

“A Tale of Two Exhibits”
Sermon for Kol Nidre, 5767
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When I am in Jerusalem I love to go to art museums and galleries. And this past July was no exception; I saw a lot of art, and I’d like to tell you about some of it.

One evening at the Jerusalem Theater I viewed several exhibits – one of them a striking collection of street photographs called “*lo b’govah ha-einayim*—not at eye level.” Children and teenagers took all of the large, colorful photographs in this exhibit. The kids are part of a community called Beit Tamar – a social service agency dedicated to serving children who suffer from severe disabilities. What’s the meaning of the show’s title? The phrase “not at eye level” refers to the way the photos were taken: the young photographers took all of their pictures from the seats of their wheelchairs, some of them using prosthetic devices. So the images in these pictures depict the world as seen from *their* eye level – not mine.

“Not at eye level” also refers to the way the photos were mounted: they were hung low on the wall—at wheelchair level, which means waist level for me—so I was always leaning over for a better view. I was fascinated by these photographs because they showed me what Jerusalem would look like to those of you, here at the Jewish Home, who use wheelchairs. As I viewed each photograph, I wanted you to be there with me to see this inspiring artwork.

Then, on a hot Friday afternoon, I visited the Jerusalem Artists House: a beautiful 19th century stone building, surrounded by gardens, that used to be the home of the famous Bezalel School of Arts and Crafts – founded in 1906. This summer the Artists House featured oil paintings by Bruria Mann. A local Jerusalem artist, Bruria is now 78 years old.

Her paintings are mostly landscapes: the Jerusalem mountains, a view of the sea, silver-green olive trees and stony hillsides. The painting that captured my attention was called “*p’richah u-k’milah*.” Painted the year she turned 70, Bruria translates the title: “blossoming and shriveling.” Most of the canvas is bursting with a garden of brightly colored flowers – lush hues of blue and green, purple, yellow and red. And in the foreground we see an unkempt patch of thistles and bramble – gray and brown, and painted with great attention to detail: you can almost feel the prickly thorns, and hear the snap of a dry stalk.

Bruria Mann's painting called "blossoming and shriveling" is her statement about the milestone birthday of 70 – a statement about growing old, about knowing both the astonishing beauty and richness of life, and also the inevitable pain. Her painting reminds us of a well-known verse in the Talmud that goes like this:

Said Rav Dimi: "Youth is a crown of roses. Old age is a crown of thorns."
(Shabbat 152a).

As you know, the Sages of the Talmud were neither naïve nor foolish; and they never hid from the realities of the human condition. When it comes to portraying the illnesses, the pain and the losses of old age, the language of our Sages is clear and direct. Indeed, what the Talmud says about old age reminds me of a book in which a photograph of our own Erna Neubauer appears; the book is called: *Growing Old Is Not for Sissies*.

Tonight, this sacred night of Kol Nidre, I am thinking about a question that is asked in one of our High Holy Day prayers. It is a question for young and old, for those who are ill and those who are healthy. It is a question for each and every one of us: "On Rosh Hashanah it is written, on Yom Kippur it is sealed: ...Who shall be tranquil and who shall be troubled?" It is a question that's bound to make us feel uneasy – that's what Yom Kippur is about; and of course none of us is able to peer into the future and answer this question tonight.

Who shall be at peace and who shall be tormented?
Who shall be tranquil and who shall be troubled?

But, as often happens, one question leads to another. And on Yom Kippur the questions are tough. When we are troubled, what can we do about it? When peace and tranquility are a million miles away, and pain pushes us toward despair, how do we deal with it? How do we make sense of it? What gives us hope? Questions to think about on this night of Yom Kippur.

A friend of mine – a social worker – wrote of her experience in the hospital after a heart attack. She said: "... I never discussed my illness or problems with [other patients] and did not want to be burdened with other people's pain... A hospital is a place where one is fiercely alone as we walk that road our maker fashions..." (Sarah Lederman, "Interlude at Elmhurst").

Pain makes us feel fiercely alone. It is, perhaps, the hardest feeling to communicate to another person. The hardest thing to share. Pain resists all our attempts to put it into words. Virginia Woolf had this to say in her essay "On Being Ill":

“English, which can express the thoughts of Hamlet and the tragedy of Lear, has no words for the shiver or the headache.... The merest schoolgirl when she falls in love has Shakespeare or Keats to speak her mind for her, but let a sufferer try to describe a pain in his head to a doctor and language at once runs dry.”

You know how nearly impossible it can be, how frustrating, to describe an ache or a pain to the doctor. We have words for almost everything – but not for pain. It can turn our world to chaos – and make us cry out like infants.

No one knows how many people at the Jewish Home have pain; I believe the true answer is: “far too many,” despite the best efforts of caring doctors and nurses. For some, the pain comes and goes; for others, it is chronic. For some, it is bearable; and, for others, it is sometimes severe, even unbearable. For most of us, pain is what we fear most about being sick.

For those who live with chronic pain, the wear and tear is constant and debilitating. Pain takes a lot out of you – more than anyone around you can see. If you are suffering from pain in your back, your knees, your feet, your head; or if you are carrying around a private sorrow – which can feel like a physical pain – it takes all you have just to get through the day. It’s hard just to have an ordinary conversation with another person. For many people here tonight, ordinary activities require heroic might and struggle. And we see that heroism every day everywhere you look in this community – in the Creative Arts and Physical Therapy rooms; and right down this hallway where men and women use every ounce of strength, with walkers and wheelchairs, to get from Friedman to the A-Lobby and 2-West. You have no idea how guilty I feel walking down the hall so easily.

Listen to the story of a young man named Jerry Long, as told by psychiatrist Viktor Frankl. A newspaper account tells us that “Jerry Long has been paralyzed from his neck down since a driving accident which rendered him a quadriplegic three years ago. He was 17 when the accident occurred. Today Long can use a stick in his mouth to type. He ‘attends’ two courses at Community College via a special telephone. The intercom allows Long to both hear and participate in class discussions. He also occupies his time by reading, watching television and writing.” (*Texarkana Gazette*).

And Jerry Long wrote the following words in a letter to Viktor Frankl: “I view my life as being abundant with meaning and purpose. The attitude that I adopted on that fateful day has become my personal credo for life: I broke my neck, it didn’t break me. I am currently enrolled in my first psychology course in college. I believe that my handicap will only enhance my ability to help others. I know that without the suffering, the growth that I have achieved would have been impossible.” (*Man’s Search for Meaning*, p. 148).

“I broke my neck, it didn’t break me.” Words of defiance. Words of hope. Words of a human being with something to live for.

Viktor Frankl was different from the early psychiatrists, like Freud and Adler, who came before him. Everything he needed to know about life he learned as an inmate in Auschwitz. There, in the midst of the worst suffering on earth, Frankl discovered that people were more likely to survive if they had something to live for, if they could just find *something* that gave their life meaning. Frankl himself managed to do exactly that – nurturing his personal project, holding it deep within himself, throughout his years in the camps. And he reasoned that, if he could find meaning for his life in that place of utter despair, then a human being can find meaning in *any* circumstances.

Frankl’s legacy to us is captured in one simple sentence – so simple, and so important, that I urge you to memorize it: “A person is not destroyed by suffering, he is destroyed by suffering without meaning.”

Writes Frankl: “There are three main avenues on which one arrives at meaning in life. The first is by creating a work or by doing a deed. The second is by experiencing something or encountering someone; in other words, meaning can be found not only in work but also in love.” But, most important, says Frankl, “is the third avenue to meaning in life: even the helpless victim of a hopeless situation, facing a fate he cannot change, may rise above himself, may grow beyond himself, and by so doing change himself. He may turn a personal tragedy into a triumph.” (*Man’s Search for Meaning*, pp. 146-7).

How do we do that? What kind of activity or “project” is Frankl talking about?

The Talmud [*Berachot* 5b] tells the story of Rabbi Eleazar, a poor man who one day fell ill. Rabbi Yochanan went to visit him and found him lying alone in the dark. Rabbi Yochanan was a beautiful man, and when he came in, his radiance lit up the room. He saw that Rabbi Eleazar was weeping. “Why are you crying?” he asked the sick man. “Is it because you fear you haven’t studied enough Torah? Do not worry, for we have learned, ‘it matters not whether you have done much or little, as long as your heart is directed towards heaven.’ Or are you crying because you’re poor? Not everyone enjoys sustenance in both this world and the next. Perhaps you’re crying because you have no children? As for me, I have buried ten sons.’

Rabbi Eleazar answered, “I am weeping because all this beauty will one day decay in the earth.” Rabbi Yochanan stopped asking questions and offering answers. He said, “then you have good reason to weep,” and the two of them wept together. Yochanan said to Eleazar, “Give me your hand.” He gave him his hand, and he raised him up.

In the end, words fail; but the warmth of a human hand, offered in friendship – this raises us up. I walked into someone’s room last week, up on F-3, and I found there a woman in pain – suffering physically and emotionally – and I thought of Rav Dimi and the crown of thorns. But there beside her was another resident, completely paralyzed from a stroke and in a wheelchair, at the bedside, offering comfort and encouragement. I felt like I was in the presence of Rabbi Yochanan. Here was a man who had recovered just enough from his own terrible illness – just enough to allow him to help another person in pain. There, in that moment, I watched a man rise above himself and grow beyond himself in ways that neither he nor I ever imagined possible. It was as though he wore a crown of roses. Yes, there is hope.

There are “projects” all around us – whether it’s holding someone’s hand, making a collage, or slowly learning to walk again. There is music to hear and appreciate, worship to share, and people to love. This Home is filled with ways to turn tragedy into triumph.

I know a woman here at the Home who has already survived two meetings at which we discussed her wishes and needs at the end of life; the first meeting was three and a half years ago because her doctor thought that death was imminent. I’m convinced that this woman’s project – learning about Judaism, developing her faith, and reciting the 23rd Psalm – has filled her with hope and helped her survive. She has grown beyond herself in ways she never imagined possible.

When we do something that helps us rise above ourselves, something amazing happens: we move the pain out of the center of our lives. Even though it does not go away, the pain is no longer the central focus of your life. That’s what Jerry Long did, the man who said, “I broke my neck, it didn’t break me.” He took back his life by moving the pain out of the center. And that’s what I saw on F-3 last week.

Rabbi Harold Kushner tells a story about a minister who sat by the bed of a desperately ill woman. Modern medicine had done its best, but its best had not been good enough. There would be no miracle. All anyone could do now was ease her pain and try to keep her comfortable until the end came. Having no words of his own for her, the minister opened his Bible, reached out to take her hand, and began to recite the Twenty-third Psalm: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” The woman’s eyes flickered open for a moment as she summoned up the energy to whisper, “But pastor, I do want!” (Harold Kushner, p. 28, *The Lord Is My Shepherd*).

And Rabbi Kushner comments: “Of course she wants. She wants to be healthy. She wants to be free of pain. She wants to live long enough to see her grandchildren grow up and marry. These are all perfectly understandable desires. They are the pure, deep longings of her soul... I believe that God has planted in every one of us

the desire for more, the reluctance to settle for what we have and what we are... Our challenge," says Rabbi Kushner, "is to want more of the right things..." (pp. 28 and 35).

I'm thinking now about the photography exhibit that I saw in Jerusalem this past summer – the photographs taken by disabled children in wheelchairs. They're the kind of kids who used to grow up, and then grow old, in state hospitals. These kids were lucky – a caring teacher gave them cameras, and now they think of themselves as artists, people who create beauty, people who share their unique perspective on the world with others. Their disability hasn't disappeared, but pain and disability are not at the center of their consciousness.

They rose above their circumstances; they transformed personal tragedy into triumph. That's what those children accomplished in their wheelchairs in the streets of our Holy City. It's what each of us can do, whatever the circumstances, in spite of the pain, here in this holy place – the Jewish Home.

As we enter a new year, may those children and their photographs remind us of the great human project: the search for meaning, the quest to make sense of our lives, the hope that we will triumph over tragedy. For we are more than our pain; we are more than our illness; we are more than the adversity we face.

With just a touch of heresy, Rabbi Kushner fantasizes about rewriting the 23rd Psalm. Here's how he would do it: "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall *often* want. I shall yearn, I shall long, I shall aspire. I shall continue to miss the people and the abilities that are taken from my life as loved ones die and skills diminish. I shall probe the empty spaces in my life like a tongue probing a missing tooth. But I will never feel deprived or diminished if I don't get what I yearn for, because I know how blessed I am by what I have." (p. 36).