

Corona Chronicle

Week 31

Wednesday, October 14th

As much as I love the Jewish calendar, feeling grateful for the depth of meaning inherent in the Jewish holidays, and for the enrichment of my life from them all – both the feasts and the fasts – it a joy to have them be *over* at last, to be able to look forward to many “ordinary” days without the pressure of practicing special liturgy, or of trying to figure out how to make the holidays meaningful to our community when we can’t gather together in person. Once during the week of Sukkot the roof of our sukkah blew off; we put it back on, and then during the last two days, Sh’mini Atzeret (a 2-day holiday in the Diaspora), two joints holding up the roof slid down, making the sukkah look a little like a Picasso painting of a sukkah. We had high winds those days (meanwhile, down South, hurricanes were battering people’s *real* homes).

I wrote two weeks ago about how the mitzvah of dwelling (or sitting and eating, at any rate) in a sukkah ingrains in us the importance of *rejoicing* even with the full awareness of the fragility of life very present to us. One might even say that if we all had eternal life here on this earth in our present form – if there were no such thing as death – that life might be much less meaningful. A life has to have a start and a finish, a “frame” to make it meaningful. In the same way, when I go out to the woods, which I did this morning, and choose something I want to photograph, it is in the *choosing*, in focusing on one leaf or one grouping of trees or stones or what-have-you, that potentially makes that image meaningful or pleasing. I cannot photograph the whole forest – the picture has to have a *frame*, a border.

And so the fragility of our lives, our temporariness here upon this earth, gives our lives more meaning, more intensity – it makes the colors of our lives more vivid, the music of our lives more beautiful, even if more poignant, and sometimes painful. It feels natural to muse about such things in the autumn, when the colors of the forest and of the trees in our yards begin to blaze, which thrills us; and yet we know they will soon fall off the trees, that the daylight hours are getting shorter, that winter is coming. It brings to my mind one of my favorite of Shakespeare’s sonnets, Number 73:

That time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,

Bare ruin'd choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.
In me thou seest the twilight of such day
As after sunset fadeth in the west,
Which by and by black night doth take away,
Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.
In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
As the death-bed whereon it must expire
Consumed with that which it was nourish'd by.
This thou perceivest, which makes thy love more strong,
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

To love that well which thou must leave ere long. This should be the motto of all of our lives – for whether or not one believes in some form of “life after death,” there has to be some meaning in *this* life, the only one we yet know. And even if there is no objective “meaning” or “purpose” – if all is random, and we are here by some cosmic accident – so much the more must we love it all well, and be grateful that we had the chance to be sentient beings for whatever time we have, a cosmic blink of an eye.

This past Saturday night we celebrated *Simchat Torah* (the holiday of “rejoicing in the Torah”) as a congregation on Zoom. It was a challenge for Mark and me to come up with a way to celebrate this holiday without our all being together in the temple, since traditionally it involves holding the scrolls of the Torah, singing and dancing, and chanting from both the last portion of the Torah, and then beginning the Torah-reading cycle all over again with the majestic chapters of the Creation story. Since we knew that we could not hold the service in the usual manner, we came up with an alternative. I contacted five of our community members and asked each one to give a brief talk on one verse, or one passage, from one of the books of the Torah – so that we had one person for *Bereshit* (Genesis), one person for *Shmot* (Exodus), etc., covering the five books. These were instead of the dancing for each of the seven *hakkafot*. (I read a Marge Piercy poem about Torah-reading for number six, and we just sang more songs for number seven.)

It was wonderful hearing the voices of our congregants transmit their wisdom and connection with the Torah and with Jewish tradition – something we have never done, and I loved it! It is thanks to this pandemic that this came about – so we now will have to find other occasions to reprise this teaching of one another. It is not only the clergy who have something to say about the Torah, some insight to pass

on to others. Though I missed dancing with the Torah, I think that this was one of the most meaningful celebrations of *Simchat Torah* that I have ever experienced.

Since I intend this “chronicle” to be a testimony to this unique time-period, I want to note that at this date we have hit the number of 217,000 in deaths due to the coronavirus. I do not keep up with the death-count in every entry. We have gotten used to living with this counter ticking in the background, and so sometimes we forget that yes, it is still ticking. Of course people are always dying, and new ones are being born, yet we do not feel the impact unless these births or deaths are part of our families, our extended circles, or of the families of famous people. And yet as we live through this pandemic-period, it is different: we all feel the impact not just of the actual *deaths*, but of the *threat* of illness and dying, at almost every level of our society. It impacts the way we pray, the way we shop, exercise, travel, go to school, visit the doctor, etc. There is hardly an activity in our lives now that has not been impacted by this threat.

And of course we have an extremely significant election coming up, with millions of people across the nation having already cast their ballots in early-voting. Many are planning to vote by mail – and I was, too – but now, with the slight possibility that there might be some legal challenge to votes cast by mail, I am planning to cast my ballot in our own early-voting in Massachusetts – which begins on October 17th. Many are saying that this is the “most significant election of their lifetime” – and I feel that, too. I don’t want to take any chance that my vote might not count!

During these past few days one has heard nothing but the disputes about the nomination of Amy Coney Barrett to fill the seat of the departed Ruth Bader Ginsburg on the Supreme Court. The hearings went on all day on Monday and Tuesday, and I believe they are still going on today – though certainly at this point most Democratic senators have realized that there is nothing they can do to stop the Republican senate majority from confirming this conservative, and by most accounts extremely well-qualified judge. Most who consider themselves “liberal” are worried that Judge Barrett, who is a well-known opponent of quite a few liberal causes (most notably, a woman’s right to legal abortion), will tilt the Court’s balance so far towards the right that even should the upcoming election result in a major power swing towards the left in the federal government, nonetheless the highest Court in the Land will reflect the values of the conservative minority, and it

might become the one way that this minority can still exert its will over our land and laws.

I have listened to a significant amount of these hearings on TV or on the radio, and I just hope that this woman, Judge Barrett, will indeed, as she has stated, listen to all cases with an “open mind,” and that she will not be anyone’s “puppet.” She seems to be an intelligent, extremely well-prepared, hard-working woman. She must have a big heart, for she has raised seven children (two of them adopted from Haiti). One of the reservations that many on the liberal side have about her has to do with her intense Catholic religiosity – and yet, if she indeed is committed to the teachings of the Catholic Church and to Jesus, this *should* result in Judge Bryant’s being all the more sensitive to the plight of the poor – not less. Because of an article that she published not too long ago, many are afraid that Judge Bryant might rule in such a way as to invalidate the Affordable Care Act, a case that will be coming up in the Supreme Court very soon – potentially leaving millions of Americans without health insurance during a pandemic. I cannot understand how a sincerely religious Catholic could be in favor of millions losing their health care, and maybe even dying because of this. Perhaps it has something to do with the boogeyman of “socialism,” a label that gets bandied about these days, and in past generations was seen as something that came hand in hand with atheism and the persecution of people of faith. Indeed, this happened in the former Soviet Union. But I can’t see that anything like that would ever happen in the United States. We are a people that love our freedom of worship. But we should also be a people that love the wall of separation between Church and State. I suppose this “wall” has always had many holes and windows.

Well, until I see otherwise, I will hold my own mind open, and hope that Judge Barrett will surprise everyone. I want to believe that such an intelligent woman has true integrity (that she is not doing any other party’s bidding, but will do her best to follow her conscience and the highest standards of reasoning in interpreting the law). Since the Democrats cannot stop the approval that is sure to come, they might as well give her this benefit of the doubt as well. Of course, if it becomes evident in the end that they were right to be up in arms about all this, then they will have a right to yell – but they can’t change the calculus now, and maybe by being polite and humane (which they mostly have been in these hearings), they can prevent this soon-to-be new Supreme Court justice from bearing ill will towards “liberals” and their causes.

There was a good rain last night, which we needed so badly. The woods near North Watuppa Pond smelled wonderful this morning (so much more fragrant than the last time I was there), and the birds were all atwitter. It is so important to get away from thinking about the virus, and politics, and other anxiety-fraught topics now and then. I know no better way to do this than to immerse myself in nature. I prefer to do this solo, because then I can best *pay attention* to the beauty, the smells, the sounds all around me (and thanks to my cell phone, I know I can call home in case of trouble). I never feel lonely in nature – I feel surrounded by a host of “saints,” or perhaps I should say “angels.” Reb Nachman of Bratzlav used to teach that every blade of grass has its own angel whispering to it “grow!” These autumn days, I think the angels are whispering instead to the leaves on the trees “it’s okay to let go.”

Which is perhaps a harder sell than “growing.” As we read in Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) last week, “*To every thing there is a time and a purpose under heaven.*” Is this true? Do all things, even turns of events that look bad or cruel to us, have a “purpose”? I cannot answer such a question. But I can admire the *Tao* of the leaves that blaze forth so boldly, and then let go, fluttering to the ground so gracefully, enriching the soil of the forest floor to ensure new life in the spring.

