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## ***The Coronavirus Exceptional Days: From the Anthropologist's Personal Perspective***

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Nearly thirty years ago I published a paper titled 'Exceptional Experiences in Everyday Life' (*Cultural Anthropology*, 7 (2) 1992: 232-243). It was then an unusual piece of writing unrelated to my ethnographic engagements. The experiences in that record related to encounters with unforgettable, seemingly 'extraordinary' incidents in my life history, defined as 'typically have an arbitrary beginning and ending out of the stream of chronological temporality. Although these events usually lack any relationship to major passages in our life cycle, they leave strong marks on the map of our life experiences'. However, the extraordinary events I related in that paper seem to represent a totally different category compared with the surrealistic existential experiences, the subject of the present account, recorded and written during the coronavirus confinement days of March-May 2020.

### **Preparing for a New York Visit**

My story started with the scheduled trip to participate at the Society for Applied Anthropology (SFAA) meeting in Albuquerque (March 16-21). As usual, whenever I travel to the US, I include a week stop-over in New York, where I feel at home. Since the early 1980s, NYC has become my anthropological 'fieldwork' site (1988, 1995/2003, 2015).

Although one could already notice the first signs of the coronavirus impact in some parts of the world, I refused to believe that the corona clouds were moving on from the markets and towns of China toward the borders of Western societies. Thus, I made my way to Ben Gurion airport on March 8, as scheduled long ago.

### **A Hectic Week in New York**

Arriving early on Sunday, I was ready to attend the morning service at the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) at West 36 Street, a site I studied as part of my research on gay organizations in NYC (2015). A buoyant NYC experience, but now a sort of an intuitive precaution grappled me on listening to the early morning news about the coronavirus casualties. On entering the sanctuary, I noticed the place was somewhat less crowded than usual, but the friendly warm ambience appeared to me mostly unchanged. After the service, I went with Don — my close informant and friend at MCC — for our 'traditional' brunch at a nearby restaurant. Reminiscing on earlier days, we discussed the delicate dilemma concerning the socio-emotional-ethical borders of intimate relationships between researchers and their informants-friends in the 'field'.

I spent a pleasant sunny Monday morning walking along the spectacular High Line (the elevated freight track transformed into a linear park), viewing both sides of the Hudson river

and visiting the Whitney Museum of American Art where I unexpectedly encountered David Rosen, Professor of Anthropology at Fairleigh Dickenson University in New Jersey. I had met David only a few months earlier at the country home of a mutual friend in Israel. In retrospect, this was among the unforgettable social encounters I experienced before I returned to Tel Aviv a few days later.

My next Monday programme included an evening visit to CBST (Congregation Beth Simchat Torah), the gay synagogue Purim celebration service. The sanctuary was not packed as expected, and I could identify only very few from among the older crowd, members of my research days in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Was this an augur of the curtailment of public activities? On arrival back home, I was informed that my SFAA meeting in Albuquerque was cancelled. The ostensible reason for my trip!

Tuesday, the first thing in the morning, I called my travel agent and asked him to change my flight itinerary. Afterwards, I walked instead of taking the subway to Hudson Yard complex of museum, shops, entertainment, business and residence, constructed recently over a rail yard. I visited Agnes Denes' Drawings exhibit, but the site seemed somewhat deserted. Before leaving, I purchased a ticket for the Shed theatre company next evening performance.

A few hours later, I went out for dinner with a couple of close friends, both successful professionals, going back to my study of Israeli emigrants during the early 1980s. We avoided the usual warm hugs and kisses, and I was advised to take precautions of hand washing in particular.

In the meantime, my Israeli travel agent suggested a return flight home on Monday evening. I was pleased with that travel schedule, which offered a full week stay in NY, fulfilling my wish to experience again the city and meet with friends I cherished.

Wednesday morning, I visited the Morgan Library, hosting an enormous collection of rare books, original manuscripts and first editions of famous authors, poets, art exhibits, etc. From there I walked up to the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) to view also my cherished surrealist painter de Chirico's illustrations of empty city squares, that have always attracted me. Then, I took the subway — not crowded at this early afternoon hour — to visit my favourite Strand book store on Broadway and 12st. I looked for books that might get me through the two-week home-quarantine I faced on my return to Israel. Towards evening, I met with Ed, my close NY friend who had followed my work, advised me on gay issues and also helped editing some writings since my early entry to the field. We had a Chinese dinner at a nearly empty Sammy's Noodles. I wondered, had not the 'national identity' of that popular culinary site kept away the ordinary clientele?

The coat check at the Metropolitan museum I visited on Thursday was closed, an early indication of the forthcoming public spaces distancing restrictions. After viewing the exhibition on Africa's Sahel empires, I walked to the nearby Guggenheim museum (coat check closed, but packed as usual), hosting Rem Koolhaas' exhibit — 'Countryside, the Future' (in retrospect, a prophetic statement about the near-future exodus from New York of those privileged to be able to do that). I was soon informed that the MET would close next day, though no plans had been

announced yet about the Guggenheim. I grasped I was watching the last scenes of the NY visit script.

I was not surprised when informed that the play at the Shed theatre was cancelled, leaving me with the already cash-paid ticket valid for a later date performance. I left the ticket to Ed with whom I had a take-out sandwich dinner on a bench in a nearby park. It was the first time in many years we had dinner seated at an open space bench.

Friday morning, the breakfast date with my CBST friend Jill was cancelled. She had to pick up her daughter who needed to vacate immediately her dorm after her college abruptly closed. I visited the Himalayan exhibit at the Rubin museum; it was the last open day, free of entry charge, and with only a few visitors. Was I the last caller to switch off New York lights before departure?

On my return to the apartment, I answered an angry phone call from my son who admonished me for irresponsible behaviour delaying my return flight to next Monday. I should have comprehended the magnitude of the Corona danger and taken the earliest flight going home. I took his exhortation to heart and called on my travel agent to change my home back itinerary. I spent the rest of the afternoon at the Strand bookstore and took a book I had checked out a few days earlier. On my return, I found the travel agent's message confirming an El Al flight back to Tel Aviv on Saturday night.

I spent Saturday morning walking to meet with another Israeli couple — a walk across town I would not have taken on foot in earlier days, but now avoided public transport. It became a closing chapter of my visit, discussing American and Israeli current social-political issues.

On my way back to the apartment, I stopped in a supermarket across the street. It was crowded as I had never seen before; it was a long queue to pay for my few items. All around me New Yorkers were filling their shopping carts, stocking up their carts with hefty amounts of foodstuff as if preparing for an impending war. Suddenly, NY was not the safe haven usually envisaged from the Israeli perpetual stage of political-security hazards and distresses. I collected my bags and headed to Newark Airport.

In retrospect, I am reminded of a dismaying experience I encountered nearly twenty years ago arriving to the Netherlands for a research meeting. I had to reschedule my flights itinerary as consequence of the 9/11 events. Those events made travel procedure more tiring and time consuming but did not affect the volume of world travel. The Corona's impact would have far more serious consequences on travel and personal life.

### **Back in Tel Aviv**

The El Al plane to Tel Aviv seemed half empty with only one passenger placed at the tourist compartment's three seats rows. In Israel, all newcomers had to enter a two-week quarantine. I discovered the power of modern surveillance technology when, a few days later, a phone call from a police officer investigated my whereabouts.

Luckily, I had no difficulty spending that incarceration verdict fully occupied with the page proofs for my forthcoming book *Can Academics Change the World?* (Berghahn 2020).

But as soon as I completed that task and the confinement period, I joined my compatriots in following the Israelis rule of 100-metres allowed movement from their apartments.

As the Covid-19 was identified as risky for older people in particular, I recalled my fieldwork days in NYC during the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the AIDS plague caused a public scare before it was considered as mostly a gay people affliction. Now, older people were considered vulnerable of the new life-threatening hazard; I was a member of this risky age-group ‘minority’. It may sound an invented horror story, a few days after arriving in Tel Aviv, I was informed that my colleague and friend, William Helmreich, sociologist at CUNY, had succumbed to the Covid-19, aged 74 and in good health. We usually met during my visits, but this time I hesitated calling him, I was somewhat disconcerted about my changed NY schedule. Was this a fortunate missed get-together? I dedicate that trip record to the memory of Willie, a distinguished urban sociologist — with whom I shared the New York fascination — and author of *The Manhattan Nobody Knows* (Princeton U.P. 2018).

In retrospect, I could have cancelled the NY-Albuquerque trip. There were enough warning signs of what was to come. But I refused to succumb to what appeared to be a sort of public panic; also, I needed to break the monotony of daily life at home, campus, national politics, and so on. I admit, I do not regret the apparently irresponsible decision to go ahead with the travel plan. However, whatever the moral lesson of my comportment, I was fortunate, indeed!

Undoubtedly, my coronavirus hectic days in New York and the aftermath at home are not comparable with the personal ‘exceptional experiences’ recorded in the 1992 account. The coronavirus had gravely impacted the lives of millions around the globe. Ironically, preparing for the incarceration weeks, I bought the recently published *Gods of the Upper Air* (King 2019) presenting the life story of Franz Boas and his close students — Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead, in particular — who reflected from their research experiences about their own home society and personal life. I reflect the other way this time, from the personal experience to a wider borderless social arena.

### **Coping with the Plague’s Distresses**

Confined at home for nearly two months in a Tel Aviv suburb, I could learn about the ‘human’ consequences from the daily media reports, phone calls and e-mail messages from colleagues and friends. The national daily news reported also on the growing tensions and violence in many family households and on socio-cultural enclaves effected by the epidemic, the ultra-Orthodox neighbourhoods in particular.

The epidemic perplexity had inevitably integrated into the Israeli national political chaos following the third election campaign to the Knesset within one year. A transitional government with no legal legitimate status, functioning under endless coalition forming deliberations, had to take immediate emergency decisions, choosing a total closure of most public activities. Incarcerated at home, the Israeli public followed the daily two-parts drama news: information on pandemic patients’ statistics and orders of comportment in the public forum, versus the last

bickering coalition negotiations raising claims of betrayal on all sides. This time, PM Netanyahu did not follow his mate President Trump's strategy of dismissing the seriousness of the epidemic. Mr Netanyahu seemed to enjoy his daily TV emergency addresses to the nation, informing about the current disease statistics, warning against misbehaviour in the public and home domains, displaying the proper way of wearing face masks, and so on. Media observers interpreted these appearances as part of a personal PM campaign. In May, a new coalition government gradually relaxed the distancing rules, which had been criticized as over-reaction. The enormous economic, social and human-emotional cost and suffering that had brutally affected many thousands of citizens have not yet been fully assessed.

By the end of May, most public places and activities had fully or partly reopened (not including cultural-entertainment hall performances). Except for the imposed rules, it became mostly a personal choice of the degree of distancing and interaction in close and public sites.

How did I endure the two-months incarceration? After proofreading my forthcoming book, I nurtured the idea of recording the last New York experience, another chapter following the earlier report of 'exceptional experiences in everyday life'. No doubt, I was among those privileged 'internees' who could, partly at least, continue with their usual professional occupation.

At this junction I relate to Albert Camus' *The Plague*, having read it again after completing the above text. I bear witness to a colossal traumatic situation that would certainly produce many dramatic accounts by individuals from all walks of life, nations and occupations, who went through experiences far more distressing and costly than those reported. However, the sheer activity of recording that predicament, as well as revisiting the enthralling week stay in New York, gave meaning and compensated for the weeks and months wasted by the ostensibly abnormal life chronicle.