

Otherness
By Sara Eber
February 10, 2005

I am gazing at the high ceiling of the Tournabourni Chapel. Neck craned for an insufferable duration of time, I am trying to decipher what the Renaissance painter, Ghirlandaio, is “saying” to me.

What am I even looking at? I see robed figures, mainly donning single colored fabrics. The characters are old and they are...doing something. How am I supposed to see the top fresco from down here? Not that it would help... I can barely figure out what is going on two feet in front of my face.

Thus began my first real art history assignment, a 500-word essay on the Tournabourni and Strozzi chapels in Santa Maria Novella. For an art history student of three weeks, it was not a simple task to move beyond the “it’s beautiful” and formulate coherent words. For an American Jew, it seemed insurmountable.

I don’t even know if I could recognize Moses, if he were there by Ghirlandaio’s brush. Maybe if I saw someone parting the Red Sea. After all, what does Moses even look like? What do any religious figures look like? How can I write about what a painter is “saying” to me if I have no idea what he is depicting? Maybe I just need to research what the frescoes are about. Where’s my guidebook? Okay, the life of the Virgin and Saint Peter. Supposing I knew the details of their lives then, what would that mean to me?

This is the point where my head bumps the ceiling, so to speak. I can accumulate knowledge ad nauseum, but I cannot find “meaning” from a travel guide, and there is only so much value I can acquire from a church. I am a self-described perfectionist. I don’t like missing the point of things. If there is something that others are seeing and I cannot, I feel a sense of loss.

Churches are a part of Italian culture like fast food restaurants are in America (this speaks quite ill of America). You cannot visit the country without seeing many, and they are ingrained in the national fabric. Despite my different faith, I recognize the importance of Italian churches. It would be impossible to study art without the Church, since works were often commissioned by religious leaders or devout elite. Yet I cannot help feeling like my Italian experience is destined to be unique from my peers.

Five years ago, I traveled around Israel with my synagogue and experienced a spiritual awakening. I do not consider myself an overly religious person, but those five weeks imbued me with immense pride for my heritage and helped me understand the inherent bond all Jews, religious and secular, share. Being in a country born of such struggle and tragedy and witnessing its triumphs evoked deep emotions of joy, sadness, frustration and awe. Each site possessed dual meaning – what it literally was, and what it symbolized. It seemed every road and tree had its own unique story.

I am standing at the Kotel, my fingertips gingerly touching its ancient stone as if a shock from G-d could pulsate through its crevices. *Yerushalayim shel zahav... How many people have stood in this exact place, sending messages of thanks, praise and desperation? How many only dreamed of standing where I am right now, but whose circumstances prevented them from reaching this point? I am here. I am touching the Western Wall.* Taking it all in, tears well up in my eyes and several softly, silently drip down my face. For my logic-wired brain, it is all beyond comprehension. *This feeling.* Even now, I cannot aptly put a religious experience into words. Spiritual encounters silence me, numb me. They are rare and dazzling.

I am at Yad Vashem, Israel's Holocaust memorial. *I can't believe my guide is **talking** here. Why can't he just let us **be**? I can't take this... I can't walk through here as if it is some academic session. I*

leave my group and wander on my own. I am frustrated but composed, until I see the photograph of a mass grave on the wall. The tears begin to cloud my vision again, now five weeks after my first spontaneous cry. *That sight... the bodies... just strewn on top of one another like limp rag dolls carelessly discarded. It's as if G-d decided he was done playing and threw them away.* I did not talk for the rest of the day.

To describe my catharsis at the Kotel or Yad Vashem to a non-Jewish person would not be useless, but would merely be a story. There can be no empathy, no true understanding. In contrast, I feel an instant connection with Jewish friends and acquaintances when speaking about an Israel encounter, because we know what occurred there; no explanation is necessary.

I recalled my trip to Israel during my second weekend in Italy, while in the Duomo of Siena. As I found myself slightly bored after an initial survey of the church interior, it hit me: There are people here having a religious experience. I realize this sounds quite obvious, and in retrospect, I do not know why the epiphany struck me as intensely as it did. All of those emotions, the awe and fierce intensity I felt in Israel could be happening to one of my peers at that very moment! I did not see any tears, but who could know what was stirring inside a person's head, or what they wrote in their personal journal?

The spectrum of possible experiences in Italy is vast. Where I see art of ambiguous meaning, others might be seeing the divine.

I did not consider at length what it would be like to be a Jew in Italy prior to my departure. Though aware that I would be more of a minority than accustomed to, I actually relished the idea of expanding my identity by inserting myself outside of a Jewish sorority, Jewish hometown and Jewish friends. After spending sophomore year of college with a schedule that literally consisted of "Jewish Days" (Monday, Wednesday, Friday: Rabbinic Literature and two hours of Hebrew class), coupled by my

participation in the Maimonides Jewish learning program and position on Hillel's leadership team, I often joked that I felt "Jewished Out." I knew my religious convictions were still in me, somewhere, but something seemed to have burned out inside. I only attended Shabbat services twice last semester, despite the fact Hillel sat directly behind my house.

Since being here, I've pleasantly found however, that my religion remains a core component of my being. Within two weeks of entering the country, I already had a mental itch to visit the synagogue. I knew I would visit it during my stay, but I imagined doing so as a matter of intellectual curiosity, like seeing an historical artifact. I re-read the Hadassah article on its origins, given to me by my Dad, countless times until I had it virtually memorized. I mentally practiced Hebrew in my head, a mock introductory conversation, in case a person at the synagogue did not speak English well but could converse in Hebrew better. I found myself guessing other Jews at the Villa, tuning my "JewDar" on high alert. None of these were conscious efforts, but were simply part of the natural thought streams coursing through my brain.

I could have waited to visit Florence's synagogue with my parents in February, but this mental itch would not desist. I wanted to go soon. Now. By myself. Something about visiting the synagogue suddenly felt very personal. Not that I could not share the occasion with a fellow Jewish friend, but I did not want to be bogged down in conversation. I just wanted to *be* there. What was I searching for?

I planned to visit the synagogue on a Wednesday, after being deterred a week earlier by rain and frightening wind. That morning, the wind still roared, but I was not giving up this time. Instinctively, I dressed up, my unconscious way of showing respect, which made me reconsider the way I dressed while visiting churches. Though not a strict observer, I simply could not imagine visiting the synagogue in a pair of blue jeans.

The wind seemed to shout at me to turn back as I walked to the bus stop, but I was on my way; my little adventure to an unknown part of the city. I had to pull out my map a few times, which I detested doing, even though there was no reason I should have known where to go, save Jewish magnetism, but I was not that desperate to find out if such a thing existed. The moment I saw a store with Hebrew lettering, “Beit Chabad,” I wanted to leap – *I must be close!* I turned left onto Via Farini, and there ... an enormous domed structure emanating from the residential street. I stopped just to compose myself, half excited that I found it, and half because finally, it was something for me; a place I knew I identified with.

As I began walking up the street, searching through my purse for my camera, I nearly ran into a large dog urinating. I knew such things happened in Italy, but did my first Italian dog-urinating encounter *have* to be during “my moment?” The audacity!

Then, as I stood parallel to the synagogue, camera on, I suddenly noticed the majestic dome was under construction, scaffolding encircling the entire sphere. After seeing pictures and thinking it was so incredible that here stood a “Jewish Dome,” I felt the air in my bubble begin to squeeze out. *No! I can accept other places not living up to my expectations, but not this place...*

I knew in advance of the tight security, so the soldier behind bulletproof glass on the right side of the gate did not shock me. Having to put my purse and camera in a locker also did not come as a huge surprise. Their security mechanism, however, did. I had to press a button once it lit green, and step into a chamber through doors resembling a hotel’s revolving glass. Once inside and free of a security threat, the revolving doors opened on the other side, allowing me to enter the synagogue’s garden courtyard.

Despite the harsh wind and frigid cold, the setting looked absolutely magnificent, almost regal. In spring sunshine, the garden would be exquisite underneath the pink marble façade, which, to me, appropriately resembled the Jerusalem stone I cherished so dearly.

The most interesting (and expected) feature was the synagogue's resemblance to a Florentine church, which seemed fitting given the city's architecture and character. Why shouldn't the Jews of Florence have a dome to call their own? It did not strike me as assimilationist, just appropriate. Yet, at the same time, the interior was not as beautiful or wondrous as anticipated. The sanctuary's décor, a kaleidoscope of muted teal, goldenrod and terracotta, did not register as a pleasing combination. The sturdy wooden benches were arranged all around, in Sephardic custom, and several ornate lamps, possibly brass, hung along the walls. It looked marvelous for its size and understated grandeur, and felt serious, imposing and almost elite. The women's gallery looked more like a luxurious mezzanine section than the "cheap seat" feeling I traditionally felt in orthodox synagogues.

That I found the sanctuary grand, but not beautiful, pleases me in hindsight. Growing up, I've always "known" that temples and synagogues are not works of art on the same scale as churches. In fact, I am always disturbed by the golden veneer of the ark at Temple Israel back home, for it consistently strikes me as sacrilegious and reminiscent of the golden calf story in the Torah.

It was, for me, beautiful because of what it was, not because of what it had. To the objective viewer, having seen the sights of Florence that I had, it was not much. But for me, a Jew living in Florence, inundated with foreign religious institutions, it was one of the most spectacular sights I had seen. A homecoming of sorts, welcoming me in the form of a knowing smile from the woman in the gift shop and a recognizable language etched on the perimeter.

The more churches I visit – which must be close to fifteen by now – the more aware I become that I am different. Growing up in West Bloomfield, the notion of Jews as "the other" felt foreign to me. I learned of the Jewish experience, but would leave Hebrew school and attend public school with my Jewish friends, and receive days off for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. I was one of many.

In Europe, I have a well-defined self-consciousness. I am Jewish and proud, but I would not wear a chai around my neck. I am comfortable, unafraid, yet cannot ignore the legacy of fascism and my geographical proximity to the horrors of the Holocaust. My keen feelings of otherness reveal themselves on a regular basis. Though I sincerely take pleasure in explaining to my friends here about the intricacies of a Seder, Jewish history, customs and practices, it still reminds me that I am a relative rarity. In *Comparative Fascism*, the antisemitic character of Hitler's regime is often debated and juxtaposed with Italy's fascist response. Like others, I participate in the discussion in a matter-of-fact manner, conversing about the discriminatory practices and attitudes of the time academically, without emotion. A voice in my head often reminds me however, that all of this occurred here, in Italy, in Europe, and in a generation not far removed. I should not treat it like a historical fable. But how to process it all?

Constructing Italy also reinforced these sentiments, particularly in a passage from Barbara Grizzuti Harrison's book, *Italian Days*. I had not felt such revulsion toward the Italian Jewish ghettos until reading Hawthorne's description of the one in Rome; he called it "the foulest and ugliest part of Rome... where thousands of Jews lead a close, unclean, and multitudinous life, resembling that of maggots when they overpopulate a decaying cheese." That sentence, more than her other anecdotes of modern prejudiced thought, elicited an actual visceral reaction. That human beings could sentence others to that life, like maggots, froze me to the extent that I could not continue reading for several minutes. Though it would be easy to cast this as history, Grizzuti reminds readers that in Italy, "Anti-Semitism is nowhere a thing of the past." Though I have not had any experience in Italy that would support this, obviously Harrison did, and felt the need to state it in her book. I find this chilling.

I am in Rome, entering Saint Peter's Cathedral with my art history professor and friends. Ceiling reaching toward the heavens, the sheer space of its interior overwhelms me. *I am so small*. Glancing to

my right, swarms of tourists are gathered around something, clicking away at their cameras.

Michelangelo's Pieta. I had seen a slide of it in class, but in person, even behind the glass, its splendor moves me. As I stare, this gentle aura seems to surround the glass-enclosed marble and I feel an indescribable affinity toward this piece. It is still the only piece of religious artwork that has drawn any sort of emotional response. I see tenderness in Mary's smooth, marble face. On a basic level, it is a mother mourning the death of her son. To me, that's all it is. It is not Mary; it is not Jesus. It is profound sadness, a young life cut short. It is the tragedy of a parent outliving a child.

Bizarrely, I am pleased, not only with the statue, but with myself, for discovering a significance. I will not find spiritual encounters in Italian churches, and that is a natural, acceptable fact. I am realizing, however, that I can find my own meaning in others' religious art, and a sense of my own religious identity through being an "other."