

Monday and Tuesday of this week were, on the Jewish calendar, the two days of *Rosh Chodesh*, the new moon, of Tammuz. (The first of Tammuz was yesterday.) “Tammuz” was the name of an Assyrian god of fertility, grains, and grasses (seen especially as a deity for shepherds)...so exactly why do we have a month named after him on the Jewish calendar? Turns out that there is nothing esoteric about it – it just reflects the fact that the ancient Israelites lived in a wider world of other peoples, and they adopted the name for the month used by the Assyrians and Babylonians that spanned a summer period, usually covering parts of the months of June and July on our secular calendar. Both of these empires had at one point invaded and carried off large parts of the Israelite population into captivity, some of whose descendants eventually were allowed to return to Israel, but some of which were forever “lost.” In any case, it is not too different from most of the world today using a calendar with names that harken back to Roman deities.

Tammuz carries reverberations of sadness and trouble in the Jewish calendar – especially as we move into the second half of the month. Jewish tradition teaches us that the Sin of the Golden Calf (and Moses’ subsequent smashing of the first set of the tablets of the Ten Commandments) took place on the 17<sup>th</sup> of Tammuz, and Mishna Ta’anit 4:6 also asserts that this was the date on which the sacrificial system ceased to function in the First Temple (leading up to its destruction); the date on which the walls of Jerusalem were breached by the Roman army, and on which a Roman general named “Apostomos” burned a Torah scroll and set up an idol in the Second Temple.

Thus the 17<sup>th</sup> of Tammuz is traditionally observed as a minor fast day (meaning that the fast goes from just before sunrise to just after sunset, not a full 25-hour fast such as is observed on Yom Kippur or Tisha b’Av) – and the day marks the beginning of a period of semi-mourning (during which the pious avoid haircuts, shaving, and for the last nine days of that period the eating of meat). We do not hold weddings or other celebratory events during these three weeks, which lead up to the saddest day of the Jewish liturgical calendar, Tisha b’Av, when we mourn the destruction of both the First and Second Jerusalem Temples and the

concomitant suffering of the Israelites that attended those tragedies. (The period right *after* the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av, however, is a happy one, very popular period for weddings, and the *haftarot* during this period are all about God wanting to *comfort* the Jewish people.)

Well, so much for wishing everyone a Happy Tammuz! But we here in Massachusetts are beginning to feel just a little easier as the rate of confirmed coronavirus cases and of deaths has gone down dramatically since their spiking in April. Some restrictions are being lifted: last week I had my hair cut (holding a mask to my face when the stylist had to cut around my ears); restaurants are allowing people to dine at outdoor tables (I have not ventured this one yet); and families of graduating high school and college seniors have been trying, in whatever fashion they can, to celebrate their kids' accomplishments – even though it is so difficult to know what comes next.

And it has gotten hot and muggy! While some people welcome hot weather, I find my hiking-lust greatly diminished by it – so yesterday I drove up to Watson Pond State Park (in Taunton) and had a truly lovely first swim of the season halfway across the pond and back. The water was just a perfect temperature (refreshing but not cold), and since there are no lifeguards there now (due to the pandemic?), no one was there to blow a whistle at me as I slipped under the rope marking off the “swimming area” and headed out across a sparkling pond that I had virtually all to myself. I experienced such an “other-being” sense of freedom – by which I mean the feeling of having left terrestrial animal-body (and face mask!) behind to meld with the elements of water, sunlight, and air (and – unlike swimming in ocean or bay water – with no worry about sharks or giant jellyfish).

But of course such a reprieve is only temporary. Though our coronavirus numbers may be going down in Massachusetts, they are going *up* in many other states across the country, most of them places that have already moved into reopening gyms, spas, nail salons, even movie theaters (at 50% capacity), and many of them places where the governors will not mandate the wearing of face masks in indoor spaces where people are not able to social-distance

There is a real danger that many people will believe that all this concern about masks and social-distancing is overblown, even a “hoax” – that is, until someone in

their own family or social circle becomes infected. And perhaps even *that* will not convince them, just as many people have been impacted by an increasing amount of devastation from hurricanes, floods, tornadoes, and droughts, and wildfires – but still refuse to believe that climate change is real (or perhaps they accept that it is real, but deny that the burning of fossil fuels and mass deforestation has anything to do with it, that it is just part of some planetary “weather cycle” that we cannot do anything about).

Rachel Carson, in her groundbreaking work, *Silent Spring* (first published in 1962), wrote:

*We stand now where two roads diverge. But unlike the roads in Robert Frost's familiar poem, they are not equally fair. The road we have long been traveling is deceptively easy, a smooth superhighway on which we progress with great speed, but at its end lies disaster. The other fork of the road — the one less traveled by — offers our last, our only chance to reach a destination that assures the preservation of the earth.*

Scientists are now telling us that the rate of deforestation in the world is not only unsustainable, but that it will lead to more and more of these “zoonotic” diseases (which pass from animals to humans) as we encroach on the territory previously inhabited by creatures who for the most part did not come into contact with humans. The message is: not only do wild creatures need wilderness – but *humans need wilderness to stay wild in order for humans to survive.*

I have had sitting on my desk for a week now the transcript from a report from the PBS News Hour broadcast on May 29<sup>th</sup>, 2014 (over six years ago!). Its title reads: “Humans increased species extinction rate by 1,000 times, new study says.” The report relies on a study published in the journal *Science*, in which “lead author and biologist Stuart Pimm of Duke University and colleagues calculated a ‘death rate’ of species going extinct each year out of one million. On a pre-human earth, the death rate was 0.1, but [now] that number [has] spiked to between 100 to 1,000”:

*The main reason is attributed to habitat loss, as animals are left without places to live as areas around the planet are being taken over and changed by human presence. With the added pressure of invasive species and climate change, the study writes, species are vanishing faster.*

What this 2014 report did not anticipate is that some species might not vanish, but instead cross over into our human realm, and, without meaning to do so, bring with

them diseases that attack the human creatures who are taking away their living-space.

But the solution is not for us to kill these creatures (in the case of coronavirus, *bats* – which are vitally important animals to our planet). The solution is for us humans to use our technology to learn how to live within smaller spaces on our planet, to lighten our footprint, to work to restore ecosystems that we have already devastated, and to protect ones that are still intact. This will produce an end that is better *both for those wild creatures and for us*.

Not that this “road,” as Rachel Carson calls it (the one “less traveled by”) is *easy*. But is suffering through a pandemic, wildfires, floods, life-shortening air pollution, etc. easy? No, it is heartbreaking.

And it is maddening how shortsighted our so-called “advanced” society can be. As long as we keep exploiting the earth with no heed to the consequences, leaving our soil, waters, forests and mineral-rich areas devastated, depleted, polluted with toxic wastes – we will keep passing on this heartbreak from generation to generation. *Unless...* a new generation rises up that has finally learned to operate on the principle of *prioritizing the health of the planet and its future over the greed for short-term gain* – otherwise, we human creatures will have engineered our own demise. Then whatever other creatures are still left can have the earth back again; they can start over. Without us.

I do have hope, though. I remember in the 60’s and 70’s swimming in waters that were far more polluted than the pond I swam in yesterday. And though I fear the great white shark (we are planning a vacation on the Cape!) I know that its return to our waters in New England is a sign of the greater health of the ocean there (due to limits on fishing, which has permitted the rebounding of the seal population, and its predator, the shark).

So it may be that I must either accept the risk of swimming in a healthy ocean that includes sharks, or just take walks on the beach and stick to freshwater ponds for my laps. (I’ll take the latter.) We humans cannot control everything. But if we want to be here on this planet for many for millennia, we had best learn to respect all the other forms of life here, to back away if need be, and give other creatures the space they need to carry on their own lives in good health.

At the end of a day on which I just heard (on the late night news) that the U.S. has reached its greatest single-day increase in coronavirus cases yet (a count of 36,000 for this one day!), I pray for good health for *all* of God's creatures.



*Rabbi Mark (tiny white dot in the background) walking at Cape Cod National Seashore, 2017.*