

Corona Chronicle

Week 46

Wednesday, Jan. 27th

Erev Tu biShevat

It is the afternoon before the full moon of the Hebrew month of Shevat – the Jewish “New Year of the Trees.” The trees received an early birthday present through last night and this morning – which was about 4 inches of snow. This is something that should not be remarkable in January, but alas, this year, at least, it is. It is the first time it has snowed this new secular year of 2021, and only the third time we have had a snowfall with any accumulation since October. Now I know that many people, especially the older folks who cannot afford to spend their winters in Florida or Arizona, are perfectly happy with our current dearth of snow. But I love snow, and it is important for our environment, for our reservoirs and other bodies of water, for the slow release of water into the soil (as the snow melts), and even for the protection of some plants (it acts as a blanket, shielding them from freezing temperatures).

And it is already melting away. I made sure to get out early to shovel the walk, the steps, and the end of the driveway before it all got too heavy, as it does when the temperature rises, and then after lunch Lev and I drove to the top of Wilson Road, where we parked, and walked down towards North Watuppa Pond, turning off to hike the 1-mile loop “Tattapanum Trail,” and then continuing on Wilson Road until the end, where we turned around and made our way back along the snowy road, and up the hill to our car. I have so been longing for this magical snowy coating of all the trees and stones, and the ice on the pond, to turn the sometimes drab winter landscape into an enchanted one. Alas, it is quickly disappearing – but at least we did get out while it lasted.

Here is something I cannot understand. The conventional wisdom is that we – our communities and our country as a whole – need to really talk and *listen* to one another, that we need to find *common ground* so that we can identify issues on which we can pull together. I would think that the health of our earth – of our waters, our air, our soil, our growing things and of all animate beings – would be an issue of common good that we could all agree on. Who wants to suffer from respiratory diseases or from contaminated water, or from the ravages of drought, flood, heat, etc.? I cannot imagine that anyone would be indifferent to these

maladies. But evidently there are powerful lobbies at work in our national, state, and local politics that do not hesitate to place short-term profits for certain companies (and they claim for these localities' workers and communities) over more long-term, sustainable benefits – like a healthy environment for these workers, and the children and grandchildren of these workers and their surrounding communities to flourish in. Even this pandemic that we are living (and dying) through (the death toll as of today is approximately 427,000) is related to the way that human beings have mistreated the environment, not giving the wild creatures that carry these viruses (benignly, for them) enough space apart from human civilization.

Of course there is still much we do not know about the coronavirus. Did it pass to us from bats, from pangolins, or from civet cats (wild Asian cats whose musk, called “natural civetone,” is still harvested as a powerful ingredient in some high-end perfumes)? It seems that, whether by the Creator's design, or by some part of the process of evolution, there are certain animals that we can for the most part live with (domestic cats, dogs, cattle, horses, etc.), and others that were meant to live lives apart from us. As we spread out, encroaching on more and more wild lands, building homes, hotels, etc. in these places previously uninhabited (and only rarely visited) by humans, we endanger both these animals and ourselves. It is one thing to collect bat guano for fertilizer; presumably the bats no longer need what they have already excreted. But to hunt down (and then keep in captivity) these rare wild cats for their musk for something so unnecessary to our human well-being as *perfume*?

Similarly with pangolins, which one source I found online informed me is the “most trafficked wild animal in the world.” Apparently their scales are highly valued in “traditional” Chinese and Vietnamese medicine, and their meat is considered a delicacy, affordable only to the very wealthy. Could these viruses be ways that they have (unwittingly, of course) developed for fighting back?

Well, I am not a wildlife biologist, nor a virologist. Sometimes things just happen; not all maladies are a “punishments” for our human greed or rapaciousness. But so often sicknesses arise because we have tried to take some kind of shortcut – from the contamination of drinking water in Flint, Michigan to the overuse of antibiotics in livestock raised in “CAFO's” (concentrated animal feedlot operations) which are both cruel to and unhealthy for the animals, and which may be linked to a rise in human resistance to some antibiotics.

My point is that if only everyone could see the *long-term* consequences of these things that they are trying to preserve their “right” to exploit – if they understood how many people will get cancer because of the chemicals they spray on their crops; if they knew how the rate of asthma would rise on account of the particle-pollution from their factories’ smokestacks – it seems that they would be in favor of finding better, safer, less cruel ways to carry on their businesses and industries. One would think. But then, we all know how the tobacco industry *knew* that smoking tobacco caused lung cancer long before the U.S. Surgeon General mandated warnings on the side of packages of cigarettes – but lied about it for decades. Similarly, it has been documented that Exxon-Mobil *knew* that carbon emissions were warming the planet (and they were raising the height of their offshore oil-drilling platforms to accommodate the sea level-rise that they knew was occurring), but they lied about this fact to the federal government and to the public.

One cannot help but wonder about human beings: are we just not that smart, or are some forces deliberately encouraging to remain ignorant, or are we just too greedy for our own short-term gain to care about future generations? Yes, all of the above!

In the current Jan/Feb 2021 issue of *Sierra* (the Sierra Club’s monthly magazine) I just last week came across an article about “Ishi,” the last known member of the Native American Yahi people (and who came to be touted as “the last wild Indian of North America”). In 1911, after having spent his whole life largely apart from modern American culture, Ishi, starving, wandered down from the mountains into a slaughterhouse yard on the outskirts of Oroville, California. All of his fellow Yahi people had already died, or had been massacred by white frontiers people, and therefore, because of a Yahi custom of not revealing one’s name unless introduced by another Yahi, he called himself simply “Ishi” – which in his language meant “man” (and sounds remarkably like the word for “man” in Hebrew – *ish!*). The thing that stuck with me from this story was that after Ishi learned to speak English (he had gained employment with an anthropological museum in Berkeley), he was known to have made the following observation about the white European-descended people he came to know in “modern” America: “sophisticated children, smart but not *wise*.”

Thursday, Tu biShevat

So why do we need a “new year” for trees? In the days of the temple cult, before its final destruction in 70 CE, an official new start to the counting-year for the age of trees for their fruits was necessary for farmers to know when their trees had passed the age of three, since they were forbidden from eating the fruit of trees during the first three years of the trees’ lives. In addition, there were annual offerings mandated by the Torah of the trees’ “first fruits” each year. A tenth of this harvest was to be dedicated to the Temple in Jerusalem before the farmers could sell or enjoy these fruits for themselves. This is similar to our having a separate “fiscal year” that begins on July 1st, or to Thoroughbred racehorses all having their official “birthdays” be the first Jan. 1st after they are born, for purposes of entering races based on age.

It was thanks to the mystics of Tsfat in the 16th century that this holiday was lifted up as a spiritual practice (with their institution of the Tu biShevat seder), even though the commandment regarding a tree’s first fruits was no longer relevant, and thus it has also served as an extra infusion of ecological consciousness into Jewish spirituality. I say “extra” infusion because an orientation towards the grandeur of all that God has created has *always* been a part of the Jewish religious outlook. What would the Psalms be without their invocations of hills, trees, the sun, the moon, the stars, the ocean’s roar? Because of the history of Jewish communities in the European Diaspora, where in general Jews were not allowed to own land and tended to cluster in cities (though this is not entirely true), there is a stereotype of Jews being more “people”- oriented rather than “nature”- oriented. But the poetic parts of the Bible certainly give you a different picture.

And in any case, why should it have to be one over the other? We can embrace all of God’s creation – which encompasses both human beings *and* all the rest of creation as well. Yes, there is a certain amount of “exploitation” that takes place which is a necessary part of human survival on this earth – just as the lion hunts and kills the zebra for food, and bison depend on the prairie grasses, so we human beings also depend on plants for food, the flesh of animals, fish, and eggs for protein, trees for food, for fuel, and for the construction of our homes (not to mention – although for most of human history we did not realize it – for oxygen). The key is in learning how to live *wisely* (to paraphrase Ishi), how to live *in balance*. Yes, we must eat, we must have fuel, we must build homes – but how can we do that in a way that does not deplete the great abundance of beauty and natural

resources that God has blessed our planet with? There is so much that we do not understand – how, if we pull one thread out of the tapestry of our biosphere, the whole may begin to unravel.

I certainly do not understand it all, and I know that I am guilty of enjoying some comforts of “modern” life that are likely contributing to the unravelling. But with a new administration in Washington I have hope that our nation’s – and world’s – eco-wisdom may be on the rise, and that our planet may just be resilient enough to give us a chance to get our act together, if only we move quickly enough.

I love Psalm 104, which our tradition designates as appropriate to be read on Rosh Chodesh (the New Moon). Because it is so lengthy, many congregations (including ours) do not observe this tradition, and even those that *do* read it tend to rush through it. This is a shame, not only because its poetry is dazzling, but even more so because it is a remarkable depiction of the ecosystem of ancient Israel. What particularly strikes me about, though, it is how the psalmist saw *all* of God’s creatures as worthy of their place, worthy of God’s blessings and attention to their needs – human beings are not on a pinnacle, more important than the wild asses, the birds, the cedars or the young lions. Neither are humans vilified; they are part of God’s creation, part of *the balance of the whole*. And so I will close with just a small section of this psalm, for it contains much wisdom that is just as relevant now as it was during the time when it was composed, so many thousands of years ago:

From Psalm 104 (adapted from Siddur Sim Shalom)

*You make springs gush forth in torrents to flow between the hills.
The wild beasts all drink from them; wild asses quench their thirst.
Birds of the heavens rest on their banks and lift their voices among the branches.*

...

*The trees of Adonai drink their fill – the cedars of Lebanon, which God planted.
Birds build their nests in them; storks make their homes in the pines.
The high hills are for the wild goats; the rocks a refuge for badgers...
You bring on darkness and it is night, when all the beasts of the forest stir.
The young lions roar for prey, seeking their food from God.
When the sun rises they steal away and lie down in their dens.
Then people go out to their work, to their labor until evening.
How varied are Your works, Adonai; in wisdom have You made them all –
The earth is filled with Your creatures!*



Lev ahead of me on the Tattapanum Trail, Watuppa Reserve, Fall River.