

Corona Chronicle, Week Six

Wednesday, April 22

Day 13 of *sefirat ha-Omer*; today is also Earth Day – and yesterday, the 21st, was the birthday of the environmentalist John Muir. It is a fraught time calendar-wise: in addition to being Muir’s birthday on the secular calendar, yesterday, the 27th of Nisan, was Yom ha-Shoah. Monday, April 20th, marked the ten-year anniversary of the start of the BP Deepwater Horizon drilling disaster on the Gulf Coast; and Sunday, April 19th, was the 25-year anniversary of the Oklahoma City bombing.

Yesterday afternoon a number of our congregants joined Rabbi Mark, Lev, and me for an online observance of Yom ha-Shoah. During this commemoration, Mark read from “The Perils of Indifference,” a speech originally delivered by Elie Wiesel over twenty years ago, on April 12, 1999, in the White House Rose Garden. In his speech, Wiesel praises the Clinton administration for its intervention (a joint decision of the U.S. and NATO) during the unfolding atrocities in Kosovo. Wiesel, who, along with millions of other victims of the Holocaust, felt abandoned by the world during Hitler’s genocide, explained that, in his mind, *indifference* to the plight of others was “more dangerous than anger or hatred”:

...indifference is always the friend of the enemy, for it benefits the aggressor – never his victim, whose pain is magnified when he or she feels forgotten. The political prisoner in his cell, the hungry children, the homeless refugees – not to respond to their plight, not to relieve their solitude by offering them a spark of hope is to exile them from human memory. And in denying their humanity, we betray our own.

Twenty-one years ago, Wiesel felt heartened by the willingness of the Western world to intervene in the mess that erupted between Bosnians and Serbs as former Yugoslavia was breaking up, with reports of genocide and “ethnic cleansing” in its wake. He hoped that this intervention was marking a real change for the Western world – a change towards caring about the vulnerable, but he asked:

Does it mean that we have learned from the past? Does it mean that society has changed?...Are we less insensitive to the plight of victims of ethnic cleansing and other forms of injustices in places near and far? Is today’s justified intervention in Kosovo...a lasting warning that never again will the deportation, the terrorization

of children and their parents, be allowed anywhere in the world? Will it discourage other dictators in other lands...[from doing] the same?

Wiesel could not answer his own questions, but he closed by invoking his childhood self, “the young Jewish boy from the Carpathian Mountains,” and placed before our mind’s eye an image of this boy walking alongside his mature self, relating that this boy “has accompanied the old man I have become throughout these years of quest and struggle.” Wiesel, of course, wanted to believe that things have changed since the dark era of Hitler’s rise, and he ended his speech with these words:

And together we walk towards the new millennium, carried by profound fear and extraordinary hope.

As I sit at my desk writing today, I feel profoundly sad that it seems, after all, that things have not changed that much. Today the world knows a refugee/ displaced persons crisis almost as great as the one during World War Two. Just off the top of my head, I can think of at least two ongoing genocides: that of the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar; and another of the Uighur Muslims in China. Of course the crisis in Syria is far from resolved, and children bear the brunt of it every day. Vulnerable people are fleeing or trying to flee brutal regimes, persecution, and unbearable conditions of living all over the world (with some of these conditions being directly or indirectly caused by climate disruption). And now on top of all this we have the coronavirus pandemic, which has reached into seemingly every corner of the globe.

Will the fear of contracting the virus dampen down violence around the world, or inflame it? I did hear that a ceasefire was agreed to in the war in Yemen in response to the threat of the virus. As far as the violence that emanates from terrorist cells go, it seems unlikely to me that fear of an invisible pathogen will slow down “true believers” who are willing both to take lives and to be killed themselves for their cause, and usually believe that they have “God on their side.” But one can only hope that for those kinds of conflicts that do not involve religious zealots, but rather rely on the more ordinary prejudices of so many peoples around the world towards those whom they see as “different” from themselves, the virus will turn their focus more on protecting themselves and their families, thus keeping them indoors and away from spaces where they might otherwise bully others.

That’s not saying a lot. In fact, it’s only saying that maybe, if we are lucky, the virus will stop some bad people from actively harming others, and just make these

bad people *indifferent* to those others while trying to get through this pandemic. So we are left with the very thing that Wiesel was afraid of: indifference.

It is too easy to fall down a dark rabbit hole in these musings, I'm afraid. Of course there are so many good, brave, and generous people now doing things to help others. Here in Fall River the United Way has brought together many different volunteer and service organizations to help make sure that our local families stay fed and get other services that they need. The world may be "small," but in reality, it is still too large for any individual to bear the responsibility of the sufferings of all vulnerable people all over its lands. As individuals, we relate to what is near: our friends, our loved ones, our communities, our neighbors, those in our state, our region, etc. – working steadily outward in "rippled" concern. But there are organizations an ordinary person can donate to that try to help relieve the sufferings of others and effect positive change in faraway places (as a Jew, I am drawn towards the American Jewish World Service and HIAS, to name two that truly do respond to the cries of the anguished).

As for the Earth (yes, it is Earth Day!), one can at least be happy that it is getting a "breather" during this crisis – with the clearest skies over Los Angeles, Mumbai and Tokyo that anyone can remember seeing for decades. As a CNN report from April 9th relates, "People in the northern Indian state of Punjab are reacting with awe at the sight of the Himalayan mountain range, which is now visible from more than 100 miles away due to the reduction in air pollution caused by the country's coronavirus lockdown."

Today on *Morning Joe* clips were shown of wildlife around the planet now enjoying the quiet and spaciousness of our cities and towns – now that the humans have, for the most part, retreated behind doors. Afterwards, I looked online and saw: geese and goslings strolling across the tarmac at Ben Gurion Airport; wild goats journeying down the thoroughfare of a Welsh village; just-hatched sea turtles making their way out to sea from sands that had not in the recent past been hospitable to them; dolphins swimming close to shores that they would normally shun because of the crowds and the garbage; and groups of three or more mountain lions in people's backyards in Boulder, CO (it turns out the photo of a crocodile in a Venetian canal was, however, a photo shopped fake!).

And, with so many industries closed, and travel so restricted, the price of oil has gone so low that oil producers literally are having to pay refiners to take it off their hands, since they have nowhere to store it! Well, let us take what blessings we can.

May the Earth have not just this one day, but may this be a trend towards continuing clearer skies and a turn towards cleaner sources of energy. And I do hope that all this wildlife continues to flourish, but hopefully we will find some balance, since it will be dangerous to both humans and the mountain lions if they keep enjoying our backyards! Of course we want *people* to be able to return to making a living, to be able to travel, to meet with friends and loved ones, to be able to attend plays and movies, bar mitzvahs and graduations, all those events that celebrate life (including the funerals and memorials that we cannot observe properly today).

No one knows how long this will go on. Yesterday Governor Charlie Baker declared that MA school-doors will remain closed through June. Will things be “normal” in September? Will we be able to come together as usual for High Holiday services in our beautiful Temple Beth El sanctuary in the fall? No one knows.

In the Torah the land of Israel was seen as having “rights” of its own – apart from the people of Israel. Every seventh year was supposed to be observed as a *shmittah* year – a year of rest for the land, when whatever grew on its own should be freely allowed as food for wild animals and for the poor, widows, orphans, and any resident aliens in the land. While there are debates among scholars of ancient biblical history as to whether the *shmittah* was ever fully observed on a large scale, the idea behind it is a beautiful one. This reasoning is expressed in the passage where the Israelites are told that they are never to sell their ancestral portions of land in perpetuity (that is, in a way that would not allow them to reclaim them during the “Jubilee” year that was to be observed every 50th year):

The land must not be sold beyond reclaim, for the land is Mine; you are but strangers, and dwellers with Me. Throughout the land that you hold, you must provide for the redemption of the land. (Lev. 25: 23-24)

Are we now observing an enforced “rest,” not just for the land of Israel, but for the whole planet, so that *all* the lands of the earth may be “redeemed”? Whether this be so or not, may we all come to realize that indeed, we are *all* “strangers” here upon this earth, that we cannot “own” the earth, to do whatever we like with it – for the earth belongs ultimately only to God, and we too shall find in God our only permanent dwelling-place.



Rabbi Mark and Lev walking on the virtually empty “Cherry and Webb” section of Horseneck Beach