

Corona Chronicle, Week Four

Sunday, April 12

(Last night's *Havdalah* marked the end of the two days of the "festival" part of Passover added onto by Shabbat, making it effectively a three-day holiday – during which I don't write – thus the lag in getting out this week's "chronicle.")

This morning Mark and I got up a little after 7 to log in to "attend" the funeral of the wife of a dear friend of Mark's in Israel. Ans was the wife of Rabbi Jonny Matt (brother of the well-known *Zohar* scholar and translator Daniel Matt, also known for his *God and the Big Bang*). Ans and Jonny lived for over 30 years together on the far-northern Kibbutz Malkiyah, on Israel's border with Lebanon. It is so very beautiful up in that region of Israel – but at times also dangerous. And yet it was not an incoming rocket from Hezbollah that took Ans, but a series of strokes, seemingly complicated by her catching the coronavirus (this is uncertain, but appears to be the case). Ever since I have known Mark (for over 23 years), Jonny has often traveled back to New Jersey to be with his mother (still alive and well at 90-something years old) for Pesach. Because of the virus this year, and its travel restrictions, this was the first year in a while that he stayed on the kibbutz for Pesach with Ans, and I'm sure she was looking forward to having him home for the holiday.

What a cruel irony that they shared their seder together in the hospital, and that she died on the second day of Pesach. But at least she did not die alone. Jonny was with her as she slipped away quietly and seemingly without pain. It is a blessing, at least, that Jonny will not have to go through the rest of his life reproaching himself for not being with her at her end.

Very sad. I never met Ans, and I have never been to Kibbutz Malkiyah, but I could see from the video that it is quite lovely, and hear from those gathered who were speaking and crying that she was well-loved. Pesach is the most beautiful time of year in Israel, in my opinion, and the day looked so lovely in the video, as did the kibbutz's small cemetery. Everyone was wearing a mask, of course, and the filling of the grave was done by pouring buckets of soft earth that had been prepared ahead of time into the grave (no sharing of shovels). It was all over so fast! And I suppose that is often how we feel about life – where did the time go?

Jonny, of course, is just one among over one hundred thousand who are in mourning for those whose lives have been cut short during this pandemic. Thankfully, we still have not been hit hard by such deaths in the Fall River area,

although our confirmed cases of those who have been infected are slowly climbing. May they all speedily recover, and may all our brave, selfless medical workers who attend to them and their families, and all who keep the hospitals clean, all who keep our supermarkets stocked and who work at the checkout lines, and all other essential workers stay well!

The numbers of the unemployed are skyrocketing...it is so hard to witness the reality of this as we are in our houses for most of the time now, somewhat cut off from the outside world. Of course we still have access to the news in many formats – but it all seems to be going on “out there” while we are experiencing our own private realities “in here.” In some ways, this may be a paradigm of what life is always like: if you yourself are not living a life of hardship, you may only witness it as if “from afar.” And yet when one can move about freely and be involved in organizations that try to help those who are suffering, or dealing with hardships, one can better sense that reality. Now almost all of us are witnesses “from afar,” and we keep hearing that the best thing we can do to help our fellow citizens is to stay home.

Of course we are still (thankfully!) allowed to take walks. But the walkways are getting crowded. One bright, sunny afternoon last week I suggested to Lev that he come with me for a walk on the paved “heart-healthy” trail at Horseneck Beach State Park in Westport. I checked online first to make sure that the MA state parks were still open. Their website said they were. I suspected that the parking lots would be closed, but I thought I knew where we could park nearby and walk in. When we got to the end of Route 88, and turned south towards Gooseberry Island, I saw that all of those dirt-parking areas where usually I would be able to park were sealed off with yellow police tape. There was only one area – right in front of the old Lifesaving Station (now preserved as a museum – closed, of course) where there was no tape, and, as far as I could see, an absence of “no parking” signs.

As we got out of the car and began to walk towards the park, I noticed many cars coming down to the point (probably thinking that they could go out to Gooseberry Island by way of the causeway, now also closed off); they had to turn around. It was as if the State Parks Department were taunting us: the parks are open, but you can't park your car, so you can't go there!

It was a gorgeous day, the sun was sparkling off the waves, the blue sky was dotted by perfect fluffy white clouds, and Lev and I had the place to ourselves. No worry about social distancing on this path! But (you can probably see this coming) when

we returned to our car, we found a bright orange parking ticket on the windshield (despite the lack of no parking signs where I had parked). I noticed the officer's name on the back of my ticket, and luckily for me in a minute saw a police car with an officer in it whose nametag matched the one on my ticket. She retracted the ticket and I promised I would not park there again!

As the government tries to close access to public places to enforce social distancing, what ends up happening is that, in the few nice outdoor places that are *not* closed, the crowds just keep getting thicker. I suppose what they are trying to instill is the idea that we should all limit our walking to places that we can get to by just walking out the door from where we live (lucky for you if you happen to live next to Horseneck Beach, but hardly anyone does!). For Mark and Lev and me, this is not so bad, since walking around the Highlands is very pleasant (even if it can't compete with the ocean or the mountains). But for people who live in poorer, less pleasant neighborhoods, this is a harsh sentence. Meanwhile, the price of gas has dipped lower than I can remember it in so many years...and although we are not prevented from driving, there is effectively nowhere to go if there is nowhere to park!

On a brighter note, we have now had two Zoom Shabbat services, and although using this technology is hardly an elegant way of *davening* together, it is a wonderful thing to see and hear both our Shabbat regulars and others of you who live further away, who we normally do *not* get to see: we've had in our "congregation" participants from Manhattan, Connecticut, Boston, and Jamestown, RI. Although we did not attempt a Zoom communal Seder, this past Friday night we began our service with some of the most-loved Pesach songs from the seder. I hope, as we go along, that more and more of you will be brave enough to accept these electronic "invitations" that go out from our office. (The Friday evening service is a recurring service, so the original invitation you received still has all you need to join.) It truly gives us all a lift to see and hear one another, even if the nature of this electronic gathering means that our singing together will be somewhat out of synch and cacophonous: we are making a joyful noise!

The words from the *Haggadah*: *mah nishtanah* (how is this day/night different?) had particular resonance this year, as otherwise all the days and nights seem to run into one another with little differentiation. And now, as we proceed through the end of the 8-day Pesach-period, these days of eating matzah and other traditional Passover foods remind us that yes, this is a unique time. It is a time when we remember both the sufferings of our ancestors and of those around us in the present

– and also a time when we rejoice and thank God for the blessings of life, health, and freedom which we still retain, albeit in a restrained way.

On Thursday (the first day of Pesach and the afternoon before the second Seder), after much wind, rain, and even hail, the sun began to come out. I had a feeling... and quickly put on my shoes and raincoat, and went out for a quick walk around the block...until I found it: a rainbow glowing against a dark sky in the east. At my feet was the rather trash-strewn corner of Grove and Locust Streets – but on the horizon was that symbol of God’s promise that humanity has looked to as a sign of hope since the time of Noah. Even without the story of Noah, I suspect we would always be cheered by a rainbow – something about one just takes your breath away, while also giving us the inspiration to believe that we will get through this. It put me in mind of a verse from *Shir HaShirim* (the biblical book, Song of Songs – traditionally chanted on the Shabbat during the week of Passover), and it seems a good way to end this week’s chronicle:

Many waters cannot quench love; neither can floods drown it. (Shir HaShirim 8:7)



2017 double-rainbow over the marsh behind my mother’s home in Hampton, VA. Photo taken on the afternoon of her 85th birthday party one year before she died.