

2/11/17 B'Shalach

My name is Rachel Rosenson. If you don't know me, I am Lynda and Arthur's daughter.

On Thursday, I move to Israel, and while a lot of people are asking me about Tel Aviv, a different city has been on my mind--Mazatlan, Mexico. 3 years ago, I packed a backpack and bought a plane ticket to a foreign country for the first time, with nothing but an email offering the possibility of lodging for work and my best friend agreeing to meet me there. My friend Jordyn and I were to work at a bungalow on the central coast, scrubbing toilets in the morning, and learning how to surf in the afternoon. It was 6 months before El Chapo was found to be hiding and running his drug cartel out of Mazatlan, but at the time the sleepy beach town was idyllic.

On one of the rare rainy days, the Australians bikers and New Zealand retirees and expat backpackers slung about the sunken furniture in the living room and someone popped in a documentary saying if we can't surf, at least we'll watch it. It was a movie called 180 degrees South, about a surfer adrenaline junkie hitch-hiking throughout Chile to hike a holy grail trail in Patagonia. Along the way, there's captivating scenic b-roll and conversations about environmental catastrophe with commentary by the legendary climber and Patagonia founder Yvon Chouinard and Northface founder Doug Tompkins. Tompkins is riffing on those that have given up on reversing climate change, when he shares this thought:

It's easy for us to blindly consume, when we don't see the effects it has on other places. The hardest thing in the world is to simplify your life, it's so easy to make it complex. What's important is leading an examined life because most of the damage caused by humans is caused unintentionally, I think. And in response to people saying, 'You can't go back.' and I say, 'Well what happens when you get to the edge of the cliff. Do you take one step forward or do 180° turn and take one step forward? Which way you goin? Which is progress?' The solution to many of the world's problems maybe to turn around and to take a forward step. You can't just keep trying to make a flawed system work.

And there, interlaced with sandy strangers I'd never see again, in a pocket of perfect that was about to rupture, between the rain clouds and the clouds of my hangover, I knew going forward in life would always mean something different.

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In this week's parsha, we talk a lot about moving forward. Pharaoh finally says the Jewish people can go free, then turns around to say never mind. The Jews begin their journey to freedom, only to see they are blocked by the Red Sea. They turn around to see the Egyptians raging towards them, and realize they are trapped. Three million Israelites are standing at the shores of the Red Sea. They get mad at Moshe, arguing they wanted to go back. That in Egypt they could suffer in the comfort of the known.

Exodus 14:11-12:

They said to Moses, "Were there no graves in Egypt that took us to die in the Wilderness? What is this that you have done to us to take us out of Egypt? Is this not the statement that we made to you in Egypt, saying, 'Let us be and we will serve Egypt?'--for it is better that we should serve Egypt than that we should die in the Wilderness!"

The midrash then relates the story of Nachshon ben Amminadav, the prince of the tribe of Judah and Aaron's brother-in-law. There were 10 generations in the lineage from Judah to King David. Nachshon was the fifth generation, exactly in the middle.

Nachshon takes a step forward in the water. And another. Nothing happens. He continues walking into the sea. Maybe it was out of sheer faith in God. Maybe he'd decided that he rather die by sea than die by sword. Maybe he'd decided he'd rather die by his own hand than that of his oppressor. But he walks until the water touches the tip of his nose. And with his last breath of life and his last breath of hope, the sea parts, and a path forward appears where once there was none.

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I was talking with my dad about this week's parsha, and he said "Ya, the Jewish people wanted to turn back, but maybe don't focus on the complaining ungrateful bit, it's a bit of a downer." Per usual, I think he completely missed the point. The act of questioning their moving forward is the most important part of this journey.

The Jews did not become free people when Pharaoh said they were free to leave Egypt. They did not become free people when Moshe declared himself their leader. They did not become free people when God said to trust and follow him. They became free the moment Nachson looked one way at the army of Egyptians and looked the other way at the wall of water and made a choice of where he thought he should go.

As they stepped out of their shackles, they exercised freedom of thought, freedom to question, and freedom in the truest sense--to kvetch. For the first time in their lives, they were able to say "No, I don't want to", a phrase no slave would ever utter. And while some were initially ungrateful, they were taking a moment to decide for themselves which direction they should head. Nachshon showed them how to be free.

In taking a step forward, we often emphasize the direction of forward. In reality, growth comes from the conscious decision to take a step.

Any direction you go to is growth because you will inevitably learn from it. And if you have to change course along the way, that's fine. And if you have to course correct over a period of 40 years, that's fine too. Because that's part of freedom. Freedom requires you to question the direction you're heading. Freedom is the ability to travel in the direction you want, without fear of the Pharaoh behind you or the blocked border in front of you. Freedom lets you move forward into the unknown of your future. And freedom is choosing to turn 180 degrees away from San Francisco and go back to your roots.

Next week, I have the freedom of taking steps to the East. Everyone keeps asking me if I'm excited or if I'm scared. In reality, I feel incredibly privileged. When my grandfather was liberated from the concentration camps, he first went to Israel because he had nowhere else to go.

In the past 3 years, I've traipsed across 14 different countries, not out of fear or necessity, but because I felt like it and I had the golden ticket of a passport to do so. And now I am choosing to go to Israel. Not out of necessity, but as a choice. Israel has great jobs, great art, great food and really attractive men. When else in our people's history was Israel seen as a vacation destination? The privilege of freedom to travel is not lost on me.

As I get ready to pack up and move again, weighing heavily on my mind is the inability of those who are trying to take steps to the west, or to the north, respectively. There are those who are currently neck deep in the water, with one breath of hope left for the waters to split. As American Jews, we find ourselves back on the shores, looking longingly at the times of comfortable suffering. If we allow a fear mongered community to strengthen and fester, we should be very concerned. Jews are safe in America today. But we cannot be naive enough to think that the future is safe for our children if we stand by while our country closes its doors to those who have nowhere else to turn. As long as one religion isn't free in America, all of our freedoms are at risk. We have a responsibility as Jews, as Americans, as those who have been there done that, to act. To turn to either side and reach out our hand to our neighbors, to turn 180 degrees and extend a hand to those we have not gotten along with before. We have a responsibility to turn back 180 degrees so that we can walk forward together. There's a lot of fear, and a lot of anxiety out there, but Nachson teaches us not to be afraid of choosing to step forward into unknown.

I haven't lived in Chicago in some time, so I don't feel like it's my place to make recommendations on what is best for us to do. So with your next step, I encourage you to think of what forward really means for you and our community.