

Corona Chronicle

Week Twelve

Monday, June 1st

No more counting of the Omer – Shavuot has passed. But the counting of lives taken by the coronavirus passed 100,000 last week.

And yet that is not even the headline at the top of the news these days. The death of George Floyd in Minneapolis last Thursday (May 25th) handcuffed, on the ground on his stomach beneath the knee of a police officer– and the large protests breaking out in cities across the United States with, sadly, a significant amount of violence and looting (more on that later) – this matter has become bigger news than the death of over 100,000 coronavirus victims.

What is going on? How do we process the events of this time we are living in?

Tuesday June 2nd

I began the above entry yesterday – feeling a pressing need to respond somehow to the events unfolding before our eyes – but took a break when I realized that it was time for our “family walk” (I try to make sure we all get enough exercise during this time when we still cannot go to the gym)...and did not get back to it when we returned at around 7:30 PM. After supper, Mark and I watched the news as one disturbing scene after another unfurled itself before us – not unlike the stories of Haman, Mordechai and Esther in a Megillah scroll!

The match that ignited this uprising, of course, was the deadly arrest-procedure of one Minneapolis police officer (along with his three colleagues who looked on while George Floyd was gasping his last breaths). I am put in mind of the Torah’s admonition, “*do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor*” (Lev. 19:16). But one death alone could not have sparked a whole nation to rise up in protest (and, disturbingly, too often, in flames) the way this one has done – not unless there was a whole lot of gasoline already spilled on our soil.

But of course there was. This morning in my email I received a message from an organization that reminded us of the names of some of (only the most well-known) black men and women who have died in the recent past at the hands of either “over-zealous” law enforcement officers, or of other white people who took the law “into their own hands.” Here is the list they sent me:

George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Michael Lorenzo Dean, Eric Reason, Christopher McCorvey, Christopher Whitfield, Atatiana Jefferson, Dominique Clayton, Pamela Turner, Botham Jean, Antwon Rose II, Stephon Clark, Ronell Foster, Aaron Bailey, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Sandra Bland, Freddie Gray, Philando Castile, Trayvon Martin, Jordan Davis, Ahmaud Arbery, and more.

But these names are just those floating at the top of the *sea* of “gasoline” that has been part and parcel of the making of America since the first Africans were brought here against their will to serve as slaves for the rest of their lives to white landowners. Yesterday, June 1st, marked the 99th anniversary of a historic event that I only recently became aware of: the Tulsa Race Massacre, which is summarized thus by its entry in Wikipedia:

The massacre began over Memorial Day weekend after 19-year-old Dick Rowland, a black shoeshiner, was accused of assaulting Sarah Page, the 17-year-old white elevator operator of the nearby Drexel Building. He was taken into custody. A subsequent gathering of angry local whites outside the courthouse where Rowland was being held, and the spread of rumors he had been lynched, alarmed the local black population, some of whom arrived at the courthouse armed. Shots were fired and twelve people were killed: ten white and two black. As news of these deaths spread throughout the city, mob violence exploded. White rioters rampaged through the black neighborhood [Greenwood] that night and morning killing men and burning and looting stores and homes, and only around noon the next day Oklahoma National Guard troops managed to get control of the situation by declaring martial law. About 10,000 black people were left homeless, and property damage amounted to more than \$1.5 million in real estate and \$750,000 in personal property (equivalent to \$32.25 million in 2019).

Many survivors left Tulsa. Black and white residents who stayed in the city were silent for decades about the terror, violence, and losses of this event. The massacre was largely omitted from local, state, and national histories.

In 1996, seventy-five years after the massacre, a bipartisan group in the state legislature authorized formation of the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921. Members were appointed to investigate events, interview survivors, hear testimony from the public, and prepare a report of events. There was an effort toward public education about these events through the process. The Commission's final report, published in 2001, said that the city had conspired with the mob of white citizens against black citizens; it recommended a program of reparations to survivors and their descendants. The state passed legislation to establish some scholarships for descendants of survivors, encourage economic development of Greenwood, and develop a memorial park in Tulsa to the massacre victims. The park was dedicated in 2010. In 2020, the massacre became part of the Oklahoma school curriculum. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tulsa_race_massacre)

So the reason that I am just hearing about this horrible event *now* is that it was hushed up; the perpetrators (or their descendants) understandably did not want to publicize their infamy, and the survivors were either too intimidated by what would happen to them if they “told,” or too traumatized by the idea of re-living the scene, even in memory, by recounting the tale.

Another element in this “sea” of gasoline that lay in wait for this recent match is the long legacy of white groups lynching black people – with impunity – in this country. According to the website of the NAACP, from 1882 to 1968, 3,446 black people were lynched in the United States, most of them in southern states, with an additional 1,297 white people joining their numbers, many of them “for helping the blacks or for being anti-lynching.” (cf. <https://www.naacp.org>)

Then there are also the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Malcolm X...you could even add Abraham Lincoln to this group, for his murderer, John Wilkes Booth, was reported to have killed the president over his plan to give voting rights to literate black men and all black veterans of the Civil War. Co-conspirators of Booth later told investigators that after Booth heard Lincoln’s proposal to do so in an address from the upper window of the White House to a crowd on the lawn below, Booth told them: “That means nigger citizenship...That's the last speech he'll ever give. By God, I'll put him through.”

There is so much more I could mention: Jim Crow laws, segregation in education and in the military...on and on, up to and including present-day voting-district gerrymandering and other tactics in some parts of the country to suppress or at least dilute the power of the black vote.

This litany makes my stomach clench in anger. It also makes me feel exhausted – and I am *white*!

But watching scenes of raging fires, billowing plumes of smoke, seeing smashed glass and looted stores, Macy’s boarded up with plywood in Herald Square in Manhattan, New York’s already-pandemic-altered streets become even more unrecognizable...I feel deeply disturbed. Who are the people doing this? Every reporter I have been hearing on the TV news remarks how peaceful these protests have been all around the country – *during the daylight hours*. But after dark the violence, looting, smashing and burning have begun. Many of the marchers who have been interviewed have said they *don’t know who these people are*. Why would anyone who wants to make the case that “black lives matter,” and who is against police brutality, resort to such behavior?

Some say that as long as it is just another peaceful protest, nothing will change – those in power will just return to the way things were as soon as the peaceful protests are over – that we have to send up a flare to get the nation’s attention, to show them that we will *not* tolerate returning to the status quo. But this morning there was news broken on NBC about a white supremacist group, “Identity Evropa,” that has tried to masquerade as an anti-fascist group (“Antifa”) online, sending out tweets to its followers to come join the protests – to loot, vandalize and

generally wreak havoc – presumably to either make the peaceful protesters look bad, or even possibly to provoke a “race war.”

This might explain how even the renowned Shaw 54th Regiment Memorial on Boston Common (honoring the first black regiment to fight for the Union in the Civil War and their white regiment commander – made famous in the film, *Glory*) was defaced on Sunday. Now why would anyone but *racist whites* attack this magnificent statue?

Add to all this the danger of the spread of the coronavirus, the unprecedented level of unemployment that the pandemic has brought on...what will happen when hurricane season begins again, which we are already being told to prepare for? How many crises can the American people withstand at once?

I should not dwell, perhaps, on such depressing, anxiety-producing events...but how does it help to stick one’s head in the sand? As a member of the clergy, especially, I feel it obligatory to pay attention, to recognize people’s fears and anxieties, to speak out about justice and injustice – not just for Jews, of course, but for all people in this nation and around the world – and even for the planet itself. For I firmly believe (along with almost all of the major environmental groups these days) that issues of racial, economic and social justice in our society and those of environmental stewardship go hand in hand.

Perhaps this is best illustrated by the words uttered by God to Cain after he murders his brother, Abel:

What have you done?! The voice of your brother’s blood cries out to me from the soil! (Gen. 4:10)

I read in the paper this morning that some residents of Boston and of other cities are going out each day now to sweep and clean the streets, to scrub graffiti off buildings and monuments that have been defaced – ordinary people, most of whom were not protesters, but who supported the protesters’ cause, and who were angered and sickened by the deeds of the looters and rioters.

I thank God for these people, and for those who brought free food and water - not only to their fellow protesters, but also to the police, for they could recognize that *most* police officers are indeed trying to live up to their job to *serve* the people, not to brutalize them.

Let us pray that through all this darkness, all this smoke and chaos and fear, a light may shine – a light leading us towards the only path forward for our nation: the path of recognizing our national sins, and of recognizing the full humanity of each

person in this country (whether citizen or not). It must be a path of humility, a path of healing, a path of generosity, a path of *love*.

A path of *hope*...



Tattapanum Trail, Watuppa Reservation, Fall River