

Corona Chronicle

Week Ten

Wednesday, May 20

Day 41 of *sefirat ha-Omer*. We all keep saying that this is “such a strange time...” When I stop to try to process it all (or some of it) – whether when I lie in my bed at night, or when I write these “chronicles” – so many disparate thoughts swirl around in my head that it is rather dizzying.

First, there is such a huge disconnect between what is going on in my personal dwelling place, with my family and our day-to-day concerns such as whether the yogurt is running out, or the grass needs cutting, or whether Lev will have enough band-width to take his English AP test online – and with what is going on “out there,” in the world at large. Yes, we watch the news on TV, we may read the paper, or be alerted to less-covered aspects of this pandemic by a friend’s posting an article on Facebook, such as one on the ravages of the coronavirus across the Navajo Nation – but the thing is, it is not as if there is an “in here” only for us, and everyone else is “out there.” We are *all* viewing the world from inside our fishbowls, looking out at a very limited view, and *reality* seems to elude us, or at least is something that we can only see with blinkers (and masks!) on.

But there are heroes who are interacting with a more immediate face of the “out there” than most of us: there are of course the medical personnel who work at hospitals all over the country; members of police departments who are responding to a heightened number of cases of domestic violence, and who have to make difficult decisions about when to try to enforce social-distancing measures; firefighters who still have to rush into burning buildings and carry out the trapped, regardless of the risk of their being infected. Yesterday I was on a Zoom meeting with eleven other members of UIA (United Interfaith Action) – an organization that brings clergy from the Fall River-New Bedford area together to address matters of social justice and poverty in our area from a faith-perspective – and I was humbled to hear of the work that some of them are doing. Father Thomas Washburn, the rector of St. Mary’s Cathedral, and a crew of his parishioners, along with the cooperation of area restaurants that are still open for takeout meals, have been serving 400 hot meals twice a week (supplied by the restaurants at a cost of 3 to 5 dollars a bag, and supplemented by parishioners’ home baked desserts) since early on in this pandemic. Families drive by and pick them up in their cars: the demand has been steady.

We know that such efforts are going on: bagged breakfasts and lunches being given out at public schools to families whose kids would normally eat these meals in the school cafeteria five days a week; bags of groceries being given out to families in a drive-through fashion at the Fall River YMCA; food pantries (one of which is just a block away from TBE, at Christ the Rock Church on Rock Street) more utilized than ever. But most of us – unless it is on the local TV news – do not see them, because we are busy “sheltering at home,” doing our part to help our city, state, and nation get through this pandemic by trying not to contract or spread the virus.

And of course cooperating with this attempt to “flatten the curve” of the virus is important – without such cooperation thousands more would surely die. But the situation creates confusion in our hearts: we may not personally know anyone who is sick or who has died from Covid-19, or any families who literally cannot pay their rent or feed their children now, but we know these situations exist. We ourselves may still be living in relatively comfortable fashion, though we may feel isolated, and missing many things that used to be part of our daily life, like going out to eat with friends, or going to the theater, etc...but we don't have to worry about where the next meal is coming from, or about whether we will lose the roof over our heads. So what do we do?

Well, if we can afford to, we can give to local, national, and international charities – for this pandemic knows no borders, and some countries were already beset with serious hunger-problems *before* the pandemic arrived. And if you are so inclined, you can write letters to your state and congressional representatives encouraging them to support measures to tide people over during this difficult time – for we know that in the end personal acts of charity are not going to be enough. There will need to be a public policy response to this crisis on a large and sustained scale – and international cooperation between nations is more important now than ever.

All that being said...I miss the world! On the mornings when we do not have online services (Sunday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Friday), I sit on the couch in my home study to daven *Shacharit* (the morning prayer service), with my computer on “screensaver,” a mode which cycles through the photos stored in my “pictures” file – so as I thank God for “renewing Creation every day,” I may see a photo of sunrise over Zion Canyon, or the light filtering through California's costal redwoods, a waterfall cascading over a cliff at Yosemite, or my mom and Lev eating ice cream at Salvador's in Padanaram. I feel so filled with gratitude and

wonder each morning I see these photos. (Luckily I know most of the prayers by heart, so I can daven and *look* at the same time!) And of course Mark, Lev and I still get out in the “world” – at least on a local basis. We have managed to find places where we can walk without being dangerously close to other people (even though we still, to my knowledge, have not been readmitted to the State of Rhode Island!). But I am becoming more and more aware that I have a “wanderer” gene in my makeup – or perhaps I should label it an *explorer* gene (since an “explorer” seems to be more purposeful than someone who randomly “wanders” – though to my mind, *wandering* is just a laid-back form of *exploring*).

Is it selfish to be longing for the freedom to hit the highways and trails – to yearn to not only look at a *photograph* of a redwood tree, but to *sit beneath* one, to experience the unique silence of the desert, or hike through an alpine meadow filled with wildflowers, with snow-capped peaks on the horizon – when so many people have to worry about feeding their families from day to day? I suppose it is a bit selfish, and yet it strikes me that it might be a kind of selfishness that can be used for good. I think of that teaching in the midrash about the *yetzer ha-ra* (the “evil urge” –but you might call it the “selfish inclination”):

Nachman taught, in Rav Shmuel's name: “*And, behold, it was very good*” [Gen. 1:31, the phrase spoken by God after the creating of human beings] refers to the Evil Inclination. Can then the Evil Inclination be “*very good*”? That would be extraordinary! Yes, [because] without the Evil Inclination, no man would build a house, take a wife, beget a family, and engage in work. (Midrash Genesis Rabbah 9:7)

These rabbis of antiquity realized that without our urge to create a life for ourselves – by finding someone we can love and start a family with, by building both a physical and emotional home for ourselves, by engaging in whatever kind of work we feel drawn to, or can make a living from – that humanity could not sustain itself. Likewise, it strikes me that without the urge that lies within much of the human race to wander through meadows, traverse deserts, explore hilltops and caves, paddle rivers and sail oceans, we would not know how miraculous this planet *is*. We would not realize how varied are God’s creatures, would not know how everything is linked – how estuaries are connected to oceans, how emissions from factories in Ohio affect trees in the mountains of Tennessee, how overfishing in one part of the world impacts the whale population across the globe...and while most of us who love to explore are not scientists collecting data, it is on account of our love, our stories, our photos and other mementos of our journeys that the rest of the human population comes to learn how precious, how magnificent all this

Creation is. We explorers must *wander with a purpose*: to bring back our “reports” that will convince our fellow human beings that the world is worth saving.

Our fellow New Englander, Henry David Thoreau, in his lovely essay “Walking” (published in 1861) wrote about the value of “sauntering” – an activity that may have looked purposeless, but was in his mind a holy activity:

“I have met with but one or two persons in the course of my life who understood the art of Walking, that is, of taking walks — who had a genius, so to speak, for *sauntering*, which word is beautifully derived “from idle people who roved about the country, in the Middle Ages, and asked charity, under pretense of going *a la Sainte Terre*, to the Holy Land, till the children exclaimed, “There goes a Sainte-Terrer,” a Saunterer, a Holy-Lander. They who never go to the Holy Land in their walks, as they pretend, are indeed mere idlers and vagabonds; but they who do go there are saunterers in the good sense, such as I mean. Some, however, would derive the word from *sans terre*, without land or a home, which, therefore, in the good sense, will mean, having no particular home, but equally at home everywhere. For this is the secret of successful sauntering. He who sits still in a house all the time may be the greatest vagrant of all; but the saunterer, in the good sense, is no more vagrant than the meandering river, which is all the while sedulously seeking the shortest course to the sea.”

I would aspire to live up to both of these definitions of a *saunterer*: to walk out into nature seeking “the holy land” (yes, to hear that “still small voice,” and to reconnect with the Divine); and also to be aware of myself as a person *without a land or home*, as we heard in *Parashat B’har* (last week’s Torah portion):

...for you are but sojourners, residents with Me. (Lev. 25:23)

A person who is aware that she truly is only a “resident” *within God* may nevertheless find herself running around trying to experience God more vividly, to love and admire as many angles of God’s face as she can take in, to seek experiences, albeit temporary ones, of “transport” to the “Holy of Holies,” trying to get as close to God as she can. For some, these experiences are felt most vividly when looking into the eyes of one’s child or spouse, or perhaps in doing deeds of justice or of healing the sick. I need these experiences, too. But for me, to behold the beauty of this planet is like gazing upon the face of God. Like Moses, I cry out:

Hareini-na et-k’vodekha! (“...show me Your glory!”) (Ex.33:18)

And God let Moses see the Divine Presence. Then Moses returned to his work of ministering to the needs of the Jewish people.

So – balance is needed: between working for the sake of heaven and for humanity (and for all of God’s creation), and between having *soul* time when one can simply

soak in the beauty and exaltation of “seeing God’s face” for its own sake. In the end, you get *recharged* to go back and transmit the sparks of this fire to others.

And so I will close with the words of John Muir, the Scottish preacher’s son:

“Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where Nature may heal and cheer and give strength to body and soul alike. This natural beauty-hunger is made manifest in the little window-sill gardens of the poor, though perhaps only a geranium slip in a broken cup, as well as in the carefully tended rose and lily gardens of the rich, the thousands of spacious city parks and botanical gardens, and in our magnificent National parks — the Yellowstone, Yosemite, Sequoia, etc. — Nature's sublime wonderlands, the admiration and joy of the world.”
(*The Yosemite*, 1912)



Redwoods in the “Cathedral Grove,” Muir Woods National Monument.