

Wandering in the COVID Desert

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With this week's Torah portion, we are *Bamidbar*, in the wilderness. Our ancestors spent years wandering, hoping to reach the Promised Land, with no idea how to get there, when they would arrive, and how they would survive along the way. In many ways, we too are wandering. We, too, are in *midbar*, the desert.

But we know we are not alone. We have learned that we can count on the first responders, doctors, nurses, teachers, cashiers, delivery people. We have learned how much we rely on each other and how much trust we need to have if our community is to stay safe for all of us. And we have realized that one of the things we desperately need is the company of other people, knowing who is with us on our journey.

And COVID-19 reinforces the lesson of *Bamidbar*: that everyone should be counted, and everyone should count. It's one of the reasons why I think that numbers, during this time, are so important: Number of cases, tests, and deaths. Number of feet we must be distant from each other, or number of people allowed into a store. These numbers are reminders that we matter, and when we take them seriously, we send the message that we matter to each other.

Rabbi Larry Hoffman had noted that the *midbar* calls not just for strength but also for stamina, the stamina we need day by day. To survive the *midbar*, we are allowed to count, to "number" our assets, our value, our worth, and to know in

advance where our inner strength lies to be reassured that we will make it, even if our personal *midbar* lasts the proverbial forty years.

And this is where we truly do look to each other. When times are tough, we want to know who is with us, whom we can count on. Do we have friends we can count on, people who call just to ask how we are doing? Who can remind us that accomplishing small goals during crises is about all we can ask ourselves? Who would tell us to breathe deeply, reframe our thinking, and practice gratitude? Who can remind us the importance of making each day—as monotonous as it may seem during this time—count? Who, in essence, is on your team?

These are the people that can lift us up, help us bounce back, and help us find the happiness and joy amidst everything. This is the time to practice gratitude, to get creative, to appreciate beauty, and, because we all matter, share a little kindness. This is the time to number our days rightly, as the Psalms say, so that we may attain wisdom. Perhaps “number our days” truly means for us to make each of our days—and the people in them—count.

There is an old Chassidic tale about Rabbi Chaim who told of a story wherein a woman became lost in a dense forest. She wandered this way and that in the hope of stumbling upon a way out, but she only got more lost as the hours went by. Then she chanced upon another person walking in the woods. Hoping that he might know the way out, she asked, “Can you tell me which path leads out of the forest?”

“I am sorry, but I cannot,” said the man. “I am quite lost myself.”

“You have wandered in one part of the woods,” the woman said, “while I have been lost in another. Together we may not know the way out, but we know quite a few paths that lead nowhere. Let us share what we know of the paths that fail, and then together we may find the one that succeeds.”

“What is true for these lost wanderers,” Reb Chaim said, “is true of us as well. We may not know the way out, but let us share with each other the ways that have only led us back in.”

It won't be 40 years. Maybe not even 40 months or 40 weeks. But, however long we need to remain sheltered in place, in any sense of the term, we know that we all count, we all are blessed to have each other, and we can number our days, together.