Vayak’hel-pekudei dvar March 21, 2020

The word that comes to mind now, Thursday night, is plague. Camus’s *La peste*, written after World War II, where the confinement and fear of contact were used as metaphors to express the feelings of the Left about a world taken over by fascism. How did Mussolini come to power in Italy, Franco in Spain, Hitler in Germany, and then, what most people have forgotten, all the other regimes in Europe that became collaborators with the Nazis, like Petain in France, the Iron Guard in Romania, and dozens of others in the world.

The outstanding communist Italian intellectual of the period was Gramsci, who wound up imprisoned under Mussolini. He struggled to understand why workers, who had forged the foundation for a Communist workers’ movement in the 1920s would have turned to Mussolini’s populist regime. We would say, nowadays, in milder terms, why did Reagan turn democratic workers into Reagan democrats, or Trump the workers of the rust belt here. For Gramsci the consent of the workers was won through ideological persuasion more than physical force; manufactured consent he called it. The result was hegemony, a rule by the dominant regime’s values, not by democratic participation.

Here is a brief wiki-type definition of manufactured consent: “Antonio Gramsci was an Italian neo-Marxist and was the first to use the term hegemony in relation to the control of ideas in society. Dominant ideas are not simply enforced, they maintain dominance through consent. Consent is therefore developed through education, culture and the media.” I don’t know what manufactures consent in our society: we are radically divided, but those who opt for Trump are generally different from many of us on the left, and they have a fervid belief in his view of the world, of America’s greatness, of the threats to that greatness, of the need to act with force to sustain America’s position, and by extension, their own place in the world. I know this is not true for all Republicans, but I see it as the backbone of his movement. In part it is a regime grounded in fear, but also in faith in the nationalist values that his supporters associate with what is positive in their lives. Their consent is not imposed by force. But neither does our parshah speak of consent based on fear.

The parshah begins with Moses’s call for those of generous hearts, נְדִיב לִבּו, to contribute voluntarily in the making of the mishkan; that their goods, be they gold or gems or wool, and labor, skills imparted by god, be put to good use to construct an edifice to be the meeting place with god, where the priests could offer sacrifices to god, where Moses could meet with god; a space that somehow would confer a specialness on the community so that god would lead them forward through the wilderness. We are talking here of consent in the sense of an ideological transformation of a people and their purpose in life, not an actual construction. Or we could say that every architectural structure, built of brick and mortar, of concrete and block and wood and nail, constructs more than a material edifice, but a psychological and spiritual space, sometimes a home, sometimes a temple, a prison, a school, a grocery store, in which we eventually come to live our lives. There is no more complete trade than that of the architect who studies how to build a building, and when given free rein, creates beauty, works with inspiration, but also, even more, within the limits of codes and materials, with cost and desires to be calculated. Building even the tallest building has to be undertaken within the budget.

This coronaflu epidemic is manufacturing our consent to change our lives, our relations, our expectations of the government as well as of other people so that they will act so as not to endanger us. We do have fear, many of us, especially our minyan members who think of their age and their grandchildren in the same breath. Some like me cannot help but be angry at young people whose insouciance marks considerable dangers for us, if not for them. Crowds of MSU students gathering in festive mode at the Riv to get drunk on $2 Corona beers; crowds of young people in festive array along the banks of the Seine River, or NY’s beaches. A holiday heightened by the ghoulish figures of those whose deaths are mounting rapidly around the world, especially today in Italy; mounting rapidly in Spain; and even growing here in Michigan. I am aware of the numbers of infected people in Ingham County, and as Liz and I shopped in Kroger’s today, we anxiously left as the numbers of shoppers were higher than we expected; came home, and washed our hands. I am not a big handwasher. But I’ve learned to change.

In the NYTimes editorial today, a young woman doctor wrote about the stress in contemplating the sky falling in, realizing what the numbers of infected and dying in New York meant. The comments in response were of two sorts. The first were like those who responded to Moses’s appeal to the generous and wise, and one woman wrote: “I was raised by a father who had survived the Spanish Flu Pandemic...he saw wagons of his dead neighbors' bodies roll by his house in rural Tennessee. He had survived 2 wars as a career Army medic before I was born. He cleaned up mass human wreckage in Nagasaki just days after the bomb. He watched children kill soldiers as he brought the first penicillin into ice cold Korea. He instilled in me that RESPECT for ALL others and community contribution were the absolute musts for a satisfying and safe life. He had learned those lessons in very dramatic ways. He believed that racism, fear ignorance and greed were the ultimate evils of mankind. Thank you Daddy. I have used your lessons all my life...now more than ever.” Her comment was matched by others who detailed how they were now making masks at home, and offering to help those in need.

Alternatively, others wrote: “No, the sky is not falling and shame on the New York Times for publishing one woman's scare story when people are trying to cope with a virus that has upended their lives. We need common sense strategies and doses of humor to deal with the onslaught of COVID-19 and not alarmist commentary that could result in mass panic. Ever heard of the expression: This too will pass? The virus will end as it apparently has in China.” Another added, perhaps after having had her drink at the Riv: “I had Covid-19 very early. These alarmist articles are unhelpful. We have a vulnerable population that needs to be protected. Everyone else should get infected to build herd immunity. This is not the plague. It’s a bad cold.”

Imagine Amalek as being the plague; or alternatively, a bad cold. The parshah leaves aside the vision of consent by force with the golden calf incident, when Moses had earlier commanded those for god to slaughter all those who opposed him. Here the emphasis is clearly on giving, not compulsion:

22The men came with the women; every generous hearted person brought bracelets and earrings and rings and buckles, all kinds of golden objects, and every man who waved a waving of gold to the Lord.

23And every man with whom was found blue, purple, or crimson wool, linen, goat hair, ram skins dyed red or tachash skins, brought them.

24Everyone who set aside an offering of silver or copper brought the offering for the Lord, and everyone with whom acacia wood was found for any work of the service, brought it.

25And every wise hearted woman spun with her hands, and they brought spun material: blue, purple, and crimson wool, and linen.

26And all the women whose hearts uplifted them with wisdom, spun the goat hair.

27And the princes brought the shoham stones and filling stones for the ephod and for the choshen;

28and the spice and the oil for lighting and for the anointing oil, and for the incense.

29Every man and woman whose heart inspired them to generosity to bring for all the work that the Lord had commanded to make, through Moses, the children of Israel brought a gift for the Lord

The beautiful spirit of giving is matched by this other comment in the Times: “My daughter is a Resident in Internal Medicine in a New York Hospital and, like you, she has been "channelling her inner Greta" as she calls it, in an attempt to get enough Personal Protective Equipment. As you said, this is no time to sit back. The sky is falling. As for me, I've been making masks so at least she's not completely exposed if the health system fails to adequately protect her. I am making extras. So if you see a young doctor with a red mask with a heart sewn on, ask her if she has an extra. I know she'll give you one.”

Shabbat shalom.