Consolation Amongst the Ruins

Thought for the Day
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I suppose we're all counting the days till we can safely go back to work, to school, even just shopping!

Well, more literally, so are Jewish people, who count the fifty days from Pesach, Passover, which fell just after this lock-down began, until the festival of Shavuot or Pentecost in a few weeks time. This for us is a time of semi-mourning, in memory of the victims of a plague that ravaged the Holy Land shortly after the Romans destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem and razed the city to the ground. In a strange portent of how things are today, we mark these weeks by foregoing haircuts, live music, and new clothes. I admit that in previous years I never really understood why these were the things we give up, but now it's obvious how these simple things represent the normality that we can no longer take for granted.

In another weird echo of the past, we're being led to hope that next week will see some relaxation of the restrictions on normal life – just as next week Jewish people will celebrate a minor festival, LaG b'Omer, the 33rd day of the 49-day count, when the plague began to decline. Traditionally it's marked with outdoor activities like bonfires, barbecues, and archery, but this year we'll be all the more aware of what we're missing.

Back in days of the Romans, the Talmud tells the story of a group of rabbis visiting Jerusalem. When they saw the ruins of the Temple, overgrown and inhabited by foxes, they tore their clothes in mourning and wept. But one, Rabbi Akiva, started to laugh. When his colleagues chided him, he explained that he was looking beyond the present misfortune – just as the Bible foretold that Jerusalem would be reduced to rubble, it also foretold that normal life would return. The others responded, "Akiva, you have consoled us; Akiva, you have consoled us."

So may we all be consoled by the thought of better days ahead.