



Murder Hornets

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In case we did not have enough to worry about, earlier this month news broke about a whole new out-of-left field threat: murder hornets. If their name itself does not do it, the description of these vicious insects is enough to send shivers up the spine. The nearly 2-inch predators can singlehandedly destroy the entire population of a honeybee hive in a most gruesome manner within the span of just a few hours.

So far, the American honeybee population, which was already waning (remember the “Save the Bees” campaigns of previous years?), have absolutely no recourse. The so-called murder hornets are impervious to their stings. The bees cannot flee far enough or fast enough, and they cannot protect their queen.

The articles warn that if we do not act quickly to prevent these foreign invaders from establishing a foothold in America, they will devastate not only honeybees, but all the fruits and flowers that rely on them for pollination. A catastrophe in the making! Not only that, but in Japan, where murder hornets originate, 50 people per year also die from their brutal stings.

In the days since the story broke, “murder hornets” have become an internet meme. One memorably shows two calendar pages: “April: ‘At least it can’t get any worse.’ May: ‘Murder Hornets.’”

Beneath the jokes, you may ask, what would possess me to bring up such a grim topic on this beautiful, celebratory morning in shul? It’s worrisome – and we don’t need more worrisome. It comes with a familiar warning – if we can track, contain, quarantine and quash this threat while it is small and isolated, we have a chance to stop it, but if we can’t, oy! Perhaps most importantly – there is absolutely nothing you or I or almost anyone other than wasp experts can do to stop the murder hornets in their tracks.

When the news first broke, and my kids anxiously brought it up around the kitchen table, I have to admit I wanted to have words with the journalists. What kind of sadist puts murder hornets – a concrete manifestation of all our nightmares -- on the front page now? What's more, people are sick and dying all over our country, losing jobs and businesses, there are broken supply chains and shortages we can see with our own eyes at our local grocery stores, and we are experiencing real anxieties and uncertainties that go so far beyond imported hornets. So why do I bring them up here on Shabbat?

Because of a little article that appeared a few days ago. It did not make front-page news or have nearly the splash value of the original news about murder hornets, but the recent article was an important coda. It turns out that over time, Japanese honeybees have developed an unbelievable adaptive technique to conquer the seemingly impervious hornets. As soon as a murder hornet enters their hive, the Japanese honeybees swarm into a big huddle, raising the temperature around them with rapid body vibration, until the hornet is “cooked.” Attacking alone, the honeybees stand no chance. The only way to do it is together.

As we enter the graduation weekend that wasn't, this side of the murder hornet story feels like a metaphor for our moment. On Sunday, like many of you, I was supposed to be sitting in the hot sun watching my favorite member of the class of 2020, my nephew Mitchell, graduate. That is not happening. But you know what did? An adaptive shift that included personally delivered lawn signs and a moving car-parade through multiple cities and towns past every single graduate's home, with family and friends honking, waving, and playing musical tributes.

As I watched Facebook's national graduation ceremony yesterday with its scrolling screen of names from high school and college students across the country, one speaker called this year's class the “unified generation.” Ironically, at this most isolated moment, the only way to do graduation was together. While every previous graduation has been parochial and particular, this year the move is every school, every student, united. Imagine that, post-coronavirus, as a template for rebuilding our broken world.

This morning people are joining our service from all over the country, coming together because of you, Orly and Rachel. From your living rooms, you are the modern iteration of an ancient Jewish art – adapting to the moment we find ourselves in.

When the Temple was destroyed in the year 70 CE and the priests could no longer offer sacrifices, Judaism could have fallen apart. But we did not. Instead, the rabbinic system reimagined what worship is. You both did exactly that today. You rose to this moment, and the whole Jewish people rises with you.

In this moment, which calls for that ancient adaptive capacity to be renewed, I want to share with you a story that ran this week in the New York Times about Cornelia Vertenstein. At 92 years old, she has been teaching piano for more than 50 years. Every week for the last half-century, students young and old came to her home for their lessons. As the Times reported, “They practiced for an hour at the Chickering & Sons piano that [she] and her former husband, both Holocaust survivors...bought for \$600 in 1965.” Her students played the classics. They learned by time-tested methods that she had been using since she first started teaching piano back in Romania at the age of 14. If ever there was a template for resistance to change, it was Cornelia Vertenstein.

But when coronavirus hit, the 92-year-old surprised her students by learning to use FaceTime – insisting her students set up cameras angled at the piano, and come prepared at their appointed hour with piano, books, and a pencil to take notes ready. She didn’t miss a beat. When it became clear that in-person recitals would not be happening, she arranged a virtual recital, recording this message:

“With great pride, I introduce my students who prepared themselves with discipline and determination in difficult circumstances. When I was a little girl, I could not go to public schools because of my religion. And they created a little school in the basement of an old building, which sometimes had heat and sometimes didn’t. Great minds and achievements came out of that school, which taught me that in any situation you can strive, learn, look ahead, and have dreams.”

And that is what she does. Making music transformed her relationship with her students, from one where they paraded through her home, to one where they opened their homes and shared their worlds with her, bringing them closer.

Making a virtual recital happen – which included one of the parents giving her a Zoom tutorial so she could participate – transformed her students and their families from individuals with a transactional relationship, there to learn music and leave, to a community bound by their care for her. The day after the recital, she was back to her lessons with them, looking ahead – as she has been, the Times story concludes, “every day since.”

There is much the coronavirus has taken from us – but so much that it cannot.

The moment we are living in today calls for adaptive change. Let us meet it like Japanese honeybees: together.

Shabbat Shalom.