

Corona Chronicle

Week 60

Friday, May 7th

Today is the 40th day in the counting of the Omer – a good, round biblical number and resonant with *birth*. It will have been three years, just after midnight tonight, since the one who gave birth to me, Patricia Altwegg Brown (later Fitzgerald) died. The themes of beginnings and endings are both very much alive for me today. I have come to a decision to stop the writing of these “chronicles” (at least for posting on our temple website; I may continue them for personal purposes). I had planned to keep writing and posting until the pandemic was officially “over,” or at least until we are able to return to semi-normal services in the temple building, but recently I have found myself in such an internal struggle over what words I can write and what words must be left unwritten that I felt I must close down this project in its current form.

We are living through a truly unique era, where the word “unprecedented” gets used as it surely never has before. That makes *writing* during this time-period interesting, especially if the purpose of one’s writing is to chronicle the era as we move through it. But because of the particularly fraught political atmosphere of this time we are living through in this nation, where people are so bitterly divided over so many issues: voting; masks; vaccinations; racial justice; policing; the Supreme Court; climate issues; energy and economic policies; 2nd Amendment rights and gun control; human rights for people of all colors and/or gender-identification; immigration and refugee policies; the debate about whether the government should provide free two-year college education...the list goes on and on – because of this divisiveness, I cannot write about the conclusions I have come to, or of the issues I feel passionate about, without concern about touching on topics that have become politically controversial in this time of such polarization.

Human beings will always respond to current events and even to ancient texts, like those in our Torah and Prophets, in very different ways. Thus even when/if I, writing as a Jewish clergyperson, comment upon our ancient sacred texts, I am nonetheless understanding these texts through my own personal lens, which can’t help but reflect my own deepest “Torah,” that which I call the *Torah sh’ba-lev*, the “Torah of the heart.” There is nothing wrong with this *per se* – in fact, it is just

natural, there is hardly any way of avoiding it – but in our current era of divisiveness, it has to be handled with great care so as not to alienate members of our community.

The Jewish clergyperson has two roles in their capacity as a congregational teacher or preacher: one is as a *moral* teacher, an uplifter of the community conscience; and the other is as a pastor, a “shepherd,” caring for the spiritual morale, health and happiness of all of the community’s members. How to balance these roles is a difficult act, but when one is in doubt, it is usually best to err on the side of the *pastoral*. I may look to moral teachers of great stature, such as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, the Rev. Martin Luther King, or to a writer such as Rachel Carson, as role models, but in truth these moral heroes of mine were more like “voices crying out in the wilderness.” They were not charged with the day-to-day care for a particular congregation in all its spectrum of stances or beliefs. They were public leaders on a grand moral stage, speaking like prophets to whomever would hear them (or read them), and those who would reject their words were free to do so.

Within a specific congregation, unless it is an unusually homogeneous one where all its members think about issues in the same way, the clergy have to be cautious when it comes to controversial topics. I confess that I have not always been good at being cautious this way; my nature is more of a passionate and impulsive one. I know there are some rabbis, cantors, and spiritual leaders of congregations who are masterful at presenting certain facts or texts, perhaps even offering opposing interpretations of these, and letting their congregants come to their own conclusions. They are able to both interest people and challenge them, hopefully to uplift them, but not alienate or divide them.

Since however, this seems not to be a gift that has been granted to me (or, I should say, that I have *yet to develop*), it seems best at this point for me to close these chronicles as an item on our temple website.

We have been through quite a year (and more) with this pandemic – getting used to services and board and committee meetings on Zoom, checking up with one another by phone, occasionally meeting at the supermarket or elsewhere, greeting one another with an elbow bump. By this time most of us have been fully vaccinated (I hope!), and we are slowly transitioning emotionally to the prospect of resuming a more “normal” synagogue (and everyday) life. But we are not there yet.

Sunday, May 9th (Mother's Day)

It feels strange at this point along the road to be speculating about post-pandemic life when we really cannot know for sure how much further we have to go before this road leads us all the way out of the woods – but with approximately a third of U.S. residents fully vaccinated now, the road appears to be getting closer and closer to the light.

Just this afternoon, for the first time since the pandemic began, we went out as a family to a restaurant (in honor of Mother's Day) and ate our meal on site (though at an outdoor patio). My meal was not fancy – a tuna melt with a side of sweet potato fries and a Diet Pepsi – but it just felt so good to be eating out with my family again! Afterwards, we drove the small, bucolic back roads of Tiverton, Rhode Island, admiring the lilacs, apple trees, dogwood, and ornamental cherry trees in bloom along the way, and stopping at the Emile Ruecker Audubon Refuge for a short hike. It made me think of our walk of about a year ago (all masked-up!) with my friend Corey at the Arnold Arboretum in Jamaica Plain to see the fabulous display of lilacs there. Hard to believe that it has been a year and we are *still* living within the confines of this pandemic, which feels to me like a kind of terrarium – a “world within a world.” It hasn't been so terrible for our family, we are all still getting along, and we are all healthy in our small world...but I wouldn't like to be confined to it *forever*.

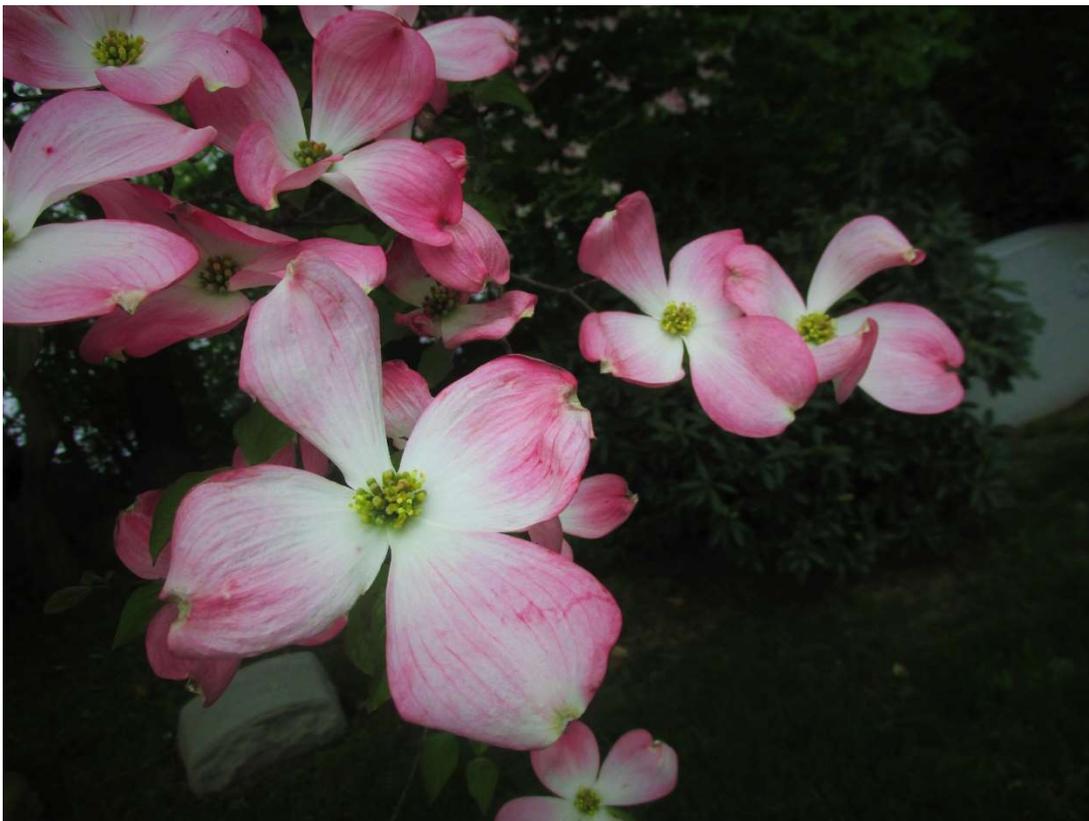
So, as I close this project as a form of communication with our congregational family, I do want to say an earnest *thank you* to all of you, our members, who have had patience and understanding as Mark and I have fumbled and “figured out” our way through this strange world of “virtual” services, meetings, and adult ed classes throughout this era. You have been supportive and faithful to our common cause during a difficult time. The difficult time is not over yet, but we have learned, together, how to do things differently – because we *had* to, and I trust that we will appreciate one another's *real* presence all the more when the blessed day comes that we can gather together again in person!

Thank you for hanging in there. Thank you for all the times you showed up virtually to sing, to pray, to learn, to discuss, to plan, to be a community with one another. In a time when “community” was a difficult thing to maintain.

If you have been a reader of these chronicles, thank you for reading. It has been enormously helpful to me to have had the task of writing them every week – helping me to stay sane, to have a sense of purpose, and to process all the truly

astonishing events we have been through. I began writing them for *you*, but anyone reading them could see how they became a lifeline for *me*, getting me through this pandemic.

But *dayyenu*. It is enough – it is time to say goodbye to this form of (one-way) communication. Surely we will be back together in person soon, and until that happy day, please keep “showing up” to our online services and classes, etc. And to all you mothers out there (and to my own, always residing within my heart), Happy Mother’s Day!



Pink dogwood in bloom at Swan Point Cemetery, Providence, RI.