

## Corona Chronicle

### Week Eleven

Wednesday, May 27

*Limnot yameinu ken hoda, v'navi l'vav chochmah.*

*Teach us to us number our days rightly, that we may obtain a heart of wisdom.* Psalm 90:12

Day 48 of *sefirat ha-Omer*. Tomorrow night we will have reached the beginning of the 50<sup>th</sup> day of our counting from Pesach, at sunset arriving at the festival of Shavuot, also known as the “Feast of Weeks.” Seven weeks from Pesach to Shavuot – and now we are up to week 11 of the coronavirus crisis (with an as-yet unforeseeable end), and thus I have been ruminating on the relationship between *counting* and *telling a story* – which is relevant to *reflecting on our lives*. I would like to explore some linguistic connections between these activities.

In English we have *count*, *recount*, and *account*. Also *chronicle* is related to the word for a type of counting (like *chronology*– an accounting of time), coming from the Greek *kronos*.

In Hebrew: the letters *samekh-peh-reish* are the root-letters for the words *l'sapper*, to tell a story; *lispor*, to count; *mispar*, a number; *sefer*, a book; *sofer*, a scribe; *sippur*, a story...but *l'sapper* can also mean to *cut hair* and *l'histaper* to get one's hair cut (with *sappar* being a barber or a hairdresser, and the word for *scissors* being *misparayim*)! Whether or not the connection between counting and telling a story (*recounting*), and getting one's hair cut – something we don't do during the seven weeks of counting the Omer (except for on Lag b'Omer) – is a coincidence I have no idea. But this year it seems significant, since those of us in states that are still not fully re-opened cannot go to a barbershop or hair salon (or a *book* store either, for that matter).

However, the first word of the quotation above, from Psalm 90, is from a different root altogether: *limnot* comes from *mem-nun-hey*, and is related to *manah*, a “portion”. Obviously, we have to *count* to *apportion* things – but the connection that I like here is to one's *portion in life*. One might understand this phrase, “my portion in life,” as signifying a kind of resignation or fatalism, but I think that the verse from the Psalm is exhorting us *take what control we humanly can take* of our

days – to value them, to search for wisdom throughout our lives, so that whatever span of days we have are rich and meaningful.

This is certainly a timely message for us all as we make our way through this corona-crisis period. Soon Shavuot will have come and gone, but we will still be counting...and, hopefully, obtaining “hearts of wisdom.”

I was thinking about all these connections this morning as I walked in the forest and around the Fall River Reservoir/North Watuppa Pond-area. Most days, I wait until the whole family can walk together. (Lev is still busy with his online high school classes during the day.) But occasionally I like to get up early and have a whole two hours or so to myself in nature, walking at my own naturally slow pace (good for photography), slow enough not to miss the many small new gifts that Mother Earth continually brings forth – such as the dizzying variety of blueberry/huckleberry plants with their varying blossoms. I never knew there were so many! Some of these bushes are large, some tiny. Some bear larger blossoms that are a kind of candle-wax white, but this morning I also saw small bushes with tiny pinkish-red blossoms. How many birds and other creatures will these bushes feed when these blossoms turn to berries!

It was about 6:30 as I walked down Wilson Road to the reservoir. I knew it was going to be a hot day, so I wanted to get out early. There was a morning fog that I suspected would soon burn off. As I walked down the very rough, pot-holed part of the road that leads to the pond, with the forest on either side of me, I felt blissful. Such intense, abundant green! There must be some programming in the human brain to make us love being surrounded by *green*, and also, to prompt us always to seek *water* – who doesn't love a “water view,” whether it be the ocean, a lake, a stream or a waterfall?

It was *quiet* – or rather, there was little *artificial* sound, so that I was able to luxuriate in the trills, tweets and long melodious phrases that rang so beautifully through the forest, which seems to have its own special reverberative qualities. I smiled to see a pair of yellow warblers chasing each other from tree to tree before I reached the causeway (separating the reservoir from a smaller swampier section of the pond), where I was treated to a fantastic display of blueberry-blossoms and also the flowers of another shrub whose blossoms looked like mountain laurel, but of a kind I had never seen before.

I wandered on to the end of Wilson Road where it meets up with Blossom and Bell Rock Roads. Right near this junction there is a trail with a greenish metal gate across its entrance. I had never walked down this path before, since it is posted with an orange restricted-area sign. But for some reason this morning I decided to investigate further – and much to my delight I discovered, further down this path, that while there are orange signs on the *left* side of the path, there are *yellow* signs on the *right* side, saying that in this area hiking is permitted!\*

At the beginning of July we will have been in Fall River for seven years...and only *now* I am discovering that I may use this path! It is like that dream where you discover an extra room in your house that somehow you never knew was there – how exciting! There were other trails branching off from this one, too...where do they all go? Not having a Bioreserve map with me, I decided not to branch off, and then eventually I turned around...but not before having spotted, for the first time ever that I can remember, a lady slipper growing wild on the forest floor! I have seen them in less natural settings, but this one took me by surprise – I felt so privileged to see this delicate flower here during what I imagined must be an evanescent life.

It turns out I was wrong. According to an article by Patricia J. Ruta McGhan on the website of the USDA/U.S. Forest Service, the pink lady slipper “takes many years to go from seed to mature plants.” She also writes that “pink lady slippers can live to be *twenty years old and more* [emphasis mine].” Of course she is referring to the *plant*, not the flower itself (but even *that* I learned from one source can last for up to a month). McGhan emphasizes that lady slippers are dependent on bees for reproduction, and describes how bees are “lured into the flower pouch through the front slit.” The bee gets tricked into going in there by the flower’s color and sweet smell, but, finding no “reward” within, has to squeeze out through a narrow exit, passing “under the stigma, so if it bears any pollen from a visit to another flower, it will be deposited before picking up a fresh load on the way out.”

([https://www.fs.fed.us/wildflowers/plant-of-the-week/cypripedium\\_acaule.shtml](https://www.fs.fed.us/wildflowers/plant-of-the-week/cypripedium_acaule.shtml))

As I beheld this marvel (and tried to get a good photograph), I had no idea about its tricky way with bees. I just felt so happy to be in this forest early in the morning (by this time the fog was burning off and the sun was streaming down through the forest canopy). I was becoming aware of how, sometimes, when I am in nature alone, the burden of self-consciousness, worry about whether I am “pulling my weight in the world,” whether I am successful in all the tasks I am hoping to accomplish these days – how all that drops from me. It is almost as if I myself

disappear – that is, that the *ego* disappears, and I am, as it were, “floating,” fluidly becoming part of the All with no distinctive self...it is so freeing, this not having to think about or worry over one’s *self* for at least a brief period! To be as free-from-sin and rightfully rooted in a particular place as a native flower or a tree, wholly “worthy” of its place in field or forest – what a wonder! Perhaps this is why the “righteous” are compared to *trees* in Jewish tradition:

*Tzaddik ka-tamar yifrach; ka-erez bal’vanon yisgeh.*

*The righteous shall blossom like the tamar (date-palm tree); like a cedar in Lebanon they shall thrive.* (Ps. 92, the “Song for Shabbat”)

Of course most commentators would point out that the likening of the righteous to a date palm has to do with the tree’s tall, upright posture (not to its lack of ego!). The cedars of Lebanon, on the other hand, are not always straight, but often bent, with branches that spread out to a wide circumference. These cedars are also very strong, and some are said to be over 2,000 years old, the oldest being quite huge... so I suppose the Psalmist might have been indicating that the lives of the righteous create a “ripple effect” – their deeds and their influence spreading out far beyond the individual’s life, and having an impact that might last for many generations.

This was certainly true for people like Abraham and Moses – and for our American heroes like Abraham Lincoln and the “black Moses” Harriet Tubman. I also think of my personal heroes, of how, for instance, Henry David Thoreau influenced John Muir, and how Muir started the Sierra Club and was instrumental in Teddy Roosevelt’s starting the National Park System in the United States, Muir also being an influence for the wilderness photographer Ansel Adams. Adams sent photographs of California’s Kings Canyon to Franklin Roosevelt to convince him to set aside that land to be a national park, and Adams was an influence as well on the film maker Ken Burns, who made the magnificent documentary series, *The National Parks: America’s Best Idea*.

In such a way the “branches” of our deeds and life-stories may spread out, reaching down through the generations, and across continents and even the globe. Thoreau’s essay “Civil Disobedience,” to toggle back towards social justice, impacted Ghandi’s, Mandela’s, and M.L.King’s campaigns of non-violence in three different continents during the century after he penned his words.

We must be connected both to human society *and* to nature, in order to protect both. Sometimes it is necessary to exert our will (yes, along with the ego) to do

good deeds for the sake of mercy or justice; and sometimes, for brief periods, we may be lucky enough to experience the egoless bliss of being like a tree, a rock, or a flower. I don't know what "good" this does for others, unless it is that it *roots* us in love to all living beings...but that is something, isn't it?



*Pink lady slipper in the Southeastern MA Bioreserve, Fall River*

\*The map of the Bioreserve indicates that this is "Mowry Path" but there is no signage at the trailhead.