

Parshat B'shalach: Risking the Red Sea

In an essay called *On Risk and Solitude*, psychotherapist Adam Phillips reports an important lesson learned by a young patient who overcame his fear of the water through risk:

I knew I was safer out of my depth because even though I couldn't stand, there was more water to hold me up.

For his patient, *the risk of learning to swim was the risk of discovering that he, or rather his body, would float. The heart of swimming is that you can float.*

Ancient rabbinic voices join the conversation about risking the water at the Red Sea:

Rabbi Meir said: When Israel stood at the sea, the tribes fought amongst themselves. One said: I'll go first into the sea and the next said: I'll go first...

Rabbi Judah objected: That's not how it happened. Rather, one tribe said: I'm not going first into the sea and the next one said: I'm not going first. Then, Nahshon ben Aminadav jumped into the sea first... It is of him that Scripture explicitly speaks: Save me, God! The water has reached my neck! (Psalm 69:2)

Ani/I will, ein ani/I won't: An almost undistinguishable syllable marks the difference between a competition of bold contenders and a story of frightened companions, one of whom takes the risk to wade into the water beyond his depth. Thanks to Rabbi Judah, we have a story that highlights risk rather than certainty.

Nahshon, the prince of Judah, is a champion of risk. He ventures into the water up to his neck—only then does water displace weight; only then does possibility displace risk. Only then does the sea part.

