Ripples of Venice: Charting the path of survival of Italian Jewry

Ripples of Venice, which opened on September 18 and runs through to May 1, takes the visitor on a journey across the centuries of the Jewish community in Venice and elsewhere in Italy.

Umberto Nahon saved the synagogue from Conegliano in Italy from destruction.
(photo credit: Zvi Henry Cohen)

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inJerusalem

Perseverance – aka survival – has been the familiar name of the game for the Jewish people across the millennia. Part of that ability to somehow come through, often against seemingly insurmountable odds, is reflected in the preservation of time-honored traditions through religious practices.

In tactile terms, that resonates in Judaica items that play a practical role in maintaining time-honored customs and rituals, often imbue life with deftly crafted beauty, and remind us whence we come and how deep our roots are.

That sentiment pulsates through the Ripples of Venice exhibition currently on display at the U. Nahon Museum of Italian Jewish Art in downtown Jerusalem. As the title suggests, there is a leitmotif dynamic to the show, curated by Devora Liss, as well as a palpable water-related undercurrent.

A journey of Italian Jewish history

Ripples of Venice, which opened on September 18 and runs through to May 1, takes the visitor on a journey across the centuries of the Jewish community in Venice and elsewhere in Italy. It is a seamless marriage between the bejeweled history of Italian Jewry and contemporary art and life.

That has long figured prominently in Liss's professional agenda. "I was in charge of the Judaica wing in Ein Harod [art village and museum], and no one was looking at it or cared," she recalls. "It was kind of 'There's a type of hanukkiah my grandmother used,' and goodbye."

A 'brit milah' kit from the 18th century. (credit: U. Nahon Museum of Italian Jewish Art)

Liss was keen to bring that history into the here and now, hand it a lifeline, and thereby spark the interest of the public in the aesthetically attractive and tradition-suffused artifacts. “Then we started saying, ‘How about if we pair contemporary Jewish art with the Judaica, and then people will come in?’ The idea was, how do you make something relevant to someone now?”

Liss says that the idea was first proffered 20 years ago, gained traction and, as is patently clear at the Italian art center in Jerusalem, enhances the visual bottom line and piques interest in yesteryear tales and practices of yore.

“Now it is so relevant. Now you look at an object from your grandmother’s time, and it’s just incredible! It really communicates and tells a story. It connects Judaica and Jewishness. I’m a great believer in pairing [the past with the present], and that’s how you get people interested.”

That makes perfect sense, particularly in this day and age when we could all do with a solid physical and emotional anchor to instill some semblance of stability and security in these perilous, rocky times. The deeper your roots go, and the more aware you are of your personal and cultural identity and timeline, the better equipped you will be to pick your way through life’s minefields.

THAT COMES across in a compelling and alluring manner in a video work by one of the participating artists in Ripples of Venice, Hadassa Goldvicht.

It is a lyrical work that both draws and soothes the eye and heart, adds much to the display, and conveys a sense of well-being and confidence that no matter how challenging life becomes – and that is certainly the case right now – if you choose the right path and breathe through it all, you stand a much better chance of coming through it in as good physical and emotional shape as possible.

In How to Navigate during a Storm, we see a mist-shrouded stretch of gently bobbing sea, with some small sea craft intermittently crossing the frame. It is a definitively relaxing scene, with a touch of mystery about it.

We also see the texts of emails Goldvicht received from a certain Aldo Izza, who, as he proudly and poignantly notes, was at the time “94 years, three months, and 10 days old” and, he continues, “I still take care of the 638-year-old Jewish cemetery [in Venice].”

That in itself is an astounding and impressive fact that adds historical and highly animated collateral to the argument for a roots-based approach to life. Izza comes across as an indestructible character, full of vim and vigor, and determined to do his bit for the Venetian Jewish community for as long as he possibly can.

Before he took on his longstanding role, for the benefit of all, Izza spent several decades crisscrossing the world’s great bodies of water as a ship’s captain. In his electronic missives, the nonagenarian dispenses some hard-earned sagacious observations, advising Goldvicht about the best approach to finding one’s way through threatening choppy waters.

It is, of course, a recurrent theme in Jewish history, and particularly pertinent in the context of the Venetian-connected artistic venture. “Part of the thinking behind this exhibition was that, like Venice, which endures ebbs and flows, the Jewish people also go through that,” says Daniel Niv, CEO of the Museum of Italian Jewish Art.

“We can only look back in order to learn something about how to find our way with the current situation. The exhibition tries to show that this too shall pass.” From Niv’s lips to the celestial ears...

THE CONTEMPORARY part of the exhibition incorporates works by five artists who took part in the Living Under Water project in 2019. That involved American-born Jerusalemite artist Andi Arnovitz taking four other internationally acclaimed Jewish artists to Venice for a month-long residency.

The thematic bedrock of the undertaking was to investigate water both as an element without which life on Earth is an untenable notion, and a force which, if we are not careful, can unleash an existential apocalypse.

It is very much about maintaining a delicate balance between the two terrestrial polar points, especially in a place like Venice, which is on the frontline of disaster should sea levels rise appreciably as a result of global warming. It is, in a word, about protecting and respecting this God-given planet of ours.

It is also something of a reprise of an earlier exhibition held at Heichal Shlomo as part of the 2019 Jerusalem Biennale, which sought to investigate the idea of specifically Jewish responsibility for keeping Mother Earth as a going life-supporting concern.

American-born artist Ken Goldman, who, like Liss, lives on Kibbutz Shluchot in the Beit She'an Valley, spells that out in simple syllabic form with his Healing the Earth work, which also resonates with Venice's long bond with masks.

Goldman adds a touch of subtle dark humor in The Water Will Rise, which features a gum-booted pair of legs topped by an ornate holy ark-style pediment astride a waterlogged seafront promenade.

The aforementioned Venetian sojourn was based at Beit Venezia – A Home for Jewish Culture, founded by Shaul Bassi. The residencies it operates are

designed to evoke new artistic perspectives on the legacy of Jewish Venice, with the works by Arnovitz and her colleagues presented in dialogue with Judaica artifacts made by the Venetian Jewish community from the time of the Renaissance through to the early 20th century.

“Beit Venezia engages in cultural renewal in the spirit of Venetian Jewry,” Niv explains. “They run amazing projects there.”

An 18th-century silver basin and jug set. (credit: U. Nahon Museum of Italian Jewish Art)

ALTHOUGH, NO doubt, the majority of us identify the term “ghetto” with Poland and other spots around Eastern Europe, the term actually derives from the first designated segregated urban area for Jews that was created in Venice in 1516. Being hemmed in by walls and gates was surely not a pleasant experience for the local Jewry, but somehow, despite the constrictions on movement, the internees found a way not only to survive but also to flourish. “It is amazing!” Liss exclaims.

Niv takes the idea of cross-fertilization between seemingly disparate groups a step further, notwithstanding the trying circumstances. “On the one hand, the word ‘ghetto’ conjures up bad associations, and the residents were separated from the rest of the world. But the Jews, from different backgrounds and communities, joined forces and did wonderful things together,” he says.

That was also fueled by Venice’s geographic and logistical standing. “It was the gateway between the East and the West in terms of trade and connections between Jewish communities,” Niv continues. “And the ghetto was home to Italian Jews, and Spanish and Portuguese Jews. There were separate synagogues, but people mingled and interacted.”

Liss also notes that collaborations between people of ostensibly differing backgrounds extended beyond the physical and cultural confines of Venice’s Jewish population. “A lot of things were probably physically made by non-Jews because Jews couldn’t be in the deal [due to official discrimination]. There was a lot of cooperation between Jews and Christians, in art, in the theater, in literature, and other areas.”

That mutual respectful and supportive relationship is front and center in the exhibition. “There are the beautiful megillot [Purim scrolls], which are so intricate. They show each little scene [from the Purim story].”

The design and artwork of the scrolls were produced by means of the incipient printing technology of the day, which, besides its other benefits, made it possible to distribute copies of the megillot and other written holy items, such as the Talmud, all over the Jewish world. “There is a Talmud page by Jacqueline Nicholls, a drawing of Venice as a Talmud page,” Liss says.

THE MIDDLE of the three exhibition display rooms primarily focuses on artifacts used in the context of Passover and Purim. Liss says she was keen to feature the latter to instill a lighter and sunnier mood to the offering. She feels there is a beneficial message in there for us all at this pivotal stage of our existence.

“You have the celebration of that resilience, and it also gives you some hope, even now. I always say we’ll get out of the story of this war because we always, somehow, got out of these things.”

History corroborates that optimistic take on the present political and emotional lay of the land. After all, we Jews are still around. “That was the story that I wanted to tell,” Liss explains. Notwithstanding our habitual efforts to survive across the ages, she says the current state of affairs demanded a stronger artistic and curatorial response.

“If I had done this exhibition, say, five years ago, I would have done it very differently. You have to give people hope. And it gives me hope,” she admits. “It reminds me that we got out of our trouble then, so we’ll do it again. They [Venetian Jews] got out of the ghetto. They produced and did things, but it was good that the ghetto ended.”

Some of the most important of the museum’s 3,000-plus artifacts made their way to Israel, and specifically Jerusalem, thanks to the efforts of Umberto Nahon, whose name graces the institution’s moniker. Nahon hailed from Livorno, Italy, and made aliyah in 1939 when things began to get tough for Jews in Italy under Mussolini.

“There are 40 holy arks from Italy in synagogues around Israel,” says Liss. This includes the one that sits in the synagogue at the museum, which Nahon shipped here from Conegliano, a town in the region of Veneto in

northeast Italy. Half of those holy arks were installed in synagogues dotted around Jerusalem.

There are so many gripping storylines woven into the fabric of the exhibition and the museum, and the tale of Nahon's exploits is probably the most impressive. "I grew up in New York, where a lot of synagogues are now churches. I wonder what happened to those aronot kodesh [holy arks]," Liss says. "Maybe they are still there or have been destroyed. I find the idea of someone saving holy arks very emotional."

Liss makes no bones about extolling Nahon's efforts. After World War II, the Jewish Restitution Successor Organization (JRSO) assumed responsibility for saving Judaica artifacts and distributing them to various Jewish communities and museums around the world.

Nahon was basically a one-man band. "This is a story of an institution that I find fascinating," Liss says. "Here is this guy who saves all these objects, with the help of some other people." The Conegliano venture was a rescue operation mounted following the local authority's decision to destroy the town's historic center as part of an urban renewal project.

That was in the early 1950s, and the U. Nahon Museum of Italian Jewish Art provided the endangered synagogue – holy ark, bima, seating, et al – with a new home, which is still used by members of the Jerusalem Italian community.

Nahon didn't stop at Conegliano. "In the 1950s, Israel wasn't dealing with artifacts and stuff. But Nahon goes back to Italy, and goes from aron kodesh to aron kodesh, from city to city, and just grabs the stuff and brings it to Israel."

That, in a nutshell, is the core of the museum and of Liss's own work. "It's not about money. It's about memory. Saving memory, and telling stories through objects. I find that very powerful," she states.

Niv says the museum has space to exhibit only around 4% of the items it has stored, but adds that the situation is due to improve in the foreseeable future. "The museum is very small, but it is going to expand," he notes with more than a modicum of pride and expectancy.

"Two years ago, we were given another floor of this building by the Jerusalem Municipality. We are at an early stage of the renovations, but we will have a lot more flexibility in exhibiting the gems we have here."

That's got to be encouraging news for us all. □

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