

The weeks tick off...in just 5 more weeks, we will have spent half a year stumbling our way through this global pandemic. It is not just the United States that is stumbling: this morning I read in the *Times* about how Israel, initially very successful in bringing their numbers of infections down, patted itself on the back and began to reopen their schools. Very soon children and staff began getting sick, and at least one teacher died. Coronavirus numbers began escalating across the country very quickly. We are all stumbling – through the dark, because we have never tried to do anything like this before, and no one knows just how to balance all the competing needs of a modern civilization like ours while keeping everyone safe. Everyone will not be safe; there will be casualties – but how can anyone decide what is an “acceptable” number of casualties out of all of the children, teachers, custodians and members of the families of all these who may get sick and even die when children go back to school again?

If the well-known rabbinic teaching, “to save one life is to save a world” is true, is not the *loss* of one life the loss of a world as well? Of course death is the exit door for *all* of us eventually (as they say “none of us are getting out of here alive”), but each child is the repository of the potential for many hundreds of generations to follow him or her, and each teacher is a person who may have a positive impact on thousands of lives throughout the course of their career, and thus their contribution to our world is great. And of course each school custodian, cafeteria worker, school nurse, bus driver, etc. are all human beings, connected to their own familial and social circle of others who rely on them – the loss of any of these, or of any of us outside of the school-connection, is something that we want to avoid – but at what cost?

These are questions that politicians, physicians, scientists, economists, governors, mayors, school superintendents and parents (especially parents!) are asking themselves...and even at this late date, no one has an answer that they feel sure of. Likewise, we Jews are still grappling with how to observe the High Holy Days at a time when the synagogue-going Jewish population in the United States is rapidly graying – a population that is at greater risk both for being infected by the virus, and for dying of it. As it is written in the Torah portion *Acharei Mot*, in Leviticus

18:5, God gave us these laws not so that we should perish in fulfilling them, but that we should *chai ba-hem* (*live by them*).

As I write these words, the winds that must be at the outer periphery of tropical storm Isaias are blowing loose papers around our kitchen, and banging our blinds against the sills. This morning there were tornado warnings for two counties in western Massachusetts, somehow related to this storm. My daughter Mira has just moved from Brighton to North Adams with her husband Stefan. I do not believe they have a basement to shelter in, as they are in a second-floor apartment. I call, but there is no answer.

For me personally, the storm winds are a welcome relief from the oppressive string of hot days we have been enduring lately. I have never wanted to have central air conditioning, both because of the excessive amount of fossil fuel that AC uses, and because I like to feel more in touch with the natural world whenever possible, feeling the breezes and hearing the birds through open windows. But this last week or so has been a challenge – especially with my wrist still in this cast, sometimes throbbing with the heat. And yet when I read that with the coming world that we are bringing on ourselves – with ever hotter, longer summers in which more and more human beings will not be able to endure the places they live without being in an artificially-cooled environment – I am all the more determined to be capable of living in this world without adding the extra burden of air conditioning onto the power grid. But I realize that there is something almost superstitious about this: as if, by my managing without AC, I can hold off this warming world and all the devastation that our rising temperatures might bring.

In the background, through my open windows, I frequently hear the sirens of emergency vehicles – probably en route to Charlton Hospital. Living near the hospital, it is not unusual to hear sirens (and it is not infrequent these days to hear medi-vac helicopters as well). Our vulnerability to tropical storms and hurricanes is not nearly as great as it is for folks who live further south, especially in the Bahamas, Florida, and the Gulf Coast. But at this point in history, between the pandemic, the increase in tropical storms and hurricanes (and tornadoes as well), and with a recent report of global temperatures rising faster than anyone had predicted (with all of the environmental calamity this will likely bring), I am feeling worried.

And yet the world is still so beautiful, vibrant, and in some places actually recovering from past decades, even centuries of abuse. In the area where I grew up,

at the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay, one can now see bald eagles daily (at least in my brother's neighborhood, Grandview, in Hampton, Virginia). When I was a child, we never saw eagles, hawks, ospreys, or pelicans. Now you can walk along the bay beach and are likely to see all of these.

While we were on the Cape, I was happy not to see any great white sharks – but also excited to see so many seals (I know the sharks are there, but cannot seem to summon up much love for these more predatory of God's creatures). Of course to a rabbit, a bald eagle is as terrifying as a shark is to me. And I love the idea of our wild areas being replete once more with grizzlies, wolves, mountain lions and black bears. But one must respect them. They are part of God's intricate web of life – but they are not our pets. Similarly, one must respect a tornado or an erupting volcano. These are phenomena of both terrifying beauty and also of sheer terror. Nature is not all fuzzy ducklings and rainbows.

And, you may ask, what about a virus? Are not viruses also part of God's creation, and don't you have to in some way marvel at their adaptability, their ingenuity in finding ways to spread themselves around the globe? Well, here is where I take a stand firmly as part of my own species, homo sapiens, and declare – *no*, I will not “marvel” at this bringer of death. Many scientist think it has erupted as a result of things being out of place, from humans encroaching on the terrain of wild creatures (probably bats in this instance), as a result of our not respecting the band of wilderness that we have to allow between them and us, and also as a result of our hopping, skipping and jumping around the globe in a way and with an ease and speed that we humans were not created for. We have erased the buffer zones between so many wild creatures and ourselves; we have lost buffers between varying human populations, so that no virus-outbreak can be contained.

It is a dangerous world we are living in, and yet it has ever been thus: in the past the dangers were starvation, childbirth, and infant/child mortality (just to name a few). Today they are the pandemic, opioid overdose, suicide, and gun violence (particularly in this country). And the more I read, the more I realize that mass murders and genocide have been a constant somewhere on the face of the globe throughout human history. Currently, there is a genocidal ruler in Syria, a systematic oppression/ethnic cleansing-campaign still going on in Myanmar, a massive effort to wipe out millions of Uighur Muslims in China, and ongoing deadly ethnic/religious tensions in many other parts of the world.

What to do? I have no grand answer, except to not lose hope. Keep contributing to organizations that try to do good. Keep looking, and loving, the world that we are privileged to see. Do not succumb to gloom – celebrate the beauty around you. But at the same time, as the bride and groom who, with the breaking of a glass remember the destruction of Jerusalem at their most joyful moment under the *chuppah*, remember that no one is absolved of trying to relieve some of the suffering of the world, of the duty to make the world at least a little bit better for someone, or for some of God’s creatures.

We will never know why God decided to create us, or to create anything, for that matter. But we do know that those who live their lives with a sense of *purpose* live happier, more fruitful days during whatever amount of time they have here. I wish you all health, happiness, and a deep sense of purpose and fulfillment during this difficult period – and beyond!



A cluster of pomegranates hanging over a garden wall on a side street in Jerusalem, summer 2018.

Thursday, August 6th

Today is the 75th anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima, Japan. And on this past Tuesday evening a huge accidental explosion went off at the port of Beirut,

Lebanon, leaving hundreds (or more) dead, thousands injured, and a quarter of a million people homeless. I wasn't planning to write anymore this week – but, having finished this chronicle before hearing of the disaster in Beirut, I felt it was necessary to acknowledge this terrible tragedy for a city of 6 million that has dealt with so much disaster and violence over the last half a century. The powers that be apparently were warned over and over that the warehouse in which they were stockpiling approximately 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate since 2014 was a disaster waiting to happen (how it got there is complicated, but suffice it to say that it had to do with an unsafe ship and its cargo passing through the port). No one planned this explosion (as far as we know); but an extremely dysfunctional, corrupt government failed to rid the port of this dangerous stockpile, and so the disaster happened.

The world is filled with so much suffering, and so much of it needless; it could have been prevented. It seems to me that this is the case with climate change as well. But too often the “powers that be” are too entrenched in the power structure that they feed off of to act sufficiently, or in time.

O Master of the Universe, Blessed Holy One, have mercy on your stumbling children! And may we grow more adept at helping one another, and ourselves, before it is too late.