

Shabbat Pesach 5781 - The Long and Short of Journeys
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Shabbat Shalom!

There's a funny Israeli commercial that shows Moses and the Israelites lost in the desert. They kvetch. They complain. They pester. Then behold! A miracle! A great ball of fire descends earthward, and when the ashes disappear, Moses cradles this gift from G-d. Is it Manna from heaven? No, it's better. It's a GPS with an arrow pointing toward the Promised Land.

Humor aside, the video raises a serious question. If the path from Egypt to Israel - slavery to freedom - was straightforward, why did they opt for the roundabout road instead of the shortcut?

This morning's Torah reading, describing the action of the Exodus as it happens, tells us that G-d sent them on the long path even though there was a shorter alternative. Perhaps the people would reconsider when they saw war and return to Egypt. In other words, says Rashi, if they were so quick to *reach* Israel, they might be just as quick to *leave* Israel.

Ramban says: "Although the way through the Philistine territory was more direct, G-d was afraid that the people would be discouraged if they had to fight their way through."

Maimonides writes: "G-d wanted to accustom them to hardship, to prepare them for the task of conquering and settling Canaan."

In the short term, this took longer. But in the long term, it was a worthwhile investment.

And here is my favorite answer, which connects to one of the best stories in the Talmud (Eruvin 53b). Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Hananyah was traveling and met a kid at an intersection. He asked the kid which way to the city. The boy answered, "This way is short but long, while that way is long but short." The rabbi started on the 'short but long' way but hit a dead end with gardens and orchards. Forced to turn around, he asked the boy, "Didn't you tell me this was the short way?" The boy answered, "Didn't I say it was also long?"

This story teaches us that sometimes shortcuts end up taking longer because we may hit a dead end. And that sometimes the long path is better because it's slow and steady. One example - ironic because it deals with roads - is that sometimes the nearest DMV

location is so backed up with lines that it's faster if you shlep out to a farther one. I had to do that in New Jersey.

But this advice is sage when it comes to life journeys as well.

One of the best decisions I ever made was taking a gap year after high school. I spent the year in Israel on a program called Nativ. When I got to college I was a year older than everyone...but also a year more mature. I was more sure of who I was, what I wanted to study, how I wanted to spend my time. I made better use of my time in college because of that year in Israel. The longer path was better for me, even if my roommates called me Grandpa.

The longer path is better for many of us, including some actors. My kids were watching the movie "The Prince of Egypt" before Passover, the 1998 delightful animated film about the Exodus. I decided to check out the cast, and I was stunned. There are more stars in "The Prince of Egypt" than in Ocean's 11, or any other movie I can think of. I am not a movie guy, and even I recognize 10 famous actors in this cast. It's a minyan of celebrities.

Patrick Stewart, of Star Trek fame, voices Pharaoh Seti I in the movie. But this actor took a long journey to arrive at the Promised Land of public recognition and acclaim. Born in England, Stewart got his start on the stage with the Royal Shakespeare Company. He landed many roles in British theater and television before signing on to a show called "Star Trek" at the age of 47. 47! Hitting his stride as an actor took decades. But when the opportunity came, the long road paid off. His professionalism and dedication to the craft rubbed off on his cast members for the good. He said, "The fact is all of those years in Royal Shakespeare Company – playing all those kings, emperors, princes and tragic heroes – were nothing but preparation for sitting in the captain's chair of the Enterprise." Earned, not given. His path was long but short - slow but direct.

There is another path to the big screen. From time to time child and teenage actors steal the stage and become household names. And often this does not bode well for their futures. Last year a documentary was made called "Show Biz Kids" which interviews adults who were famous child actors. While their stories and experiences differ, some themes emerge. A review in the New Yorker Magazine said, "Everyone [the director] spoke to had a different story to tell, but almost everyone described struggling through some version of the same 'wilderness period' that [the director] went through after stepping away from the business," that is, finding their individual identity. I am fascinated by the language of "wilderness period" because the Jews were marching through the wilderness. Through no fault of their own, these child stars were placed on

the path that was short but long - a fast track that was riddled with obstacles and challenges.

Hurdles and pitfalls faced the Jews of the Exodus beginning the march to freedom thousands of years ago... and us today. We each face challenges and choices. There is not enough time for everything. In our work, in our relationships, in our family, we are constantly asking ourselves, how much time should I spend on this? Should I take the long road or look for a shortcut?

I think the Torah and the Talmud remind us of something we know in our heads but is difficult to do with our hands: focus on the long term as much as the short term. For the Israelites, they had to make sure the Exodus and freedom were permanent, not temporary. For Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Hananyah asking the kid for directions, he learned that shortcuts can present obstacles. For my college self, I learned that living independently in Israel wasn't just fun but a foundation for my future. For Patrick Stewart, he learned that only decades of work could prepare him for his big moment saying, Live long and prosper. The long path is today's investment in tomorrow.

Maybe that's why people have two eyes: one to focus on today, the other for the future. That's the long and short of it.

Chag Sameach!