

Corona Chronicle

Week 27

Sunday, Sept. 13th

Normally, I do not begin chronicling the week until at least Tuesday, or more likely Wednesday – in order to have it ready by Friday. But this coming Friday evening is Erev Rosh haShanah, and I expect to be quite busy this week in preparation, so I thought I had better put my words down for the record today.

Also, I failed to mark last week how catastrophic the wildfires have become all up and down the West Coast – from Mexico to Washington State. It is truly an apocalyptic scenario! In the state of Oregon, 10% of the population is under evacuation orders...in this time of the coronavirus (and even if this were a “normal” time) *where does everyone go?* I have heard that there are some convention centers being prepared to house people...but what about those who cannot be moved easily, due to medical conditions, what about pets and larger animals (horses, livestock)? What if the fires come all the way to the coast...will everyone have to evacuate to the Pacific Ocean?

In California over 3 million acres have burned, decimating thousands of homes, whole neighborhoods (this is true of Oregon as well). I talked to my dear friend, Tsvi in the San Francisco Bay area (he and his wife live in Berkeley), and he told me that although so far they are okay, the outdoors the other day was like “nuclear winter”; the ash from the fires east of them had so darkened the sky that it was as if the sun had only partially risen. They had to stay inside with the lights on all day, and with the windows closed against the smoke. Fortunately, the sun’s having lost its power to pierce the smoke, combined with the famous bay-area fog, brought the temperature down to the fifties, so people who don’t have air-conditioning (as many in the area don’t) were *able* to keep their windows closed.

Point Reyes National Seashore Park, the village within it (Point Reyes Station), and the adjacent neighborhood where Mark and I rented a cottage last summer for about 10 days, Inverness Park, have all been impacted by the “Woodward Fire” which began near the end of August – the park has been closed and the neighborhood has been evacuated. (I just checked the Facebook page of our host there, who hasn’t posted anything except a few words about “this eternal dusk”... probably he is in transit.)

Where will everyone go? And where will the wildlife go? Of course fire is a *natural* phenomenon (many of these fires, though not all, were initially caused by lightning), and as we have all heard many times, *necessary* for certain trees (especially redwoods and sequoias) to propagate (their cones only opening to release seeds under intense heat). And Tsvi said to me the other day, they are used to the normal “fire season.” But *this* is something else. At this point, according to a *New York Times* article I read on Friday, these wildfires raging throughout California constitute “a modern record and nearly 20 times what had burned last year.” I cannot imagine that any of the land-based wildlife (that is, the creatures that cannot fly or breathe underwater) can survive something this intense, this abnormal.

Can there still be *anyone* who denies that our planet is heating up? Just yesterday I read a *New York Times* article (dated 9/8, by Coral Davenport and [Jeanna Smialek](#)) on the “first wide-ranging federal government study focused on the specific impacts of climate change on Wall Street.” The advisory panel which drafted the report was actually conducted by Trump administration appointees (two Republicans and one Democrat), who wanted to project the impact that a warming planet would have on our financial markets:

A report commissioned by federal regulators overseeing the nation’s commodities markets has concluded that climate change threatens U.S. financial markets, as the costs of wildfires, storms, droughts and floods spread through insurance and mortgage markets, pension funds and other financial institutions.

“A world wracked by frequent and devastating shocks from climate change cannot sustain the fundamental conditions supporting our financial system,” concluded the report, “Managing Climate Risk in the Financial System,” which was requested last year by the Commodity Futures Trading Commission and set for release on Wednesday morning.

It has long been known by those who follow the news on climate change, global warming, and the earth’s rising sea-level, that even while the oil corporations and the federal government were officially *denying* the reality of climate change (or at least calling it “uncertain”), nonetheless the U.S. military was *making changes in the infrastructure* of their bases that could be impacted by melting ice-packs, more intense storms, and rising seas (going back at least to 2015). Meanwhile, some oil corporations were busy *raising the height of their offshore oil rigs* as far back as 1997, while publicly declaring that the “science of climate change is too uncertain to mandate a plan of action that could plunge economies into turmoil” (see Amy Liebermann and Susanne Rust, “Big Oil braced for global warming while it fought regulations,” Dec. 31, 2015, *Los Angeles Times* - <https://graphics.latimes.com/oil-operations/>). If they had not believed that the seas would rise, would they have

invested money in changing their infrastructure? Likewise, as one of the authorities quoted in the Davenport/Smialek article on the federal report just released this week, Douglas Holtz-Eakin, president of the American Action Forum (a conservative research organization) noted, “If you’re denying this exists, you don’t ask for a report on it.”

The federal authorities know. The heads of oil corporations have known it for decades. It does seem at this point that there are few true outright climate-change deniers left. There may still be those who say that the future is “uncertain” (of course that is always true!); and some who continue to say “well, the planet may be warming, but who says that it’s caused by human activities?” (in other words, arguing there is not enough data to justify our trying to limit the burning of fossil fuels)...and then there are those, who, like one official also quoted in the Davenport/Smialek article admit that climate change is a real danger, but nevertheless, worry that

“transition risks’ of a green economy could be just as disruptive to our financial system as the possible physical manifestations of climate change, and that moving too fast, too soon could be just as disorderly as doing too little, too late.”

Is it even possible to “move too fast” – now that we are seeing what we are seeing? Can we move fast enough to beat these wildfires, to save our citizens (and people around the globe) from financial ruin or even famines caused by drought – or by typhoons, hurricanes and other forms of extreme weather?

This past year there were severe infestations of locusts in parts of Africa, the Middle East, and Southwest Asia. According to one National Public Radio report:

The swarms are gargantuan masses of tens of billions of flying bugs. They range anywhere from a square third of a mile to 100 square miles or more, with 40 million to 80 million locusts packed in half a square mile. They bulldoze pasturelands in dark clouds the size of football fields and small cities. In northern Kenya...one swarm was reported to be 25 miles long by 37 miles wide — it would blanket the city of Paris 24 times over.

Experts say the upsurge is likely to be tied to extreme weather events: *According to Cressman [the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization's senior locust forecasting officer], powerful cyclones in 2018 dumped water in Oman, Yemen and the Horn of Africa. The wet conditions have persisted, creating ideal bug breeding conditions.*

(cf: <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2020/06/14/876002404/locusts-are-a-plague-of-biblical-scope-in-2020-why-and-what-are-they-exactly>)

I never stepped foot in California until my mid-thirties, and then only for an academic conference held in San Francisco. I did make one trip outside the city on that visit – to the Muir redwood forest just north of the Golden Gate Bridge. It was

the week before Thanksgiving, not a popular tourist time for the forest, and it was wonderful that my first visit to that natural “temple” was so quiet. My daughter, only three at the time, was with us (her dad and I were there together), and she had fallen asleep in the rental car. I remember us pushing her in her stroller along the boardwalk-paths in the Muir Woods, and it being so quiet that she never woke up the whole time!

Since 2011, I have been to California numerous times – once for a Jewish professional conference combined with a family trip down the coast from the Bay Area to San Simeon, and then across the state to behold the splendor of Yosemite. I have been twice for mother-daughter trips with Mira, in addition to being there for her wedding. (I am greatly relieved to note that she no longer lives there, since she has chronic asthma; I don’t think she could take the current smoke-filled air.) And then, just last summer (2019), Mark and I were there with Lev. Lev attended a computer-tech camp at Berkeley for a week while Mark and I explored the Bay area, wine country, the northern coastal redwood area, then drove down the coast to stay at the cottage in Point Reyes, where Lev later joined us. This was my second time in Point Reyes: on one of those mother-daughter trips, Mira and I stayed in a hostel in Point Reyes for two nights; it was my first introduction to this magical peninsula, a place that struck me as Eden-like in its beauty, temperate weather, and fruitfulness.

I just looked up the Point Reyes National Seashore Park to see whether they had suffered much damage from the wildfires, and I am happy to report that the Woodward Fire is, according to the park’s website, “95% out.” As serendipity would have it, it turns out that **today**, precisely, according to the park’s Facebook page, is the 58th anniversary of its having been established. They write:

Happy 58th Birthday Point Reyes National Seashore!! On September 13, 1962, President John F. Kennedy signed into law the establishment of Point Reyes National Seashore. It is a unit of the National Park Service but the only National Seashore on the Pacific Coast!

Alas, it is difficult to feel celebratory under the circumstances.

Monday, Sept. 14th

Having just re-read what I wrote above, and in addition, an article in this morning’s *New York Times* on the history of the steady, purposeful reversal by the current federal administration on so many environmental regulations that had been put in place by previous administrations, I feel that I am just holding my finger in

the dyke of despair. And if I feel this way, how do the millions of people on the West Coast feel?

The cry that has rung out over and over again this summer rings out for our fellow citizens on the West Coast even more truly: ***I can't breathe!***

Thus I approach Rosh HaShanah, the opening of the New Year, with grief, with frustration, with anger...but also with passion, with resolve, and somehow, inextinguishably, with hope. We do have an important election coming up; I can hope against hope that all Americans who have been paying attention to these wildfires, to the higher temperatures, to the droughts, to the floods and to extreme storms across the nation...and to the almost 200,000 lives lost thus far to the coronavirus *in this nation alone* will not despair that their votes can make a difference.

This past Shabbat's Torah portion held that wonderful exhortation,

*See, I set before you today... life and death, blessing and curse.
Now **choose life**, so that you and your children may live!*

Wishing all who read these words (and also all who don't!) a New Year full of life and blessing, beauty, vitality, love, joy, friendship, kindness, and purpose.
L'shanah tovah u'metukah!

