

Corona Chronicle

Week 28

Tuesday, September 22nd

Autumnal Equinox

Today the United States has passed the number of 200,000 in coronavirus fatalities.

In addition to the sad and grim news above, there is so much more that is blazing across our headlines today: more wildfires; floods; questions about whether Facebook is trying hard enough to quell the use of its platform by QAnon conspiracists and militia movements calling for armed conflict in the streets of American cities; evidence of the Center for Disease Control bending to political pressure to alter scientifically-sound advice on its website, weakening its guidance on precautions to take to resist the coronavirus.

But first, I will report the domestic, close-to-home news: that our first live-streamed online Rosh HaShanah services went very smoothly, and from all reports thus far, it seems they were well-received. It was strange from the clergy-side of things to pack it all into two hours (the Torah, while it *was* taken out of the ark, was never actually opened or read, which seemed to me like that part of the movie *The Princess Bride* where the princess was “married” in a rushed wedding where the bride never said “I do”)...but due to the pandemic, it had to be done. As we recently read in the Torah portion *Nitzavim*, above all we must *choose life*.

Since Mark and I do not turn on the TV or radio during Shabbat or *yom tov* (in this pandemic-period, we use the computer for Zoom services, but for that purpose only), it was only at the end of the service on the first day of Rosh HaShanah that we heard that Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg had passed away the evening before - right at the beginning of Erev Rosh HaShanah. As I read just now in *U.S. News and World Report*, National Public Radio’s Nina Totenberg (a close friend of Ginsburg’s), tweeted about this barrier-breaking woman the next day:

A Jewish teaching says those who die just before the Jewish new year are the ones God has held back until the last moment bc they were needed most & were the most righteous. And so it was that [#RBG](#) died as the sun was setting last night marking the beginning of RoshHaShanah.

It is a great shame that we cannot pause as a nation to simply mourn and honor Justice Ginsburg the way we did the late Congressman John Lewis. Instead, the political battle as to whether the President and the Senate Republicans will begin a nomination process for her replacement on the Supreme Court began almost instantaneously – and of course this will be a bitter fight. Despite many of these

same Republican senators' pronouncements about the inappropriateness of nominating a new Supreme Court justice during a presidential election year back in 2016, they cannot resist the lure of wanting to get one more conservative judge on the court while they still have a Republican president. Democrats of course cry "foul," and "hypocrite," but there is little that they can do to stop this process, since this is really a question of which party holds the Senate majority – the question of "appropriateness" will have little to do with what happens. Since I am trying to keep these "chronicles" partisan-free, I will not get caught up in the thorns of this debate here. But it all underlines what a tinder-box our nation's political life is these days, which, although it may make this period of history an interesting one to study someday in the future, makes it a tough one to live through now.

Just this morning in the *New York Times* I read an article by Nellie Bowles ("Protesters Pressure Bystanders to Choose a Side") that actually upset me more than the death of Justice Ginsburg: it was about the phenomenon of some faction of the racial-justice protest movement taking their protests up a notch towards bullying or threatening quiet Portland neighborhoods. It begins with the instance of a black man, Terrance Moses, who

...was watching protesters against police brutality march down his quiet residential street one recent evening when some in the group of a few hundred suddenly stopped and started yelling.

Mr. Moses was initially not sure what the protesters were upset about, but as he got closer, he saw it: His neighbors had an American flag on display.

"It went from a peaceful march, calling out the names, to all of a sudden, bang, 'How dare you fly the American flag?'" said Mr. Moses, who is Black and runs a nonprofit group in the Portland, Ore., area. "They said take it down. They wouldn't leave. They said they're going to come back and burn the house down."

Bowles goes on to report that

...the marches in Portland are increasingly moving to residential and largely white neighborhoods, where demonstrators with bullhorns shout for people to come 'out of your house and into the street' and demonstrate support... But the tactics are dividing supporters of Black Lives Matter, with some worried that the confrontational approach will antagonize people who would otherwise be receptive to the message, or play into conservatives' critique of the protests, which have been largely nonviolent nationally.

No kidding. This turn by some of the BLM demonstrators, however small their number, just might devastate their support by the wider American population. It is worth noting that, according to Bowles' report,

Some residents in Portland say the tactics are escalating as the protests become increasingly dominated by white people, including anarchists and supporters of antifa, the diffuse collection of militant left-wing activists that has a strong presence in the region.

As the saying goes, “with friends like this, who needs enemies?”

I was recently cleaning out a container on my desk, looking for a small but important item (which I did not find), and while looking, I found the pin that was supplied to many of us by the Boston ADL during the vigil at the Fall River Hebrew Cemetery in 2018. It now sits immediately below my computer monitor as I type. It is black with white letters, and states simply: “NO place for HATE.”

Oy vey! If only, at a minimum, we could stop *hating* one another; and then, perhaps the next step could be to start treating one another with *politeness* – despite the fact that we may disagree about some very important things.

But of course this attitude would have to be adopted by *both* sides of our divide. These two steps may sound small, but actually they would be huge. If people could stamp out all hate in their hearts, the fight against racism would be practically won. If everyone (including police and even the most ardent protesters) tried to be *polite* – even if they could not find it in their hearts to actually *respect* those with whom they disagreed – there would be no more police brutality, and no more use of violence by those exercising their right to free speech and freedom of assembly.

The next step would be for people to *really try to listen to and understand one another*. This is surely much harder. If, for example, a person’s belief about what our government’s policies should be are based on a religious value or teaching that I do not share (let’s say, that sexual relations between two men is an “abomination,” as is taught in several sacred texts, including the Torah, the New Testament and the Koran) – how can I have a reasoned conversation with someone who feels that this is what God wants and that it is their duty to obey? If, when I speak, they consider that I am a mouthpiece of Satan, tempting them to turn from the truth...what then?

Of course most of the time this is not the case. People want things to be a certain way for all kinds of reasons, probably mostly unexamined (but perhaps I am wrong about this). Sometimes it stems from fear. And on both the right and the left, there are things to be afraid of. The left fears a government that will roll back racial and sexual justice, toss civil liberties to the wind, and allow industries to exploit workers and pollute our environment with impunity. The right fears a breakdown in civil order, a creeping loss of national identity and national pride, the destruction

of the traditional nuclear family, and our nation's being overwhelmed by so many immigrants and refugees (who might take their jobs at lower wages) that we will just be at a breaking-point as a nation – no longer speaking the same language, sharing a common heritage, caring about the same holidays...in short, that America will not be “America” anymore.

If only people on both sides of the divide could actually have deep-listening conversations with one another! I can imagine a white construction worker in West Virginia, for example, earnestly explaining to a would-be immigrant from, say Honduras, that he is having such a hard time surviving economically, and that his region's public schools are struggling (because their tax-base is so low) – even if he can empathize with the dangerous conditions in Honduras, and why this person would flee that state – nevertheless, he just can't cope with being responsible for all the problems in the world. Why should his school district have to pay to teach English as a Second Language-courses, and deal with the immigrants' social welfare and health problems? Why can't Honduras get their own house in order?

And what might the would-be Honduran immigrant say in return? (Let's imagine that she is a woman with two children.) She might say (through her translator), “I understand, but didn't your ancestors come from Ireland? Do you understand why they came here? Do you know that they felt oppressed by their overlords just as I do in Honduras, and that they wanted to give their children a chance to live, rather than die by famine?”

He might say, “Well, at least they spoke English!”

She might say, “I understand that it is important to speak English in America, and I am trying to learn it – and I am sure that my children, if we are allowed to stay here, will be very good English-speakers. My people are hard workers. I know that you are worried about losing jobs to immigrants. But did you know that many American farmers cannot get enough workers to bring in their crops because recently the numbers of immigrants allowed in the country has gone down so much? We are doing jobs that white Americans do not want to do! We will help make your country stronger, just as your ancestors from Ireland once did.”

Well, this is just an imagined scenario of how it might go. I'm sure that a conversation between an evangelical from the Deep South and a very out-of-the closet drag queen from San Francisco would be more difficult. But even here, both

parties can relate to the desire for love and meaning in their lives, even if they find it in different places.

The point is, America is/has been unique in the world for being founded not on the basis of one particular ethnicity, religion, or cultural heritage. Even leaving the indigenous inhabitants out of the equation (which the colonists did indeed do most of the time), the English colonists who settled Jamestown were loyal Church of England subjects in full support of their English king, while the Massachusetts Bay Pilgrims were in rebellion from both the English Church and the Crown. They may have spoken the same language, but their values and brands of Christianity were quite different. And those who settled the Rhode Island Colony under Roger Williams had yet another ideology – namely, the one that allowed America to come into being the way we know it, as a country with religious liberty and separation of church and state. This is what allowed this land to become a haven for Jews, for example, along with other religious minorities such as Quakers and Baptists.

I seem to have strayed far from my idea of *if only we could listen to one another!* But not really. The glue that eventually held all these disparate groups together was “live and let live.” There was a tacit agreement that you can be different from me – as long as your (or my) way of being does not do harm to others. Of course this can be rather slippery: if I am a school teacher, and I teach your child a version of American history that you do not want them to know about (or that you think is untrue) – am I harming your child?

I have a headache thinking about all this! It seems that there will never wholly be an end to the walls between the different “factions” in this country. But I dearly hope that we can learn to live together in spite of some differences that will never be resolved. I remember my political philosophy professor at Smith, Dr. Leo Weinstein, who used to say that the strength of the U.S. Constitution lay in its “creative ambiguity.” There is indeed a significant amount of ambiguity about what America stands for. The question is: can we take this ambiguity and be “creative” with it? Can we utilize it to allow more people more freedom to live and prosper? Or will we devour one another arguing about *whose* country this is, whether it was intended to be a “Christian” nation, whether its dominant culture must continue to be white Anglo-Saxon (as if that were the definition of “America”)?

These are serious, deep questions that lie at the heart of much of the debate (more like a shouting match, really, sometimes including bullying tactics) that is ripping our nation apart today. Today I am not feeling like a partisan or a warrior for either side; I am just feeling sad. I can only hope that the saying is true that “it is always darkest right before the dawn.”



Sunrise as seen from Horseneck Beach, Westport, MA