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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Beshallah

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

"And Moses said to the people, fear not, stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord, which He will show you today. For as you have seen Egypt this day, you shall not see them again any more forever. The Lord shall fight for you and you shall hold your peace. And the Lord said to Moses: Why do you cry out to me? Speak to the children of Israel that they go forward." (Shemot 14:13-15)

The people of Israel were in a terrible position. The Egyptian troops were coming toward them from behind. The sea was in front of them. Being trapped, they blamed Moses for bringing them out of Egypt only to die here. Moses offered words of reassurance. The Lord will fight for you, all will be well.

But apparently Moses himself was not convinced of his own words. The very next verse has God chastising him: Why do you cry out to me?

Moses, realizing the magnitude of the dilemma, tried to calm the people; but he himself was uncertain of what to do. In desperation, he cried out to God for help.

God could have told Moses: You are the leader, set the example, walk into the sea as an act of faith and courage. But instead, God told Moses to instruct the Israelites to go forward. Whereas Moses had told the people to hold their peace and wait for God's salvation, God instructed otherwise. The Israelites first had to take initiative on their own. They had been passive throughout the period of plagues in Egypt, but now that they were on the road to freedom they had to take on responsibility.

Rabbi Meir Simha HaKohen of Dvinsk (1875-1926), in his commentary *Meshekh Hokhma*, suggested that God wanted the people of Israel to demonstrate faith by plunging into the water first. Moses was to follow the Israelites rather than lead them. The Midrash credits Nachshon ben Aminadav for being the first to enter the water. Once he took the initiative, the Lord split the waters of the sea and the Israelites were miraculously saved.

But the question remains: why did Moses cry out to the Lord in a seeming panic? Why didn't Moses himself march into the sea to set an example of faith and leadership? Why was it Nachshon, according to the Midrash, who took the initiative?

Perhaps the Torah is indicating that even Moses, the greatest of all prophets, had a moment of doubt. At a critical time, he froze. He could not understand why God had brought the Israelites into such an impossible trap and he could not muster the courage to lead the people into the sea. But while Moses hesitated, Nachshon took the lead. Sometimes even the best of leaders falls short. It takes the courage and initiative of others to save the situation.

Once Nachshon took the lead, the Israelites themselves realized that it was time for them to move forward. Moses and the people learned that at a time of national crisis, courageous action is required. The price of freedom is: increased responsibility.