

Entering the wilderness “after” COVID-19

[ejewishphilanthropy.com/entering-the-wilderness-after-covid-19/](https://www.ejewishphilanthropy.com/entering-the-wilderness-after-covid-19/)

By Rabbi Danny Burkeman April 23, 2021

April 23, 2021



This is what we’ve been waiting for.

We have a vaccine to help stop the spread of COVID-19, increasing numbers are being vaccinated, and all adults will be eligible. States are relaxing restrictions for businesses to reopen and people are venturing out of their houses. And for our religious institutions we have the potential to return to some level of in-person services and programming. This is what we’ve been waiting for and yet, this moment is daunting.

We are leaving Egypt, and that is never easy.

When we reflect on the biblical narrative, we think about *Mitzrayim* – Egypt as the geographic location in the Middle East, the place where we were slaves, a place where our ancestors suffered and were persecuted. And *Mitzrayim* is also a symbolic narrow place (from the Hebrew word *metzer* – narrow). *Mitzrayim* is a place of pain and suffering. It is a time of enslavement and loss of control. It is any period of loss. The last 13 months have been a personal, communal, and global *Mitzrayim* as we have suffered under the weight of COVID-19.

And now, just like our ancestors before us, we are finally leaving *Mitzrayim*. But we do not immediately arrive at the Promised Land. Instead, just like them, we are entering into the wilderness. The wilderness is characterized by uncertainty and doubt. We do not know how long we will be here; we do not know what exactly to expect: we do not know what tools we will need to navigate through the journey.

Almost as soon as the Israelites began their journey through the wilderness they began complaining. In the same biblical chapter that we read the celebratory Song at the Sea (*Exodus 15*), we also read about the Israelites grumbling against Moses because the water was bitter (15:24). And in the next chapter they claim it would have been better had they died in Egypt (16:3). These are just the first two incidences of the Israelites complaining and moaning in the wilderness.

I do not believe the Israelites ever really wanted to return to slavery in Egypt, but the uncertainty of the wilderness was frightening. In Egypt there were rules and restrictions, and even though it wasn't pleasant, the Israelites knew what to expect and how they had to live their lives. At times in the wilderness, they forgot how challenging life in Egypt really was.

For us, over the last 13 months, while I doubt any of us have enjoyed the restrictions and regulations for life with COVID-19, we at least knew clearly what we could and could not do. As we enter this new phase where some are vaccinated, with question marks about new strains, and uncertainty over what we should and should not do – we are in a wilderness and that is always a very difficult and unsettling place to be.

For those of us in leadership roles like Moses was, we need to be prepared for the people to complain. It will not necessarily be a reflection on what we are doing or not doing; instead, it will often be an expression of personal fears and concerns in the current moment. They will be looking for answers and certainty, where we may also be in positions of questions and doubt. Ultimately, our challenge is to navigate through the wilderness together.

We can learn lessons from Moses and the Israelites to help us in this current moment. He knew that he could not carry the burden alone, and so after one incidence of complaining, he gathered around himself seventy elders to share the responsibility of leadership (*Numbers 11:16-17*). In this way, we need to consult with our communities; we cannot and should not make decisions in isolation, but we need to understand what our congregants are thinking and listen to their perspectives and opinions. We also know that a lack of communication in the wilderness led to problems. When Moses was up Mount Sinai, the people misunderstood when he would be returning, and so they panicked when he was "delayed" (*Exodus 32:1*). While synagogues sometimes get criticized for sending too many emails, this may be a moment for over-communicating, to make sure that people are informed not just when decisions are made, but also throughout the process and conversation.

And there are cautionary tales, such as when Moses lost his temper and struck the rock in frustration at the people's complaining (*Numbers 20:11*) – his response was immediate and emotional. We need to ensure that in responding to challenges and objections, we take a moment to pause and breathe, to remember that we are part of one community, and to view the questions as coming from a place of commitment to the community.

What we know is that the Israelites ultimately reached the Promised Land. Their journey through the wilderness prepared them for what lay ahead. It was not always easy, the journey was not smooth or quick, and there were moments of tension and opposition. But they found ways to support one another, they overcame all of the challenges that were placed before them, and they made it to the Promised Land together. Just as we followed their example in leaving Egypt, we can also follow their example to make it through the wilderness and reach a Promised Land that we will create together.

Rabbi Danny Burkeman is the Senior Rabbi at Temple Shir Tikva in Wayland, MA.