

Standing in Light and Shadow: Seeing Ourselves Through Image and Text

Diane Palley, commissioned by Edenton Street United Methodist Church
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The entire piece, created by traditional Jewish papercutting, is mounted in front of colored mirrors, compelling us as participants literally to see ourselves through the images and text. A papercut is uniquely suited to this journey; our reflection creates the background and contrast that craft the images. We are invited to consider ourselves as both victim and perpetrator, as survivor and hero. The central motif is the burning bush, a complex image in which fire that usually destroys does not consume. The destructiveness of fire speaks to the suffering, tragedy, and trauma in our lives and histories. Yet, in the midst of this destruction, there remains the divine fire of hope, meaning, and presence. When Moses passes by the burning bush, he is called by name. He responds: “הֲנִי - Here I am.” The first step any of us can take to address the holiness in our lives, and the suffering in our world, is to *be here now* - to be aware of our own lives and the lives of those around us. The Hebrew and English words of Exodus 3:4 are found around the inner circle:

Take off your shoes, for the place on which you stand is holy ground.

שֶׁל נְעֻלְיָה מֵעַל רַגְלֶיהָ כִּי הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה עוֹמֵד עָלָיו אֲדַמָּת קֹדֶשׁ הוּא

The challenge is to find the holy place of compassion in the midst of life and tragedy, and in our own hearts—and then to take appropriate action. The burning bush is the medium of God’s message to Moses: to work for freedom and justice for his enslaved brothers and sisters.

The burning bush emerges out of two hands in the shape of a human heart; while standing before this piece, the hands locate our own hearts in the clear mirror behind the papercut. The hands both hold and open; we need to hold the memory of human cruelty, and then open our hearts so that somehow the memory causes us to heal the pain, not repeat it or run from it. The flames are transformed into a bird—a dove, the universal symbol of spirit and redemption. The eye of the bird is our own eye looking through the fragile cut paper to the mirror behind. The verse around this circle (Genesis 4:9) is the central message of the piece, extended to include our sisters as well as our brothers:

Where is Abel your brother? I do not know. Am I my brother’s keeper?

אֵי הִבֵּל אָחִיךָ לֹא יָדַעְתִּי הֲשֹׁמֵר אָחִי אָנֹכִי

The Hebrew includes the entire verse, calling us to be aware of the fate of those around us, to know where our brothers and sisters are. Cain’s response, “I do not know,” is not an answer to the questions posed in this piece: “Who are my brothers and sisters? How are they suffering? What can I do?”

The central circle is surrounded by flames, which are themselves surrounded by a large Tree of Life. This area is mounted in front of a dark gray mirror, more difficult to see ourselves in but also allowing the papercut images to be seen in more contrast. Flames of suffering surround the roots of the tree; waves surround the fire, nourishing the hope of freedom in the passage through the parted waters of the Red Sea during the Exodus. The bottom of this central Tree of Life is rooted in an image of compassion—two open hands cradling a vulnerable, young deer. The lowest circle contains the words of Micah 6:8:

Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.

עֲשׂוּת מִשְׁפָּט אֶהְבֵּתוּ הַסֹּד וְהַצְנֵעַ לֵבָת עִם אֱלֹהֵיךָ

This image and instruction support the tree, and us, through the lower circles that refer to genocide and enslavement. The lifeless, broken branches that extend out of the tree remind us of the loss of lives and cultures caused by human cruelty. These angular branches also recall the broken glass of *Kristallnacht*, one of the first coordinated Nazi attacks against the Jews in November 1938. The name *Kristallnacht* refers to the shards of broken glass that covered the streets after the windows of Jewish stores, buildings, and synagogues were smashed. On the right of the tree, flames rise from a pile of books, recalling the early book-burnings by the Nazis, five years before *Kristallnacht*. Among those works burned were the writings of 19th-century German Jewish poet Heinrich Heine, who wrote in 1820:

Dort, wo man Bücher verbrennt, verbrennt man am Ende auch Menschen.

Where they burn books, they will also ultimately burn people.

Hanging from the dead branches in the second circle is a Jewish Star constructed of barbed wire. Under the Nazis, Jews were forced to wear yellow stars on their clothes to identify them as Jews; making a person into a stranger, an “other,” is the first step of dehumanization that allows us to oppress, enslave, and ultimately kill each another. On the right side of the tree hangs a triangle, again constructed of barbed wire. The Nazis devised an elaborate system of identifying the exact nature of the “otherness” of all the inmates of their concentration camps. Political prisoners were identified with inverted red triangles, Roma (Gypsies) with brown triangles, foreigners with blue triangles, homosexuals with pink triangles, Jehovah’s Witnesses with purple triangles, and so on.

Two feathers are found next to the burning books, one broken and one whole, standing for both the tragedies suffered by many indigenous people throughout the world as well as their continuing survival. Since the arrival of the Europeans in the Western hemisphere, it is estimated that 112 million indigenous people died through war, genocide and disease.

Genocide, the “final solution” proposed by the Nazis, begins with oppression and enslavement. On the right of the tree trunk, the slave ship *Duke of Argyle* sails on waves of the first five notes of the hymn *Amazing Grace*. John Newton was the captain of this ship before experiencing a conversion; he later became a prominent supporter of the abolition of slavery and composed many hymns, including *Amazing Grace*. This ship represents the forced relocation of oppressed and enslaved people. Chains and handcuffs hang from the lifeless branches next to the ship, remembering the estimated 12.5 million Africans who were transported to the New World; of those, 1.8 million died during the dreaded Middle Passage.

Confronting the enormity of this suffering can be overwhelming and can lead to feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, and denial. The Book of Psalms offers comfort and clarity to counter this despair and paralysis. The words of Psalm 27:1 are found in the first radiating circle:

God is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?

יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי אִשְׁעִי וְיְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי אִשְׁרָאִי. יְהוָה מְעוֹז חַיִּי מִמִּי אֶפְתָּח

In Genesis 28:16, Jacob awakens from his dream of angels ascending and descending a ladder that reached to Heaven and says:

Surely God is in this place, and I did not know.

אָכֵן יֵשׁ יְהוָה בַּמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה וְאֲנֹכִי לֹא תִידָע

These words are found in English at the top of the tree and in Hebrew at the bottom, amid the images of cruelty and pain. Jacob did not notice the holiness in his place of comfort; how much more difficult to find God in times and places of suffering and despair? This quote echoes the words surrounding the burning bush, that this very place is holy ground, that holiness can be found wherever we are, even if we “did not know.”

As the Tree of Life reaches up to the central circle, it comes to life and begins to grow branches and leaves. Above the circle, clouds, rain, and a partially covered sun appear in the sky, recalling the constant interconnection of tragedy and grace, sorrow and joy. The cycle of the moon reminds us of the passage of time, the precious gift of human life. A single candle of memory and hope is found at the top of the tree.

The outside border is mounted in front of the central image, inviting viewers to go deeper into the art and themselves. The horizontal and vertical panels are mounted in front of gold colored mirrors, and contain messages of both oppression and liberation. The top panel pictures barbed wire, symbol of the oppressive

power of both genocide and slavery, blossoming into intertwined grape vines and figs, recalling the verse from Micah 4:4.

“Everyone beneath their vine and fig tree shall live in peace and not afraid.”

וְיָשְׁבוּ, אִישׁ תַּחַת גִּפְנוֹ וְתַחַת תְּאֵנָתוֹ וְאֵין מִחָרִיד

The barbed wire also turns into the words from Leviticus 19:18, telling us how we can live in peace:

“Love your neighbor as yourself.”

וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹךָ

In the central panel, we are asked to be our brother’s and sister’s keeper, to extend compassion to those who are closest to us, who are like us. Here we are asked to extend our love a little further, to those who are part of our community, our neighbors. Finally, in the bottom panel, we are challenged to enlarge our circle even more. Barbed wire is transformed into the words of Exodus 23:9:

Do not oppress the stranger. You know the soul of a stranger, for you were once strangers.

וְגֵר, לֹא תִלְחָצֶנּוּ; וְאַתֶּם, יָדַעְתֶּם אֶת-נַפְשׁ הַגֵּר—כִּי-גֵרִים הָיִיתֶם

This verse reinforces the central question of the piece: Is the stranger also our brother and our sister, and are we their keeper, too? The barbed wire is transformed into roses and wheat, recalling the slogan of the Lawrence, Massachusetts, Textile Strike of 1912, “Bread and Roses,” inspired by a speech by union organizer Rose Schneiderman that included the words, “The worker must have bread, but she must have roses, too.” This cry for human dignity rejects the perversion of human worth and labor that is at the root of all slavery and exploitation.

The vertical panels contain waves crashing through and breaking the chains of oppression, with the words from Amos 5:24:

Let justice roll down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream.

וַיִּגַל כַּמַּיִם, מִשְׁפָּט; וַיִּצְדָּקָה, כְּנַחַל אֵיתָן

The waves break up into drops of water, tears that we shed while working for peace and justice. The parted, separated walls of water recall the passage from oppression to freedom in the Exodus story. The four corners, mounted in front of a rose-colored mirror, repeat the motif of the burning bush and remind us that even in the midst of tragedy, we find hope in the holy ground of compassion.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who lost most his family in the Holocaust and who linked arms with Martin Luther King in Selma on March 21, 1965, said: “The question about Auschwitz is not where was God, but where was man.” In this piece, the questions are about the choices we make, about the absence or presence of our own recognition of holiness, about our own actions, compassion, and courage.