

# Parashat Beshallach

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## THE EXODUS AND THE WANDERINGS IN THE DESERT<sup>1</sup>

- Who sends Israel out of Egypt - Pharaoh or God?
- Why does God lead Israel the long way through the desert, not the short way through the land of the Philistines?
- What is the concern that the Israelites will want to return to slavery in Egypt, and what is the logic behind it?

### A. “And it was when Pharaoh sent the people out”

#### WHO SENDS THE ISRAELITES OUT OF EGYPT?

Is it Pharaoh or is it God who lets the people go?

In our Torah portion, *Parashat Beshallah*, we begin a new chapter in the history of the Jewish people: the Israelites, emancipated from Egyptian slavery, go out to the desert. How does the Torah choose to describe this historical moment, the beginning of a new era?

“And it was when Pharaoh sent the people out”??

1 This lesson has three parts and we will look at two topics which are in fact one: in the first part of the lesson, we will look at the Israelites' departure from Egypt; in the second part, the Israelites' wandering in the desert; in the third part, we will explore the connection between the two previous sections and we will briefly summarize them.

And it was when Pharaoh sent **וַיְהִי בְשִׁלַּח פְּרַעֲהַ**  
the people out... (Ex. 13:17) **אֶת הָעָם...ּ**

This introduction is perplexing. Is it appropriate to present the Exodus in this way? Is Pharaoh the one who sends the people out? Presumably, it should have said: And it was when God took Israel out of Egypt. Why is Pharaoh credited with being Israel's liberator? Is it not true that God is the One Who compels Pharaoh, using a strong hand signs and miracles, to send Israel out, while Pharaoh is the one who opposes the Exodus with all of his strength and only emancipates them when he is left with no choice?<sup>2</sup>

God took us  
out of Egypt.

Indeed, if we look at the previous verses at the end of *Parashat Bo*, the Torah represents the Exodus in a different way:

And on that very day the Lord **וַיְהִי בַעֲצָם הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה**  
brought the people of Israel **הוֹצִיא ה' אֶת בְּנֵי**  
out of the land of Egypt by their **יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם**  
hosts. (Ex. 12:51) **עַל צְבָאוֹתָם.**

2 This question has already been addressed by the commentators and a number of approaches have been suggested. Or Ha-chayim cites a *midrash*:

“When Pharaoh sent the people out” – for if God would have brought them out against his will, even if he had no desire to send them out, he would not have had any cause to pursue them, but his eye deceived him into thinking the matter was dependent upon him, and that is why he thought of reclaiming them.

According to his words, the Torah emphasizes that Pharaoh sends the people out as if of his own volition and for this reason he thought he could pursue them, as described below.

Immediately after this verse two *mitzvot* are mentioned which relate to remembering the Exodus from Egypt: the festival of *matzot* and the redemption of firstborn. The purpose of these *mitzvot* is to remind Israel that it is God Who takes them out of Egypt.

Then Moses said to the people, **וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל**  
“Remember this day in which **הָעָם זָכוֹר אֶת הַיּוֹם**  
you came out from Egypt, out **הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר יָצְאתֶם**  
of the house of slavery, **מִמִּצְרַיִם מִבַּיִת**  
**עֲבָדִים כִּי בְחַזֵּק**  
**יָד הוֹצִיא ה'**  
**אֶתְכֶם מִזֶּה וְלֹא**  
leavened bread shall be eaten... **יֹאכַל חֻמֶּץ...ּ וְהָיָה**  
And when in time to come your **כִּי יִשְׁאַלְכֶם בְּנֶךְ מִחָר**  
son asks you, ‘What does this **לֵאמֹר מַה זֹאת**  
mean?’ you shall say to him, **וְאָמַרְתָּ אֵלָיו בְּחַזֵּק**  
**יָד הוֹצִיאָנוּ ה'**  
**מִמִּצְרַיִם מִבַּיִת**  
**עֲבָדִים: וַיְהִי כִּי**  
**הִקְשָׁה פְּרַעֲהַ**  
**לְשַׁלַּחַנוּ וַיְהִיג**  
both the firstborn of man and the **ה' כָּל בְּכוֹר בְּאֶרֶץ**  
firstborn of animals. Therefore **מִצְרַיִם מִבְּכוֹר אָדָם**  
I sacrifice to the Lord all the **וְעַד בְּכוֹר בְּהֵמָה עַל**  
males that first open the womb, **כֵּן אֲנִי זֹבַח לַה' כָּל**  
but all the firstborn of my sons I **פֶּטֶר רְחֵם הַזֹּכְרִים**  
redeem.’ It shall be as a mark on **וְכָל בְּכוֹר בְּנֵי אִפְדָּה:**  
your hand or frontlets between **וְהָיָה לְאוֹת עַל יָדְכָה**  
your eyes, **וְלִטּוֹטְפוֹת בֵּין עֵינֶיךָ כִּי**  
**בְּחַזֵּק יָד הוֹצִיאָנוּ**  
**ה' מִמִּצְרַיִם.** (Ex. 13:3-16)

The Torah emphasizes three times that the Exodus from Egypt is through God's strong hand. In addition, the Torah makes the role of Pharaoh in the story very clear: he **“stubbornly refused to send us out”** and therefore God brought Israel out of Egypt using a strong hand. This account is the most accurately describes the process of redemption and it is compatible with the simple understanding of the previous portions, supporting the version at the end of *Parashat Bo* – **“the Lord brought us out of Egypt.”**

If so, it is not only in the simple understanding of the narrative that God is responsible for the Exodus from Egypt, not Pharaoh; the Torah emphasizes this repeatedly to stress this. Therefore, the opening of *Parashat Beshallach*, “And it was when Pharaoh sent the people out,” becomes even more perplexing.

## TWO ELEMENTS OF THE EXODUS

In order to resolve this problem, let us return to the opening portions of the Book of Exodus and see what Pharaoh's role is in letting Israel go.

**The Burning  
Bush: God's  
initiative  
in the  
redemption**

In God's first revelation to Moses, at the Burning Bush, the Torah states:

Then the Lord said, “I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt... and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land. Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt.”  
(Ex. 3:7-10)

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' רָאֵה  
רְאִיתִי אֶת עַנְי עַמִּי  
אֲשֶׁר בְּמִצְרַיִם...  
וְאָרַד לְהַצִּילוֹ מִיַּד  
מִצְרַיִם וּלְהַעֲלֹתוֹ  
מִן הָאָרֶץ הַהִוא...  
וְעַתָּה לֵךְ וְאֶשְׁלַחְךָ  
אֶל פַּרְעֹה וְהוֹצֵא  
אֶת עַמִּי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל  
מִמִּצְרָיִם.

The Torah emphasizes repeatedly that God is the initiator of the redemption of Israel (“I have surely seen...”), and it even describes this as a change from the Divine providence which has been in effect until now “And I have come down to deliver them.” Certainly, there is no initiative taken by Pharaoh.

**Exodus  
through  
Dialogue  
with  
Pharaoh**

Since the initiative for the Exodus comes from God and not Pharaoh, it would be appropriate to flee from Egypt despite Pharaoh's wrath and fury. A flight such as this could have been accompanied by miracles and wonders to glorify God and exact His vengeance upon Pharaoh. However, God says to Moses “Come, I will

send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt.” God teaches Moses from the outset of his mission that the Exodus is to be achieved through Pharaoh’s letting them go. The process of taking Israel out of Egypt will only proceed through a dialogue with Pharaoh.

For this reason already at the Burning Bush Moses is commanded to seek permission from Pharaoh to leave Egypt:

...”and you and the elders of Israel shall go to the king of Egypt and say to him, ‘The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us; and now, please send us out a three days’ journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to the Lord our God.’ But I know that the king of Egypt will not send you out unless compelled by a strong hand. So I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all the wonders that I will do in it; **after that he will send you out.**” (Ex. 3:18-20)

...ובאת אתה וזקני ישראל אל מלך מצרים ואמרתם אליו ה' אלהי העבריים נקרה עלינו ועתה נלכה נא דרך שלשת ימים במדבר ונבחה לה' אלהינו: ואני ידעתי כי לא יתן אתכם מלך מצרים להלך ולא ביד חזקה: ושלחתי את ידי והפיתי את מצרים בכל נפלאתי אשר אעשה בקרבן ואחרי כן ישלח אתכם.

Moses requests that Pharaoh send Israel out.

God informs Moses that Pharaoh will refuse his request and therefore there will be a need for a “strong hand,” but the end of the process Pharaoh himself will send the Israelites out. Indeed, Moses

stands before Pharaoh and asks him to send Israel out:

Afterward Moses and Aaron went and said to Pharaoh” ,Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, ‘**Send my people out**, that they may hold a feast to me in the wilderness.’” But Pharaoh said, “Who is the Lord, that I should obey his voice **and send Israel out?** I do not know the Lord, and moreover, **I will not send Israel out.**” (Ex. 5:1-2)

ואחר באו משה ואהרן ויאמרו אל פרעה פה אמר ה' אלהי ישראל שלח את עמי ויחגו לי במדבר: ויאמר פרעה מי ה' אשר אשמע בקלו לשלח את ישראל לא ידעתי את ה' וגם את ישראל לא אשלח.

The root *shallach* – to send out, to release, to send forth, to banish –appears three times, both in Moses’ request and Pharaoh’s refusal.

This is a concept which recurs throughout the story:

1. In all of these conversations between Moses and Pharaoh, the request or demand is for Pharaoh to “send Israel out”.
2. In God’s words to Moses, He says that Moses will ask Pharaoh to send Israel out, that Pharaoh will refuse to send them out, and that he will ultimately be compelled to send them out.
3. The signs and plagues are described by the Torah as being designed to compel Pharaoh to send Israel out.

The root shallach is central.

The centrality of the topic of letting Israel go is expressed by the root of shallach, which repeats itself sixty times! In addition, the use of the root shallach in contexts other than the Exodus from Egypt as well as in contexts in which it would have been reasonable to use another root, further emphasizes the importance of the root shallach.<sup>3</sup>

There are two integral elements to Exodus.

It appears that letting Israel go is a central theme in the story of the Exodus and that the process of the Exodus depends on Pharaoh's consent.

On the other hand, already at the Burning Bush it is clear that Pharaoh will not consent of his own will; he will only do so when compelled by God's "strong

3 In some of its appearances, the root is used to refer to the release of the Israelites by Pharaoh and the Egyptians (Ex. 12:33), the request to send them out (Ex. 4:23), Pharaoh's refusal to let the Israelites go (Ex. 5:2), and Pharaoh's empty promises to send Israel out (Ex. 8:24); in these places, there is a direct connection to the Exodus. On the other hand, the root does appear in other contexts:

- a. The first time the root shallach appears, it relates to Moses' mission to Pharaoh (Ex. 3:10), and at the Burning Bush the calling of Moses is described with the root shallach seven times. Below, the term is used numerous times in this context.
- b. God's striking the Egyptians is described as sending forth his Hand (Ex. 3:20).
- c. Moses' grabbing the snake is described as sending forth his hand: "Send forth your hand and grasp its tail" (Ex. 4:4).

The root shallach is mentioned a number of times in Pharaoh's words or in the context of actions not connected to the Israelites in Egypt: "And Pharaoh sent, and behold, none had died of Israel's flocks" (Ex. 9:7); "Now therefore send, get your livestock and all that you have in the field into safe shelter" (Ex. 9:19); "And Pharaoh sent, and he called to Moses and Aaron" (Ex. 9:27).

hand" tactics.

In other words, the Exodus must take place through Pharaoh's consent, but this consent is not straightforward; it will require coercion.

Why is there such a need? Is it not possible to send the Israelites out by miracles without Pharaoh's consent, or alternatively to cause Pharaoh to agree to send Israel out without using God's "strong arm"? What is the significance of these two elements?

"AND THEY SHALL KNOW THAT I AM THE LORD."

One goal of the Exodus was to save the oppressed.

A primary objective of the Exodus is clear – to deliver the oppressed people physically.<sup>4</sup> To realize this goal,

4 This aspect of the Exodus is mentioned in the first announcement of redemption:

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' רְאֵה רָאִיתִי אֶת עַמִּי עֹמֵי אֲשֶׁר בְּמִצְרַיִם וְאֶת צַעֲקוֹתָם שָׁמַעְתִּי מִפְּנֵי נַגְשָׁיו כִּי יִדְעוּתִי אֶת מִכְאֲבָיו: וְאֵרַד לְהַצִּילוֹ מִיַּד מִצְרַיִם וְלְהַעֲלֹתוֹ מִן הָאָרֶץ הַהִוא אֶל אֶרֶץ טוֹבָה וְרוֹחֶבָה אֶל אֶרֶץ זָבֶת חֶלֶב וְדָבָשׁ אֶל מְקוֹם הַפִּנְעָנִי וְהַחֲתִי וְהָאֱמֹרִי וְהַפְּרִזִּי וְהַחִוִּי וְהַיְבוּסִי: וְעַתָּה הִנֵּה צַעֲקוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בָּאָה אֵלַי וְגַם רָאִיתִי אֶת הַלֶּחֶם אֲשֶׁר מִצְרַיִם לֹחֲצִים אֹתָם: וְעַתָּה לֵכָה וְאֶשְׁלַחְךָ אֶל פְּרֹעֹה וְהוֹצֵא אֶת עַמִּי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרַיִם:

Then the Lord said, "I have surely seen **the affliction of my people** who are in Egypt and have heard their **cry** because of their taskmasters. I know their **sufferings**, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land. to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. And now, behold, the **cry** of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have also seen the **oppression** with which the Egyptians oppress them. Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt." (Ex. 3:7-10)

In these verses, we find essentially the personal and moral



it would have been sufficient for Pharaoh to send the Israelites out of his own free will.

The other goal of the Exodus was to make God known.

However, there is an additional goal to the Exodus – that God be known and believed in by the Israelites and Pharaoh:<sup>5</sup>

I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the Lord your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. (Ex. 6:7)	ולקחתי אתכם לי לעם והייתי לכם לא-לֹהִים וידעתם כי אני ה' א-לֹהֵיכֶם המוציא אתכם מתחת סבלות מצרים.
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From the outset God clarifies that the Exodus will cause Israel to believe in him and to become His servants. Indeed, the first of the Ten Commandment that declares faith in God includes the belief in the Exodus: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (20:2)

In addition to the Jews’ faith in God, God’s strong hand acting against Egypt brings Egypt to have faith in God: “The Egyptians shall know that I am the

justification for the redemption of Israel from Egypt. The purpose of the signs and miracles is to compel Pharaoh to send Israel out from under his control:

ואני ידעתי כי לא יתן אתכם מלך מצרים להלך ולא ביד חזקה: ושלחתי את ידי והפיתי את מצרים בכל נפלאותי אשר אעשה בקרבו ואחרי כן אשלח אתכם.

But I know that the king of Egypt will not send you out unless compelled by a mighty hand. So I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all the wonders that I will do in it; after that he will send you out. (Ex. 3:19-20)

5 See our lesson on *Parashat Vaera*.

Lord, when I stretch out my hand against Egypt...” (7:5) For this reason, taking Israel out of Egypt has to be done in a way that demonstrates that God is the one who brings Israel out, and that their Exodus does not come from Pharaoh’s initiative; it must not be circumstantial and therefore it is done in this way.<sup>6</sup>

Why do we need Pharaoh’s consent?

To realize these two goals (freeing the Israelites and encouraging belief in God), there is no need that Pharaoh specifically is the one to send the Israelites out. The redemption could happen with an outstretched arm and by miracles in total opposition to the will of Pharaoh and the Egyptians; if so, why do we need the element of the Israelites being released **by Pharaoh**? Why is God compelled, as it were, to wait for Pharaoh’s consent to bring Israel out of Egypt?

6 In light of this goal, the connection between Pharaoh’s will and the plagues changes. If in Chapter 3, the plagues come as a result of Pharaoh’s lack of will, in certain places (which we will indicate below), the lack of will of Pharaoh is orchestrated by God to increase the signs, as it says explicitly:

ויאמר ה' אל משה בא אל פרעה כי אני הכבדתי את לבו ואת לב עבדיו למען שתי אתתי אלה בקרבו: ולמען תספר באזני בנך ובן בנך את אשר התעללתי במצרים ואת אתתי אשר שמתי כם וידעתם כי אני ה'.

Then the Lord said to Moses, “Go in to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants, that I may show these signs of mine among them, and that you may tell in the hearing of your son and of your grandson how I have dealt harshly with the Egyptians and what signs I have done among them, that you may know that I am the Lord.” (Ex. 10:1-2)

See Yonatan Grossman’s article, “*Bein ‘Shamatti’ Ve-‘Ezkor’*” and “*Hakdasha Sheniya Li-geula Sheniya*”, on the Virtual Beit Midrash website.

Does God  
control  
Pharaoh's  
will?

However, the struggle with Pharaoh demonstrates that God controls Pharaoh, who sees himself as a powerful and omnipotent ruler; Pharaoh thinks that he can oppose God, and God proves that Pharaoh has no power to act against God's will and that he will ultimately conform to the will of God. It is not only that the Israelites leave Egypt; they leave Egypt with Pharaoh's permission and he sends them himself. Pharaoh is compelled to release the Israelites against his will and this proves that **God rules even over the will of a person**. He may cause Pharaoh to be stubborn – “And the Lord strengthened the heart of Pharaoh” (Ex. 9:12) – and he may cause Pharaoh to send out the Israelites (even though he decides not to do it). The *midrash* expresses this idea:

“And it was when Pharaoh sent” – this is what is written (Ps. 147:15), “Who sends his statement to the land.” Woe to the villains, who will be full of decay and worms and erased from the world, who seek to annul the word of the Holy One, Blessed be He.

He said to them: “You said (Ex. 5:2), ‘Moreover, **I will not send Israel out,**’ and I said (Ex. 5:1), ‘**Send my people out.**’ We will see whose words are fulfilled and whose words are nullified.”

In the end, Pharaoh got up of his own accord and went and fell at Moses' feet, and he said to Israel (Ex. 12:31): “Get up, go out.”

The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to him: “Well, Pharaoh, did your words stand or mine?”

(*Exodus Rabba* 20:3)

If so, it is very important that specifically Pharaoh should send Israel out, and the fact that this occurs does not demonstrate that Pharaoh is in charge, but rather the reverse: that God manages to control Pharaoh in an absolute manner.

“And it  
was when  
Pharaoh  
sent”!!

For this reason, the opening of the portion, “And it was when Pharaoh sent the people out” aptly describes the Exodus: God controls Pharaoh's will and He causes Pharaoh to send Israel out himself. Even when events appear to be directed by nature through Pharaoh's sending the Israelite nation out, God truly is the One Who brings things about. However, superficially it seems that Pharaoh sends Israel out as a human action, in the natural way – “And it was when Pharaoh sent the people out”; but in truth, the people knows that God is the sender, “And I will send forth my hand and I will strike Egypt... and afterward he will send them out” (Ex. 3:21).

God's kingdom is revealed in the world at its greatest degree not through the negation of the free will by the plagues, but specifically when a person chooses of his or her own free choice to fulfill God's will. Even though Pharaoh's desire to send them out is under duress as he first announces, “I do not know the Lord, and moreover, I will not send Israel out,” he is still ultimately compelled to personally send them out himself: “And it was when Pharaoh sent the people out.”



And so says the *midrash*:

Why does the verse open with this language? The mouth which says “I will not send Israel out” came back and said “I will send you out.” Therefore, it opens with “And it was when Pharaoh sent”.

(Midrash Tanchuma, Beshalach 1)

## B. “Lest the people change their minds when they see war and return to Egypt.”

### THE PURPOSE OF THE LONG JOURNEY THROUGH THE DESERT

What is wrong with the close Philistine way?

The chapters of slavery in Egypt, and even the process of being brought out of Egypt, have come to an end. Now, we are at the beginning of the new era, travelling through the desert to enter the land. The first thing that the Torah tells about him in this context is choosing a route:

And it was when Pharaoh sent the people out, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, for that was near. For God said, “Lest the people change their minds when they see war and return to Egypt.” (Ex. 13:17)

וַיְהִי בִשְׁלַח פְּרַעֲוֹה אֶת הָעָם וְלֹא נָחַם אֱלֹהִים דֶּרֶךְ אֶרֶץ פְּלִשְׁתִּים כִּי קְרוֹב הוּא כִּי אָמַר אֱלֹהִים פֶּן יִנָּחַם הָעָם בְּרֹאֲתָם מִלְחָמָה וְשָׁבוּ מִצְרָיִמָה.

The natural and simple route to travel from Egypt to Canaan is “the way of the land of the Philistines,” and the reason for this is “for that was near” – this is the shortest, closest way. This is how Nahmanides explains it:

It is correct to say that God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, which<sup>7</sup> was close; it would have been good to lead them on that path.

Why does God not direct Israel on the shortest path to Canaan? Why does God take them on a longer, circuitous route through the desert?

**The distance from Egypt prevents their retreat.**

The verse explains that the reason to choose the long route is “Lest the people change their minds when they see war and return to Egypt.” According to Nahmanides,<sup>8</sup> God tries to prevent Israel from encountering war while they are close to the land of Egypt, out of concern that they will panic and return to Egypt.

For God said, “Lest the people change their minds when they see war and return to Egypt” – a war will be the result if they should pass through the land of the Philistines, for the Philistines will not allow them

7 The word in the text, “*ki*”, has a number of meanings beyond “because”. According to Nahmanides, in our verse “*ki*” should be explained as “which”.

8 Many commentators explain the sentence in a similar way, despite that there are a number of interpretive arguments related to the phrase “for it was close” – is it a justification for going around in the desert, or does it have a different meaning? See the commentaries of Rashi, Rashbam and Ibn Ezra.

to pass through peacefully; then they will return to Egypt. However, on the desert route, they will not see war until they are in the lands of the Amorite kings Sihon and Og, which will be given to them; at that time, they are far away from Egypt.

Thus, the Israelites take a circuitous route so that it will not be easy to return to Egypt if they become panicked about war. The verse summarizes the concern, “and [they] return to Egypt”. The great worry is that Israel will return to Egypt and God is interested in preventing this.<sup>9</sup>

9 This is how Rashi, Ibn Ezra and Rashbam (*ad loc.*) explain it. In the *midrashim*, we have found other directions, e.g. *Exodus Rabba* (20:12):

Another explanation: “God did not lead them” [alternatively: God did not change His mind] – even though Pharaoh sent them out, the Holy One, Blessed be He did not change His mind.

To what may this be compared? To a king whose son was kidnapped and his father went to save him from the bandits and killed them. The son said to his father, “This is what they did to me; this is how they struck me and enslaved me.” Even though he killed them, he would not change his mind, but rather he said, “This is what they did to my son.”

This is what the Egyptians did when they enslaved Israel, as it is said, “And they embittered their lives” (1:14). The Holy One, Blessed be He, brought upon them the Ten Plagues and redeemed his sons, and even so He would say, “I will not change My mind until I kill them all.” Therefore, it says (14:27): “And the Lord shook off the Egyptians into the midst of the sea,” and (15:1), “the horse and his rider He has thrown into the sea”. And it says (Joel 4:19), “Egypt will become a wasteland”. Therefore it says, “God did not change His mind.”

According to the *midrash*, redirecting Israel by way of the

### A circuitous route for independence

However, is there a concern that the Israelites will return to Egypt when their lives there were so bad?

Apparently, in spirit, the Israelites are still a nation of slaves and therefore they cannot fight for their independence. As a result, there is concern that if they encounter war, they will prefer returning to the known Egyptian slavery rather than deal with combat, the results of which could be great slaughter or a new unfamiliar enslavement.<sup>10</sup> According to this, the circuitous route in the desert is meant to strengthen Israel as an independent nation ready to fight for its life.<sup>11</sup>

desert is designed to cause Egypt to pursue Israel into the sea and drown Egypt in it.

10 There may be another reason that Israel would want to return to Egypt. In Ezekiel, there is a description of the Jews not wanting to leave Egypt because of their connection to its idols:

ביום ההוא נשאתי ידי להם להוציאם מארץ מצרים אל ארץ אשר תרחי להם וְבַת חֵלֶב וְדָבַשׁ צְבִי הִיא לְכֹל הָאָרְצוֹת: וְאָמַר אֱלֹהִים אִישׁ שְׁקוּצֵי עֵינָיו הִשְׁלִיכוּ וּבְגִלּוּלֵי מִצְרַיִם אֶל תִּטְמְאוּ אֲנִי ה' אֲדַלְהֵיכֶם: וְיָמְרוּ בִי וְלֹא אָבוּ לִשְׁמֹעַ אֵלַי אִישׁ אֶת שְׁקוּצֵי עֵינֵיהֶם לֹא הִשְׁלִיכוּ וְאֶת גִּלּוּלֵי מִצְרַיִם לֹא עָזְבוּ וְאָמַר לְשֹׁפֵךְ חַמְוֵתִי עֲלֵיהֶם לְכָלֹת אֶפְיָהֶם בְּתוֹךְ אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם

On that day I swore to them that I would bring them out of the land of Egypt into a land that I had searched out for them, a land flowing with milk and honey, the most glorious of all lands. And I said to them, Cast away the detestable things your eyes feast on, every one of you, and do not defile yourselves with the idols of Egypt; I am the Lord your God. But they rebelled against me and were not willing to listen to me. None of them cast away the detestable things their eyes feasted on, nor did they forsake the idols of Egypt. (Ez. 20:6-8)

In light of these verses, it is very clear why God would worry that they might seek to return to Egypt.

11 This is what Maimonides says in *Guide of the Perplexed*, III, ch. 24:

שהוא ית' הקדים להרגילכם הטורח במדבר – להרבות טובתכם כשתכנסו לארץ;...וידוע שלולא טרחם ועמלם במדבר לא היו יכולים לכבוש הארץ ולא להלחם ביושביה – כבר אמרה התורה זה, "כי אמר אֱלֹהִים פֶּן יִנַּחַם הָעָם בְּרֵאוֹתֶם מִלַּחְמָה וְשָׁבוּ מִצְרִימָה, וַיִּסַּב אֱלֹהִים אֶת הָעָם דֶּרֶךְ הַמִּדְבָּר יַם סוּף" – כי המנוחה תסיר הגבורה, וצוק הפרנסה והעמל יתנו הגבורה – והיא ה'טובה' אשר באה בזה הענין.

God has first trained you in the hardships of the wilderness, to increase your welfare when you enter the land of Canaan... It is indeed a fact that the transition from trouble to ease gives more pleasure than continual ease. It is also known that the Israelites would not have been able to conquer the land and fight with its inhabitants, if they had not previously undergone the trouble and hardship of the wilderness. Scripture says in reference to this: When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near. For God said, "Lest the people change their minds when they see war and return to Egypt." But God led the people around by the way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea. And the people of Israel went up out of the land of Egypt equipped for battle." Ease destroys bravery, whilst trouble and care for food create strength; and this was [also for the Israelites] the good that ultimately came out of their wanderings in the wilderness.

See also III, ch. 32:

והוא אמרו, "ולא נחם אֱלֹהִים דֶּרֶךְ אֶרֶץ פְּלִשְׁתִּים, כִּי קָרוֹב הוּא וְגו', וַיִּסַּב אֱלֹהִים אֶת הָעָם דֶּרֶךְ הַמִּדְבָּר יַם סוּף". וכמו שהסב האֱלֹהִים אותם מן הדרך הישרה אשר היתה מכוונת תחלה, מפני יראת מה שלא היו גופותם יכולים לסבלו לפי הטבע... שאין בטבע האדם שיגדל על מלאכת עבדות בחומר ובלבנים והדומה להם, ואחר כן ירחץ ידיו לשעתו מלכלובם וילחם עם ילידי הענק' פתאום, ...שהיה מחכמת האֱלֹהִים להסב אותם במדבר עד שילמדו גבורה – כמו שנודע, שההליכה במדבר ומעוט הנאות הגוף מרחיצה וסיכה וכיוצא בהם יולידו הגבורה, והפכם יוליד רוח לב – ונולדו גם כן אנשים שלא הרגילו בשפלות ובעבדות...

Here occurs in the Law a passage which contains exactly the same idea; it is the following: "God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near. For God said, "Lest the people change their minds when they see war and return to Egypt." But God led the people around by the way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea," etc. Here God led the people about, away from the direct road which He originally intended, because He feared they might meet on that way with hardships too great for their ordinary strength... it would be just as if a person trained to work as a slave with mortar and bricks, or similar things,

**Breaking the chains of dependence upon Pharaoh**

According to Rav Yoel Bin-Nun<sup>12</sup> the reason for the circuitous route is something else entirely.

The Exodus happened with Pharaoh's consent and permission...

"The way of the land of the Philistines" was a royal military road controlled by Egypt...

Had the Israelites taken this highway, they would have had to demonstrate good and friendly behavior towards Pharaoh and to recognize his continued authority over them. At the border crossing, they would have presented Pharaoh's legal authorization, and the same at every fort along the way. The Egyptian army commanders would have saluted and cleared the barricade, and after that they would have reported to Pharaoh that his subjects, the Israelites, passed by according to his permission. Also, the Israelites would have written appropriate notes of gratitude...

Had they left Egypt in this manner, Pharaoh would not have pursued them at all. He could have given

should interrupt his work, clean his hands, and at once fight with real giants. It was the result of God's wisdom that the Israelites were led about in the wilderness till they acquired courage. For it is a well-known fact that travelling in the wilderness, and privation of bodily enjoyments, such as bathing, produce courage, whilst the reverse is the source of faint-heartedness: besides, another generation rose during the wanderings that had not been accustomed to degradation and slavery.

12 See at length the essay by Rav Yoel Bin-Nun, "Derekh Eretz Pelishtim", Megadim 3.

them a mountain region in Canaan and turned them into his agents, vassals subject to his authority. At the first sign of war, the people would have renounced its independence and returned to Egypt to accept Pharaoh's patronage.

According to this explanation, the desert route serves not only to distance them from Egypt so that technically they will be unable to return when faced with war; it is designed to annul their dependence upon Pharaoh.

However, we must ask the following question: how does the desert route address this problem? What will bring the Israelites to such a deep emotional change?

#### RESULTS OF THE SPLITTING OF THE SEA

The Red  
Sea –  
War with  
Egypt

Immediately after the Exodus, the Israelites reach the Red Sea and wage war with Egypt, under God's protection. From this we learn that the desert route **is not designated to prevent war** for Israel, but to substitute war with the Philistines for war with the Egyptians.<sup>13</sup> Why? What is God's aim here?

13 However, some commentators explain the concern of war specifically as a concern about a confrontation with Pharaoh. This is how Rabbi Yosef Bekhor Shor explains it (13:17):

“When they see war” – war with Pharaoh, for if they had not travelled by way of the Red Sea so that He could drown them there, they would have pursued them by way of dry land, and they would have needed to fight him on dry land.

Similarly, Chizkuni explains there:

Fearing War,  
Preferring  
Slavery

When the Israelites see the Egyptians pursuing them, they respond with great fear:

They said to Moses, “Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us in bringing us out of Egypt? Is not this what we said to you in Egypt: ‘Leave us alone that we may serve the Egyptians. For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.’” (Ex. 14:11-12)

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶל מֹשֶׁה  
הַמִּבְּלִי אֵינֶן קְבָרִים  
בְּמִצְרַיִם לְקַחְתָּנוּ  
לְמוֹת בַּמִּדְבָּר מֵהָאֵת  
עָשִׂיתָ לָּנוּ לְהוֹצִיאָנוּ  
מִמִּצְרַיִם: הֲלֹא זֶה  
הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְנוּ  
אֵלֶיךָ בְּמִצְרַיִם לֵאמֹר  
חֲדַל מִמֶּנּוּ וְנַעֲבֹדָה  
אֶת מִצְרַיִם כִּי טוֹב  
לָנוּ עֲבֹד אֶת מִצְרַיִם  
מִמָּוְתוֹ בַּמִּדְבָּר.

Indeed, it is evident that the concern that the Israelites will prefer slavery to war is justified because they respond in this way when they face Egypt in war: “Leave us alone that we may serve the Egyptians.”

“When they see war” – Egypt will pursue them. The Philistines will come out towards them to send them back to their cousins, the Egyptians. Furthermore, they know that they are coming to attack them, for the land of the Philistines is part of the Land of Israel, as I explained in *Parashat Vayera* and *Parashat Toledot*, and as is explained in the Book of Joshua. Thus, they will have then war at their front and their rear, and due to this, they will “return to Egypt” – they will consider returning to Egypt, as they indeed do even when they stayed in the desert.





wilderness, and the people of Israel said to them, “Would that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.” (Ex. 16:2-3)

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֲלֵהֶם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִי יִתֵּן מוֹתֵנוּ בְּיַד ה' בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם בְּשִׁבְתֵּנוּ עַל סֵדֶה הַבָּשָׂר בְּאֶכְלֵנוּ לֶחֶם לְשֹׁבַע כִּי הוֹצֵאתָם אֹתָנוּ אֶל הַמִּדְבָּר הַזֶּה לְהָמִית אֶת כָּל הַקָּהָל הַזֶּה בְּרָעָב.

The concern “Lest the people change their minds and return to Egypt” applies not only “when they see war,” but in the face of any challenge. Israel is still worried about coping with the challenges of independence, and when it is difficult they do not only cry out to God, but they declare that they prefer Egyptian slavery over such struggles.

The challenges in the desert free the Israelites from dependency.

The Israelites still feel that they are dependent upon Egypt for all of their existential needs and they need to break this dependency. How can they do this? They do this through repeated struggles that prove that they can survive without Egypt’s help, but rather with God’s help. Israel, however, requires a long process to free itself from the feeling of enslavement to Pharaoh and to arrive at complete faith in God. In the desert Israel goes through the process of emancipation from Egyptian bondage, building faith in God’s leadership and, in parallel, building confidence in their power to cope.

Why does this process take place specifically in the

desert? Firstly, entering the Land of Israel can only occur when the people are ready from a spiritual perspective.<sup>15</sup> Secondly, the desert is a place which provides unique challenges that do not exist in a settled area. The desert detour does not prevent difficulties; on the contrary, staying and travelling in the desert raises a number of difficulties for the nation to cope with, and through this the nation learns to recognize Who helps it with all of its challenges.<sup>16</sup>

15 This may be alluded to in *Exodus Rabba* (20:15):

Another explanation: “God did not lead them” – this may be compared to a king who had a son; he sought to give him an inheritance, but he thought: “If I give it to him now, **he is still a minor and has no competence to keep it.** Rather, I will wait until my son learns his letters and understands them deeply, and afterwards I will give it to him.”

So too, the Holy One, Blessed be He, thought: “If I bring Israel into the land now, they are unfamiliar with the commandments, and they have no knowledge of gifts and tithes. Rather, I will first give them the Torah, and then I will bring them into the land.”

16 This what is stated in Deuteronomy:

וַתִּזְכֹּר אֶת כָּל הַדֶּרֶךְ אֲשֶׁר הוֹלִיכְךָ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ זֶה אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה בְּמִדְבָּר לְמַעַן עֲנִתְךָ לְנַסּוֹתְךָ לְדַעַת אֶת אֲשֶׁר בְּלִבְךָ הֲתִשְׁמֹר מִצְוֹתַי אִם לֹא: וַיַּעֲנֶךָ וַיִּרְעַבְךָ וַיִּצְאֲכֹלְךָ אֶת הַמָּן אֲשֶׁר לֹא יָדַעְתָּ וְלֹא יָדְעוּן אֲבוֹתֶיךָ לְמַעַן הוֹדִיעְךָ כִּי לֹא עַל הַלֶּחֶם לִבְדוּ הַחַיָּה הָאָדָם כִּי עַל כָּל מוֹצֵא פִי ה' יִחַיֶּה הָאָדָם:

And you shall remember the whole way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not. And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. (Deut. 8:2-3)

There Nahmanides explains:

This is the meaning of “that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would



## GOD'S LEADERSHIP IN THE DESERT

“And the Lord went before them.”

Journeying in the desert requires direct and open Divine providence at all times:

And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night. The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people. (Ex. 13:20-21)

וַיֵּלֶךְ ה' הַלֵּךְ לִפְנֵיהֶם  
יוֹמָם בְּעַמּוּד עָנָן  
לְנַחֲתָם הַדֶּרֶךְ וּלְיָלֵהָ  
בְּעַמּוּד אֵשׁ לְהָאִיר  
לָהֶם לְלֶכֶת יוֹמָם  
וּלְיָלֵהָ: לֹא יָמִישׁ  
עַמּוּד הָעָנָן יוֹמָם  
וְעַמּוּד הָאֵשׁ לְיָלֵהָ  
לִפְנֵי הָעָם.

God provides for them in the desert.

After the Splitting of the Sea, the Torah tells us of four stations in the desert:

- **Marah** (Ex. 15:22-26)
- **Elim** (Ex. 15:27)
- **Sin Desert** (Ex. Ch. 16)
- **Rephidim** (Ex. 17:1-7)

In these places, it becomes clear to the Jewish people that God is the one who provides their needs in the desert.

keep his commandments or not” – for this was a great test for them, that they unquestioningly entered the great desert, a place with no bread; and they did not have anything in their hands from the manna, because it would fall daily and melt when the sun grew hot, and they would grow very hungry for it. All of this they did in order to keep God’s command, to do everything He commanded; **now, God could have led them through the towns surrounding them, but He brought them through this test for by this it is made known that they will keep His commandments forever.**

In **Marah**, the waters are bitter, but God rectifies the situation miraculously. Subsistence in the arid desert is impossible for a nation unfamiliar with it, and only through a miracle do they manage to survive. The complaints about the lack of water return many times during their travels through the desert, and after each complaint God provides water for Israel in a miraculous way, something which dramatically proves to them that they are dependent upon God.

In **Elim**, God shows them a great oasis, providing them with everything they need without any exertion on their part.

In the **Sin Desert**, the Israelites complain about the food, and they recall with nostalgia their slavery in Egypt: “Would that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full...” (v. 3) After this complaint, God gives Israel “bread from the heavens” – manna. This miraculous food, which provides all of their nutritional needs throughout their decades in the desert, is one of the strongest proofs of the dependence of Israel upon God.

In **Rephidim**, the Israelites once again find themselves without water, and again their complaint recalls their dependence upon Egypt (v. 3): “Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?”<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> In Rephidim, an additional story occurs: the war with Amalek (Ex. 17:8-16). It is very interesting to note that specifically in this case, Israel does not express a panicked desire to return to

Dependence upon Egypt prevents the Israelites from entering the land.

Many times during their wandering in the desert, the deep impact left by Egyptian slavery surfaces – every time there is some difficulty, the Israelites want to return to Egypt.<sup>18</sup> As long as they feel this, they cannot enter the land. The Israelites can enter the land only when they see “war” without feeling the compulsion to return to Egypt; they can only do so when they feel that they are capable of dealing themselves with the problems and they have no need to “return to Egypt,” to depend upon the Egyptians.

EMANCIPATION FROM EGYPT

The final complaint allows Israel to disperse the illusion.

Israel’s final complaint in the desert, before they enter the land, appears in the book of Numbers:

From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way. And the people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out	וַיֵּסְעוּ מִהַר הָהָר דֶּרֶךְ יָם סוּף לְסַבֵּב אֶת אֶרֶץ אֱדוֹם וַתִּקְצַר נַפְשׁ הָעָם בַּדֶּרֶךְ: וַיְדַבֵּר הָעָם בְּאֵלֵהִים וּבְמֹשֶׁה לֵמָּה הֵעֵלִיתָנוּ
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Egypt. It may be that the war upon the Red Sea emancipated them from the fear of combat.

Similarly, from all of the complaints it is evident that the worry “Lest the people change their minds when they see war” is not specifically the concern of war but the concern of all challenges, and the most harsh complaints relate to thirst and hunger.

18 Additional complaints in which the desire to return to Egypt is mentioned include: Graves of Craving (Numbers 11); the Spies (Numbers 14); the claim of Dathan and Abiram in Korah’s rebellion (Numbers 16:13); and Mei Meribah (Numbers 20).

of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food.” Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. And the people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord, that he take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. (Num. 21:4-7)	מִמִּצְרַיִם לָמוּת? בְּמַדְבָּר כִּי אֵין לֶחֶם וְאֵין מַיִם וְנִפְשָׁנוּ קָצָה בְּלֶחֶם הַקֶּלֶקֶל: וַיִּשְׁלַח ה' בָּעָם אֶת הַנָּחָשִׁים הַשֵּׂרָפִים וַיִּנְשְׁכוּ אֶת הָעָם וַיָּמָת עִם רַב מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל: וַיָּבֹא הָעָם אֶל מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמְרוּ חָטָאנוּ כִּי דִבַּרְנוּ בְךָ וַנְּבַךְ הַתְּפַלֵּל אֵל ה' וַיִּסַּר מֵעֲלֵינוּ אֶת הַנָּחָשׁ וַיִּתְּפַלֵּל מֹשֶׁה בְּעֵד הָעָם.
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This time, after the punishment, the Israelites confess their error: “We have sinned.” It may be that the punishment that God gives to them this time brings them to understand what is happening, finally and suddenly.

Throughout the journey, God goes before them and takes care of their needs, clearing the path before them and dealing with all of the snakes and other hazards native to the desert. After this complaint, God sends the snakes against them. Sending the snakes is not a miraculous phenomenon, like the plagues of Egypt. The snakes exist in the desert in a natural way.<sup>19</sup> Sending the snakes is executed by

19 This is stated explicitly in Deuteronomy: “Who led you through the great and terrifying wilderness, with its fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty ground where there was no water, who

removing the unique miraculous protection which God provides for Israel in the desert; naturally, the snakes then strike.

**Understanding  
one's  
dependence  
upon God**

When the Israelites see this, they suddenly understand that their entire existence in the desert is dependent upon God, and without God's miraculous protection they cannot survive. They then understand that they depend upon God alone, and their dependence on Egypt has utterly no significance.<sup>20</sup> Suddenly, they understand everything that has happened in the desert: they understand that God is the One "Who led you through the great and terrifying wilderness, with its fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty ground where there was no water, Who brought you water out of the flinty rock, Who fed you in the wilderness with manna." (Deut. 8:15)

**Emancipation  
from  
dependence  
upon Egypt**

After this event, the Israelites never mention Egypt again. Now that they have achieved this liberation from an emotional dependence upon Egypt, they reach recognition of and faith in God and are ready to enter the land. Indeed, immediately after this story, the conquest of the lands of Sihon and Og begins.

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brought you water out of the flinty rock." (Deut. 8:15)  
20 This story occurs at the end of the forty years, when all of the people who had been in bondage in Egypt are dead. The generations present, the one which will enter the land, has not known enslavement and therefore does not feel dependent upon Egypt.

## C. Summary

Our portion introduces Israel's wanderings in the desert and the Torah sets out the essential purpose of these sojourns.

Israel leaves Egypt "by a strong hand and by an outstretched arm", with Pharaoh's consent, to prove God's full control even over the will of human beings.

However, the fact that Pharaoh sends the people out causes Israel to remain dependent upon him and emotionally enslaved to Egypt. Travelling through the desert presents many challenges for the Jewish people, through which they undergo a long process of emancipating themselves from dependence upon Egypt and reaching true faith in God. In the desert, they will experience God's war with Egypt on the Red Sea, as well as many challenges which will cause them to seek to return to Egypt. Nevertheless, they will come to realize that God is the only one capable of keeping them alive in the harsh desert. Ultimately, they will free themselves from the spiritual enslavement to Egypt and they will understand that God is the One Who has brought them out of Egypt, He is the One Who has brought them through the desert, and He is their true leader.

With this realization, they may at long last leave the desert and enter the Land of Israel.