

*(Ann Berliner- Vayakhel: March 22, 2025)*

Shabbat shalom.

My older brother, Steve Berliner, was an artist, a sculptor. He made his living with his hands, but he also wrote poetry and had a wicked sense of humor. Throughout our lives, we could make each other laugh, even in the worst of times. He could, with just a quick quip, dispel darkness out of my mind. We spoke the night before he died, not knowing that it would be our last conversation. The next morning, he had a massive heart attack. A year ago so many of you gave me great comfort to get through the loss and I am grateful for it.

In this week's *parsha*, we meet Betzelel, a gifted and skilled artisan, who is tasked with building the *mishkan*. When Moses asks Betzelel to construct the sanctuary and the sacred items that will go into it, Moses reverses the order of construction that God had said, placing the items ahead of the sanctuary. Betzelel questions Moses about this change of direction, as though he had heard God directly, implying that artists might have a direct connection to the divine

Betzelel forges the temple menorah and the other sacred items that go into the tabernacle. He layers the enclosure in gold, with the cherubim, wings spread out, facing each other.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks points out that the very specific details of the *parsha* seem to pop out at us because Judaism, as a tradition, eschews religious imagery and idolatry. How do we relate to these instructions? Or to religious imagery?

Maimonides states in his introduction to Pirkei Avot, that "Someone afflicted with melancholy may dispel it ...by strolling in gardens, by experiencing beautiful buildings, by associating with beautiful pictures and similar sorts of things that broaden the soul."

In a conversation between Rav Kook and the sculptor Avram Meinkoff, Meinkoff questioned the Rabbi as to the place of art in Jewish tradition. The Rav shared a personal experience with the sculptor:

“I really think that Rembrandt was a tzaddik” Rav Kook told Meinkoff. He continued, “Do you know that when I first saw Rembrandt’s works, they reminded me of the rabbinic statement about the creation of light? We are told that when God created light... one could see from one end of the world to the other. But God was afraid that the wicked might abuse it... (So) He reserved that light for the righteous [*tsaddikim*]...But now and then there are great... (ones) who are privileged to see it. I think that Rembrandt was one of them, and the light in his pictures is the very light that God created on that first day.”

Art uplifts us, broadens the soul, as Maimonides says. Art embodies for us principles and concepts that can reflect our deepest theological and philosophical values.

When we look at paintings from East Asia, we can see the influence of Taoism in the painting itself. Hopefully, you can recall, in your mind’s eye, seeing a painting of either Chinese or Japanese origin where mountains are depicted by only seeing the ridges, the very tops of the peaks. In the bottom of the painting, in the corner, perhaps, there are a few trees and a small human figure below the canopy of leaves. In the center of the painting is the absence of any form, implying fog, or clouds. This absence of form represents emptiness. Formlessness or emptiness allows for presence to be useful. It accentuates what is present.

The Tao Te Ching (the foundational text of Taoism from the 4<sup>th</sup> century) states that:

“We fashion wood for a house,  
but it is the emptiness inside/  
that makes it livable/

We work with the substantial, /but the emptiness is what we use.”

(v. 11, *Tao Te Ching*)

To make this more immediate, if I ask you how did you get into this sanctuary, you will, reasonably, say, I came through the door, but a Taoist might correct you and say, you came through the lack of wall. This sanctuary, and the space within it, would be useless to us, unless there was the lack of wall. We need the absence to value presence.

In grief, born of absence, we are forced to forge a different kind of presence. The presence of memory. I can't phone my brother, anymore, but I can recreate his presence through memory. His laughter rings in my ear.

In summoning his memory, others are recalled. My parents, my grandparents. The absences are many, a factor of aging, but I can be the artisan, Betzelel, who creates a sanctuary inside to hold these many memories, these sacred items. In doing so, in recalling loved ones who have already gone, their absence makes my continued presence more meaningful. They inhabit a space inside me. As an artisan of memory, I am forced to forge a new life without their physical presence.

When I think of my brother, I recollect his influence on me. His love of philosophy, his giving me Watts and Ouspensky to read before I even started college. In this recollection, I am filled with his love for me. I can do this, also, for all those who are now absent, who once loved me. And in doing so, their love lives in me. Let me be a sanctuary for my brother's memory. Let us all be sanctuaries for those who are gone and may their memories continue to be a blessing in our lives.

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