

Italy: Where Beauty and Beast Reside

April 30, 2015 / 11 Iyyar 5775

July 5, 2015 / 18 Tammuz 5775

Dear Friends,

Neither Lori nor I had ever visited Italy so, prior to our departure, friends happily shared with us their personal favorites, "not to be missed" sites which included museums, outdoor sculptures, "favorite" churches, best places for shopping, best pizza and best gelato. We did our best to experience them all.

Italy's reputation for beauty and splendor is well-deserved. We toured Venice, Ferraro, Florence and Rome, viewing the magnificent paintings (as in the Sistine Chapel) sculptures (David and the Pieta), marble-covered buildings (the Duomo) and artifacts preserved from medieval and ancient times (Uffitzi Gallery).

I found my favorite art collection housed at the Bourghese Gallery, the "Barnes" of Italy. Cardinal Scipion Bourghese was an independently wealthy Italian Cardinal, a patron of the arts and the nephew of Pope Paul V (1605 - 1621). During his lifetime, Bourghese collected mostly contemporary sculptures and paintings which were, and remain, among the world's finest examples of NeoClassical and Baroque art. His "palace," a work of art in itself, served as his gallery. (Place this on your "must see" list!)

Beyond the art, our trip had an additional focus. Ours was a synagogue trip which was designed to include a special emphasis on Jews and the rich communities in which they had lived. What was happening to the Jews when these wonderful works of art were being created? As we toured and learned, the Jewish aspect of our trip revealed an unexpected irony. And nowhere was this irony more pronounced than at the ancient Arch of Titus, located just steps away from the Colosseum. Titus, of course, was the Roman general charged by the Caesar Vespasian to "handle" the situation with the Jews in the land of Palestine. It was Titus who destroyed and looted the Second Temple,

brutally killing thousands, taking hundreds into captivity and sending those lucky enough to escape, into exile. But beyond the aforementioned "accomplishments," under Titus and the other Roman generals before him, the Roman Legions enacted and enforced the most stringent laws restricting the study of Torah and Jewish observance. Those who did not comply, such as the ten martyred rabbis of whom we read on Yom Kippur afternoon, suffered the most degrading indignities, the most painful torture and the most horrific deaths.

Beyond the sensitive and inspiring artwork through which Ancient Rome paid homage to the human body, the Romans knew as well the secrets of the most awful tortures, the ways to defeat, deflate and dismember their enemies in ways that would yield the greatest suffering and pain. In short, Rome elevated the human body through art. They used their knowledge, as well, to become masters of torture and murder. And all of this comes to mind as one stands beneath the Arch of Titus.

Built in honor of the success which Titus enjoyed in destroying the Temple and so many Jews with it, the Arch has ensconced, in bold relief, the great moment of triumph. There, beautifully hewn into the rock, is the scene in which Titus is leading his legions back to Rome, the 7- branched candelabra, the Menorah, from the Temple depicted as the ultimate prize and proof of the desecration and destruction. Those poor souls taken into captivity are pictured crying beneath the heavy hands of the Roman soldiers.

The beauty of ancient Roman art, art in which the human body is utilized and idealized as the forms taken by the Gods of Rome, grows from a culture in which the desecration of the body, the infliction of pain and suffering is also an art form. How is it that those who elevated and deified humans are the same ones who defile and degrade other humans?

During the period of the flourishing of medieval art, art which was cherished and celebrated by Church leaders (Bourghese, for example), the Church also sponsored the Crusades which resulted in the decimation of entire Jewish communities (and communities of other non-Christians): people, buildings and the burning of books, over a period of several hundred years. The latter part of the

Crusades coincided with a period known by a different name: Renaissance. Is it not ironic that, once again, the heights of artistic achievements, culture and beauty overlap with some of the most painful and perilous periods for our Jewish ancestors?

I write to you on the Jewish calendar date on which the ancient Romans breached the outer walls of Jerusalem, on their way to destroying the Temple three weeks hence, on the 9th of Av. This is a period of sadness and mourning for us. For Jews, ancient history is part of our collective consciousness. Remembering does not imply that we are doomed to dwell in or on the past. But these observances, markers which we note at several points during the course of the year, remind us that we are here today because our ancestors persevered in spite of the threats against them. Despite the pain and sufferings of the past, our observances remind us that others have endured in order for us to survive.

As I left Italy, it struck me that our world is filled, simultaneously, with that which is most beautiful and that which is most horrific. If we focus too much on pain, however, we will miss the world's beauty. If we see only good, we commit the sin of willfully ignoring the pain and privation suffered by so many in our world suffer. In fact, sometimes those capable of creating that which is most beautiful possess, as well, the greatest capacity for evil.

History speaks to us every moment. But, as I write now from Israel, I am reminded that history does not determine the future. From Israel we learn a lesson different from that taught by Italy: despite the "beasts" of the past, to be a Jew means to live with hope, to cherish beauty and to focus on the future.

More later.

Shalom from Israel, Rabbi Neil Cooper