EXTRAORDINARY PASSAGES:
TEXTS AND TRAVELS

Global Day of Jewish Learning: Curriculum

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A Project of the Aleph Society
Introduction (10 minutes)

Welcome to the Global Day of Jewish Learning!

For many of us, travel is the thing we do to get from point A to point B. Sometimes the journey can be quick, and we don’t really pay any attention to it, relative to the things we do once we’ve reached our destinations. Other times, a voyage can be unpleasant or grueling, and we remember the bad things about those negative travel experiences.

Then, there are the times when we travel for travel’s sake. Sometimes we do it deliberately, and other times we are surprised by how much we learn or experience unintentionally. When we go on a journey, our horizons are broadened, we gain new insights into the world, and new appreciation for the human experience.

Is it any wonder that we use journeys as a metaphor for life? Today, as we explore the “Extraordinary Passages” of the Jewish People, we will look closely at texts that tell stories of journeys and paths, and find ways these ancient stories can inform our present-day behaviors.

Let’s start by looking at a map. This map is a 16th century German woodcut, depicting the “Journey of the Children of Israel out from Egypt”. (Look closer, using the National Library of Israel’s interactive map reader at bit.ly/exodusmap)
The Stops Along the Way

Ask:

1. What does this map tell you about the route the Jewish People took through the desert?
2. Do you recognize any of the places marked? Can you understand the map at all? How does your ability to understand the map make you feel about the journey depicted?
3. While the map is of something ancient, what could it tell you about the culture and times of the mapmaker?
4. Why is it important to make a map? What do you do to record/remember your travels?

Even if you can’t identify any markers on the map, it’s clear to see that the Jewish People made a lot of stops and traveled a very tangled route between Egypt and the Promised Land. They certainly didn’t go as the crow flies!

Sometimes looking at a map does not tell you much. You can’t see from this map how rough the terrain was, or what the weather was like. You probably couldn’t use it to navigate around the region today. So why is the map important?

The map is a record, which is part of the process of remembering. Today, we might take photos or use geolocation tags on our social media posts, or keep a personal journal. Those are all records we keep to show that we were in a place. Even in the ancient Roman city of Pompeii, there is preserved graffiti on the walls that says “Lucius wrote this” — it is a very human impulse to prove that “I was there”. Our photos, our tags, our journals — they can be records of being in a physical space or an emotional state, or even at a developmental stage in life. Those journeys are preserved in our recorded memories.

Part One: These are the Journeys (20 minutes)

The journey through the desert after the Exodus from Egypt has been described by generations of sages and scholars as a symbol of the Jewish state of wandering. The Book of Numbers details the journey of the Jewish People after their escape from slavery. As they moved around in the desert between Egypt and the Promised Land, they made stops along the way.


1 These are the journeys of the children of Israel, who came out from the land of Egypt according to their hosts, at the hand of Moses and Aaron. 2 Moses wrote their points of origin, their starting points for each of their journeys according to the directive of the Lord; these are their journeys from their points of origin. Each journey ended at a place of encampment from which the next journey commenced.
The Stops Along the Way

Ask:

1. What do you notice about what parts of the journey Moses records? Why might that be significant?
2. What do you find surprising about this text? When and where is this text?
3. What might be the significance of Moses writing down their points of origin for each of the journeys?

Chapter 33 goes on to list the places where they stopped and then set out from again, and some of the major events that occurred along the way, such as the death of Aaron. Many people, including Rashi, have wondered why an entire chapter of the Bible is given over to listing places where the Jewish People stopped. Rashi lived in France in the 11th century. He is the most important commentator on the Bible and Talmud, and one of the most famous scholars in Jewish history.

Ask a participant to read Text #2 aloud.

Text #2: Rashi. Commentary on Numbers 33:1.

These are the journeys: Why are these stations recorded here? In order to make known the loving acts of the Omnipresent: that although He had decreed against them to make them move about and wander in the wilderness, you should not think that they wandered and moved about without cessation from one station to another station all the forty years, and that they had no rest. For you see that there are here only forty-two stages. Deduct from them fourteen, all of which were their stopping places in the first year after they left Egypt, before the decree was made...

Further deduct from them the eight stages which were after Aaron’s death viz., those from Mount Hor to the plains of Moab in the fortieth year (v. 38). It follows that during the whole of the thirty eight years they made only twenty journeys. This is excerpted from the work of R. Moses the Preacher [Moshe Hadarshan].

— Rabbi Tanhuma gave another explanation of it (of the question why these stages are here recorded). A parable! It may be compared to the case of a king whose son was ill and whom he took to a distant place to cure him. When they returned home the father began to enumerate all the stages, saying to him, “Here we slept, here we caught cold, here you had the headache, etc.” (Midrash Tanhuma 4:10:3.)

Ask:

1. What are the different explanations Rashi cites in order to describe why journeys are recorded? How do those approaches and their underlying perspectives differ?
2. Which attitude appeals to you — playing down the number of stops, or counting them all deliberately? Why?
3. What are some challenges or journeys in your life that you’ve taken either attitude towards? How did your attitude towards the stops and starts shape your appreciation for those experiences?
Rashi explains that the many stops were recorded to “make known the loving acts of the Omnipresent”, as a demonstration that God kindly let the People rest, rather than let them wander without stopping for 40 years. Rashi then brings two texts with differing ideas of how record shows those “loving acts”.

The first comes from Rabbi Moshe Hadarshan (Moses the Preacher), who downplays the number of stops. In his view, the stops are kindly given by God, and they are really not that disruptive to the process of travel. Thanks to His kindness, the people were able to spend a few years in the 20 or so major stops, taking rest and building up resources for the next leg of the journey.

Next, Rashi brings a story from Midrash Tanhuma, which has an opposite perspective. Midrash Tanhuma is a collection of discussions of the Torah passed down through the generations, believed to have been compiled around the 16th century in Constantinople, and republished later in a 19th century edition. The story in Midrash Tanhuma tells of a king who travelled a long way with his sick son to seek a cure. The tenderness with which the father treats his son is analogous to the “loving acts of the Omnipresent”. God remembers every stop His People made, and holds them as precious markers of His Children’s development, even though they might not be aware of them as such.

Let’s look at another explanation for the record offered by the Sforno. Ovadia ben Jacob Sforno (c.1475-1550) was an Italian rabbi, commentator, philosopher and physician. He is noted for his mixture of new interpretations and comments from earlier rabbis, while remaining faithful to the original texts.

Read Text #3 aloud.

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**Text #3: Sforno. Commentary on Numbers 33:1.**

God wanted all the journeys to be recorded in order to compliment the Jewish people who had followed him blindly through the desert where nothing grew, so that as a reward for their faith they would deserve to enter and inherit the land of Israel.

Ask:

1. What does the Sforno say is the reason to record the journeys? How does he describe it?
2. The Midrash Tanhuma highlights the miracles that God performed to help the Jewish people in the desert. How does that compare to the Sforno? Which of the three explanations do you connect with? Why?

Unlike the explanations given by Rashi, the Sforno sees the journeys as a test of worthiness, and the record is a testament to the Jewish People’s success in passing that test. The hardships of the desert, “where nothing grew” and that the people went “blindly through,” were a test of faith that proved the People deserved to enter the Land of Israel.

The different perceptions — a clerical record, a memorializing list, a test of faith — each shift the ways in which we value and learn from the experiences of the Jewish People in the desert. But, regardless of the reason for the record, it is agreed that the way through the wilderness was difficult. What, then, is the significance of the desert? If the journey through is so difficult and long, why not take a shorter route?
Part Two: Looking for a Longer Route (20 minutes)

The Jewish People have continually taken longer and/or more difficult routes, as the Talmud and subsequent commentaries say. The difficulty and test of the journey through the desert could have conclusively told the Jewish People to take a shorter road, but no, consistently the difficult way was chosen. But why choose the harder path? The Mekhilta D’Rabbi Yishmael, a commentary on the Book of Exodus from the Mishnaic times (2nd century CE), offers an explanation for this behavior.

Ask participants to read Text #4 aloud.


God did not bring the people to Israel on the direct route. Instead he took them through the desert. God said “If I bring them to the Land of Israel now, everyone will immediately involve themselves with their field and vineyard and they will pay no attention to Torah! Instead, I will take them through the wilderness. They will eat the Manna and drink water from the miraculous Well and the Torah will become absorbed in their body.

Ask:

1. What parts of the journey to the Land of Israel does the text emphasize?
2. How does the text see the indirect route as beneficial? How does the text see the direct route as disadvantageous?
3. Does this idea that going through the “wilderness” allows wisdom to be “absorbed in [the] body” resonate with you? Have you experienced anything like this in your life?

The longer route through the desert was, in a sense, the fire in which the Jewish people were forged. Before they could enter the Promised Land they had to receive the Torah. Their shared experiences in surviving the desert, acquiring the Law, and solidifying their identity was what made them a People. They then came into the Land as a nation formed, rather than entering the Land as loosely-associated people escaping Egypt. The difficulty of the passage through the desert was essential to becoming the People.

The Talmud also grapples with this tension between wanting to take a shorter road and finding that the longer road was the better path to take. The Talmud recounts several stories about Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananya, who was said to have never been defeated in a debate, except for three times. Let’s read together about two occasions on which he was looking for the shortest or fastest route, and found his choices questioned.

Ask participants to read and discuss Text #5a and #5b together in chavruta.

Chavruta is partnered learning. Learning with a friend or two allows you to share ideas and insights with one another as you read and discuss texts together.
The very next story in the Talmud recounts the time when Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananya also takes a shortcut, and this time finds himself matching wits with a little boy.

Text #5a: Babylonian Talmud Eruvin 53b. English translation and commentary by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in the Koren Talmud Bavli.

What is the incident with a young girl? One time I was walking along the path, and the path passed through a field, and I was walking on it. A certain young girl said to me: My Rabbi, isn’t this a field? One should not walk through a field, so as not to damage the crops growing there. I said to her: Isn’t it a well-trodden path in the field, across which one is permitted to walk? She said to me: Robbers like you have trodden it. In other words, it previously had been prohibited to walk through this field, and it is only due to people such as you, who paid no attention to the prohibition, that a path has been cut across it. Thus, the young girl defeated Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananya in a debate.

Rabbi Yehoshua discovers that what he thinks is a shorter route is actually not the best route. As the little girl pointed out, just because a path has been used before, that doesn’t mean it is the right path for everyone. And as the boy pointed out, the route that looked shorter did not actually lead into town, but into an orchard next to town.

Text #5b: Babylonian Talmud Eruvin 53b. English translation and commentary by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in the Koren Talmud Bavli.

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.

Ask:

1. How do these two stories about Rabbi Yehoshua compare? What are some similarities and differences?
2. What could Rabbi Yehoshua’s thought process have been in these instances of taking a shortcut?
3. Rabbi Yehoshua justifies his path through the field by saying that a well-trodden path gives implicit permission to use that path. What are some examples of this attitude you’ve encountered? Do you think it’s justified?
4. If we use paths as a metaphor for our behaviors, what do you think the Talmud is cautioning us against doing?

Bring the group back together and ask a few of the chavruta pairs to share their responses with everyone.
In both instances, Rabbi Yehoshua knew where he wanted to go, but still was not certain the best way to travel there. In those cases, he thought his own logic — and his urgency to reach his destination — would be enough to guide him. But what happens when we don’t even know where it is we want to go?

**Conclusion (10 minutes)**

In Text #6, Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz provides insights into the challenges involved in journeying through our lives, without having a map or being able to know the final destination. One of the leading scholars of this century, Rabbi Steinsaltz is best known for his commentaries on the Bible and Talmud, and for his work on Jewish mysticism.

› Read Text #6 aloud.

**Text #6: Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. “Masei”, Talks on the Parsha.**

Part of the difficulty of the wilderness, which is also a perennial trial for the Jewish community and for the individual, is that if one could understand where one’s steps are leading, one would know his exact distance from the final destination, and one would know what the solution is: Everything would be simpler. The great difficulty is that just when it seems that we are going northward, we suddenly begin to move southward; just when we think that we are ascending the mountain, we suddenly begin our descent.

This problem is the source and essence of the whole conception of Jewish destiny. If we understood all the nuances of the process leading to redemption, and saw clearly that we are progressively drawing nearer to it, everything would seem different. But since we do not know this, we need only recall that “these were their stops along the way,” for the community and the individual. We constantly re-experience the same journeys; we stand and we fall…

This is our story, which we will be able to read and understand only at the end of time, when we reach the final station. Then we will receive the meaning of the map by which we have traveled, and this will enable us to explain our history and the events that have befallen us.

The path from Egypt to the “good and spacious land” is long and arduous, a path that traversed “the wilderness of the peoples.” Only at the end of the path will we come to the point at which it will be possible to understand both the “going forth” and the “journey.” Only then will we comprehend the meaning and the content of all our experiences over the years.

› Ask:

1. Do you agree with Rabbi Steinsaltz that everything would be simpler if we could know the exact distance to our “final destination”? Why or why not?

2. When in your life have you experienced an unexpected change in direction, when you had thought you were going one way and found yourself moving in another direction?

3. When have you or your community made “stops along the way”? How do the texts we explored today change your understanding of your journey and the journey of the Jewish people?
The stories we tell and the traditions we keep are a map of our lived experience. As a people, these records serve as ways to tell the future generations what we have done and what we have learned along the way, so that the lived experiences and memories do not disappear as each generation gives way to the next. Likewise, our personal records make it possible for future generations to learn from our mistakes and remember our triumphs. At the same time, we know that maps can be inconclusive, and that life itself doesn’t have a detailed map. Our journey — as a Jewish People and as individuals — has never been a straightforward one.
Introduction

Part One: These are the Journeys


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Conclusion


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For more lessons and resources from Rabbi Alex Israel, visit his website www.alexisrael.org.