

“Anguish and Art”

By Rabbi David Wolpe

Does illness contribute to achievement? Many years ago Thomas Mann wrote an essay attributing some of the spark of Dostoevsky’s genius to his epilepsy. The ancient Greek myth of Philoctetes recounts that the suppurating wound he suffered ended up enhancing his skill as an archer. *The Wound and the Bow* was the title of a well-known series of essays on literary artists by Edmund Wilson, exploring the link between anguish and art.

In Judaism the premier exhibit for this linkage is Jacob. Jacob is wounded in his confrontation with the angel, but that same confrontation creates a man out of a willful boy. Injured, he acquires the name Israel. Through wounding he is deepened, matured, made more whole. He does not seek the pain, but he also does not shrink from it.

Disease and pain are the legacy of an imperfect world. But they are also, at times, the means by which we discover resources inside ourselves that are not summoned by quotidian ease. Do we owe *The Brothers Karamazov* to the author’s seizures? Surely any such equation is too facile and reductive. But at the same time, the novel bears the stamp of one who knew loneliness, and pain. Beethoven’s music is marked by his struggles, and many of Goya’s works are inconceivable without the suffering he endured.

Unable to decide if we will experience pain, we can decide how to respond to it. Had Jacob not struggled and overcome, he would still have endured the pain, but there would be no Israel.