Corona Chronicle

Week 56

Thursday, April 8th

26th of Nisan

Day 11 of S’firat haOmer

Yom HaShoah (Holocaust Remembrance Day)

573,134 – number of U.S. fatalities due to the coronavirus as of today

64.4 million – number of adults in the U.S. fully vaccinated against the coronavirus

Last year during this period between Pesach and Shavuot I wrote about the tradition of s’firat ha-omer, the counting of the seven weeks of days between those two pilgrimage holidays, so I won’t repeat all that here. I will admit that while many of my colleagues (especially those involved with the Jewish Renewal movement, which has a mystical, “neo-Chasidic” flavor to it) are very assiduous in this mystically-infused practice of counting the Omer, with each day having a different accompanying kavanah (“intention”) associated with it, I am no good at this practice at all! One is supposed to count the Omer at night. Many people do it along with the Ma’ariv (evening) service, and others do it right before going to bed. But I do not pray Ma’ariv on a daily basis (I am, however, faithful to Shacharit, the morning service, and for me, that is enough) – and I have a tendency to fall asleep watching the news on the couch before 10:00, so right before bed is not a good time for me to remember anything!

All this being said, we happen to be living through an era of counting. We count the number of deaths by the coronavirus, the number of infections, the number of hospitalizations – and now, the number of those who have been fully vaccinated, partially-vaccinated (that’s me – I had my first vaccination last week!), while we watch the infection-percentage ratings go up and down in different states, and wait…it is hard to make plans for even a few months ahead, since we just don’t know where this is all going (with the newer, more potent strains of the virus gaining ground in more and more places), and whether enough people will consent to be vaccinated.
Why anyone would want to remain unvaccinated is difficult to fathom. So a few days ago, I did a Google search on this question. Of course we know that some Black Americans are leery of government-sanctioned “experiments” (the current vaccines being technically in the “investigational,” or “emergency-authorization” phase, having been developed so rapidly) – and while this is understandable, in the light of the Tuskegee “experiment” with Black men and the syphilis virus in the 1930’s, nonetheless, since so many White people are getting the vaccine and seem to be fine, one would think that that kind of vaccine “hesitancy” would be disappearing by now.

The truly eyebrow-raising demographic when it comes to opposition to the vaccination program is that of White Evangelical Christians. According to many reports in the news, some of these groups believe, or at least strongly fear, that this vaccination program is somehow part of an “End of Days” scenario, where the vaccine functions as the “Mark of the Beast” (see the New Testament Book of Revelation 13:15-18). These Christians do not necessarily deny that the virus is real, but they say that Jesus will keep them healthy, and if not, then it must be their “time to go,” and they are willing to leave that up to God. Now – even if you granted them the right to take such a risk with their own lives, of course the risk does not end at the border of their own personal bodies. If they get sick, they may infect family, friends, neighbors, health care workers, anyone! Somehow they cannot see that “love your neighbor as yourself” cannot possibly mean that if you are not worried about getting sick and maybe dying, then it is okay to be equally cavalier about the health of your neighbor as well.

There are some prominent Evangelical pastors who have publicly urged these Christians to get vaccinated (one of the most prominent who has spoken out being the Rev. Franklin Graham, son of Billy Graham), but a quick Google search will show you what such pastors are up against: a multitude of drivers of theories about the End Times, microchips being injected into us via the vaccines, the cells of aborted fetuses being part of the ingredients…yes, it sounds loony, but in an era when “QAnon” became such a huge driver of political events in this country, apparently nothing is too wacky to be passed off as believable by some people.

One would think that reports of medical and scientific facts made by reputable, fact-checking media sources would be heeded by the vast majority of the American public. But according to a recent NPR report (by Sarah McCammon, April 5th, 2021, on “All Things Considered”), which cites a recent study by the Ad Council,
just barely over half of White evangelicals say they are likely to get vaccinated (compared with 64 % for evangelicals of color, and 77% of non-evangelicals).

Meanwhile, in Israel, in mid-December, three of the most prominent Charedi (ultra-Orthodox) rabbis (Rabbis Chaim Kanievsky, Gershon Edelstein and Shalom Cohen) issued a statement recommending members of their communities to become vaccinated against the coronavirus. And yet, even there, there was opposition to the vaccine, with some Orthodox leaders opposed to the vaccination program. Apparently, their reaction of distrust of this quickly-developed drug is similar to the distrust among Black Americans – they remember how the Germans under Hitler “experimented” on Jews in the camps. To add to the confusion, some unknown party in Israel was found to be printing out fraudulent fliers (both on paper and online) in the name of certain prominent Orthodox rabbis urging people not to take the vaccine. (It turned out that although these rabbis did not endorse these flyers, they also did not publicly contradict them to urge their followers to get vaccinated.)

In one recent New York Times article (from April 5th) it was reported that several pastors “were forced out of their churches after promoting health and vaccination guidelines.” This article (“White Evangelical Resistance Is Obstacle in Vaccination Push,” by Elizabeth Dias and Ruth Graham) goes on to report:

*Politics has increasingly been shaping faith among white evangelicals, rather than the other way around [Pastor Joel Rainey of Covenant Church in Shepherdstown, W.Va., said]. Pastors’ influence on their churches is decreasing. “They get their people for one hour, and Sean Hannity gets them for the next 20,” he said.*

And what of the role of non-Orthodox Jewish clergy? How do we walk the fine line between staying true to our “call” to endorse the Torah’s calling to us all to build lives and communities where health and justice are priorities on the one hand, and yet not alienate those members of our Jewish community who see issues quite differently from us? If one speaks out purposefully as a member of the clergy, articulating the truth as one sees it, is s/he courageous or naïve, a “prophetic voice,” or a bully, someone who helps members of the community to understand what is needed in our times more clearly – or someone who causes division in the community, and thus will soon be unemployed? These are not empty questions, they are real – especially in an area like ours, where the number of Jews who still live here is not what it used to be. We cannot afford division.
I do not at present have a good answer to these questions, but I do believe that one positive aspect to being a cantor or rabbi of a relatively smaller congregation is that you can get to know most of the congregation’s members personally. When we know one another by name, and care for one another as we would for members of our extended family, then one’s political views just become another aspect of that person, like their laugh or their hair color. We love one another not because of our opposing views, but somehow alongside them. What does that mean? It means that we simply accept that this is who I am and this is who you are, you know I tend to think this way, and you tend to think that way, and for the sake of our “family” we are going to always care about one another’s well-being.

What are all the implications of this way of being? Does it mean that we should never have discussions about anything that might be “controversial”? What if what you have to say can help me understand a side different from my own? What if I can help you see something more clearly? Are topics such as health and poverty, peace, war, justice and injustice off-limits as far as “Torah” goes? Hardly! I laughed the other day to see a photo of a Black woman in the news who was wearing a T-shirt that read “Justice ain’t political – it’s Biblical!”

But sometimes, like Aaron the High Priest, who was known both as the one who allowed the manufacture of the Golden Calf (to keep the people engaged when they were getting restless after Moses’ long stay up atop Mt. Sinai) and praised by our tradition as a “lover of peace,” well, sometimes, perhaps one has to do some tough discerning as to which thing is more advantageous to the community. I admit that I haven’t figured all this out yet.

And today is Yom HaShoah. I shudder to imagine what it would have been like for Christian pastors and other Christian clergy at the beginning of the Nazi regime – and even for Jewish clergy, who perhaps in the regime’s early stage might not have realized how absolutely dire the situation was for all Jews. To cry out, or not to cry out? A “prophet” would only attract attention to him/herself, probably getting killed or otherwise silenced, and perhaps attracting attention to their church or shul-community, so that others would be hurt or even killed as well, or even if not, left without a religious leader, so what did they accomplish?

It is easy for us to criticize silent Christians or scared Jews from an eighty-year distance – why didn’t they say something? Why didn’t they object? Why didn’t they protest, take a stand against the Nazis? And of course some did. But the ones
who we now know were more successful at saving lives did not speak out boldly – instead they found more surreptitious ways to subvert the Nazi regime. Today in our Yom HaShoah service we will be focusing on the life and heroic work of the Japanese Consul in Lithuania, Chiune Sugihara, who saved over 6,000 Jews from the Nazis by writing them illegal visas. He did not broadcast his opposition to Hitler – how could he? Japan was Hitler’s ally! Nor did he resign his post in opposition to his own nation’s alignment. Instead he used his position and quietly did as much as he could to save as many individual lives as he could for as long as he could.

But if more people had spoken out before Hitler built up so much power, could they have stopped him? Was it a matter of cowardice, or of people being blindsided? I am certainly not one who can answer such questions. One could just as well ask whether, if the Rev. Martin Luther King had been more “careful” he could have stayed alive, and thus done more for Black Americans over time.

Who can say? Certainly King had a profound impact, although he died so young. On the other hand, one of the few German Protestant pastors to publicly oppose Nazism, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, despite his valiant efforts to lead a Church that stood against Nazism, and despite his going so far as to be part of a plot to assassinate Hitler, he actually had little impact on the regime itself. It was the Allied Forces, not Bonhoeffer’s “Confessing Church” that brought Hitler and his forces down. Bonhoeffer was eventually imprisoned and executed by the Nazi government. His writings, however, did have a profound impact on Christians that came after them – one of them being Dr. King himself.

So I suppose we just cannot know what impact our lives, our words – spoken or written – and our actions may have on others, and on events as they unfold in this world. We can only search our consciences, our hearts, and use whatever measure of wisdom we have been granted to walk that line to the best of our ability. One thing we can take away from the Holocaust is this: we cannot rely on God to intervene or necessarily save our lives in this world. But we can live our lives with integrity, and, if we must go to our deaths, keep our humanity, our dignity, our love of truth and justice intact. Nevertheless, when we have a choice, we should always lean towards life!
Magnolia tree behind the Fall River Historical Association building blooming on Yom HaShoah.