

# Conversation in a Garden, Fall, 2020

We talked about if, whether, and when we should leave New York City.

by Phyllis Chesler



We sat in their brownstone garden on a glorious fall day in New York City, surrounded by sweet birds, trees in full flower, small, clambering squirrels, greenery galore—and a table laden with iced tea, a cheese board, gazpacho, muffins—all that we might desire.

This was the first time we'd seen each other in more than six months and we were overjoyed that we could at least, however briefly, pass for socially normal. Of course, we sat in our socially distanced spots and kept our masks on except when we were chewing or sipping.

We talked about if, whether, and when we should leave New York

City.

What would function as a last straw? Violent rioters bashing down our front doors or perpetually menacing us at outdoor dining tables? Protesters that make shopping or taking a walk very unpleasant, even dangerous? The likelihood of permanent civil unrest as a function of whoever wins the upcoming election? Wearying of living in a city in which shooting and looting, formerly confined to racially marginalized and impoverished communities, bleed over into formerly safer neighborhoods?

“Ah, that’s one of the very points the protestors are trying to make. Fix us, heal us all. Until then, no one is entitled to be safe.”

“But where is there to go? Do we want to find a rural area in Kansas or Idaho? Or relocate to Vancouver?”

“We would not be able to work there. Who among us has enough money to retire instantly and live decently for the rest of our lives?”

“Why not go to Israel?”

“At our ages? Life is also expensive there for all but multi-millionaires. Our licenses would not allow us to work there. How can we leave our children and grandchildren behind? Would they agree to leave their hard-won jobs, homes, friends, and schools behind and begin their lives anew?”

“I would not want to burden the Jewish state with the care and keeping of a senior citizen.”

We could have been sitting in the garden of the Finzi-Contini’s or somewhere in Europe in about 1936, maybe even 1935.

Unlike the Finzi-Continis, we four are among a minority of Jews who’ve been upset by the anti-Semitism which is rising steadily in our country and in the world. We were and still

are distraught over all the attacks on Jews—Physical, homicidal, verbal, in the media, on campuses. We have known for a long time that anti-Zionism=anti-Semitism. Jewish-American organizations have hotly denied this and downplayed any danger; sided with every other persecuted ethnicity and race, not with their own people, not with Israel. They are performing white guilt. They will never want to leave. Until it's far too late.”

“I know wealthy Jews in France who won't or can't leave. Many have bought apartments in Israel 'just in case.' But they're not living there, at least not yet.”

“I know dissidents and secularists in Turkey who've been leaving. I know about a family of very wealthy Turkish Jews who, as of a few years ago, absolutely refused to leave. Their lives were still so privileged and they are so rooted. I wonder what they're thinking now.”

“I know a Jewish man who has four passports. Lately he has them all out, the Hungarian, the Israeli, the American, and the Canadian.”

“My father was a Holocaust survivor. I wish he were here to give us his opinion.”

Ah, it is always too hard to leave Egypt—especially without Moses and without G-d to “bring us out with signs and wonders and an outstretched hand.”

Now, it's entirely up to us. We are living in Queen Esther's time, in the diaspora, at the mercy of secular Kings and Haman-like mobs.

I do believe that America is in the midst of a revolution, one that will soon become seriously violent.

I also believe that the issues of structural anti-Black racism and profound class inequalities which cut across all

ethnicities and races are real and abiding issues that should have been better addressed long ago—but it's impossible to solve them at the instant. Hasty window dressing—yes, that is already underway.

Going forward, Hollywood promises to hire diverse casts and staffs; newspapers are focusing on ever-so-many race stories and showing us African faces in their news coverage, Obits, Arts, fashion layouts, on magazine covers, etc. (Of course, such faces were always there in the almost all-male Sports section.) Corporations, politicians, and other elected officials are also very sensitive about diversity and are hiring and promoting those with African and Hispanic faces.

Whether such mainly upper-middle-class symbolic redress can help single Black (or white or Hispanic) mothers who work for \$15.00 an hour and who have no quality medical care is doubtful. Whether it can rid ghetto neighborhoods of gun and gang violence, drugs (pushers and addicts), men who both batter and abandon their female intimates, sociopathic criminals—is doubtful.

What about the hopelessly failing schools in urban areas all across the country? Will more Black actors and Hollywood directors solve that problem? And what about medical research that is primarily based on men, not women, and on white folk, not people of color? What about the high infant mortality rate and maternal death rate of Black women?

Police brutality is an important issue. No police protection at all is also an important issue.

We had a bi-racial President who looked Black—how did that work out for impoverished Black people in his home city of Chicago?

We have rap and hip-hop stars, football and baseball players who are Black multi-millionaires, billionaires—how exactly has that improved structural racism and endemic poverty?

What will? Do those who are protesting in the streets have a plan? If so, what is it? Take all the money away from the rich and give it to the poor? Paraphrasing Gertrude Stein: That will only lead to more poor people, unemployment, and a stagnant economy.

Destroy every building, every offensive statue, ruin every business, terrify every civilian of all ethnicities—and what exactly will that accomplish? China's occupation of America?

I am waiting for some answers and I hope to return to that lovely garden again long before the snows fall.

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