One year anniversary of Gov. Charlie Baker’s declaration of a “state of emergency” in Massachusetts due to the coronavirus outbreak

This week’s “chronicle” is the 52nd I’ve written, since my first one on March 19, 2020. Who would have thought at that time that we would still be living in this altered way – with 524,000 fewer Americans among us – a year later? That number is so abstract, though. When the air-borne terrorists of 9/11 took the lives of over 3,000 New Yorkers back in 2001, we seemed to feel it more personally. Was that just because I was living in New York, or was it the whole country that felt that way? One of my bar mitzvah students at that time lost his father in one of the Twin Towers. In the middle of a city park in Huntington (where we lived at the time) a memorial wall to its victims was erected, with a flowing fountain. We felt the wound then in a way that I think is hard for people to feel now – unless they have been directly impacted by losing someone in their family, or unless they work in a profession where they come into contact with coronavirus sufferers on a regular basis.

But I don’t think it was just this way for those of us who lived in New York City or the greater New York metropolitan area. I think I may have recounted this story before in these pages, but I will always remember that when we took a trip out West in 2005, and got out of the car at an overlook with Mark’s brother Erwin and his wife, Bonnie – we were at the rim of Arizona’s Canyon de Chelly – we stopped to speak with a Native American woman who had set up shop there to sell her handmade wares. I was not interested in buying what she was selling, and yet, as I was wrestling with my white-colonizer guilt, she asked where we were from, and when she learned that we were from New York, she offered her sadness for us over what we had been through there four years earlier!

I suppose the impact then was more emotional, the shock more intense, because that tragedy came at us so suddenly, and there was no way out for its victims. The spectacle of those towers crumbling to ash and dust, it was just so hard to believe what we were seeing on our TV screens before our own eyes. I have never felt quite like this during this pandemic – except when we watched, also on our TV
screens, the storming of the Capitol on January 6th. Here again was an event that most of us could not have imagined, and which felt so violent, so hard to believe, as we watched it unfold in real time.

In our own family and community, we have been relatively lucky. Yes, we have lost two dear temple members, but we have not had the sense of being “besieged” by illness and death all around us – as I imagine some larger Jewish communities have had, especially those in the New York area, which was hit so hard last spring.

Instead, we have been afflicted with cabin fever, some of us rarely leaving our homes, and some of us, surely, with loneliness for real, live human company. I consider myself so lucky to have had Mark and Lev with me through this long year. And then our Zoom services and Jewish adult education classes have given me the feeling that I am actually meeting with members of our community every week...thank goodness for this technology!

Just recently, via the help of Facebook, I reconnected with Lisa, a woman who had been one of my best friends when I lived in St. Paul, MN from 1993-1996. Lisa had lived two houses away from me, where I lived with my then-husband and our daughter, Mira (who was just 3 when we moved there). With my husband having just started a new job (as the Hillel rabbi at the U of MN), with only one car between us, and with me being at home working on my PhD and acting as the primary caregiver to a three-year-old, I used to feel a little stir-crazy. Many were the times Lisa cheered me up and kept me from going insane when the temperature was well below zero (when it was hard to go anywhere with a young child – we could manage the walk to a house 2 houses over, though).

Lisa was a single mom when I met her, and finishing her nursing degree. She was/is highly intelligent, creative, warm, compassionate, and was just always full of great ideas for how to have fun. We shared so much in her small, warm kitchen – I don’t know how I could have survived those years without her! But after Mira, her dad and I left Minnesota for Long Island, I talked with Lisa relatively little, and after Mark and I were married, I saw her just once (in Manhattan), when she came to visit her daughter, Emily, who was a student at Barnard College. Shortly after that, Lisa found true love and married Lane, and we exchanged cards at the turning of the year, but I did not hear anything more until after we moved here to Fall River. In 2014 a friend of Lisa’s called me to tell me that Lane had died in an accident on an icy road; she wanted to let me know so that I would have the chance
to reach out to Lisa, who was of course too much in shock and mourning to get in touch with people herself.

So, back then, in 2014, I called Lisa…but then her “Solstice” cards stopped coming (she was always the one who initiated the exchange)…and I did not think to get in touch with her again – even though I have a hand-calligraphed picture hanging in the bathroom off of my home study that she made for me with my favorite passage from Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* on it. During this past year I have been thinking about her often, only now I realized that I had forgotten what her last name was since the marriage (which soon turned her into a widow), and I thought I did not have any current contact information for her. But then I thought that perhaps I could look up her daughter, Emily, on Facebook, since she might still have the same last name.

Somehow, through all this process, I eventually realized that Lisa had been in my list of Facebook friends all along, and had been “liking” some of my posts for years – only I did not recognize her last name! (I thought the name I was seeing was that of someone who used to be in the Aleph cantorial program with me.) And then I further discovered that I still had her email address in my contacts (it had not changed since before she married Lane)…and all this time I had thought that I had no way to contact her!

I suppose this story is a metaphor for something – that sometimes we don’t see our nose because it is between our eyes (I don’t think that is a real expression, but it ought to be!)…in other words, I had the ability to reach out to Lisa all along, but I didn’t realize it. So after exchanging brief instant messages on Facebook, I emailed Lisa, and this morning I received a nice, long letter from her catching me up on her life. In return, I took an hour to write her back – with so much to catch her up on!

And yet, even though I got up at 6:30 this morning, I felt anxious that it was already 8:30 by the time I was done with my letter to Lisa – I had not yet prayed my morning prayers, not yet exercised, had breakfast, or read the paper (though I *had* had my first cup of coffee!). Is it too much to take an hour out of one’s life to write to a friend that one hasn’t been in touch with for years?

If this pandemic has not taught us that these most meaningful *relationships* in our lives are our *real* life’s treasures – worth more, in the end, than any material possessions can possibly be – then it is not the pandemic’s fault. The fault would be *ours* for being inattentive students. I am so glad to be back in touch with Lisa, and now I am thinking about how much fun it would be to go visit her after this
pandemic is over. I have another long-standing dear friend who lives outside Minneapolis as well (someone I went to the Episcopal Divinity School with back in the 1980’s), so I could visit with them both. Life is short, and the unexpected always happens. It is all too frequent that people put off visiting one another – until the trip is made for the funeral. Perhaps this trip cannot happen this coming summer, but if not, then in 2022 for sure!

I had thought that I might write a few lines about the big interview that Oprah did with Prince Harry and Lady Meghan Markle this past weekend. On the one hand, the whole thing seems frivolous: why should people the world over care or spend energy feeling sorry for these ultra-rich, pampered people – ache for them because some powerful people within Buckingham Palace have treated them shabbily? Of course anytime that notable, famous people evidence signs of overt racism, that makes the news. (According to Prince Harry, someone – not his grandmother the Queen or grandfather Prince Philip – expressed concerns when Meghan was pregnant the first time over “how dark” her child might be; also, a decision was made not to allow their child to have a title.) And yet, ordinary people of color experience racism every day, and have much harder lives than this interracial couple will ever have, so why is it worth remarking on?

Yesterday this story of the British royal’s woes was on the front page of the New York Times along with a horrifying report of the genocidal abuses of many different ethnic groups who are not part of the majority in Myanmar. The Myanmar military, which is running the nation now, routinely grabs men of ethnicities they don’t like to make them carry their supplies and act as human shields against any rebelling groups; they make them walk ahead of them in places where they suspect there might be land mines; they set fire to the homes of villages of despised ethnic groups, and routinely rape young girls and women there. The abuses remind me of both the Nazis and of the Khmer Rouge. Horrible!

And so what is the connection? That this same disease – the dis-ease that too much of the human race has with people who are different from themselves in some way – this is behind both the unimaginable atrocities that are being committed in Myanmar and in the “unfair” way that a bi-racial royal couple is being treated by the House of Windsor. I use quotation marks because who says it is “fair” for anyone to be treated as if they are in a class above all the rest of the population? America was supposedly founded on the idea that to live under the reign of a
sovereign who got that power by virtue of their birth – rather than being chosen by the people – was a form of tyranny.

Looking at it another way, the British royal family, especially as manifested in the sovereign, Queen Elizabeth, is not really about who rules Great Britain. Yes, the Queen and her family live with great wealth (which comes from the British people) and privilege. But these days the power resides in the British Parliament. She is a symbol of the nation (almost like a mascot) – and of British culture. And here is where it gets sticky. Can this family which functions as a symbol for British culture include a prince or duke, princess or duchess, who is half American and of mixed race? What about Jewish, Arab, or Asian? I wonder what the British people themselves would say? Considering that when Elizabeth was first coronated (1953), the British Commonwealth comprised quite a few African, Caribbean and South Asian nations, and that people from all these states have immigrated to England, perhaps such a symbol is after all needed in the House of Windsor!

Just a thought, and not one of great consequence to us Americans, after all – except insomuch as it is important to recognize that for many people, there is an unquestioned notion that whiteness is an essential part of the definition of what is “English,” “British,” or “American.” I suppose I can’t speak for the British people, but for Americans, this is a noxious notion. What will one day make America truly the America it was meant to be will not be the predominant skin-tone of our population, or even what language we speak. It will be the wisdom and fairness by which we conduct ourselves as a nation, the health and happiness of our people, the justice in our realm. If only we can learn to dream of how beautiful and pleasant such a realm would be, rather than fear it (as some do), then perhaps we can truly aspire to it together, and maybe, someday, actually achieve it.

It looks like the bill called the “American Rescue Plan” will be signed by our new president tomorrow. I think that this is a significant step for our nation in investing in the health and happiness of those of our people who have all too often been overlooked – of those in both the middle and at the bottom of our nation’s economy. No more “trickle-down” economics, but instead giving us a chance for an “upsurge.” The light is getting brighter.
Lisa and yours truly in the Hungarian Pastry Shop on NYC’s Amsterdam Avenue in 2007.