

Corona Chronicle

Week 23

Thursday, Aug. 20

Rosh Chodesh Elul

Today is the first day of Elul, the last month before the Jewish New Year. Because this month is seen as a time of preparation for our season of repentance and spiritual renewal, the rabbis of the Talmudic era took advantage of the letters comprising the Hebrew word *Elul* – *alef*, *lamed*, *vav* (which can make a “v”-sound, but more often represents an “o” or a “u”-vowel sound), *lamed* – and taught that the name of this month is an acronym for the words from the biblical Song of Songs, *ani l’dodi, v’dodi li*, meaning *I am my Beloved’s and my Beloved is mine*.

The feeling that the rabbis were trying to instill with this alphabet (or *alef-bet*)-play is that our relationship to God, to our soul, to our spiritual and ethical life, should best be approached not as a relationship of fear, or of “accounting,” so much as a relationship of *love*.

But love of God, or understanding that you are loved *by* God, does not mean that that our relationship with God is all rainbows, hearts and puppy dogs. God wants us to love with *all our hearts*, with *all our souls*, and with *all our might* – and to love our neighbor as ourselves! This is a pretty exacting task; it can bring joy, satisfaction and tenderness; but it can also demand a fierce passion for justice and strenuous efforts to repair the broken aspects of our society and of our world. It is a task that is supposed to consume our whole lives. It is what we were all made for.

You might rightly ask *why? Why* did God create us, why would God need creatures to exhaust themselves in loving God and each other (and, I would add, the rest of God’s creation as well)...and I can only answer: I have no idea. I can project human qualities onto God and say that just as God says in Genesis 2:18, “it is not good for the human to be alone,” God also did not want to be alone. God was lonely...but I know that I am speaking in metaphor, or perhaps parable. In so doing, I am not really talking about *God*, since I cannot possibly fathom God’s essence. I am talking about the *way I relate* to God. The rabbis taught that the Torah speaks “in human language.” It is the only way we can speak. We cannot really fathom God. But somehow, billions of people the world over experience themselves as having a *relationship* with this unfathomable reality.

What do I know? Not much, in the grand scheme of creation, existence, and reality. But I know that those two commandments, of loving God, and loving our

neighbor, have helped to make human existence in this world a more meaningful, life-affirming, hospitable experience than it would have been without them. While it is true that, historically, some people have used the excuse of “loving God” to make religious war on their neighbors, or even claim that the highest form of “love” for their neighbor demands that they try to convert their neighbor to their specific form of religion (perhaps even stealing their children to save their souls, or threatening people with burning at the stake if they will not convert) – this is obviously a gross perversion of the notion of “love.”

So how does one know what the true meaning of *love* is when it comes to one’s neighbor – i.e. one’s fellow human beings? You can argue that “Well, since I believe that there is only one way to heaven, if I had not found it, I would want my neighbor to do whatever it would take to show me the way...”. We all know where *that* leads. Perhaps that is why Hillel brought the maxim down to earth by teaching: *Whatever is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor.*

Of course *love* surely must mean more than “live and let live.” But that, at least, is a good starting point. It is too big a topic to deal with exhaustively here – although, upon reflection, it occurs to me that it is highly relevant to our coronavirus era: if it is hateful to me to have to wear a mask, why should I ask my neighbor to wear one? The answer: because getting sick or dying from the virus is *much worse* than the temporary discomfort of wearing a mask. I don’t want to die before my time, therefore, I should not let myself be the cause of my neighbors dying before their time.

This principle is at the core of both Judaism and Christianity. Jesus called these two commandments, the “two great commandments.” How then, one wonders, did we get so off-track?

As anyone reading these pages surely knows by now, I was born (and raised) in southern Virginia, just a few hours, as it were, past the “Jim Crow” era as far as the law went, and still well within that era in many other respects. I was always angered by the most obvious forms of racism (hearing other kids call someone by the “n” word, or shunning someone because of the color of their skin); and made to feel uncomfortable by the “genteel” forms (seeing that all of the maids in my grandparents’ and other white family’s houses were black, and that they were always called by their first names – while we never called other grownups by their first names). These are just two examples. But strangely enough, I have no memory of when I first learned that there had once been such a thing as slavery,

and these black people around us now were likely descendants of other black people who had been slaves – perhaps even owned by some of my own ancestors. Why do I not remember that? Was I not shocked?

I think I was in fourth grade when we took a school field trip to Colonial Williamsburg – where I had already been many times with my mother and/or grandmothers. There was something about the “old-fashioned times” that I loved: it was exciting to see all the period re-enactors working in the historic buildings in their period costumes, to walk through the streets where you might see a wagon pulled by horses (I loved horses) or oxen, but never see a car. I loved the beauty of the restored colonial buildings, buying gingerbread in the “colonial” bakery, playing goofily with my brothers at the “stocks” where townspeople were punished for various offenses.

That would have been *before* fourth grade. Why can I not remember when I first learned that some white people had kept Africans (and later, African-Americans) as enslaved people, thinking that they “owned” them? Was it because I saw period re-enactors dressed up as “slaves” in Williamsburg at a young age that I never experienced a “shock” of learning about slavery? Or was it because I grew up in such a stratified society, where white and black did not meet except in a hierarchical way (the black man shines the white man’s shoes) that it did not surprise me to learn how this hierarchy got started?

Why do I ask all these questions? Because I think it is instructive for understanding how something as obviously, egregiously wrong as slavery could have been tolerated for over half of our nation’s history – in a nation that has previously thought of itself as (and is still thought to be, by many) a “Christian” nation. And I should add that there were some Jews who participated in the slave-based economy, too, both as “owners” and as traders – so we are not completely off the hook.

Did I ask myself, as a young girl, how could my fairly pious Presbyterian grandmother justify treating Marie and Viola (I never knew their last names) as “lesser” human beings, seeing them cook and clean and launder for her for low wages? My mom and I sometimes gave them a ride home at the end of our visit (so they did not have to take the bus); I could see the poverty and shabbiness of their neighborhood, while my grandmother lived in luxury – and yet somehow she seemed to think she was “better” than them. Did I see this as a contradiction to the commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself?”

I don't know. But I remember that when we would come over to Grandma and Granddaddy Brown's house, I usually preferred to go in through the kitchen door, where I could greet Marie or Viola first, before my grandmother. They would always give me an effusive hug (and they often smelled of something delicious) – while my grandmother, who wanted me to come in the main door, would give me a polite peck on the cheek. The black women (and for a time, a black handyman/chauffeur, George, whom I especially loved) who worked for my grandparents were warm, effusive, soulful. My grandmother and grandfather Brown were prim, proper, and cold, and often found things to disapprove of.

So it wasn't so much a matter of my doing any theological or philosophical thinking. I just saw that the white so-called "Christian" culture that was all around me in the South, especially among the middle- to upper-middle class, was sterile and hypocritical. These folks like my grandparents on my father's side looked down on people who were in reality (at least from my perspective) so far above them in the ways that really mattered – that is to say, in the matters of the *soul*.

How did it happen? It has to do with the agrarian economy of the South, with its labor-intensive commodity-crops (cotton, tobacco, rice, and sugar) that brought a few great wealth, and the necessity (from the plantation owners' point of view) of having this labor done by people who they saw as being able to withstand great heat and other brutal conditions – at the least possible cost to themselves. It was about greed, and the ability of enough of the white population to silence their consciences to let these people who were "not like them" toil and suffer for them. Early on, according to the book I am now reading – Isabel Wilkerson's *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* – the European colonists told themselves that these Africans were not Christians, so somehow, they did not have to be treated according to the dictates of Christianity. But later, as more Africans began to embrace Christianity, most white Southerners would still not let themselves regard them as fully human (even in our Constitution, each of these captive people only counted as "3/5 of a man").

And now...we as a nation are still in need of a great "soul-reckoning" (a term we use during this Elul season, in Hebrew *cheshbon ha-nefesh*). It is a long process that was not nearly finished during the 1960's Civil Rights era; nor can you say the process was completed just because we had an African-American president for eight years. But to return to my earlier point about *love* rather than fear or "accounting" as being the most important element in one's relationship with God, I think that this also is the most powerful force one can both draw on and manifest

for use in transforming the world for better. If we who see ourselves as fighting for a more just world are defined by what (and *who*) we *hate*, and get caught up with our own guilt, perhaps even starting to hate ourselves, we will never have the love that it takes to build a world of joy, a world of beauty, a world of hope and promise for the next generation.

This thought was better articulated 53 years ago by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr:

And I say to you, I have also decided to stick with love, for I know that love is ultimately the only answer to humankind's problems. And I'm going to talk about it everywhere I go. I know it isn't popular to talk about it in some circles today. And I'm not talking about emotional bosh when I talk about love; I'm talking about a strong, demanding love. For I have seen too much hate. [...] and I say to myself that hate is too great a burden to bear. I have decided to love. If you are seeking the highest good, I think you can find it through love. And the beautiful thing is that we aren't moving wrong when we do it, because John [the New Testament writer] was right, God is love. He who hates does not know God, but he who loves has the key that unlocks the door to the meaning of ultimate reality. (From King's sermon "Where Do We Go from Here?" delivered on August 16th, 1967 at the annual convention of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in Atlanta.)



Met while walking: our Cambodian Buddhist-monk neighbors on Highland Ave, beautifying the neighborhood.