



The opening verse of Parashat Beshalach tells of God's decision to lead the newly-freed Hebrew slaves in a circuitous path towards *Eretz Yisrael*, rather than bring them along the direct route through the Philistine lands. The reason, as we read in this verse, is that *Benei Yisrael* would encounter hostilities as they approach the Philistine territory and might then return to Egypt.

Maimonides expands on this verse in a passage in his *Guide for the Perplexed* (3:32):

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 traveling 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.

God, in His infinite wisdom, wanted to ensure that *Benei Yisrael* would not encounter warfare until developing the courage, confidence and physical strength necessary to properly respond to this challenge. He therefore chose to lead them away from the Philistine route, such that the battle for Canaan would commence only after a period of desert travel, during which the former slaves would develop strength, stamina and courage, and shed the effects of over two centuries of humiliation in Egypt.

Later in this chapter, Maimonides raises the question, "What prevented God from leading the Israelites through the way of the land of the Philistines, and endowing them with strength for fighting?" Rather than delay *Benei Yisrael's* entry into Canaan and subject them to the grueling conditions of desert travel (not to mention the frightening experience of being trapped against the sea), God, in His omnipotence, could have just as easily granted them the strength to defeat the anticipated Philistine assailants. Why did He choose instead to lead them along an indirect route through the wilderness?

Maimonides answers, "Although in every one of the signs [related in Scripture] the natural property of some individual being is changed, the nature of man is never changed by God by way of miracle." The doctrine of free will includes the axiom that God will never change any aspect of a person's character through miraculous intervention. Therefore, endowing the Hebrew slaves with courage and fortitude was not

an option. Maimonides explains further, "I do not say this because I believe that it is difficult for God to change the nature of every individual person; on the contrary, it is possible, and it is in His power...but it has never been His will to do it, and it never will be."

The opening verse of last week's *parasha*, Parashat Bo, tells of God's "hardening" of Pharaoh's heart, which, as we discussed last week, Maimonides explains as denying Pharaoh the ability to repent. In rare, exceptional instances, God interferes with a sinner's free will and makes *teshuva* impossible. The opening verse of Parashat Beshalach, by contrast, emphasizes the precise opposite theme: that under normal circumstances, God does not directly affect a person's nature or character in any way. A person can change his character through only natural means: hard work and concentrated effort; God will not miraculously change a person's heart.

According to Maimonides' understanding, the first verse of our *parasha* teaches that the road to character refinement is often a long, circuitous one; there are no shortcuts in the pursuit of perfection. A person cannot wait for a sudden rush of inspiration before working to improve himself. Rather, like *Benei Yisrael* after the Exodus, we must be prepared to embark on the long, often grueling journey of personal growth, working slowly but steadily to develop the strength and courage needed to surmount the obstacles that we confront during our lives.