

## ***Art as A Lifeline: A Collection of Notes***



*The Daily Postcard. Half a Year. Zeev Engelmayer. April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2024.*

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Sunday, April 7<sup>th</sup>, officially marks six months of war in Israel. For me, and, I am sure, many others, the past six months still feel like a fever dream, a reality I am unable to accept in its entirety. Six months into the war, I am still waiting to wake up and return to life as I knew it on the evening of October 6<sup>th</sup>, dancing with the Torah in my synagogue in celebration of Simchat Torah. There is, however, no turning back. And so, each one of us must find something to keep ourselves tethered, an aid to help us cope with the unimaginable.

Over the past six months I have often been reminded of the famous line written by German poet and playwright Bertolt Brecht during his exile from Germany in the 1930's: "In the dark times/Will there also be singing? /Yes, there will also be singing/About the dark times". We *are* living through dark times, and our dark times have seen an explosion of art of all kinds as people seek to make sense of the world around them. Photography, music, theatre, dance and, of course, fine arts,

are cultural therapies which have increasingly been in demand and supply since October 7<sup>th</sup>. In my personal experience, art has returned to centre stage over the past six months, as a lifeline – something I never would have expected upon graduating from my BFA in 2019. I am not alone in feeling this way; looking around, it is clear to me that many Israelis are also clinging to art as their lifeline, too. And so, I hope readers will permit me to share here, this month, a few personal examples of and thoughts on the role of art in helping me through the war as we mark six months of the unbearable.

I distinctly remember my last moments of art school. It was spring 2019, and I was standing with my professor in what would be my last critique, staring with him at the series of mixed media pieces I had created over the semester. The class was a specialized course on using art as a medium for storytelling and narration, and I had loved it. But, I was also desperate to finish with art school. After nearly ten years of specialized arts education, I had had enough. I was burnt out. So much so, in fact, that one of the pieces I had prepared for my final critique was the acceptance letter I had received to my master's program in Security and Defence Studies with the words "goodbye art school" handwritten all over it. *This is it*, I remember thinking to myself, *I am closing this chapter in my life*. I completed my final critique feeling relieved, ready to leave art behind and move in a new direction.



Some pages from my art journal. November 2023 – February 2024.

It is November 22<sup>nd</sup>, and we are six weeks and four days into the war. I am standing outside a residential building in Ra'nana, nervously clutching my new sketchbook. After living with my adopted family for close to five weeks after the outbreak of the war, I have just moved back home, and, in my search for normalcy, I have registered myself in an art journaling class I saw advertised on Facebook. I have no idea what art journaling is, or how the class is going to go. All I know is that my painting

teacher has left Israel because of the war, and I am in desperate need of a few hours of quiet with a sketchbook away from my usual schedule of watching Daniel Hagari on an endless loop all day alone at home. And so, I ring the bell and head upstairs.

In the following months I attend class every Wednesday and it becomes an essential part of my war routine. I am the youngest in the class by about twenty years, and sometimes it is just me and the teacher, Lara, a wonderful *olah* from South Africa. In the first couple of weeks, we barely discuss the war, and I learn how to use all kinds of mixed-media materials in my art journal, my sketchbook. Eventually, we do talk about the war and everything going on in Israel. Somehow the discussion feels less overwhelming sitting around a candlelit table on a sunny morning, knitting and drinking coffee with two or three other women. One morning, as we sit discussing the daily news, Lara says to me, “aren’t we so lucky to have something we can do to take our minds off everything?”. I look down at the page I am working on in my sketchbook, a sprawling image of Tibetan prayer flags and beads reminiscent of far-off places. I cannot imagine living through what we are living through without art offering me this means of temporary escape. As I continue to attend class, my pages expand to include Israel, too. It is in my art journal that I find the courage to express my hopes for peace, to document my fears for the future.



Our space dedicated to the hostages at the ulpan. April 2, 2024.

For the past few weeks, I have been settling into my new routine as a volunteer at the ulpan. Art is the reason why I was able to receive a volunteer position – the new manager of the ulpan, Gili, knew I had an arts background and, when I inquired about volunteer opportunities, asked if I was interested in painting murals and organizing art projects for the ulpan. Of course, I agreed, and now I am back in the ulpan three or four days a week, painting on the walls and adding a bit of *simcha*, joy, to the space. It is amazing how quickly art can brighten a building; every time I have been painting or

installing art, I am met with the excited faces of new immigrants who are curious to ask about the projects or simply want to tell me how happy they are to see some simple flowers painted on the wall.

One of the projects I completed this week was the creation of a small display dedicated to the hostages. After placing a few posters on the wall and adding a small painting of the Bibas family painted by a friend of mine, I debated what to do about the yellow ribbon. Of course, the yellow ribbon, symbolizing the hostage crisis, had to be included. But how to do it? At first, I thought I would just paint it on the wall directly, using the acrylic paints we had for the murals. But then I started thinking of the implications of using the paint, and it started feeling too permanent to me. Speaking to Gili, I tried to explain my dilemma to her. I could not remember the word for permanent in Hebrew, and so I said *kaved*, heavy. *I do not want it to be too heavy*. We agreed to staple a large ribbon on the wall instead, easy to install and, more importantly, easy to remove when all the hostages are freed.



It goes without saying that perhaps the most obvious way in which I have used art as a means of coping with the war has been in my role as arts and culture correspondent for this newsletter. A perfect and wonderful excuse to always be on the search for new and interesting art in Israel, I have on many occasions felt grateful to be able to write and reflect on our situation from the perspective of an artist rather than a military analyst. Every day I see art, everywhere. I see performance art in the act of putting my, now rusting, dog tag around my neck, engraved bilingually in Hebrew and English to read “My Heart is Captive in Gaza/Bring Them Home Now”. I see installation art all over Israel, yellow ribbons wrapping every corner and tree, a permanent reminder of the hostages. And, of course, every day I am confronted with art, period, about our reality, such as the image I chose for the cover of this article, Zeev Engelmayer’s *The Daily Postcard. Half a Year*. There is art everywhere, and every day I am thankful that I can see it – and, even more thankful that I was not successful in removing art from my life in 2019.

I eagerly await the day we exit from the dark times we have been living through for a half a year in Israel, though I do not know when that day will come. Nonetheless, it brings me some relief knowing that art will continue to act as my lifeline so long as I need it to and will be there as a lifeline for others as well. I hope this thought brings readers some comfort.

