

**The Joy of Color**  
**Kol Nidre, 5782**  
**Cantor Jill Abramson**

It was 90 degrees and the line stretched out the door on the concrete sidewalk alongside the parking lot. Locals and tourists alike waited in the sun to get in. It was before smartphones so people did what they used to do before they stared at their devices: they talked, they stood in place and they waited for the doors to open.

An exhibition entitled “The Joy of Color” had just opened at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. I was living in Israel, beginning my first year of cantorial school, and went to see the much talked about show on a morning we didn’t have class.

The “Joy of Color” featured the works of Henri Matisse, Wassily Kandinsky, Marc Chagall and 46 other modern artists whose bold, bright use of color informed the show’s namesake.

I had come to view modern art treasures in a land famous for ancient ones.

Why had so many people chosen to line up in the extreme heat to see this exhibition? Were there a limited number of tickets? I don't remember. Was it a limited run? Maybe. Was it a vacation week in Israel? Not sure. But over 20 years later, I still think about the people lined up in the hot sun to see the art. That's not an implicit critique of art's importance. Rather, it raises a question: why was *that* exhibit important to all of *those* people? Why had they come to experience the Joy of Color?

I don't know the answer and truly there is no way to know. But here's my *midrash*, the Hebrew term for a rabbinic imaginative explanation: Living in Jerusalem is complicated. I imagined that those bold colors brought joy to a part of the world where everything is nuanced, muddled and complex. I further imagined

that all those people lined up to take in the “Joy of Color” were hoping for a small respite from the almost infinite shades of gray that characterize life in the Middle East.

In Psalm 27 we say, “One thing I ask of God, only this do I seek: to live in the house of the Eternal all the days of my life, to gaze upon all that is *beautiful*.”

In this moment in time when our gaze is consumed by so much that is wretched, so much that is challenging and heart-wrenching in our lives, I want to ask: How many opportunities do we have to gaze upon beauty? What doors do we need to open to allow that beauty to enter, even now, maybe especially now?

According to the Talmud (Shabbat 133b), we are to find beauty in very specific items. The tractate enumerates them: We are to find a beautiful

shofar, beautiful tzitzit, a beautiful sukkah, and a beautiful parchment for a Torah scroll written in beautiful ink with a beautiful quill, and wrap it in beautiful silk.

Why make an effort with beauty? Doesn't the Talmud also say "*al tistakel b'kankan eleh b'ma she'yesh bo?*" Don't judge a book by its container but rather what's inside?

Of course we shouldn't judge a book by its cover, but we can certainly appreciate its beauty. In fact, it is a mitzvah to appreciate its beauty! In Judaism, this act is called *hiddur* mitzvah. That is, the beautification of a *mitzvah*.

In the sanctuary, right above the Holy Ark, often stands the *ner tamid*, the eternal flame. Its presence in our sanctuaries is derived from a verse in Exodus, where we read that an "eternal flame was to burn on

the golden menorah in the holy Temple at all times.”  
The eternal flame is a reminder of God’s presence in our lives.

The Torah doesn’t say “a beautiful flame;” it simply requires an eternal flame. But the rabbis add “hiddur mitzvah,” -- “make it beautiful.”

For many years, we lacked a permanent *ner tamid* at Shir Ami, but this year, that has changed. As many of you know, to honor the memory of Dr. Harold Axe, the late husband of our Rabbi Emerita, Vicki Axe, Shir Ami purchased a beautiful new Eternal Light. We dedicated the Eternal Light on the occasion of Harold’s first yahrzeit this past April, and now we celebrate its permanent placement on our Ark.

We might have chosen a simple unadorned light, but instead we chose something colorful and radiant. Its stunning palette reminds us that ritual is enhanced by

beauty. We can express our dedication to Jewish tradition by taking the time to make our ritual items especially beautiful: our Ner Tamid, our Torah covers, our seder plates, even the dishes upon which we serve apples & honey. All of our human artistry can enhance the beauty of our world.

And as for naturally occurring beauty? There is an entirely separate blessing just for that, for those moments when we gaze upon something truly beautiful in our world: *Baruch ata Adonai Eloheinu Melech ha-olam, she'kacha lo b'olamo*. Blessed are You O God, who has such remarkable creations in the world: a sunset bearing the hues of pink-orange splendor; the ice-blue lakes of the Canadian Rockies and the emerald greens of Aurora Borealis--the magnificence of which causes stirrings of humility and awe, and before which we are humbled.

Tomorrow afternoon, we'll recite prayers of *Yizkor* or remembrance. I am remembering the life of a young artist named Devra Freeland z'l. A graduate of Oberlin College and the Rhode Island School of Design, Devra made sculptures and videos which explored climate change and geology through an eco-feminist lens. Her life was tragically cut short when she was hit by a truck while cycling through a Brooklyn intersection. You know of Devra indirectly, because her mother, Rabbi Elyse Frishman, is the editor of *Mishkan T'fila*, our Shabbat prayer book and both of her parents are cherished friends of mine. Devra's work draws on bold color combinations. With her hands, she fashioned pieces of ethereal beauty that practically begged us to discuss them. [Screen share in silence.]

The psalmist teaches us :

“Let the work of our hands prosper; O prosper, the work of our

hands!” Through the work of her hands, Devra brought us a dialogue of color--a gift to a hurting world longing for beauty.

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When my son Eli was about 5 years old, he was painting on an easel in the basement and he said to us: I am painting my *own* version of “Starry Starry Night!” He had come to know the name of the painting because we had a children’s book on art. We all have our own version of “Stary Stary Night.” We each have the capacity not only to gaze upon beauty, not only to appreciate beauty, but to create beauty.

20 years after I saw the Joy of Color exhibit in Jerusalem, I stood in another line, on a very hot day, on a concrete sidewalk, alongside a parking lot, locals and tourists together, this time... in... Manhattan, waiting to attend the Immersive VanGogh exhibit, an interactive display featuring 360 digital projections of

Van Gogh's work which had been thoughtfully paired with classical music selections. The website describes it as a "uniquely atmospheric sound and light show." The choreography between the music and the moving images of Van Gogh's art was extraordinary. How the colors washed over us! How the musical notes matched the colors! I smiled beneath my facemask as the irony hit me. I had shown up to view 19th century treasures in an ultra-modern space. For me, it was a respite from the mask, the pandemic, and the complicated "shades of gray" of COVID existence.

But here's the thing. Beauty only touches us if we let it in. And we can only do that if we are open to seeing it. Let us not be blinded by distraction and frustration. Let us not be consumed only by all that is wrong with our world. Let us also stop and gaze at the bush that burns unconsumed, at the work of human hands that add wonder to our lives, at the creations of the Holy

One that defy understanding, so that beauty can rush  
in and flood us with hope, with joy, and with peace.