Corona Chronicle, Week 5

Friday, April 17

Day Nine of Sefirat ha-Omer (the Counting of the Omer).

The practice of “counting the Omer” seems rather arcane in today’s world – a practice that goes back to the Torah’s injunction that Israel count off seven weeks of days from the first time they put the sickle to the new barley harvest until the 49th day (which would be near the end of the wheat harvest), and then on the 50th day they would bring grain offerings to the Temple, and all Israel would celebrate the harvest festival of Shavuot (which means “weeks”). An omer was a sheaf of grain, and in ancient Israel the practice was to “wave” a sheaf each day until reaching the end of the seven weeks.

Some time after the Second Temple was destroyed (in 70 CE), the Rabbis decided that the counting should begin irrespective of the harvest (and of the fact that there was no temple to bring offerings to) on the second night of Pesach. For us in the Diaspora, it is first said at the end of the second Seder. Now I confess that I have never been good at this omer-counting practice. I always forget to do it at night (you can do it in the morning, but then it is supposed to be done without a blessing). Mark, being more of a night-person, is much more successful at the practice than I. But there are people who really go deeply into this omer-counting as a spiritual practice, conducting special text-studies or meditations each day that correspond somehow to the spiritual significance of the number of the day (which is related to the Hebrew letters that are used as numbers).

I look on from afar with admiration for my colleagues’ zeal and creativity, but I cannot claim to be a zealous “counter.” However, I am thinking today about the relevance of this “counting” because of the unique period of time that we are in now – not only in America, but the world over. In Rabbi Arthur Waskow’s excellent book on the Jewish Holidays, Seasons of Our Joy, he delves into why, over time, this practice of Sefirat ha-Omer took on a tone of semi-mourning:

...Except for the two new moons that come during the 49 days – Rosh Chodesh for the months of Iyar and Sivan- and for the day of Lag B’Omer – the 33rd day of the omer – it was prohibited to have weddings or to play musical instruments or to get haircuts. When and why this tone of mourning was adopted is not clear. (p. 167)

Waskow goes on to lay out some hypotheses for why this time-period was associated with anxiety and mourning. One reason may hearken back to ancient Israelite times when you never knew how the harvest was going to turn out and
whether there would be enough grain to get people through the year without famine. Analogous to this, the rabbis may have wanted Jews to experience the anxiety that their newly-freed slave ancestors felt when they trekked across the Sinai wilderness not knowing what future their God held in store for them until the Revelation at Sinai (which we celebrate at Shavuot). He also speculates that the semi-mourning might have grown up because while Jews were counting in the post-Temple times they all the more keenly felt the loss of the Temple to which they could no longer bring their offerings. He also mentions that the sense of mourning might have paralleled “a spring mourning period of the Romans, during which the souls of the dead were thought to wander on earth and marriages were avoided.”

But the hypothesis that Waskow details that makes me think of our current situation is the following:

*It may have grown up...out of a deadly epidemic that befell the rabbinical students of Rabbi Akiba in the second century C.E. – a plague that began with the omer and paused or ended on the 33rd day [Lag b’Omer]. Alternatively, the Talmud’s reference to the death of Akiba’s students may have been a code-word reference to Akiba’s soldiers. These were the soldiers of Bar Kochba’s revolt against Rome, which Akiba supported. Perhaps many of them died in a terrible defeat during the omer period; but perhaps some of them escaped or the battle ebbed on the 33rd day.* (p. 168)

For whatever reason, through a Jewish lens, this period of the 49 days after Passover is associated with anxiety. While it is true that during this period (ever since 1948) we celebrate Israel’s Independence Day, *Yom Ha-Atzma’ut* - certainly a day to be joyful – nevertheless, this day is preceded by *Yom Ha-Shoah* (Holocaust Remembrance Day), which comes eight days prior to it, and *Yom Ha-Zikkaron* (the Memorial Day for Israel’s fallen soldiers) which, as the sun sets, leads directly into *Yom Ha-Atzma’ut*.

Israel knows that freedom comes at a great cost. And perhaps this is true for all the world: our global community, interconnected as we are through trade, high-speed transportation, social media and all kinds of connectivity, is also vulnerable to the high-speed spread of viruses and other plagues (both literal and figurative). It could be an invasive species that has hitched a ride into the Great Lakes on the propeller of a ship from overseas and begins preying on the ecosystem there; a network of foreign terrorists who can now recruit in America because of the internet; young women and even children who are “trafficked” into sexual slavery and taken from one continent to another; a “bug” that gets encoded into your computer or phone and allows an enemy to spy on you or send you false “news” or announcements of group-meetings that did not originate in this country; or a deadly virus that begins
on one side of the world and eventually spreads worldwide. But the genie is already out of the bottle. We cannot go back to the horse-and-buggy and the pony express now. The modern, hyper-connected world brings with it many boons: world-wide, poverty, child mortality, maternal deaths, and deaths from diseases like malaria, TB and polio are at their lowest points in world history. And yet we are vulnerable to the threat of climate change and, as we know all too well now, the high-speed spread of new deadly diseases.

During the counting of the Omer, traditional Jews experience both anxiety and hope. We remember the tragedies of the past as we look towards the light of the Revelation at Sinai. Of course Sinai stands not just for a sense of “light” but for an awesome responsibility. There is no such thing as “freedom” not bounded by a sense of duty, responsibility, by values and dedication. Eleanor Roosevelt once said:

*Freedom makes a huge requirement of every human being. With freedom comes responsibility. For the person who is unwilling to grow up, the person who does not want to carry his own weight, this is a frightening prospect.*

And I think Eleanor would have appreciated the simple but profound statement of Rosa Parks who said:

*I would like to be remembered as a person who wanted to be free...so other people would also be free.*

The commandments of the Torah represent “freedom” for us only insomuch as our following them helps to create a society where others can also be free. The same is true for our nation’s laws and our participation in civil society. It is not easy. We cannot just “do whatever we want.” Currently we are living with many restrictions on our usual freedoms. We cannot congregate in large (or even medium-size) groups; we cannot travel unrestrictedly; there are many places we cannot visit while we are trying to ride out this pandemic. We restrict ourselves, we cover our faces, we live in a kind of semi-mourning now so that more people can continue to live – so that others may ultimately be free to live out their natural days and fulfill the potential of their lives.

Unlike the days of *Sefirat ha-Omer*, which are a known quantity (49), we do not know how long these days of the coronavirus will last. I am counting here by the weeks, not by the days. In Ps. 90, verse 12, the Psalmist asks God to *teach us to number our days, that we might obtain a heart of wisdom.* It is an existential truth that we ought to value and treasure each day of life, and use our days both to gain
wisdom, and to do good for others and for the world. This heightened period of anxiety and counting our days just brings out a deep truth about human existence.

But even in such an anxious, watchful period, there are moments of beauty and joy. We have been enjoying coming together for Shabbat and holiday services online (please join us!) – the deprivation we have had from forced isolation makes us feel all the more joy when we see one another’s faces and hear one another’s voices – even if it is not in person. As we go out for exercise, or for a drive to the supermarket, we can’t help but notice the beauty of spring making its inexorable way through this time. And so I will leave you with a photo of the magnificent cherry tree across from Charlton Hospital which today is in full bloom – if you happen by, be sure to slow down and maybe even make the blessing (which is traditional to say the first time you see a fruit tree blossoming during the month of Nisan):

Barukh atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melekh ha-Olam, she-lo chisar b’olamo klum, u’vara briyyot tovot, v’ilanot tovot, l’hanot ba-hem b’nei adam.

Praised are you, Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe, for your world is not lacking anything, and you have created goodly creatures, and goodly trees to give pleasure to human beings!