

## Corona Chronicle

Week 13

Wednesday, June 10th

Yesterday the second funeral for George Floyd was held (this one in Houston, last week's in Minneapolis), and once again, broadcast on live television. I was quite struck with how, after all the many thousands (probably *hundreds* of thousands) of people who have flocked into the streets in protests over police brutality against people of color – protests which are really not just about treatment of people of color at the hands of the police, but rather about the injustice, racism and dehumanization of non-whites in this land for the past 400 years – I was struck with how this huge six-foot-six ex-football player had, via his brutal murder, been turned into a saint, even a kind of “redeemer.” The preachers and others speaking at his funeral kept talking about how, out of what looked like darkness and defeat (Floyd's death), came an opening, a miracle, a chance for reconciliation for this nation. They were comparing him to Jesus and his death on the cross, which (in the Christian view, of course) brought about the possibility for redemption for all of humanity.

Now Floyd, unlike the figure of Jesus depicted in the Gospels, had no idea in his mind that he was on a mission to “redeem humanity.” Floyd, rather, was simply coming out of a convenience store where he had gone to buy some menthol cigarettes, supposedly using a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill. (According to several news reports, there had been a rash of counterfeit bills in circulation in that Minneapolis neighborhood, and Floyd's best friend and roommate of four years said that “if Floyd did use a counterfeit bill, it was unintentional – he probably didn't know that the bill was fake.”) Floyd had been a regular customer at Cup Foods; it is really tragic that the cashier didn't just look at him and say, “Sir, do you realize that this is a fake bill?” – in other words, giving Floyd the benefit of the doubt that he would not knowingly commit this crime (in fact, if someone had passed on a fake bill to Floyd, he was the victim of this forgery crime, too). Sadly, the cashier “followed protocol” by calling the police after Floyd had turned away, and we know what happened next.

Why was this particular act of brutality towards a black man at the hands (or under the *knee*) of a police officer different from all the many others that have occurred up until now? Partly, it was because it was all caught on camera, in all its gruesomeness, in a way that excluded any plausibility about the officer being in

fear of his life. Partly, it was because the consciousness of the nation has been raised over the past few years in the wake of other similar deaths, and with the birth of the Black Lives Matter movement. Partly, it was because Floyd had a reputation in his neighborhood as a good man, a “gentle giant.” He was known as “Big Floyd.”

I wrote last week about how there had already been so many incidents of this nature, that this particular event just turned out to be the match thrown onto a sea of gasoline. Truly, George Floyd’s death sparked a conflagration and now we see a huge uprising across the nation – not just of people of color, but an uprising consisting of huge numbers of white people as well.

But why George Floyd? He did not walk knowingly towards his death as Martin Luther King did. King had received numerous death threats before he died, and had a premonition not long before he died that his life might soon be cut short. On April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1968, one day before his assassination on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel, King said in a speech to Memphis’ sanitation workers:

*We've got some difficult days ahead...But it really doesn't matter to me now, because I've been to the mountain top, and I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life - longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now.*

*I just want to do God's will. And he's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over and I've seen the Promised Land.*

*I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land.*

*And so I'm happy tonight; I'm not worried about anything; I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.*

Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Frederick Douglas, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman...these are all names of black Americans who acted heroically and spoke out to try to free their people. All of them knew that to do so was to court death. (Of this number, only two – King and Malcom X – were actually killed for their deeds.) And although we honor them all, the masses of people who have come out into the streets this time – people from across a rainbow spectrum with regard to skin color, and in cities and towns large and small all across this country, not just in the South or in the nation’s large cities like New York or Washington DC – this time feels different. Calls for police reform are reaching the halls of Congress. Police and even National Guard officers themselves have been seen “taking a

knee” along with protesters as a way of acknowledging that so much wrong has been done in the past, that there is a need for atonement.

What was it about George Floyd? His image is now painted on a shard of the Berlin Wall, in Bethlehem (on the security wall between Israel and the West Bank), in a mural in Belfast, on a wall in a blown-out building in Idlib (Syria), in the slums of Nairobi, Kenya – his words “I can’t breathe” painted across a wall in Montreal. Protests have arisen in over 90 countries, including Australia, New Zealand, Ghana, Japan, France, Germany, South Korea, and Israel (attended by many from the Ethiopian Jewish community, as well as by Jews of European and Sephardic descent).

As I meditated on the portrait of Floyd that sat prominently on the stage at his funeral, and viewed the video montage that was played along with the singing of a Gospel song, “My World Needs You right Now,” it came to me: this man was so large, so strong (he worked as a bouncer at a Minneapolis club) – seemed a tower of strength. But his face was gentle. *This* man should have been one that they could not subdue, one that they could not hold down. For his community, the downing of such a man, one who would never intentionally commit a crime, who only longed to *help* people (as he did with his volunteer activities for youth through sports) – he should have been indomitable. It feels doubly sad when one of a community’s “protectors” passes – and at the hands of a white officer who had a previous record of brutality, with three other officers looking on.

George Floyd, in his death, somehow strikes a chord of grief, outrage, and hope all over the world – and he is talked about as if he intentionally *sought* to be a human sacrifice to “redeem” not only his people, but all humanity, as we struggle with the sin of racism all over the globe. And yet that was not his intention at all. He only wanted a pack of cigarettes.

And perhaps that’s it. It is one thing for a person who knows they are going out to fight a battle, who knows that it requires heroism, who knows that they might die...but this phenomenon of being killed for being black while driving, jogging, sleeping, even just sitting on the couch watching TV in your own home...the “redeemer” had to be one of these. Not a “hero,” but a typical (if *large*) man – not on a heroic mission, but just doing an un-extraordinary thing that anyone ought to be able to do without getting killed...

George Floyd had no intimations of death, was not confronted with the knowledge of how dangerous it was for him to simply go into a store and come out until the

danger was upon him. *Floyd is representative* of minorities across the globe who are so often oppressed, brutalized, and even killed at the hands of the establishment in power, who don't think twice about their victim's rights, who think that they can continue to get away with lording it over those who have no voice.

George Floyd, who could barely get out the words "I can't breathe," and died calling for his "Mama," has given voice – a *powerful* voice – to such people across this nation and around the globe. They love him not because he was heroic, but because he was not trying to be a hero. He was just an ordinary black man. He was one of them.

Today I attended a joint Zoom meeting of the New England Board of Cantors and the Massachusetts Board of Rabbis. Sixty-two participants listened together to a talk by Rabbi Irving "Yitz" Greenberg (speaking to us from Jerusalem), addressing the specific challenges we have before us as Jewish religious leaders in this time of the coronavirus. The main thrust of Rabbi Greenberg's talk was that Judaism always prioritizes *chayyim*, life, above all – that God is always on the side of life... and yet in the case of George Floyd, it may have been his *death* that brought this nation, after 400 to years *finally* begin to do *t'shuvah* – to turn in repentance – for its long, knowing complicity as a society and culture embedded in racism. May God make this man's memory truly be for a blessing, may his death not be in vain!

So many uprisings throughout history have seemed miraculous, have whispered promise...but later were put down, or fizzled, or led up to an even worse, more oppressive power structure than the one that sparked the uprising...may it not be so for us now! And what will make the difference this time? Perhaps the fact that, in America at least, our population is quickly moving towards a majority minority population (which means that if you take all the various minorities and combine their numbers, they will outnumber the majority group – i.e. white people). Perhaps we are finally realizing that our nation cannot survive the practice of a "winner takes all" type of contest between our varying communities – that in fact as long as you have populations *competing* against one another, eventually *we will all lose*. Let us work together for justice, and for the health and well-being of all communities, cultures, and ethnicities in this nation. Only when we can fulfill the commandment to indeed *love our neighbors as ourselves*, only then will this nation truly flourish – not only in terms of our safety, our fulfillment, our health and our material well-being, but in terms of our *souls*.

The last line of *Aleinu* reverberates through my mind: *Ba-yom ha-hu, ba-yom ha-hu, yihyeh Adonai echad* – on that day will Adonai be One. May God, and all God's creatures, move ever more surely towards wholeness.



*Backyard peony blooming on the day of George Floyd's being laid to rest.*