THE EARLY ZIONIST SPIRIT IN PHOTOGRAPHS

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Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons Podcast, passionate perspectives from Judaism's leading thinkers, brought to you by HUC connect, the Hebrew Union College's online platform for continuing education. I'm Joshua Holo, Dean of HUC's Skirball campus and your host.

JH: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons podcast and our conversation with Rotem Rozental. Dr. Rotem Rozental is the executive director of the Los Angeles Center of Photography and lecturer at the USC Roski School of Art and Design, Critical Studies Department. She also teaches seminars about photo theory at the Brooklyn Institute for Social Research. Her upcoming book, Pre-State Photographic Archives and the Zionist Movement, is in press with Routledge Publishers and was named recipient of the Jordan Schnitzer First Book Award by the Association for Jewish Studies. Her writings about contemporary art and image-based media, as well as Jewish and Israeli art, have been published in artforum.com, Photographies, Jewish Currents, Tablet, and The Forward, among other outlets. Rotem Rozental, thank you for joining us and congratulations on your Jordan Schnitzer First Book Award.

Rotem Rozental: Thank you. Thank you so much for having me. It's so good to be here.

JH: Fundamentally, we're going to talk about the role of photography in both capturing and shaping the relationship between people and land, particularly in the context of Zionism. But before we dive into the themes that captured your eye in particular, tell us about the archival source for your images.

RR: I never thought that I would find myself looking at, and thinking about the photographic archive of the Jewish National Fund that was established in Palestine, pre-state Israel during the 1920s. And it was actually a daring question by my dissertation advisor, Professor John Tagg, who challenged me to think about what is my archive? And what is the world that I bring with me to my research? The shaping of life and visual culture as I knew it in Israel were the images that were created by photographers that were commissioned by the archivists. The Jewish National Fund. And I realized that I need to get a better sense of how that archive was established and how it influenced what became the Zionist visual culture.

JH: What is the special relationship between the very early stages of photography as a technology and an art form and Palestine in the land of Israel?

RR: It's really interesting to note how only months after photography was declared by Daguerre as an invention in front of the French Academy of Sciences in August of 1839, that Western visitors, colonial representatives, ambassadors, and businessmen were already experimenting with various photographic contraptions on the ground in Jerusalem. It is actually even prior to the Daguerre's declaration of his invention that we have evidence and documentation of people that were already trying to capture the region with various visual technologies that went beyond painting or illustration, really anticipating the rise of photography. And it's interesting to note how that area of the world... And specifically Jerusalem and Palestine, were at the nexus of photographic developments, photographic technologies and how they were utilized by first people that came from the West, but also quite quickly by the Ottoman Empire as well. And it's interesting to look at that area of the world in the context of the development of photography because it was a crucial meeting point of political needs, aspirations and ambitions, military, strategic plans, financial shifts, all those realms of economic production that have come to define for us what was the 19th century, played out in various ways in Jerusalem and in Palestine and of course in the Middle East.

JH: You also describe an entirely other series of motivations in one of your later chapters, about the role of the photographic technology in relation to military intelligence and what's going on in Palestine that also promotes this kind of keen interest?

RR: Palestine and the Middle East was at the heart of conflicts between colonial powers and their need to control population on the ground. And it soon became apparent that simply put the ability to view populations on the ground from the air provided a safe way for colonial forces to occupy and discipline and control. Photography then comes into the story from that perspective, when thinking about the incorporation of cameras into airplanes and thinking about the early days of aerial photography. Of course this is not just a question of control over population although it's central to that, it's also survey photography that then becomes key to the shaping of the relationship between the colonial authorities and people on the ground. In the process, it also produced a really important image of how Palestine was seen and understood and discussed beyond the realms of the Middle East. In that area of the world it seems that whenever social and political relations shifted and the relationship of control over the region shifted, photography had a crucial role to play.

JH: With respect to photography more perhaps purely as an art, you discussed the founding of the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in 1906 as a founding element of the artistic component of the Zionist enterprise. And indeed even today a quick perusal of the website illustrates the fact that the Israeli visual medium itself is entangled in its political landscape still today. Tell us a little bit about the Bezalel project, in particular as relates to the photos you discuss in the Zionist enterprise.

RR: Absolutely, but I want to relate to something that you said which is, thinking about fine art. Because it's really interesting to see how photography, even when it is suspected of being informed by fine art sensibilities. Especially when we're looking at the rise of the Zionist movement in Palestine, it's never just about fine arts. Especially when we're thinking about the Bezalel school and the way that it was founded by the Zionist movement during the first decade of the 20th century. Bezalel had a crucial role to play within the shaping of the Zionist movement and its presence in Palestine, in pre-state Israel. It was actually key in the shaping of what is the land of Israel or Eretz Yisrael. Bezalel was the first art school that was funded and supported by the Zionist movement, and its mission was to shape, define, articulate, and distribute a visual culture that is based on a Hebraic culture. Something that seemed almost revolutionary and completely new, to build a world of visual practice and visual expression that begins from Hebrew and begins from Jewish life in Eretz Yisrael. So it was crucial for the Zionist movement to be able to have Bezalel on the ground but it wasn't without conflicts and it wasn't without issues and economic problems.

RR: We can talk more about the problematic relationships with students at the school, with how they were regarded, with how workers at the school were regarded. But even before we get into that, just to note that within this enterprise... Again just thinking about what you said about fine arts, in order for the school to be sustainable and in order for the school to succeed in its mission, it had to provide and create and produce and disseminate objects, products, that originate from that Hebraic culture. And those objects were then to be sold to supporters of the Zionist movement and the Zionist ideology worldwide. So on the one hand we have the concept of Bezalel, what Bezalel tried to create and imagine as an ecosystem of a visual culture, and on the other hand of that we had the financial production that needed to be maintained and needed to be ongoing in order for the school to survive. So those two elements always went hand in hand. This really first iteration of the school is very, very different than what we have on the ground today. The school actually closed down a few times until it opened in its current iteration.

RR: The main reason why I bring the school into the book, is because that shaping of the Hebraic visual culture was key to the development of a Zionist visual culture that will then inform the early beginnings of photographic production by the Zionist movement. If we're trying to imagine what was photographic production in Jerusalem before Zionism, halfway through the 19th century. It is interesting to see how photography was there to capture this imagined state of existence, to be there at the service of people that came to Jerusalem from the West, seeking to shed away from them what they saw as the constraints of modern life, seeking to immerse themselves in the Orient, seeking to find a different way of life, with the advent of tourism technologies. That journey seemed to be more feasible. And within the scope of that journey, photography was there to capture them playing out that fantasy, playing out that image of themselves. And that was already part of the local zeitgeist, when the need to shape a Zionist visual culture emerges. And I think that should be understood in the context of how Bezalel shaped its own visual culture and the visual expression of life in Eretz Yisrael at the time, because there are echoes of that Orientalist approach within early visual production in Bezalel.

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JH: So you speak of some of these motivations to shape a visual idiom. One of the most compelling motivations was tragic and oppositionally negative. And it was the 1903 pogrom in Kishinev in Moldova. An event that ignited Jewish solidarity and really a sense of urgency around the world. But you point out that the horrific images that emerged from that pogrom engendered a very specific visual response from the pre-state Zionists. How did they communicate their need for strength and independence in these photos that you studied?

RR: What was striking for me to realize during this research is that you can't really understand the photographic language and logic of the Zionist movement without looking at those photographs of slaughtered bodies that were captured in the wake and the aftermath of that horrific pogrom. Kishinev is key to the shaping of Zionist ideology during the first decade of the 20th century. And it is key to understanding how photography was essential to that process. What was different about this pogrom, photographically speaking, is that this was the first time the photographs that document what had happened to Jewish communities circulated in global public media. Of course, we're not talking about a globalized media market, right? But images that were captured in Moldova began emerging in newspapers and publications in the West, in the US. And that triggered an inevitable response. That was the first time that both Jews and non-Jews would not look away. And where this plays an essential role is that it is from there, from those slaughtered diasporic bodies that within the Zionist psyche, the powerful Zionist body is resurrected. You cannot really understand the shaping of the body of the Zionist pioneer, the Chalutz, with its forceful capability, with its powerful physicality, without looking at images of those bodies, because those are intertwined.

RR: And you need to look at one in order to understand the other. You have to look at those images, because those images speak to the body that needs to be literally left behind. The diasporic male body that within that Zionist understanding failed to protect its home, its family, and its community. And it is the negation of that body that is needed in order to build a secure Jewish future. And photography is essential to that, as the photographic images that will then be produced by the Zionist movement depict the formation and the rise of that new Jewish Zionist body.

JH: It's evocative of the poem by Hayim Nahman Bialik called The City of Killing or The City of Slaughter, in which he speaks to exactly that sensibility, the need to reject what is perceived as the Jews' weakness in diaspora, presumably remedied by Zionism, seems to be coming from the same wellspring.

RR: Bialik is so important and interesting within this context. So why was Bialik even there? Why did Bialik write the poems that he did about Kishinev? He was actually sent there in order to provide a report from a Jewish perspective. And why was there an interest in a report from a Jewish perspective? Because there were already other reports out there in the world made by journalists who were there on the ground, who were sent by Randolph Hearst in order to capture what was happening on the ground. So Bialik gets sent there, and he's supposed to draft a report about what he had seen. But he then realizes that he can't, he just can't, he can't write a report about what he sees. What emerges instead are poems that capture a very triggered response to what he sees around him. And we tend to think about these poems as a capturing of historical events or as a historical account, in and of themselves.

RR: But as Michael Grossman showed so beautifully, it is actually not a very accurate historical account. And it is actually there in Bialik's words that we're seeing the emergence of the shaping of the negation of those slaughtered male bodies that are laying there on the floor. It is actually there that we're seeing the articulation of the particular relationship that Zionism then develops toward that diasporic condition. And we in fact now know that even though Bialik seems to write about the weakness and the lack of ability of the victims to protect themselves, that actually does not capture what had happened there. People were able to defend themselves, defend their wives, defend their kids, or at least they tried to fight back.

RR: They just could not fight against the orchestrated rioting of civilians and soldiers. They couldn't win. It was a lost battle. But it doesn't mean that they didn't try. And it looks like all the accounts that originated around Kishinev at the time, especially by other diasporic Jews, capture weakness, whereas what they should have captured perhaps was strength. And that's why it's key to understand the dynamic of the aftermath and the capturing of these events in order to understand how Zionism then develops its modes of photographic production and its visual language.

JH: It's terribly poignant and painful to imagine the violations and the rejection built into all of these layers of artistic production and ideology. And they pick up on some of these key human realities of being marginalized and persecuted. But there's another angle to this quality of the human condition when it's marginalized, under-enfranchised, and how it folds into the ideological project, in this case of an archive or what have you. And that is the marginalized population of pre-state Palestine itself. What do photographs reveal that maybe words cannot about the less enfranchised people in Palestine?

RR: During my first visit to the archive at the Jewish National Fund, I was really surprised to find a shelf that was titled as Types. And I asked the archivist, "What does that category mean?" And the archivist told me that it's like an accumulated residue of people and occupations and faces that the archivist came across that they weren't really sure what to do with them. They weren't really sure how to place them. And in some cases, the archivist had sent the photographers to the field asking them to capture people that are doing specific works or people that are engaged in certain activities. And I thought to myself that within that shelf, within that residue, there's an

opportunity to find there a lot of the interests of the archive that may not be as fully disclosed as they are in other categories.

RR: So within those binders on that shelf, I started seeing types of pioneers or types of women pioneers that are doing certain works. I came across types of women of Mizrahi descent that was captured during the 1920s in Jerusalem. I saw types of elder comrades that are working at the kibbutz. This shelf was driven by a need to categorize and typify. Offer typologies in the landscape in a way that really showed what the archive as a system was interested in. And within that archival system, photography is then, of course, harnessed in order to clarify how those types are being captured and how are they being positioned in the landscape and what is the archives regard toward those types. Every time I reached a new archive, I then began looking at who is included in the archive, but who is not included in the archive.

RR: And those who are not included in the archive, are they included in any other way? Do they appear in other categories? Do they appear suddenly where they're not supposed to be in? So I started looking at the system itself, the way that the photographic system is encapsulated by the archival system and what do those categories tell us about interests and ideologies and the formation of social relationship on the ground. And for me, it was really interesting to see how the others of that Zionist body were captured into the archive. One example that comes to mind is the survivors of the Holocaust. The refugees that were able to overcome various limitations and constraints that were placed upon by the British regime that refused to allow extensive immigration to Palestine. How were the Holocaust survivors captured by the archives?

RR: How were the ultimate victims of that diasporic existence captured by the archives? And how were they seen next to the bodies of the Zionist pioneers, for instance? So that was one interesting question to pose for the archive. Another was the changing depiction of Arab communities in the archive. I found myself looking at images from the 1948 war. Seeing Jewish soldiers accompanying Arab women in Haifa as people were being evacuated from their homes and people were expelled and exiled from their homes. And I was thinking about that in relation to depictions of peacemaking and forming new connections between Zionist settlers and Bedouin tribes, for instance, that were captured by the Jeniff archive in the 1920s and early 1930s. So suddenly by posing questions about who is included and who is not included and who gets depicted and who is being left outside. And looking at how those relationships are then being played out photographically, you get a different sense of the systemic operations and the shaping of civic relations on the ground.

JH: So much of your observations are about the art and its context in collections and archives and the story of the art after it's made, as well as the story of the subject of the art, which I suppose is not surprising, but it sometimes feels surprising. What surprised you?

RR: There were so many moments that were unexpected to me. I got to look at private collections. I got to look at archives created by underground Jewish organizations that capture the lives of soldiers and warriors. I got to look at images and archives created as an attempt to form a counter archive to the official institutional archive formed and shaped by the Jewish National Fund. And I think that for me, one of the moments that surprised me the most was to

look at those collections created by Jewish soldiers during and after the 1948 war. Today, we each have a computer in our pocket and we can capture our faces once every minute. But to think about 1948 and to think about how young people in the field during war captured themselves, and to look at how they did it in a way that shows how the presentation that was created by the institutional archive, the representation of Zionist lives and Zionist bodies to see how they internalized it and then processed it and made it their own within that context was really surprising to me. I wasn't expecting to see that at all. And it really made me realize the impact of the language developed by the Jewish National Fund and other branches of the Zionist movement in their photographic activity.

RR: They really created an ecosystem within which these younger Zionists then imagined themselves like they put themselves as part of that world. And once I realized that it actually made a lot of sense to me because that is how I also imagined my grandparents that met on a boat on the way to Palestine to form a kibbutz together. I am also the product of that photographic language, of that photographic archive. And I think that only by being made aware of the workings of that system, you can begin to see how this is a representation that can be reimagined in and of itself.

JH: Dr. Rotem Rozental, thank you so much for the conversation, the fascinating look, literal and figurative into the early Zionists and this incredible archive, the Jewish National Fund. Congratulations...

RR: Thank you.

JH: On your award. And again, thank you so much for the pleasure of your conversation.

RR: Thank you so much for having me.

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