

# THE JEWISH JOURNAL

OF GREATER LOS ANGELES

## Opinion

2006-04-07

### A Nod to Heroes of Past and Present

by Simon Greer

The holiday of Passover celebrates the liberation of the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt, but the Haggadah doesn't mention Nachshon ben Aminadav.

Who was this man?

According to the biblical account of the Exodus, the people have no sooner left Egypt than they encounter a seemingly insurmountable obstacle — the Red Sea. As Pharaoh's army pursues them from behind, God performs a miracle and divides the sea in order that the Israelites may walk through on dry land.

In the rabbinic retelling of this story, the crossing of the Red Sea becomes a test of the Jewish people's faith. According to one midrash, as the people stood on the edge of the sea, each tribe said, "I'm not going in first."

As each tribe waited for another group to take the plunge and as Moses stood praying to God, one man — Nachshon ben Aminadav — jumped into the water. This action prompted God to split the sea in order that the rest of the people could walk through safely.

Nachshon is a biblical profile in courage. Without his faith and determination, the Exodus story might have ended before it even had begun.

Even today, we are often still inspired by a contemporary Nachshon to take the first step, to lead us through uncharted waters. Within the last year, we lost two women who fulfilled that role profoundly: Rosa Parks and Betty Friedan.

Their stories are well known. Parks, who lived in Montgomery, Ala., was a civil rights activist with the NAACP in the 1940s and 1950s. Parks was an educated woman — she was among only 7 percent of blacks with a high school diploma at the time — who had been involved in desegregating the South.

On Dec. 1, 1955, Parks boarded a public bus and took an empty seat next to a black man. When told to vacate their row of seats for a white man, the man next to Parks complied. Parks did not and was arrested.

The next day, she agreed to be the plaintiff in a lawsuit by the NAACP challenging segregation on

public buses. At the same time, leaders of the local Women's Political Council took action, making 35,000 handbills calling for a bus boycott in Montgomery. It would last for more than a year and help the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. become the nation's preeminent civil rights leader.

Friedan was a housewife earning money on the side by writing for women's magazines, when, in 1963, she produced one of the most important books of the 20th century. "The Feminine Mystique" took aim at a central myth of postwar America: Women were happy to give up their career ambitions to be housewives. The book was based on and inspired by interviews Friedan conducted with — and surveys she distributed to — alumnae of prestigious women's colleges.

Her surveys and interviews with women across the country made it clear that discontent with household drudgery — "the problem that has no name" — was pervasive. Yet 18 years after World War II, no one had been able to articulate this problem in a way that could galvanize an entire women's rights movement.

In the years after "The Feminine Mystique" was published, Friedan helped to found several of the most important women's organizations in the United States, including the National Organization for Women and the National Association for the Repeal of Abortion Laws.

Parks was not the first black to be arrested for refusing to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus. Friedan was not the first woman to recognize and stand up to the daily oppression suffered by women in their role as housewives. Like Parks and Friedan, it is unlikely that Nachshon was the only one willing to step into the unknown, to step into the Red Sea. But each of them was the first to inspire multitudes to follow them on what appeared to be a fool's errand.

Nachshon looked at the sea, heard God's command to cross and saw potential where others saw debilitating peril. He was driven by his determination to reach the Promised Land and his certainty that the Israelites were but one step behind him.

Contemporary Nachshons like Parks and Friedan inspire us because they saw potential where we remain transfixed by peril.

Our hopelessness often leads us to dismiss challenges like the ones confronted by Parks and Friedan as lost causes. Their faith, courage and hope compel us to improve conditions that are too often ignored.

In the biblical story, it would not have been enough for Nachshon alone to step into the Red Sea. The community needed someone to go first, but Nachshon needed a community behind him to walk with him toward the Promised Land. Similarly, it is not enough to celebrate the courage of leaders like Parks and Friedan. Their example should be a challenge for us to follow closely behind and to walk together into the Promised Land.

This Passover, I hope we accept their challenge to confront hopelessness with righteous action.

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