

# Echoes of Eden

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## Parashat B'Shalach

### The Long Shortcut

When the Israelites finally leave Egypt, rather than taking them on the shortest, most direct route to their destination, God leads them on a circuitous path. The trip eventually becomes so long that almost an entire generation passes away and the overwhelming majority of the adults who leave Egypt never make it to the Promised Land. One might be tempted to regard this entire venture as a failure. However, at the very start of the journey, the Torah tells us that God took them on this longer route because they did not have the moral fortitude to take the shorter route.

Perhaps it is human nature that makes detours infuriating; any trip that takes longer than scheduled can make us bristle. Maybe we are hardwired to want to shorten our travels, and arrive at our destination in as short a time as possible. For most of us, the only thing better than arriving on time is finding a shortcut and arriving early, especially when we are going home.

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But travel is not always about geography, about movement from one place to another; travel is not only result-oriented. Sometimes the places, experiences and people we meet along the way are really the point of the trip. Sometimes the journey is not about the destination, but rather the growth experienced along the way.

The Israelites had been thrust into freedom, but the generations of slavery had limited and stifled them in so many ways, “relieving” them of the burden of independent thought and initiative. Incongruously, slaves and prisoners often

create a “comfort zone” of rote functionality. Their lack of freedom can become like a womb or a cocoon, limiting yet sustaining. Without exercise, innate creativity and even the instinct for self-preservation become dull. People who become accustomed to having their basic needs taken care of by their captors or masters quickly lose the ability to take responsibility for their own lives. This is not a mass occurrence of Stockholm syndrome, in which the slaves identify with their oppressors. The dynamic is far more subtle: Slaves quickly “learn their place”, and begin to believe that this is their fate.

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In a certain sense, they are liberated from the burden of providing for their own needs and mastering their own fates. The security of the present – even an oppressive present – often outweighs the frightening prospect of the unknown, of the uncharted road to freedom and independence.

Had the Israelites taken the direct route to the Promised Land, they would have faced war, on the one hand, and economic independence on the other. They were neither physically, emotionally nor spiritually prepared for either, as is evidenced by their recurring bouts of nostalgia for the “good old days in Egypt.” Their long, circuitous journey through the desert, then, was an educational and spiritual process of growth. In the course of their travels, they would reexamine their dependency. Their most basic needs would become acute, pressing, in a new and alarming way, and they would learn to turn to God, and not to Pharaoh, as the ultimate Provider and Sustainer.

God knew that these newly-freed slaves were not yet capable of providing for themselves. Their spiritual and physical capabilities required nurturing. In the desert, they would develop a unique and intimate relationship with God, while at the same time evolving from a rag-tag band of emancipated slaves to a nation capable of defending itself and its right to exist and control its own destiny. For this to happen, the journey would have to be long and the pace slow but deliberate. They would be given commandments, but they would slowly assume responsibility for fulfilling those commandments over time. At the point of the Exodus, they were physically and emotionally exhausted; they had been enslaved and abused for hundreds of years. Had God not intervened, Pharaoh would not have granted them even the three-day

vacation Moshe had requested on their behalf. They were in no fit state to carry all of the burdens of independence. Thus, while they would be granted the Sabbath - a revolutionary concept for the slave mentality - God knew they were not really ready for the six-day working week. They would have to learn about the true source of their sustenance without the physical labor of agrarian life in their homeland.

For that generation, then, the message of Shabbat was learned when on the seventh day they did not collect the manna/bread that fell from heaven throughout the week. Their “work” would be minimal, but the thrust of the lesson – that sustenance comes from God and not Pharaoh – would be clear and unmistakable nonetheless. The spiritual reality they experienced in the desert would achieve an even higher level on Shabbat by the simple cessation of activity, in imitation of God.

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This was one of the many lessons they learned on the road, a lesson independent of their ultimate destination; the journey itself would teach them so many more invaluable lessons. The longer, less direct route would allow them to grow in so many ways, while the shorter route would have brought them to their destination long before they were ready to meet the challenges that awaited them there, long before they would truly be worthy of the inheritance that awaited them at the journey’s end. Perhaps the same holds true for our personal journeys in life: The path we take, and the lessons we learn along the way, are often no less important than the destination.

For a more in-depth analysis see: <http://arikahn.blogspot.co.il/2014/01/audio-and-essays-parashat-bshalach.html>