

**Parshat Beshalach**  
**The Long and Short Way**  
**Luz Toff**

If you were given a map with two routes shown, one shorter and more direct and one which is longer and more roundabout, which would you take?

While not given a map, we are told about a similar situation at the beginning of this week's parsha when the Israelites are led out of Egypt.

The parsha begins:

וַיְהִי בַשְּׁלַח פְּרַעֲוֹה אֶת־הָעָם וְלֹא־נָחַם אֱלֹקִים דֶּרֶךְ אֶרֶץ פְּלִשְׁתִּים כִּי קָרוֹב הוּא כִּי אָמַר אֱלֹקִים  
פְּנֵי־יַנְחָם הָעָם בְּרֹאֲתָם מִלְחָמָה וְשָׁבוּ מִצְרָיִם:

Now when Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although it was nearer; for God said, "The people may have a change of heart when they see war, and return to Egypt." (Shemot 13:17)

If we were visualising this, we would see the map and the most direct route along the top, and down below the roundabout route the people actually took, as delineated later in the Torah, and we would see the difference in these two routes. One is the "short way" and the other the "long way".

The commentators note that just as the quickest and most direct route was the easiest way to leave Egypt, it was also the easiest way to return there. To avoid the people losing heart and returning to Egypt as soon as we encountered the war-like Philistines, we were led on a roundabout path, through the Sinai desert. Even so, there were times during the journey that we complained and wanted to return. If the return journey had been quick and easy, surely the people would have attempted it.

In the Talmud (Eruvin 53b) we have a story which illustrates this parallel of two different ways:

תינוק מאי היא? פעם אחת הייתי מהלך בדרך, וראיתי תינוק יושב על פֶּרֶשֶׁת דְּרָכִים. ואמרתי לו: באיזה דֶּרֶךְ נֵלֵךְ לְעִיר? אָמַר לִי: זו קְצֵרָה וְאֶרֶבָה, וְזו אֶרֶבָה וְקְצֵרָה. וְהִלַּכְתִּי בְקְצֵרָה וְאֶרֶבָה, כִּינֵן שֶׁהִגַּעְתִּי לְעִיר מְצֹאֵתִי שֶׁמְקִיפִין אוֹתָהּ גְבוּת וּפְרָדִיסִין. חֲזַרְתִּי לְאַחֲרָי. אָמַרְתִּי לו: בְּנִי, הֲלֹא אָמַרְתָּ לִּי קְצֵרָה? אָמַר לִי: וְלֹא אָמַרְתִּי לָךְ אֶרֶבָה? נִשְׁקַתִּיו עַל רִאשׁוֹ, וְאָמַרְתִּי לו: אֲשֶׁרִיכֶם יִשְׂרָאֵל שְׂכֻלְכֶם חֲכָמִים גְּדוּלִים אֲתֶם, מְגֹדְלֶכֶם וְעַד קִטְנֶכֶם.

**What is the incident with a young boy? One time I was walking along the path, and I saw a young boy sitting at the crossroads. And I said to him: On which path shall we walk in order to get to the city? He said to me: This path is short and long, and that path is long and short. I walked on the path that was short and long. When I approached the city I found that gardens and orchards surrounded it, and I did not know the trails leading through them to the city. I went back and met the young boy again and said to him: My son, didn't you tell me**

that this way is **short? He said to me: And didn't I tell you** that it is also **long? I kissed him on his head and said to him: Happy are you, O Israel, for you are all exceedingly wise, from your old to your young.**

The paths lead to the same destination. The path might have seemed short, but it turned out to be long. Had the people taken the seemingly short path out of Egypt, it might have led them straight back to Egypt - which would have really been the long way. Instead, the seemingly long path was the route that contained the right amount of complication.

In life too, there is a "short but long" way and a "long but short" way. So argues the Tanya, where Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi sets out the fundamentals of the Chabad-Chassidic approach to life. In the opening cover, he sets out, based on Devarim 30:14, that the Torah and all of its precepts are "exceedingly close, in a long and short way." Based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, this can be further expounded. The long but short way is winding, steep, tedious, and long as life itself. It is full of ups and downs, setbacks and frustrations. While these may not be what we were expecting, they may contribute to our development and provide opportunities for growth. The long path demands every ounce of intellectual and emotional stamina the human being can muster. But it is a road that leads, steadily and surely, to the aspired-to destination.

We are currently in the month of Shevat. In Mishnah Rosh Hashanah (1:1) we learn:

בְּאֶחָד בְּשֶׁבֶט, רֵאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה לְאֵילָן, כְּדַבְּרֵי בֵּית שְׁמַאי. בֵּית הַלֵּל אוֹמְרִים, בְּחֻמְשָׁה עָשָׂר בּוֹ.

**On the first of Shevat is the New Year for the tree in accordance with the statement of Beit Shammai. But Beit Hillel say: The New Year for trees is on the fifteenth of Shevat.**

Now, what do trees have to do with this idea of a long but short way? The New Year for the tree here is connected to the formation of the fruit rather than the planting.

The Gemara (Rosh Hashanah 14a) seeks to explain the reason that the New Year for trees was set on this date.

אָמַר רַבִּי אֱלֶעָזָר אָמַר רַבִּי אוֹשְׁעִיא: הוֹאִיל וַיִּצְאוּ רוֹב גְּשָׁמֵי שָׁנָה, יַעֲדִיין רוֹב תְּקוּפָה מִבְּחוּץ.

**Rabbi Elazar said that Rabbi Oshaya said: The reason is since by that time most of the year's rains have already fallen, and most of the season, i.e., winter, is yet to come, as it continues until the spring equinox, which usually occurs in Nisan.**

In agriculture, during the winter months, we do not see most of what is happening to the trees. Once a tree sheds its leaves, we don't see much until it blossoms in the spring. The Gemara is telling us that rain plays a role in the growth but that it is not all that happens to a tree during the winter. Using the rain, it is growing and preparing inside. In the spring we then see the blossom which will then turn into fruits later in the year.

This is a long process of annual development in order for the tree to bear fruits at the right time of year. The New Year for the tree, according to the Gemara, signifies a point where

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most of the rain has fallen and the tree has been watered but there is still growth and development to happen, away from what we can see, before the tree blossoms and bears fruit.

Going back to the parsha, after the Jewish people left Egypt, there was a process of development that was required before we were ready to enter the land of Israel. Indeed, the journey turned out to require a generation longer than expected. Perhaps this idea of a long but short way, as seen in Eruvin, the Tanya and Rosh Hashana, can help us see the need for this process and help us understand on a deeper level why we weren't led "by way of the land of the Philistines, although it was nearer." (Shemot 13:17)



*Luz Toff grew up in Oxford, England and has been involved in Limmud UK from a young age. Luz moved to Israel and then London and then back to Israel before pursuing her undergraduate degree in Brighton, England. For the last 7 years, Luz has been sharing a thought on the weekly parsha and how it can be relevant to us in our lives today. Luz cares deeply about making Jewish text and practice meaningful, relevant and accessible for as many people as possible. Luz has worked as an informal educator in a Jewish day school in the UK and was blessed to learn in a variety of Jewish learning institutions around the world, including Midreshet Emunah v'Omanut, Drisha, Pardes, the Susi Bradfield Educational Leadership program and Maharat's Beit Midrash program.*