

## Text Study: Taking the Long Way

*After saying the blessing before study, please read this text and discuss the questions below.*

### Part One

The following text is taken from *Parashat B'shalach*. The text raises the question of why God took the Israelites on a roundabout journey to the Promised Land rather than leading them on a direct path.

שמות פרק יג פסוק יז-יח

וַיְהִי בְשַׁלַּח פְּרַעֲהַ אֶת הָעָם וְלֹא נָחַם אֱלֹהִים דֶּרֶךְ  
אֶרֶץ פְּלִשְׁתִּים כִּי קָרוֹב הוּא כִּי אָמַר אֱלֹהִים פֶּן  
יִנָּחַם הָעָם בְּרֹאֲתָם מִלְחָמָה וְשָׁבוּ מִצְרָיִמָּה׃  
וַיִּסַּב אֱלֹהִים אֶת הָעָם דֶּרֶךְ הַיַּמְדָּבָר יַם סוּף  
וַחֲמֹשִׁים עָלוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאֶרֶץ 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." 18) So God led the people round-about, by way of the wilderness at the Sea of Reeds

**Exodus 13:17-18**

1. How does the Biblical text explain God's decision to take the people the long way around?
2. In what ways do you find this answer satisfying? In what ways do you find it unsatisfying?

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## Part Two

We can gather that at least some of the rabbis found the Biblical answer unsatisfying because, in various *midrashim* (explanatory tales), they offered alternative explanations for God's decision. Many of these *midrashim* were collated by Louis Ginzberg in his monumental work *Legends of the Jews*. The following passage is excerpted from one of Ginzberg's volumes.

*For several reasons God did not permit the Israelites to travel along the straight route to the Promised Land. He desired them to go to Sinai first and take the law upon themselves there... Over and above all this, the long sojourn in the wilderness was fraught with profit for the Israelites, spiritually and materially. If they had reached Palestine directly after leaving Egypt, they would have devoted themselves entirely each to the cultivation of his allotted parcel of ground, and no time would have been left for the study of the Torah. In the wilderness they were relieved of the necessity of providing for their daily wants, and they could give all their efforts to acquiring the law.*

3. Do you find the answers presented here more satisfying? If so, why? If not, why not?
4. From this explanation of the Israelites' wandering, what can we learn about achieving goals through indirect routes?

## Part Three

Another lens through which we can view the process of change is that of organizational development. The following is a quote from Peter Senge in The Dance of Change:

*....we use the term "profound change" to describe organizational change that combines inner shifts in people's values, aspirations, and behaviors with "outer" shifts in processes, strategies, practices, and systems....In profound change there is learning. The organization doesn't just do something new; it builds its capacity for doing things in a new way - indeed, it builds capacity for ongoing change....It is not enough to change strategies, structures, and systems, unless the thinking that produced those strategies, structures, and systems also changes.*

5. As you guide your Task Force and stay in communication with congregational members and staff you may hear people wonder why deep changes are not being made immediately. As a leader you will be called upon to help people understand the need for process as well as product.

The benefits of products will be quickly evident through "low hanging fruit" (small early experiments) that you create early in the project. But the time it takes to dialogue, study, reflect and imagine may need explanation. Drawing from Exodus, the words of the rabbis and Peter Senge what might you respond to someone who says, "Why talk, let's act now?"



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## Background

**Louis Ginzberg (1873-1953)** – one of the outstanding Talmudists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Ginzberg served as a professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America for over 50 years. He is the author of *The Legends of the Jews*, a 6 volume set which combined hundreds of legends and parables from a lifetime of *midrash* research.

**Peter Senge** – a senior lecturer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the chairman of the Society for Organizational Learning, and the author of *The Fifth Discipline* in which he developed the notion of a learning organization. He is a recognized pioneer, theorist, and writer in the field of management innovation.



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