him. But the shop operated on Saturdays, on Shabbat, when observant Jews will not work. When the son of the rabbi learned that his sons were expected to work on Shabbat, he was astonished, horrified. He forbid his sons to defile the sacred Sabbath. The first Friday night in America, the grandfather pushed the heavy wooden dining table up against the front door. Fully clothed, he lay down upon it. He intended to stand guard; but sometime during the long night he fell asleep. Unfortunately for him, the poor man had never heard of that urban invention--the fire escape. The boys awoke early. Excited by this new country, the adventure and the promise of it, they quickly climbed out the window and fled from their old life.

That moment, excitedly climbing down the fire escape to the formerly forbidden world beyond, marked a crossroads. Those boys' lives after were never the same as their lives before. They climbed into a world freed from the archaic and irrelevant trappings of their father's religion.

But in the next generation, Ruth looks back at that crossroads with a different vision. She finds in that apartment a treasure to take with her as she makes her way through the world. The daughter and not the son, she does not need to escape. The daughter and not the son, she takes on her grandfather's name-Seymour-to wear proudly as an adult. Ruth takes a different path at the crossroads, a path which returns her to grandfather's faith.

The words of Torah from Exodus which we just read mark a crossroads as well. The crossing of the Red Sea was not only the crossing out of Egypt, out of slavery, it was also the entrance into an unknown future, an entrance made possible by a moment of extraordinary faith.

This moment is marked by triumph, by a celebration in song for the redemptive moment of crossing the Red Sea. Both Moses and Miriam offer different renditions of this song. Moses proclaims, "I will sing to God for God has saved." Miriam, accompanied by her timbral, chants, "Let us sing to God, this new song of victory."

Moses and Miriam, safely across the Red Sea, turn around and celebrate a moment at the crossroads, a moment of redemption. But earlier, in the moment of terror, with Egyptians behind and waters in front, neither Moses nor Miriam are recognized and acknowledged by the rabbis commenting on this portion. The rabbis concentrate instead on the person who first plunged into the billowing sea--a little known figure named Nachshon ben Aminadav. Nachshon is a curious hero. There is a brief notice of him in Exodus as Aaron's brother-in-law. That's all. But not only is he not singled out at the Red Sea as a hero, he is not even mentioned! Yet the rabbis praise him for being the first in line to enter the water. The rabbis distinguish Nachshon ben Aminadav as the one who leads all of Israel to safety.

So where do they get this idea? Well, in Numbers, Nachshon, the prince of the tribe of Judah, is the first to bring his offering at the dedication of the tabernacle. The rabbis looked carefully at this honor, and they told the following story about the biblical text, a story known as a midrash.

"When it was time for the tabernacle to be dedicated, in the moment of celebration, Moses confessed to the princes of all the tribes, "'The Holy One has commanded you to bring offerings, but I don't know who should go first.' The princes all looked at Nachshon, and said, 'This man has sanctified the name of the Holy One at the Red Sea. He is worthy to bring the Shechina, which is God's feminine image presence. Let Nachshon go first.'"(Bamidbar Rabbah 12:21)

For the rabbis, Nachshon's leadership at the Red Sea is rewarded by being the "first among princes". Nachshon's reward--being the first to act at the dedication of the tabernacle-- enables him to become, as well, a ritual innovator. Nachshon's offering on the first day set the stage for all the offerings of the princes to follow. Once Nachshon is identified as a leader in one realm, he is counted upon as a leader in another. Nachshon, too, faced a crossroads-- whether to have faith and plunge into the waves, or whether to be gripped by fear and remain on the shore. What was that moment at the crossroads like? If we were on the shore of the sea that fateful day, how would we have each acted? Confidently? Timidly? Would we have entered the waves gingerly or with fury? Flailing or swimming? How do we approach the crossroads in our lives? Are we coerced by an army from behind or pulled by the unknown ahead?

Perhaps like us, the rabbis aren't sure. This is not only a biblical scene, but a contemporary one as well. Each story they tell about that moment at the crossroads is a story about their own lives, their own time, their own imaginings. The rabbis agree that Nachshon was the first to get wet. What they disagree about is how.

In the story about the dedication of the Tabernacle, the princes convey their admiration for Nachshon. They saw that Nachshon was fearless in his willingness to sanctify God's name. Some rabbis assert that he was not only fearless, he was determined to be the first into the water. In one description (Midrash Tehillim passage 114: 8), Nachshon is said to have pelted his brothers with stones in order to insure they wouldn't beat him to the water. This Nachshon was going to be the first at all costs, no matter who he hurt in the process.

The daredevil confidence of this Nachshon is in stark contrast to another description of the same moment (Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael, Beshallah 5) Huddled together, a terrified crowd looked behind at the Egyptians, They looked in front at the water. Old and young alike they yelled with alarm, "I don't want to go into the sea." Amidst the jostling, Nachshon jumped up in fear, and losing his footing, he fell into the waves. In his fear he quoted a verse from Psalms, "Save me, O God, for the waters are come in even to my neck." (Ps. 69:2) In this version, Nachshon is a drowning man, crying for God's help.

Here are three different descriptions of the crossroads. Whether as the hapless victim, the brash show-off or the dignified eager leader, Nachshon's entry into the water changes Jewish history. Whether his faith in God is expressed by bravado, by cries of terror or by quiet confidence, Nachshon becomes a leader. He braves the waters and is noticed by his community for doing so. He is changed by the waves and by his responsibility to the people who follow him.

Unlike Moses and Miriam, who are groomed for leadership, Nachshon's leadership is ambiguous and surprising. Only when he enters the waves, when the waters come up to his neck, when he is fighting for his life and his footing, only then do the waters recede. As we read in Exodus, "And the children of Israel entered the sea on dry land." Only after the children of Israel entered the sea did it become dry land. Only after Nachshon's intentional or unintentional, aware or unaware leadership, did the sea become dry land. Nachshon's entrance into the waves causes God to create a miracle.

Nachshon is a leader for our time. Nachshon, more than Moses or Miriam. The one upon whom the mantle of leadership does not fit snugly. The one who is surprised at his own authority, but who looks around and recognizes with humility that he is essential to God's purpose.

Nachshon is a leader for our time--a time when it is possible to enter the waters of change with both surprise and faith, a time when the landscape is changed and ritual innovation is created by those who have not been the identifiable leaders, when a link to the past is accompanied by an eye toward the future. For Nachshon is not only a prince from the tribe of Judah, he is also the grandfather of Boaz, who, with the biblical Ruth, continues the messianic line through to David. Nachshon reminds us that leadership and innovation may come from many quarters. Nachshon teaches us that a commitment to continuity and redemption is found by looking forward as well as by looking back.

Taken together, the description of the rabbis leave Nachshon's story surprising and ambiguous. Taken together, they point to leadership arising from quarters where it is not expected. The rabbis were not sloppy editors. These Rabbinic teachers were reminding us that we, too, each face crossroads. We too can choose to enter the waves or we can hang back and wait for another to lead. And if we enter, it may not be with quiet certitude. It may be with brash impulsiveness. It may be with terror at what lies ahead. We may be hanging back, looking around for someone else to go in first, we may be making a mad dash uncertain of what we will encounter, we may be listening to a still small voice, but when we enter the waves, we, and the waves, our world, are transformed. In our time we cannot wait for someone else to change the world. We cannot demure that we were not born privileged nor bred to expect greatness. We cannot blend into the crowd and complain about the future. We are needed too much.

For us, such a moment to enter the waves may come as a cry for social justice, when we unexpectedly find our voice waxing prophetic, it may come as we read a book in which we are seized with understanding about our place in the world. It may come when we look into the eyes of one we love and decide, yes, I will make my life with this person.

Like Nachshon, we each face a crossroads. Like Ruth Seymour, we are fortified by our religious past. Like Moses and Miriam, we want to sing and celebrate success. Each of us in this sanctuary has gifts given by God. Each of us in this sanctuary has fears or impulses which may not serve us well. Each of us sometimes thinks of ourselves as smaller than we can be. But we do or we will each face a crossroads. We are or will be asked to be leaders. And if we enter the waves, if we speak and act out of awe and gratitude, if we look around and trust our vision, we may, surprisingly, discover at the crossroads, that we are bathed in and buoyed by the presence of God. And then, may we be privileged to sing a new song in thanks.