

Corona Chronicle

Week 53

Wednesday, March 17th

Coronavirus deaths as of today: 537,000

Sunday was Rosh Chodesh Nisan, the first day of the month in which Passover comes. And so the countdown in our home begins. The first part of this, for me, is the clearing and cleaning – but it is hard to clear all spaces of *chametz*, any leavened products, or even tiny crumbs of such products (the pretzel crumbs between the sofa cushions), and keep it that way until Passover, when you are still in the pre-Passover period when you are eating regular, non-kosher *l'Pesach* food. So I start with the spaces furthest from the kitchen. So far I have cleared and cleaned (and reorganized!) our entry hall. It's amazing how much junk you can accumulate in such a small space, junk that you don't need!

So I start out this big project every year with dread – but as I go on, it becomes *almost* fun, and definitely liberating.

You end up pulling out bags and boxes and other stashes of things that you have been meaning to get rid of, donate, shred, take to recycling, etc., and while you are doing it you wish you had the compunction to deal with these things all year long so that they would not pile up. Some people do, I guess. But I guess Mark and I are procrastinators when it comes to these kinds of activities, when we would rather be attending to our rabbi-cantor duties, studying, writing, or hiking. Thus it is a good thing for us that this holiday comes to give us the push that we need to not let it all pile up!

I wonder if our country is now doing a kind of house-cleaning as well. I keep hearing news commentators remarking on certain politicians who have made shockingly racist or xenophobic statements that they are “saying the quiet part out loud.” I am especially thinking of Senator Ron Johnson (R-WI), who on March 12th said in a radio interview (the Joe Pags Show) that:

“Even though those thousands of people that were marching to the Capitol were trying to pressure people like me to vote the way they wanted me to vote, I knew those were people that love this country, that truly respect law enforcement, would never do anything to break the law, and so I wasn’t concerned...Now, had the tables been turned—Joe, this could get me in trouble—had the tables been turned, and President Trump won the election and those were tens of thousands of Black Lives Matter and Antifa protesters, I might have been a little concerned.”

Of course Senator Johnson wasn't attempting to purge *himself* of the *chametz* of racism, but there *is a positive side* to these ugly thoughts and passions being brought out from the corners and closets and from between the cushions of some assumed "respectability" or "gentility." And this is it: we cannot ever move our nation towards its potential, its aspiration of being a country created for the equal justice and opportunity for *all* its inhabitants unless we know what is holding us back. And if certain people keep their darkest thoughts and desires *secret* (perhaps only voicing them when in secret conclaves of like-minded people) – well, then, we will have a hard time combatting such attitudes.

So in a strange way, perhaps we who believe in the promises and ideals of this nation can be *thankful* for the shocking things we have heard and seen over the past five years, and even on and since January 6th. At least we see what we are dealing with – one cannot combat prejudice that one cannot *see*.

I come back, many times, to wondering what is it that makes some people so frightened, so full of hate and suspicion towards "the other"? Is it truly *fear* (as Sen. Johnson implies above), and if so, fear of *what*? Does Sen. Johnson have a consciousness of *guilt* at what a raw deal Black people have had since they were first brought unwillingly to these shores in 1619? Does he fear *retribution*? Perhaps, deep down, he believes that he *deserves* some kind of retribution or vengeance, but does not want to admit that belief to himself, and so he projects his guilt onto the BLM and antifa protestors – like the High Priest putting the sins of Israel onto the head of the scapegoat on Yom Kippur in the ancient Temple ritual.

Or is it simply that there seems to be a human tendency for people to "root for their own tribe"? When we go to a sports game, or watch one on TV, we do not root for our favored team because we think they are culturally or ethically "superior" to the other team – rather, we root for them because we have some personal connection to them: they are the team of our locale, or perhaps the locale where we grew up, or perhaps we actually know a player on the team, etc. And people can get so passionate over their cheering on their own team (and booing the opposing team) that, famously, deadly riots have on occasion broken out in stadiums. What is this all about?

The late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes about the irrationality of such passions in his last book, *Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times* (2020):

“Could a computer [artificial intelligence] understand the passions aroused by a sporting event? This is human behavior at its most irrational and most powerful. It has to do with identity, with our need to identify with a group whose existence is maximally affirmed when it clashes with another group...How could AI make sense of it? Yet the point is anything but theoretical, because time and again the West has overestimated human rationality – most notably in the eighteenth century in the form of the Enlightenment – and underestimated the power of our tribal passions, whether focused on nation, religion, ethnicity, political party, or the myriad other ways we define who and what we are.” (pp. 127-128)

I think back to the feeling in the air around the start of the First Gulf War. I remember sitting one morning at a local diner in Leominster (where I lived at the time), having a muffin and a cup of coffee while I tried to get some work done on my graduate studies in Midrash. The TV was on over the diner counter, and there was a “group buzz” in the diner, a kind of feeling of “togetherness” because our country was at war against Saddam Hussein and his forces. The fact that most of us perceived Hussein to have invaded Kuwait illegally, that he was the aggressor, made for a more united feeling amongst the American public (there was much more division over sending U.S. troops into Afghanistan). Additionally, because of my identification with Israel, and because Hussein was launching SCUD missiles towards Israel during that war, I felt an added layer of passion. Whereas I normally do not use electronics during Shabbat, there was one Shabbat back then when I left the radio on in one room in the house so that I could go in there occasionally to listen for updates.

And as much as we do not want wars to come, we do not want danger for our group or for the innocents of *any* groups, there is something about these times of “rallying the troops” that is poignant, memorable. It seems to be programmed into our DNA as “group” or “tribal” animals that we thrive on the feeling of our group coming together in a crisis, our pulling together. This can happen when a natural disaster strikes, but, sadly, as Rabbi Sacks notes, the feeling is strongest when we feel pitted against some other group, a human form of “enemy.”

No artificial intelligence could understand why I get teary-eyed at every funeral of a veteran when a soldier plays taps, and as I watch an officer give the survivors a tightly-folded American flag “on behalf of a grateful nation.” At those moments I do not think about the geo-political situation which led to whatever war this veteran might have served in. I am not really *thinking* as I react to these rituals; I

am responding from a much deeper place – from a sense of common cause with my group, which in this case would be my country.

But what if your group, or your country is *wrong*? The World War II era is the setting for countless Hollywood movies, with a special focus on Germany’s Nazi regime. Somehow, all the audience members in the theater are rooting for those who are trying to thwart the Nazis, and it seems *obvious* that one *has* to feel this way – they are the epitome of evil! But how many people watching such films ask themselves whether they would have realized how wrong and evil the Nazis were if *they themselves* had been ethnic Germans (that is, not amongst the German minorities who were being persecuted)?

Of course there were some Germans who resisted their government. We know how perilous it was for those who defied the Nazis by hiding Jews – these stories of “righteous Gentiles” are ones we tell each year near Yom HaShoah. But do we think about how hard it must have been for many ordinary Germans to turn away from flags, parades, uniforms, national songs, and the big, cheering rallies that Hitler used to bring together? Some people have an instinctive dread of such things. But more are probably drawn to them. For someone who feels that draw, to stop themselves and truly *examine* what lies beneath all this emotive nationalism, that is a difficult and courageous act. The fact that such questioning can make you unpopular, can even make you an outcast amongst your group (such as your religious group, your family, your place of employment, your school, etc.) – this is no small thing; for some it would be as big a disincentive as the threat of going to prison.

The cleaning of our hardest to reach recesses of fear, group-think, self-protectiveness (against the outsider) – this is not an easy task. But it *is* made easier when such feelings are brought so obviously (as in Senator Johnson’s case) out into the open. Of course to hear such words, to have seen the acts committed by the mostly-white mob on Jan. 6th, these things are also frightening. And saddening. I am so sad that, after over 400 years (since 1619, when slavery of Africans was initiated on these shores), we are still as divided along “color” lines as we are. Fear is driving so many traditionally conservative state legislatures to try to devise ways to make it harder for people of color to cast their votes. They are afraid they will be voted out of power. They are afraid that they will lose their say as the arbiters of society and culture in those states, and nationally. They are afraid to trust to the process that we all pay lip service to, to *democracy*.

But not just democracy. A group's being the most *numerous* in advocating for any given policy does not make it *right*. That's why we have the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and a court system. We have to try to make our society come into alignment with our amazing founding documents and their subsequent legislation: especially the 13th, 14th, 15th, and 19th Amendments.

And we are going to need to strive with all our might for a great conversion to green energy in this country, and all over the world. This too, will not be easy. But if we don't succeed, we *all* will lose.

Yesterday I went for a walk in the nature preserve behind Fort Barton in Tiverton, RI. The woods are still dull these early March days, the trees have not yet begun budding. I did appreciate the almost melodramatic gloominess of one frozen pond there, graced by a ghostly, hollowed-out, left-leaning tree. I imagine that in just a matter of weeks, the spring peepers will be singing away in this spot, the reddish-pink new buds of the swamp maples and yellow-green buds of other trees will be in evidence, and this same spot will be transformed.



Fort Barton Woods, Tiverton, RI.