



OK, We Left Egypt. Now What? Our Stories and Traditions at Work in the Wilderness of Covid-19

By Rabbi Benay Lappe and Laynie Soloman

Passover's over. Egypt is behind us. That first glimpse of liberation is exhilarating. You're free! At least that's the story we're taught. But the journey to liberation can also be scary. Really scary. And as every one of us knows, getting free isn't a one-and-done. It never happens all at once. That first step is the most important, for sure, but then, after that, *what's next?* How do we move from that first step to *really* rooting that liberation in our bodies, and in our lives?

This is where our stories can help us. This is where we can lean on the practices that our ancestors came up with to help us through those experiences that they *knew* we were going to have – because they had them, too. As the philosopher and Bible scholar Leon Kass says, “Our stories are so powerful not because they tell us what happened, but because they tell us what **always** happens.”

After leaving Egypt, our ancestors had no idea how long they would be wandering in the open desert – there was no way to count “down” – they had no destination. And our stories tell us that, when faced with the possibility of aimless, endless journeying, so many wanted to just go back because, well... that's what *always* happens. That's what people tend to do. It's hard to be in the Wilderness. It's a vast, empty place of nothingness, and there's no map. No structure, no schedule, no end in sight. You're not even sure what it's going to look like when you get there. Sound familiar?

But our tradition knows how hard this desert moment is and that's why, as soon as that first seder is over and we've left (our very own) Egypt, the tradition gives us a spiritual practice to hold onto until we get to our final destination – and even if we don't. It's a practice designed to strengthen our ability to take it one day at a time, and to *use* each day to get stronger and more resilient, and more loving, kind, and compassionate. It's called “Counting the Omer,” counting the sheaves of the first grain harvest in the weeks between Passover and *Shavuot*.

As they did with so many of their newly imagined “Option 3” practices, our ancestors took an agricultural *mitzvah* about harvesting grain and turned it into a spiritual practice. Forget the “omer,” part, they said, it’s the *counting* that counts. It’s the daily reminder that we’re moving forward, toward something real, even if we don’t know exactly what, something that will be there for us when we’re done counting, something that will help us hold onto the conviction that leaving our familiar but tight place into an infinite state of un-knowing-ness, into a vast desert with no clear path to stability and comfort, was the right thing to do.

And one of the many ways the tradition has developed to really enhance the power of this process of counting is the practice of using each of the 49 days from *Pesach* to *Shavuot* – from Exodus to receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai – to learn, each day, a line of a text from the *Mishnah*, *Masechet Avot*, called *kinyan torah*. *Kinyan torah* literally means “acquisition of Torah.” Outside, let’s call it “Ways to Become a Torah-Person.” And there are 48 of ‘em! [Which gives you one day at the end to do a review of all 48.] And on Day 50, the practice teaches us, you’re ready for Mt. Sinai. And that’s when we celebrate *Shavuot*. Freedom *from* becomes freedom *to*, freedom to be bound to a way of life that binds us to each other, and to God.

We’ve been learning the text of *kinyan torah* in our daily *Mishnah* Collective for the last month, diving deep into each of these 48 paths/steps/values/traits that our tradition has sifted out and put into a simple, but really quite profound and all-encompassing list. The practice is to meditate on, focus on, and work on, one each day. Or, pick and choose a handful of the 48 that speak to you and spread them out. Or maybe even pick just one! But work on them – or your one – every day during this 49-day period when our little baby plant of a redeemed self is still so fragile and could use the support of a community and a daily reminder to hang in there, and to keep going as we move through the Wilderness.

OK, so here’s the list!

One comes to acquire Torah...

1. Through learning
2. Through careful listening
3. Through deliberate speech
4. Through a discerning heart
5. Through a reflective heart
6. Through wonder

7. Through awe
8. Through humility
9. Through joy
10. By serving the sages
11. By checking your *chevruta*
12. Through the sharpness of learning with students
13. By sitting / contemplation
14. By learning Torah
15. By learning *Mishnah*
16. By limiting sleep
17. By limiting idle conversation
18. By limiting pleasure
19. By limiting jest
20. By limiting concern for politeness & decorum
21. By being slow to anger
22. Through a good heart
23. Through faith of (or in) the sages
24. Through the acceptance of suffering
25. By knowing your God-Place
26. By being content with your portion
27. By making a fence around your words
28. By not grabbing credit for yourself
29. By being beloved

30. By loving God
31. By loving all creations and by loving justice
32. By loving compassionate critique
33. By loving directness
34. By distancing yourself from honor
35. By not swelling with pride in your learning
36. By taking no joy in making rulings
37. By carrying your friend's burden with them
38. By giving your friend the benefit of the doubt
39. By placing your friend on the path of truth
40. By placing your friend on the path of peace
41. By putting your heart into your learning
42. By asking and helping others to answer
43. By listening and adding
44. By learning in order to teach
45. By learning in order to act
46. By wisening your teacher
47. By having direction in your learning
48. By saying something in the name of the one who said it, for one who repeats something in the name of the one who said it brings redemption to the world.

Today is Friday, April 24, the 1st day of *Iyar*, and tonight begins the 16th day of the *Omer*. Start at #16, or go back to #1 and catch up, or start with whatever jumps out at you!

Let's use this practice together to help us connect to who we are, and to who we want to be while we're in this Wilderness. Even when there is no end in sight, we can

count. We can hope that we'll get there, and that we'll do it *together*. This practice, our tradition, and our yeshiva, is here for you as you move through these next days of counting. Our bodies may be sheltering in place but, remember, we are moving through this Wilderness of quarantine, together. One day at a time.

Rabbi Benay Lappe is the Founder and Rosh Yeshiva of SVARA: A Traditionally Radical Yeshiva. Laynie Soloman is SVARA's Director of National Learning and member of its Talmud faculty.

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