

Corona Chronicle

Week 36

Wednesday, November 18th

Yesterday was Rosh Chodesh Kislev (the first day/new moon of the Hebrew month of Kislev), and, being a fine morning (and my day off), I took a long walk down a country road in Tiverton. I am a little fuzzy about who is allowed to cross into what state – are we Massachusetts residents legally barred from visiting Rhode Island without quarantining, or is it the other way around, or have the states given up on these largely unenforceable measures? In any case, being that I came across perhaps at most six human beings on my walk, and certainly never came within six feet of any of them (and dutifully donned my mask as I got near), I am sure that this walk of mine was much less dangerous than a routine visit to Shaw's or Stop & Shop.

I find myself walking more and more these days. Usually around this time in November we would be getting ready for the Ruderman Shabbaton Weekend; and in past years, after the *shabbaton* was over, I would take a few days off to visit my mother in Virginia. Of course my mother died in May of 2018, and this year, with the pandemic, we can have no *shabbaton*, and there are no Jewish holidays until Chanukah (beginning this year on the evening of December 10th) – which we also cannot celebrate as a congregation in the usual way this year...so there is a little more time for walking and reflecting, which I welcome during this anxiety-inducing era.

Walking relaxes me. It helps me to not think about the ever increasing coronavirus fatality numbers (almost 250,000 as of today), and of the currently spiking rate of people contracting this illness. It helps to get away from the TV, the radio, the newspapers, news on social media – to just walk and breathe, sometimes to hum a tune, to stop to admire the bright red of the winterberries that are common along the South Coast roads now, to listen to the chirping of chickadees, to feel the warmth of the sun on my face. Also, although the YMCA is open again, I think it best not to return to a gym yet, so I need the exercise! Although Dr. Fauci and so many others are warning us that we will be embarking upon a dark, difficult winter as far as the lethality of the virus goes (for even though there is good news about the coming availability of vaccines, they probably won't reach the general public until late spring), nonetheless, I am hoping for some good amount of snow this winter – last winter I did not get out on my cross-country skis once.

As I walked yesterday, I passed by a horse farm, and grazing alongside the horses were three donkeys. I had clucked to the horses (I love horses!), but they barely looked up from their grazing, if at all. I suppose, after all the rain we have had lately – following upon a long period of drought – the newly-green grass just tasted too good to them to be bothered with a pedestrian trying to get their attention. But two of the donkeys, both white, walked over to see who this was – and one in particular pricked up her long ears and really *looked* at me in a very kindly and intelligent-seeming way. I say *her* ears because her belly extended so far on either side of her, I would guess that she is pregnant. (I've never seen a donkey foal – how cute that must be!) She let me take her picture, and after I got home and uploaded it to my computer, I started thinking about the significance of white donkeys in Jewish lore.

I had heard of an association (but did not know the biblical or rabbinic source) of a white donkey with the coming of the Messiah. It seemed appropriate to be wondering about this on the first day of Kislev, since it is the month of Chanukah, when we sing “Mighty Rock of my Salvation” (“*Ma'oz tzur y'shuati*”). Chanukah begins at sundown (the beginning of a new Jewish day) on the 25th of Kislev, and some scholars/historians think it is no accident that the Early Church set the date for celebrating the birth of their own agent of “salvation,” the one *they* called “Messiah,” on *December 25th*. Whether it was this, or whether the Christians wanted to transform a pagan solstice-celebration at this darkest time of the year into a religious celebration that they could endorse (likely, *both* are true), I wondered about the significance of the *donkey* in the ancient Semitic world (and why *white?*).

One historical testimony to this association of a donkey with the messiah in the proto-rabbinic (Pharisaic-Hellenistic) era is the story told in several of the Gospels, where Jesus instructs his disciples to untie the foal of a donkey and bring it to him to ride into Jerusalem for what would turn out to be the last week of his life (known as the “triumphal ride” and celebrated by the Church as Palm Sunday, which falls one week before Easter). But in none of these Gospels is this donkey specified to be *white*. After reading articles on several different websites, and the entry on “ass” in the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, I learned a lot about donkeys (he-donkeys, she-donkeys, donkey foals, and mules...all signified by different Hebrew words in the Bible) There seem to be two important sources for the association of donkeys with royalty. Foremost in the messianic association is a passage from the prophet Zechariah:

*Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion,
Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem;
Behold, your king comes to you,
He is triumphant, and victorious,
Lowly, and riding upon a donkey,
Even upon a colt, the foal of an donkey. (9:9)*

It seems clear to me that the Gospel-writers made this association of Jesus with a young (but clearly, not a *baby*) donkey to signal to Jews who knew their Scripture that Jesus was fulfilling this prophecy of the longed-for messiah. Jesus, of course, would be seen by the preponderance Jews as a *failed* “messiah” (to the extent that they were aware of him at all). But the use of this imagery, drawing on the Zechariah-passage, probably was intended to emphasize the idea that the messiah might overturn your expectations: that he would not be a figure coming in *power*, with pomp and all the trappings of state, like a Roman emperor. Rather, as Zechariah points out, this king will be *lowly*, the kind of man who rides upon a donkey, not upon the more prestigious (and warlike) *horse*. In fact, if you read on in the same passage from Zechariah, you see how *donkeys* are contrasted by the prophet with *horses*:

*And I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim,
And the horse from Jerusalem,
And the battle bow shall be cut off,
And he shall speak peace unto the nations;
And his dominion shall be from sea to sea,
And from the River to the ends of the earth. (9:10)*

The *horse* (especially a horse and *chariot*) was seen in the Bible as a weapon of *war*, a kind of ancient tank or weaponized drone. Thus the prophetic passage emphasizes that the longed-for messianic figure would not bring salvation by way of earthly might, but through lowliness, and by “speaking peace unto the nations.”

This association of the donkey with a messianic figure runs through Rabbinic Judaism as well. In the tractate Berakhot (56b) of the Babylonian Talmud, in a long passage about the interpretation of dreams, it is taught: “If one sees a donkey in a dream, he may hope for salvation, as it says: *Behold your king comes to you; he is triumphant and victorious, lowly, and riding upon a donkey.*” In Chasidic thought, especially in the writings of the Lubavitcher movement, there is an emphasis on similarity of the Hebrew of the word donkey (*chamor*) with the word for the *physicality* of God’s creation (*chomer*). Thus the teaching is that material reality is not bad, it is part of God’s creation, what God desired to bring into being

– but that material reality is meant to be *elevated into the spiritual realm* through the doing of mitzvot; and that the Messiah himself must “ride” upon the material/physical reality of this world in order to bring the consummation of the material with the spiritual to completion, thus effecting *salvation* for all the world.

Well, what about the donkey’s being *white*? Apparently, this tradition stems from a passage in the Song of Deborah and Barak (although here the donkeys in question are deemed to be she-donkeys, *atonot*):

*You who ride on white she-asses,
You who sit on rich cloths,
And you that walk by the way, tell of it;
Louder than the voice of archers, by the watering-troughs!
There shall they rehearse the righteous acts of Adonai,
The righteous acts of His rulers in Israel.* (Judges 5: 10-11)

The word for *white* in this passage is not the usual *lavan*, but a much-rarer word for “white,” *tz’chor*, which becomes associated in Chassidic teaching with *tzohar*, a window (used in the story of Noah’s ark), and *zohar*, meaning light or brilliance. I suppose it is only a small leap from here to the belief that lowliness/humility is a prerequisite of true spiritual radiance.

Upon my bookshelf there is a book entitled, *There is No Messiah and You're it: The Stunning Transformation of Judaism's Most Provocative Idea* (by Robert N. Levine, 2005). I confess that I started reading this book, but it did not captivate me; my favorite thing about the book is its title! So here we are in this difficult, strange time – at the end (but not quite yet) of one of the most norm-breaking executive-branch administrations that the United States has ever had; nearing the end (with these vaccines in sight) of a deadly pandemic such as our nation has only seen once before (the 1918 flu); with schoolchildren going to “school” via computers, with congregations worshipping together via Zoom...it is a time we are all looking forward to seeing the end of! It is a time in which we all long for a kind of *salvation*.

But how will this “salvation” come about? We can see already that it is not going to be via any one charismatic human figure – such a thing hardly ever happens in history, and when it *appears* to, it is usually because things have gotten so bad (think of the relationship of Abraham Lincoln to the Secession of the Southern states, or Franklin Roosevelt to the Depression) that any ruler/leader who manages to get the nation through this dark period looks like a “savior.” Certainly things seem “dark” now, but there is still much light, and in our case the light comes

mostly from ordinary people doing things like calling a friend, donating blood, working at a polling place, and from those extraordinary people like teachers, doctors, nurses, EMT's, police officers, firefighters, and grocery store personnel.

For some people, salvation comes about through their interactions with their pets, especially their cats and dogs, who comfort them and keep them sane through this lonely time. For me, it comes through my connections with Mark, Lev, and my daughter, Mira; through my bonds with our congregational family and with other friends; and it especially comes through my connection with all of God's creation. I always feel restored by the austere beauty of the ocean, by the quietness and fragrance of a forest; I am wowed by the splashy red of the male cardinal at our feeder (and the subtler beauty of his mate). As for my new friend the white donkey of Tiverton, RI, I smile inwardly when I think of her, with her kind, intelligent face and big belly – may she give birth in a good hour, and may she and her offspring enjoy a world that is still pretty marvelous. Such things may not bring about “salvation,” but any kindness and intelligence is a cause for hope in this world.

