

TRANSCRIPT

Spirituality & Health Podcast

TAO LIN

Rabbi Rami: From the *Spirituality & Health Magazine*, I am Rabbi Rami, and this is the *Spirituality & Health Podcast*. Our guest today, Tao Lin, is an American novelist, poet, essayist, short-story writer and artist. He's published numerous novels and novella, two books of poetry, a collection of short stories and a memoir, as well as an extensive assortment of online content. His newest novel is called *Leave Society*, and a review of the book appears in the July August issue of *Spirituality & Health Magazine*. Tao Lin, welcome to essential conversations.

Tao: Yes. Thank you for having me and thanks for reading my book. It's not a short book story so I appreciate it.

Rabbi Rami: [chuckles] Yes. It's not a long book, I didn't think it. It moves quick and the characters are engaging, and it triggered a lot of questions in my head that weren't about the book. I'm not going to ask you fanboy questions about the plot and stuff like that, I'm looking for more general philosophical things that the book made me think of. Hopefully, they will spark something in you so that we can have a conversation about them.

One of the first things that the reader of the new novel, *Leave Society* learns about the protagonist Lee, is that he's meeting with a medical doctor while he's on LSD. I know because I read it. In your 2018 book *Trip*, LSD also plays a role. I'm just curious before we get into the new book, what's the connection?

Tao: My use of LSD, it comes out of-- before in the past, I used a lot of pharmaceutical drugs like Adderall and Xanax and opiates, and in a self-destructive way, then I reached the bottom with all that, with being addicted to those drugs. Then at some point, I'd turn towards natural drugs like cannabis and psilocybin. LSD is semi-natural and it's also a psychedelic. I've just found these drugs, these natural drugs, and psychedelics much more sustainable and less toxic, and less addicting. At the beginning of the novel, the character is on a quarter tab of LSD, which is like microdosing. You've heard of microdosing?

Rabbi Rami: Yes. Michael Pollan's books promote that.

Tao Lin: Yes. On that dose, you can function pretty well, and for me on that dose, it just makes me more of an outgoing, more normal, happier person, because otherwise, I'm pretty glum and kind of autistic and just not that social.

Rabbi Rami: It helps on a therapeutic level? Have you done more than microdosing and had some spiritual experience on LSD?

Tao Lin: Yes. I've had bigger doses. I haven't had such a big dose that I had a spiritual experience, where I've lost my sense of ego on LSD, but I have on psilocybin and DMT. I don't do that often at all. I haven't used a dose bigger than

microdosing in probably five years, because it's destabilizing to me to have a big psychedelic experience where I lose my sense of myself.

Rabbi Rami: I think that's the point of the psychedelic experience, is to lose that narrow sense of self and try to awake to something larger. In the novel, Daoism plays a role. In fact, we even have a chapter in *Leave Society* called that. As I'm reading-- just the notion, just the title, *Leave Society*, that could mean so many different things. I read the book just after I was just-- finished reading this article in the *New York Times* about something in China that I can't say in Chinese, but in English, it translates as "lie flat." Have you heard of this?

Tao Lin: Yes. I heard of this. My friend's son told me about this. He told me that someone had come out with a song about lying flat, the positives of lying flat. How you can't fall down if you're lying flat, and that the government had banned it. I never read the article, so maybe you can tell me more about it?

Rabbi Rami: The idea is that this is a counterculture, an act of countercultural resistance to the work ethic that dominates contemporary China. A lot of youth are saying, "Look, I'm just going to step out of this. I'm going to leave society" and not get caught up in that lifestyle of constantly working in order to make money, in order to buy more stuff. The author of the piece in *The Times*, her name is Elsie Chen, she says that to lie flat, and I'm just going to quote from the article. She says, "To lie flat means to forego marriage, not have children, stay unemployed, and eschew material wants such as a house or a car. It's the opposite," she writes, "Of what China's leaders have asked of their people."

That's why it's so controversial, is they're looking for people to raise their lifestyle and to want to have things and that will get them working. In her article, she doesn't connect it to anything in Chinese culture, but when I read the article and then read *Leave Society*, it seemed to me, and I guess, I want to get your take on this, you don't have to read the article, I'm just curious, it seemed to me that the Chinese communist work ethic sounds very Confucian to me.

You have this obligation and you're trying to always better yourself within your status in the society, whereas this lie flat or what Lee does in *Leave Society*, it's very Daoist, especially the Daoism of Chuang Tzu, which is about what we might call like Timothy Leary, to go back to the LSD thing, "Turn on, tune in and drop out." It's a very laid-back way of being in the world. Like I mentioned earlier, you have a chapter in the book called Daoism. I'm just wondering, if you see-- Let me ask it this way, I'm wondering if you're attracted to Daoism as a philosophy? Then the follow-up question would be if you have friends or connections in China and they're aware of this, and do they see Daoism as part of this lie flat or lie flat as part of Daoism?

Tao Lin: I don't know anyone in China at all. The only people in Taiwan, where my parents live that I talk to are my parents, but I like how you made the connection between Daoism and the lying flat thing, and it is interesting that the author of the article didn't mention Daoism because Daoism is the indigenous religion of China, I've learned. I mostly was attracted to it because it promotes nature so much. Seems to be one of the only major religions that center in nature in its worldview, and I see connections between it and the lying flat thing, because Daoism, it's ideal, at least in the Tao Te Ching.

It's for people to live in villages and to not have knowledge of the outside world and to just live simple lives. You mentioned how communist China promotes everyone getting a job and having a strong work ethic and all that. I would say that it's not just communist China, but the whole global culture that promotes that. In my novel, the title *Leave Society*, it's more specifically promoting the idea of leaving that global culture where nature is really belittled and materialist roles are put at the forefront so I like the lying flat thing, and I think they could look into Daoism as an earlier philosophy that's similar to theirs.

Rabbi Rami: Yes. It would seem to me that, like you said, Daoism being an indigenous religious tradition within China and also from what I understand in Taiwan, Daoism has a strong presence in Taiwan perhaps more strong than in China where it's probably suppressed because it doesn't really help the Chinese cause, the communist cause at all so if I were to pick a religion from scratch, just if I was born without anything and had no background, and I just studied the world's religions, which one would I choose? I think I would choose Daoism.

In fact, I was asked just recently one of those questions like if you were on a desert island, what's the one book you would like to be stranded with? The first thing that popped into my mind was the Tao Te Ching. I'm interested in Daoism. I love that aspect of your novel. I want to ask you one more question, then I'm going to stop talking about this. [chuckles]

In the novel, you tell us that Lee is, and the word you use is deformed, so I'm going to let you describe what you had in mind when you say that Lee is deformed? Lee is the protagonist if people didn't catch that earlier. That Lee is deformed.

I'm going to let you describe that in a second, but just to stick with this Daoist theme for a second, as soon as I read that, I stopped and I had to go look up something that Chuang Tzu who's-- Lao Tzu being the founder of Daoism in a sense, Chuang Tzu being the next greatest philosopher of Daoism, and he oftentimes presents his philosophy through parable. Chuang Tzu has this story, maybe you've heard this story, but Chuang Tzu has this story in which he's with his friend, Hui Tzu, who complains about having this big deformed tree on his property that he can't sell.

Hui Tzu says "The trunk is so distorted, so full of knots, no one can get a straight plank out of it. The branches are so crooked, you can't cut them up in any way that makes sense. There, it just stands beside the road, no carpenter will even look at it. I can't make any money off of it." That's a quote from one of the translations of Chuang Tzu, "But" Chuang Tzu tells us, "Because the tree is deformed, and has no monetary value, all the other trees around it being more straight and easily turned into planks for a building, they're all cut down," but because this deformed tree is useless, it's an ancient tree, it just lives on and on and on.

I'm wondering, and maybe I've misread this completely, but it seemed to me that Chuang Tzu's deformed tree speaks to-- or let me ask you this way, how might Chuang Tzu's deformed tree speak to your notion of Lee being deformed?

Tao: Yes, Lee is deformed in one way. The main way he's deformed is he has this chest deformity, where his chest is sunken, because he just didn't get enough nutrients or something, so his chest when growing up, it didn't expand to the normal

size, so that flattens his heart and lungs. While you were saying all that, I imagine that Lee could have been like the tree if he was in a time of war, and the government was recruiting people to go fight somewhere. They probably passed on Lee because of his deformity, because he gets out of breath really fast, and he just looks pretty weak, but in the novel, there isn't anything like that. I don't think.

Rabbi Rami: I realize that. Not explicitly, but I'm just wondering in your head when you think about it now, and what Chuang Tzu is trying to say is that besides the obvious, the deformed tree lives longer than all the rest, but that there's a value in being deformed. Nature isn't only-- You were saying that one of the reasons you liked it was Daoism is centered in nature, but nature isn't only, "Perfect trees," because what's perfect is what the society can make money off of, that nature includes the deformed and maybe honors the deformed in some way that those of us who really are absorbed in the society miss out on.

Tao: Yes. I can see that, but also there's other aspects to it because even though Lee has this chest deformity, society can still use him in the same way it can use anyone else as a consumer, and just as a participant in the whole materialist push, and just to help buy stuff and participate in politics and corporations. In that sense, even though he has a deformity still being used by society I feel like.

Rabbi Rami: No escape, which makes the notion of leaving society all the more radical I suppose?

Tao: Yes, it's something deliberate you have to do I feel like because no matter how deformed as a person you are, you're still going to be in society when you're born. I guess if you're really deformed, like in the book I write about severe autism, and they could be said to be deformed mentally, and they're so deformed that society has no use for them, but still, it's not an enviable position.

Rabbi Rami: Sure. Yes, that's extreme on the autism scale I guess, but Lee isn't anything like that. He's capable of not only agency, that he can do what he wants, but he's capable of making this leap out of the norm into which he was born. I want to change directions for a second, and because there are just things that-- because I read both *Trip* and *Leave Society* that just struck me. One of them is that in both books, you referenced the philosopher Terence McKenna. I know I was supposed to know that name. I had to look it up. [chuckles]

It just didn't didn't flash in front of me when I saw it in *Trip* or in *Leave Society*, but when I saw it again in *Leave Society*, I went back and looked at *Trip*, and then I said, "Okay, so who is this?" I did a little research on it, but tell us a little about Terence McKenna, and how his teaching informs your thinking and your writing?

Tao: I don't think you should have recognized him, because-

Rabbi Rami: Oh [laughs]

Tao: -I had never heard of him until 2012 when I was 29. Oh, I heard of him on Joe Rogan's podcast. At that time, I had reached the bottom with pharmaceutical drugs, and also had a really bleak worldview. I just felt that life was meaningless, and I couldn't find any compelling arguments for why to feel good about life. Then I

encountered Terence McKenna and he promoted natural drugs a lot, psychedelics. He also promoted nature a lot. He's partly who got me more into Daoism.

I had read some Daoist stuff in college and found it interesting and attractive, but then I lost touch with it, but then as I was trying to get away from pharmaceutical drugs and a bleak worldview, I encountered Terence McKenna. I feel the main thing that he inspired me to do was try to figure out the world independently instead of getting other people's opinion on it. He led me to read a lot of non-fiction books and then in *Leave Society*, I include a lot of my research. Did you notice the non-fiction that I included?

Rabbi Rami: Yes. I'm not normally a fiction reader. I like non-fiction, that's mostly what I read. It made the book richer for me, because, "Oh wait, this is-- I feel more comfortable reading the non-fiction stuff. Yes, I absolutely picked up on that. It's also interesting, and we don't have to go into it, but to bring real-life people into the novel that way I thought. It seems just a nice little plot twist or something-- just the way of doing it.

Again, I want to turn to something, there was a phrase in the book, and I didn't write down where in the book it is, I just wrote down the phrase itself, but you coined this phrase, "Going beyond instead of away." I want to unpack that with you a little bit. I have got a bunch of questions about it, but let me not take you off on my sidetrack-- my side trails here. What do you have in mind when you say going beyond instead of away?

Tao: When I first got really disillusioned with my life, and then I had this psilocybin trip, I took a big dose of psilocybin and that combined with listening to a lot of Terence McKenna made me during the trip have this idea that I should leave society, leave the life I had in New York City where I was really depressed. Then at that point, I realized that I didn't know what I would leave towards. That's when I started researching a lot and finding nature as something that I could leave towards being really urban and detached from nature so I started to think that I wasn't leaving society, I was more just going past this layer of society that I was surrounded by to reach this other place where I could work on-- or just where I could find communities that were outside, what I call in the book, dominator society.

Rabbi Rami: When I read it, I read it at a funny time because I was reading the book and my mom had just had a stroke. She's doing fine now, but at the time, as I'm reading the book and got a phone call from my sister that my mother had a stroke, it looked like she could die. My sister said to me when-- and I'm quoting her, but paraphrasing her, "When she dies," my sister said, "We will have to deal with the fact that she's gone away," and I've just read going beyond instead of away. I realize that that's wrong. Not what you wrote, [chuckles] but what my sister said.

That when we think of away, we think we're at point A and we're going to leave A and go B, and that's going away. When I read going beyond, I thought of going to a wider place that includes A and B and C and D and E and all the rest of that. That this beyond is ultimately I would say, an infinite carrier of space that holds all existence. I'm turning it into a theological thing here, and that may not be what you intended, but the greater beyond includes where we happen to be.

This again is a stretch and you can say "No, I don't know what you're talking about," but I think this fits with what you just said. When Lee leaves or when anyone leaves society, if you could actually leave, you can leave the society of New York for example, which was really detrimental to your wellbeing. You can leave New York, but going beyond is what I understood was happening when you went into nature, when you found the larger field of nature, which includes Manhattan, you can't separate these things, so that this whole leave society is not so binary leaving X to get to Y, it's more leaving the narrowness of society to see the larger society, the natural world in which we live.

Not that you stated it this way, but that seemed to me, the trajectory of the novel. At the end, I felt you pointed me in a direction, not of leaving A to get to B, but a direction of expanding beyond A to experience this greater beyond. Going beyond instead of away. Does that make any sense, what I'm saying?

Tao Lin: Yes. I like that interpretation a lot, how instead of leaving somewhere to go somewhere else, it's more like expanding your context.

Rabbi Rami: Yes. Right.

Tao Lin: Yes. You were talking about how you thought of death like that, I think. I also in the book promote a view of death where maybe when we die, we just enter a much bigger context where we still have access to this world, but we also have access to other things. What do you think about death?

Rabbi Rami: I think something similar. I think death is going beyond and not away, but I'm not sure about--well, because I don't think there's an A and a B, there's no break between this life and some other life, it's all seamless, there may be some connection like you said, between this world and the next. I could see the whole thing as a seamless phenomenon. The analogy I prefer is like a wave in the ocean. You and I are waves, but all waves are simply the ocean waving. That when I die, the form of the [unintelligible 00:26:09] wave dissipates, but the oceanic nature that was that wave remains.

The beyond to me is having the wave realize it's also the ocean. That, to me, is the ultimate leaving of society, with its narrow definitions of who I am and taking leave of that and going beyond that to realize my truer nature, which is the whole, the Dao, the infinite or nature herself. That's what I think happens when you die. Your form goes and you become what you already are, this greater reality that is happening is everything.

Tao Lin: Yes. The ocean is so much deeper than just a surface.

Rabbi Rami: Yes, but we live on the surface, we identify with the surface, and the society insists on us being on the surface, which, to go full circle and then to bring this conversation to a close, which seems to me what this whole lying flat idea is. It's that I'm trying to take refuge in the beyond, in this greater beyond, and live more deeply, even though I'm lying flat, but living more deeply than the society with this obsession with this surface world, and all of its possessions and things allows us to do.

Tao Lin: I like lying flat in terms of that. It could be a first step from just detaching from the surface. Then once you're lying flat, you could go into more spiritual stuff I feel like.

Rabbi Rami: Yes. Now we're making this up. Well, I'm always making stuff up, but if you think about it, when you're in the ocean, if you're struggling in the ocean, you drown, but if you lie flat in a sense, if you relax, then you discover the ocean will support you. That's another element of your going beyond, instead of away in the context of this larger phenomenon in China, and maybe in Taiwan, I don't know of lying flat, but we are going to have to leave it there which is too bad because I really enjoy talking to you, Tao Lin.

Our guest today is Tao Lin, he's the author of his new novel. He's the author of numerous books of poetry and fiction. Tao Lin is the author of *Leave Home* and a review of the novel appears in the July-August issue of *Spirituality & Health Magazine*. You can learn more about Tao Lin's work at his website taolin.us. Tao Lin, thank you so much for talking with us.

Tao Lin: Thank you for having me. I'm glad we got to talk about Daoism and of my thoughts.

Rabbi Rami: Well, you're welcome. Thank you.

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[00:30:15] [END OF AUDIO]

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