

## Corona Chronicle

### Week 57

Wednesday, April 14<sup>th</sup>

#### *Yom HaZikaron* (Israeli Memorial Day)

2nd of Iyyar, day 17 of *s'firat HaOmer*

Toll of coronavirus fatalities in U.S. (as of 4/16): 579,000  
Number of Americans fully vaccinated as of 4/14: 78.5 million

Yesterday was *Rosh Chodesh* (the first day of the new month of ) *Iyyar*, and, as noted above, today is Israel's Memorial Day for fallen soldiers, which, even as I write these words – Israel being seven hours ahead of EST in the U.S. – is already morphing into *Yom HaAtzma'ut*, Israeli Independence Day. The flavors of these two days are so different from one another, *Yom HaZikaron* being perhaps the saddest day of the year on Israel's calendar, while *Yom HaAtzma'ut* is one of the most joyful, filled with fireworks and dancing in the streets. When I say that *Yom HaZikaron* is the saddest, sadder even than *Yom HaShoah*, it is because the losses of the *Shoah* are *old* wounds, covered with decades of scar tissue. But the losses felt on *Yom HaZikaron* – those of young men and women fallen while serving in the Israeli Defense Forces – many of these losses are still fresh, some of them open wounds that have not even begun to heal. And they are distinguished from the losses of the *Shoah* in this way as well: when Israelis look back on the history of Jews in Europe, they see a minority people living by the permission or *largesse* of the ethnic majorities of the various nations in which Jews lived. They see a frequently-uprooted, dispossessed, unenfranchised, disempowered people, some of whom lived by their *cleverness* (doctors, bankers, retailers, small business-owners, journalists, scientists), along with another large contingent who lived by their *heavenly-mindedness* (rabbis, Talmud scholars, mystics, and the pious poor). In both cases, however, Israeli Jews see, through their backward-facing lens, Jews who were not agents of *power*, at least not of power for the survival of the Jewish people.

They would except from this rule, of course, those who immigrated from Europe to pre-state Israel (then British Palestine), who were activists for the right of Jews to establish a state of their own, and especially those who began preparing for armed defense of their people before the state was even established (which was illegal,

but obviously necessary). This is the hinge where the two days, *Yom HaZikkaron* and *Yom HaAtzma'ut*, are joined. Without the willingness of individuals to put their lives on the line, to march into the fray, there could be no Independence Day. It makes so much sense that one day bleeds into the other, one wonders why our Memorial and Independence days in America are not back-to-back like this. But the transition from one day to the other in Israel *in the evening*, where the two meet, is based on the biblical pattern of reckoning days, which begin at dusk: *And there was evening, and there was morning, Day One...* (cf. Genesis, chapter 1). We do not count our days in this way in America (except on the eve of the New Year, when we begin the new day not at dusk, but at midnight). Also, as I just discovered through a little research, these two national holidays in the United States were separate due to our *history* – Independence Day commemorating the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776, but Memorial Day being a federalizing of many separate commemorations around the nation on different days in the aftermath of the Civil War, almost a century later.

As it turns out, a historian named David Blight, while researching a book he was writing on the Civil War in 1996, discovered that the first recorded “Memorial Day” (at the time it was called “Decoration Day”) in the U.S. took place on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 1865, less than one month after Lee’s surrender to Grant at Appomattox. Remarkably, it was a group of newly-freed Black Americans who, unlike the city’s White inhabitants, had not fled Charleston when the Union troops captured the town, who inaugurated this ceremony. According to David Roos’ article on the History Channel website,

*When Charleston fell and Confederate troops evacuated the badly damaged city, freed slaves remained. One of the first things those emancipated men and women did was to give the fallen Union prisoners a proper burial. They exhumed the mass grave [of the Union soldiers that had been buried by Confederate troops on the grounds of a Charleston race track] and reinterred the bodies in a new cemetery with a tall whitewashed fence inscribed with the words: “Martyrs of the Race Course.”*

*And then on May 1, 1865, something even more extraordinary happened. According to two reports that Blight found in The New York Tribune and The Charleston Courier, a crowd of 10,000 people, mostly freed slaves with some white missionaries, staged a parade around the race track. Three thousand black schoolchildren carried bouquets of flowers and sang “John Brown’s Body.” Members of the famed 54th Massachusetts and other black Union regiments were in attendance and performed double-time marches. Black ministers recited verses from the Bible.*

(cf: <https://www.history.com/news/memorial-day-civil-war-slavery-charleston>)

This was a remarkable story to have stumbled upon – quite unexpectedly! – in the midst of reflecting upon the connection between Israel’s marking of Memorial and Independence Day. Certainly for those newly-freed men and women in South Carolina, the cost of freedom was very present to them, and they well knew that these fallen soldiers were not likely to be memorialized by the White citizens of Charleston.

But to turn my gaze back to Israel...it just so happens, as I reflect upon all this, that I remember that there is another significance to this date, on the secular calendar, at least. April 14<sup>th</sup>, 1984, was the day that my father died in the crash of his Moni Sailplane (aka “Moni Motoglider”) near Kitty Hawk, N.C. And it was this sudden, unexpected death of my father at age 57 (I was then 24) that led to my decision to take a year off from my studies at the Episcopal Divinity School to go to live and study for a year (which turned into two years) in Israel. Of course I did not make this decision on that same day. I found out about my father’s death on the evening of that day, and I was devastated. It took weeks and months for it to sink in. But this sudden cutting off of a life drove home to me that we never know how much time we have in this world. If there is something nagging in the back of your brain, or your conscience, something that you feel you should take care of – *do it now*. And if there is some experience that you would really like to have in this life, if at all possible, *don’t wait until it is too late*.

In my case, I had been struggling for months with whether I could remain in the ordination process for the Episcopal priesthood (and whether I could even remain a Christian at all) due to the conclusions I had come to through my studies at seminary. New Testament scholarship, Church history, the history of Christian anti-Semitism, feminist and liberation theology...it all converged to render me both unable and unwilling to recite the words of the Nicene or the Apostle’s Creeds, along with many words of the Episcopal liturgy. Clearly I would not make a very good priest! My father’s dying suddenly like that called out to me: “Get your life in order! Do what you have to do – while you still can!”

I was young, single, with no children, with very little money, but no debt. If ever there would be a time when I could take off for an adventure on the

other side of the world, this was it. In addition, such a break would allow me to study Hebrew more intensively (something I had begun in seminary), and to further explore my burgeoning attraction to Judaism, to make sure that dropping my ordination plans was what I really wanted to do.

So – in a way very different from the people of Israel – the shortened life of one person (my father) enabled me to realize to my own *atzma'ut* (independence). Yes, the analogy is not a tight one – since Israel's soldiers risk their lives in a conscious serving of their country, knowing that they may be laying down their lives so that others may live, just as generations before them did for them. My father had no such idea in his mind when he took off at that demonstration flight at Kitty Hawk on April 14<sup>th</sup>, 1984. And my life was never in peril, nor my liberty – not in the way that we mean when we talk about “liberty” for the citizens of a nation. But *spiritually* I was in a bind that I had not been able to figure out how to get free from – until I saw how high the stakes were. I had to make a decision: whether to *choose* the life I wanted to live, or just let life *happen* to me, to follow the path of least resistance. Of course we can't always choose everything that happens to us, and sometimes the things that we *don't* choose turn out to be blessings in disguise. Nonetheless, I have always known that my being Jewish was due, in large part, to the unwelcome death of my father. I would never call his death a “blessing in disguise,” but because of the immense impact his death had on me, I was able to leap into the unknown, whereas before I had been stuck.

This week another young Black man, Daunte Wright, was killed during a “routine traffic stop” in Brooklyn Center, MN – just ten miles away from the court in Minneapolis where the police officer under whose knee George Floyd died is being tried. What will it take in this land to not have to hear, again and again, of the brutal deaths of young Black men (and sometimes women, even children) at the hands of White police officers – or of others who “deputize” themselves to take the “law” into their own hands?

I suppose, if you want to find a “silver lining” to this period of history, one thing you *can* say is that we have become, as a nation, much more *aware* of the prejudice, the discrimination, and of the great divide between the haves and the have-nots in our land. Those who have suffered injustice in silence, or with only muffled screams, will not stay quiet any longer. Might all of

this death lead to a national reckoning, a change for the better, a path to greater justice and truer liberty for all in this land?

May God bless and protect Israel, and *all* peace- and justice-loving people around the world; may we never forget the sacrifices of those who have laid down their lives for the freedom of others, and may we all do what we can so that more and more people in this world can live lives of empowerment and independence. Not just “our own” people – *all* people. This much at least we should be learning through this pandemic: that we are all connected to one another, both in our deaths and in our lives – as we are connected to all forms of life on our planet, to all ecosystems. Eventually, the death or illness of one ecosystem on our planet will impact us all...well, more on that next week, when we mark Earth Day.



*New buds of red maples blossoming in Weetamoo Woods, Tiverton, RI.*