Corona Chronicle

Week 55

Wednesday, March 30th

Coronavirus deaths as of today 551,000

4th Day of Passover

Last week I wrote of the tragic killings in the Atlanta area at three massage parlors, and then the very night that I finished that “chronicle” another shooting rampage occurred, this one at a grocery store, King Sooper, in Boulder, Colorado. Ten people were killed in this incident, including the brave police officer, Eric Talley, who was the first to respond to the shooting.

Mark and I both know many people living in the Boulder area. The founder of the Jewish Renewal movement, Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, had lived the last part of his life there with his wife, Eve Ilsen, who lives there still. Because of “Reb Zalman’s” advanced age, during the last decade or so of his life, we held all our Jewish Renewal clergy conferences in Boulder or in nearby Broomfield, so that Reb Zalman could be with us without having to undergo the rigors of traveling a long distance. Boulder became a kind of “Mecca” (or I suppose I should say “Jerusalem”) for Jewish Renewal.

So this killing spree felt more personal for me than so many that we have had to deal with over the years – although I did not personally know any of the victims. I did join a Zoom call last Tuesday with over a thousand participants, organized by members of the Jewish community of Boulder, where we could, to a very small degree, “process” and mourn in the wake of this loss of life. Some of those on the call had known some whose lives were lost in this incident.

And since I write during the week of Passover, having celebrated our two sedarim (the plural for seder) just days ago, I will ask: what can our Jewish tradition teach us, how can it help us to cope with such pain, with such random evil?

Rabbi Irving Greenberg, responding to a famous passage from Elie Wiesel’s Holocaust memoir, Night, has written (in his 1974 essay, "Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire," ) that no theological statements should be made in our times that “would not be credible in the presence of burning children.”

So, very little can be said. We hope that the victims are in a “place” beyond pain, suffering, or sorrow, that they are “bound up in the eternal bond of life,” as we sing in the El Malei memorial prayer. That is about all that can be said. As for the
friends and family members whom they have left here, who mourn them – they will likely never get over their pain and sorrow until they, too, join them in that “place.” Some of them will likely do good deeds in their loved ones’ memories; they may apply themselves vigorously to fight for causes that they believe in as a way to honor those they have lost.

Harei zeh m’shubach. Yes, this is praiseworthy. We go on. We don’t forget those we have lost, but we endeavor to make the future better for those still here, and for those yet to come. The one thing that our tradition does firmly teach us is not to forget! We don’t forget those we have lost, nor the circumstances in which they were lost to us, however painful. The whole purpose of the Passover Seder is keep the memory of our people’s history alive.

We memorialize, we re-count, we re-tell the story of our ancestors each year. Along with those who made it out of Egypt, to freedom in the wilderness, there were also all those generations who died under the crushing bondage in Egypt. Over 400 years of slavery. How and why did God wait for so long to decide to act?

There is a midrashic legend that relates the following: After Pharaoh had forbidden the Egyptian taskmasters from supplying the Israelites with straw for the making of their daily quota of bricks, the Israelites began to use the bones of their babies who had died under the harsh oppression of slavery. They used these bones in place of the straw as the binding material to hold the mud together, turning them into bricks. One of God’s ministering angels, seeing this, flew down to earth, took one of these bricks, and flew with it back to the Heavenly Realm, bringing the brick containing an Israelite infant’s bones to the Throne of Glory. “How long, Master of the Universe,” the angel asked, “how much longer will you delay?” According to this legend, this was the proverbial “straw” that finally moved the Almighty to begin the process of Redemption.

So what do we do? We remember. We tell and re-tell our stories. We work for redemption, for a better world, ourselves, and hope to feel infused with the power of God – that God will meet us halfway, that we may be partners in Redemption together.

Borrowing one element of the Passover Seder, our Four Questions to God over such tragedies might be:

*Why, oh God, did You allow so much cruelty and evil in Your creation?*
Why did You allow mental illness, which takes away Your creatures’ right minds, and therefore, their free will?

How can You look on, seeing Your creatures suffer so?

Will there ever really be a Redeemed World, and if so, when?

These are questions which have no answers. At least no answers that we are likely to hear in this realm. But, as with Avraham – who, upon learning of the fate that God had in store for S’dom and G’morrah, famously asked God, Shall not the Judge of the whole world do justice? – we are allowed to ask.

This is perhaps what I most cherish about our tradition. We are allowed to challenge. We are allowed to ask. We might not get an answer, but we are not required to keep silent.

Newly budding skunk cabbages arise like vegetative memorial flames in the woods at Allens Pond Refuge, Dartmouth, MA.