

## **COVID-19 and our Community: Resisting Despair and Marking Time**

Rabbi Laurie Zimmerman

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Like most of us, I had never attended a Zoom seder before this year. It was a decidedly mixed experience. While I usually participate in or lead two seders a year, this year that number climbed to five. I had much to be thankful for. Zoom allowed me to celebrate with family all over the country, made attending far more accessible for people with disabilities and chronic illness, and facilitated new and creative kinds of Jewish ritual.

But it just wasn't the same as celebrating in person. It was better than nothing, but I really missed sharing a meal with two dozen people. It was near impossible to have informal conversation. My seders lacked the energy that comes from everyone singing together as a group. While "Safer at Home" orders are essential to protect the public's health, there is real loss in not being able to connect, in person, with friends, family, and community.

It's important to name this loss. The pandemic will eventually pass, but it has forever changed the world we once knew. In the short-term, we grieve for what was – the normal routines of dining at a restaurant, chatting with colleagues at the office, or attending a bat mitzvah. We worry about becoming ill, losing income, and not seeing our loved ones. The future, too, is uncertain. We just don't know what life will be like three months, six months, or two years from now.

In Jewish tradition we do a practice called *sefirat ha'omer*, or counting of the *omer*, at this time of year. The counting began on the second night of Passover, and it lasts for the 49 days leading up to Shavuot, when the Israelites received the Torah on Mount Sinai. This was a time of transition, from leaving the slavery of Egypt to becoming free and entering into a covenant with God.

I imagine this was a terrifying, anxiety-ridden period for our ancestors. As they wandered through the desert they faced an unpredictable future. They were vulnerable. The desert felt endless and was a dangerous place. The sun was unrelenting. They were in a liminal or in-between space, neither in Egypt nor in the Promised Land.

With the Governor's "Safer at Home" orders extended through May, we may also feel deep anxiety. Instead of wandering in a desert, we are largely confined to our homes. We wear gloves and face masks if we venture outside. At this time, counting the *omer* takes on new meaning. We mark not only the days that our ancestors edged towards Mount Sinai. We mark the days until we can freely leave our homes, when we are less

vulnerable and less likely to contract COVID-19. We do not know when that will be. We do not know what the future will bring.

Counting the *omer* can bring meaning to this amorphous time. The act of counting day by day gives us structure. It makes each day feel more manageable. We take time to say a blessing, to engage in an ancient ritual but also to breathe new life into it. We can express gratitude each night for the abundance in our lives. We can show our appreciation for the bravery and dedication of our healthcare workers. We can focus on the needs of others and commit to running an errand for a neighbor, calling a member of the community who is isolated, or bringing a meal to a shelter so others can eat.

Counting the *omer* can be a time when we refuse to let our anxiety consume us and when we resist despair. Now is the time to help each other be strong and to keep our hearts open. To be resilient at this time, we need to keep reaching out. We need each other.