

Corona Chronicle, Week Nine

Wednesday, May 13th

19th of Iyar, 34th day of *sefirat ha-Omer*. Once again, I am feeling rather overwhelmed by the issues of the day: Dr. Fauci's and other members' of the White House Coronavirus Task Force testimonies before the Senate yesterday have stirred up worries about the mixed-messages coming out of the White House. The president wants us to "open up," "get back to normal." But these medical experts see grave dangers in trying to get back to "normal" until we have a vaccine that is safe, effective, and available to all. And of course no one knows when that will be.

Also yesterday, the Supreme Court heard arguments having to do with the scope of (and limitations on) presidential immunity from certain kinds of legal accountability. We have often heard it said that no one in this nation is "above the law." But is this so?

And just this morning I heard the journalist Franklin Foer interviewed on *Morning Joe*; Foer has written an article for the June issue of *The Atlantic* entitled "Putin Is Well on His Way to Stealing the Next Election: RIP Democracy."

Oy vey! Such heavy, momentous issues! So today I think I will talk about *hair*.

Yesterday was the 33rd day of the omer-count: *Lag b'Omer* (*lag* being the way of pronouncing out loud the Hebrew letters *lamed* and *gimmel*, which represent the number 33 – thus the 33rd day in the omer-count). *Lag b'Omer* traditionally offers a break to some of the restrictions during the seven weeks of counting leading up to Shavuot (see Week Five for further explanation of this). One of the traditional restrictions during the "counting" period is the cutting of one's hair, but on *Lag b'Omer*, haircuts are permitted. With all salons and barbershops in New England still closed, this might seem a moot point – but behold: I have risen to the challenge and cut my husband's hair myself! (Thanks to his natural curl, this wasn't too difficult, the curls covering up a multitude of rough edges.)

As for my own hair, I had made a last-minute dash to my hair-stylist before all the salons shut down in March, and told her to make it "plenty short," since we didn't know when we would see each other again. And it is still manageable, at least as far as length goes...but of course the grey roots are beginning to creep further and further southward. I find myself fantasizing about eventually (when we are no longer under this shutdown) having it all cropped close enough to my head to get

rid of all the artificial color altogether – of being liberated to be a true “natural woman.” Will I have the courage to take this plunge? Would people start to see me as “old?” Is hair-color, for a woman, a kind of “samsonian” issue?

And you might wonder why I even dare ask these questions in this public way. Yes, there is a certain vulnerability to it. Of course so many women have their hair colored nowadays, it’s hardly anything one needs to be secretive about. And everyone who manages to stay alive necessarily *ages*. And yet there is a push in our culture to pretend that we can stay young, that our hair will never turn grey; for women it is especially implied that it is our responsibility to stay as “attractive” as possible (thin, no grey hair, ample makeup). What happens if we defy these unwritten rules? Right now, those who “attend” our TBE services on Zoom can only see me in a shadowy way, so I don’t need to worry about whether I have remembered to apply lipstick or not...but it sets me to wondering.

There is a certain degree to which the way one presents oneself in public *matters* – especially if you are ministering to people, or in some way serving as a representative for a particular community to the larger world. Rabbi Mark almost always wears a suit or at least a white dress shirt when leading services, even though we are on Zoom. I don’t wear my sweatpants, even though no one can see me below the waist. Probably this affects much more the way *we* feel about what we are doing than it matters to others; it both reflects and inculcates our sense of respect for the people who join us in prayer.

So, just like the questions about how and whether to begin to re-open our economy (there are arguments on both sides, but there is also middle ground), the question of how a person, especially a *woman*, presents herself physically, to what degree she strives to meet pressure of being “attractive,” is not a simple one. And I am not making a declaration here that I will shave my head and not return to coloring my hair or wearing makeup when this pandemic is over. But it is fun to fantasize about it – for this entails imagining a world where people do not judge one another by their *outward* appearance, but instead by the “content of their character,” as Dr. Martin Luther King so famously said...and also, I would think, by their warmth, their compassion, their sense of humor, their *joie de vivre*. Two women who come to my mind as being enormously “attractive,” but not at all in the conventional feminine-beauty-contest sort of way are Ella Fitzgerald (of blessed memory) and Whoopi Goldberg (still very much alive!). The former won us over via her irresistibly warm, velvety voice (and through her *grace*, which is a quality that comes from the *inside* but is manifested on the *outside*); and the latter steals our

hearts through her humor and her unvarnished honesty. You can't help but like and trust Whoopi.

Neither of these women are/were conventionally “attractive” (although Ella did have a face with great bone-structure) – but they are/were *powerful*, not just because of their great gifts as entertainers, but, one senses that there is some other element. Could it be that, as women of color, they had to develop extra courage, grit and *magnificence* to be able to succeed in a world where the gatekeepers were usually white?

If you have the time, I invite you to watch this clip of Ella Fitzgerald singing “Summertime” in 1968, and you will understand what I mean by her power and magnificence:

<https://youtu.be/u2bigf337aU>

So... I am aware that I have rambled...from Senate hearings to the Supreme Court to Putin to *hair*, and on...to the fraught notions of female attractiveness, and to the question of wherein lies a person's ultimate power.

Forgive me if you find this dizzying – but to me, it makes perfect sense. It's all about power and *balance*, and, if you will, a balance of powers: the balance between the three branches of the federal government, but also – between pleasing oneself and taking into consideration the needs of others; being true to oneself while also thinking of the “big picture.” What do we all need to survive this difficult time? How much individual liberty should we rightly be willing to give up so that the greatest number of us (including the most vulnerable) will live and thrive?

Some in the media have called this time we are living through a “crucible” of our values as Americans – we are being put through the fire, and it remains to be seen what metal (or perhaps *mettle*) will remain after the superficialities have burned off. Coincidentally, on *Lag b'Omer* it is traditional (especially in Israel) to celebrate this day with the building of large bonfires, with a picnic, and with singing and dancing around the fire. I cannot conjure up a “celebratory” feeling about the fire that our nation is going through now, but I can take inspiration from some great Americans who have walked through “fires” in their own lives and have come out singing. And so I close with one more listening suggestion, which is

that of the great duo, Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong, singing “They Can’t Take that away from Me”:

<https://youtu.be/uhCXXOhQ4zw>

