On a Human Scale

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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, your host. Welcome to this episode of the College Commons Podcast and our conversation with Deborah Dash Moore. Deborah Dash Moore is the Jonathan Friedman Distinguished University Professor of History and Professor of Judaic Studies at the University of Michigan.

JH: She is Editor-in-Chief of the Posen Library of Jewish Culture and Civilization and the author of several books, including GI Jews, How World War II Changed a Generation, and the 2023 volume, Walkers in the City, Jewish Street Photographers in Mid-Century New York, which is the topic of our conversation today and which won the 2023 National Jewish Book Award in American Jewish Studies. Professor Deborah Dash Moore, thank you for joining us and congratulations on your National Jewish Book Award.

Deborah Dash Moore: Well, thank you very much. It's a pleasure to be here.

JH: In your front matter, I believe it's the introduction, you quote Alfred Stieglitz as saying, "I was born in Hoboken. Photography is my passion, the search for truth, my obsession." In fact, this spirit is embedded in and woven throughout the entire book, both in the text and the photos. And at the same time, you also argue that the mid-century experience of Jews, New Yorkers and children of immigrants, figures crucially into the city's photography of the era. Tell us what it is about that Jewish experience that, as you say, reframes New York in a particular or perhaps even unique way.

DM: We're speaking about the children of immigrants who are often called by historians the second generation. These are Jews who grow up in New York. They go to the city's public schools. They live in densely populated Jewish neighborhoods. And they also live in relatively small apartments, which means they spend time on the streets, that's their playground. People didn't play much in their apartments in those years. And they learned street culture as kids growing up, which involved learning how to look and see what was happening, not just in front of you, but what was happening across the street, what might be happening in a doorway, what might be happening behind you.

DM: And the street culture itself becomes a vehicle for these New York Jews who decide to take up cameras, and a lot of them are given cameras as teenagers, to explore the New York that they know and also the New York that they don't know. It's a means of reaching out to others whose lives are also on the street, and that means other working-class New Yorkers. And New York in those years is very much a union town. There are strong unions. Its politics is particularly left. Jews are an important piece of that. And the pace and culture of the city is very much inflected by the fact that two million Jews are living in New York City in these years, and that means that they represent close to 30% of the city's population.

DM: If we were to think about New York in comparison with Europe, it would be as if New York were a country. There are more Jews living in New York City than live in France, or than live in England, or than live in Germany, or than live in Austria. And they're living mostly in the Bronx, in Brooklyn, and Manhattan, and they have an impact on the city itself. And that's what these photographers absorb as kids growing up, and then come to wanna picture as adults in the city.

JH: There's a great photo by Sid Grossman on page 17 of a woman standing with this really decided chagrin, or doubtfulness, or some kind of impasse. It's really, really great. And I wanna ask you, as the editor of the photos and the author of the text, what do you find most revealing, most engaging to you personally among these wonderful photos, particularly the portraits, where you kind of have two categories? Some of the photos catch a really distinctive expression on the subject's face, as the one I just described. But there are also tons of photos that really capture the opposite, where the photographer has captured a neutral kind of resting face with the people apparently just getting on with the business of living. What to you, Debra Dash Moore, is the more evocative, the more curiosity-inspiring?

DM: Oh, that's a tough question. Let me start by talking about Sid Grossman's photograph 'cause Sid Grossman was one of the two founders of the New York Photo League, together with Sol Libsohn. They met at City College, which was a place where a lot of Jews attended. It was free in these years. And Grossman took this photo in Chelsea. It's on the corner of 23rd Street by the IRT subway station. And if you go to Chelsea today and you stand by the IRT subway station, which is now called the number one, you will have not that different an experience from what this woman has. Why did I choose it? I chose it first because of the way in which she takes possession of the streets. She's standing there with her arms crossed over her chest. She has a pocketbook on her elbow. She's dressed neatly with a jacket that's patterned and striped, a relatively short skirt, actually high heels, of course, because that's what women wore then.

DM: And behind her, you can see reflected in the plate glass windows, all kinds of other things happening in the city, all those different signs for food that were there to entice walkers in the city. Hi, you want something to eat. You want a donut, you want a drink, a sandwich. And so in many ways, it captures what it meant to be on the corner. Now, she's probably waiting for something. She may be waiting for a bus. She may be waiting to meet somebody. She may be waiting for a pickup. We don't know. But waiting, which actually is the title of one of the chapters of the book, is something New Yorkers did a lot. And it was also something that the photographers pictured.

DM: So people, when they wait, as you noted, sometimes don't have any particular expressions. This woman is looking off to the side and it's not a sneer exactly, but her mouth is curved in a way that suggests something's going on. And I think that the expressions or the lack of expressions, you asked me which ones I'd like, I like them both because they capture the reality of what life is like when you're on the streets back then, I should say now, if you were to do it, half the people you would be looking at, would be looking at their phones.

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JH: I wanna go back to the demography and the sociology that you began to speak of in response to my first question that had to do with politics. And you also cited the New York Photo League. Introduce us to the New York Photo League at the intersection of the second generation of Jews in New York and left-wing local politics.

DM: You're right to call it left-wing. Some of the people who were engaged in the early years of the Photo League were members of the Communist Party, like Sid Grossman. But many of the people who joined their politics were pro-New Deal or perhaps socialist rather than communist. They joined because they believed that photography could be a means, not just of self-expression, but a means to help shape how people understood reality. And the Photo League was for everybody. They called photographers workers. All workers could join. It was very inexpensive and gain access to a dark room and a chance to be able to print, but also gain access to classes that were taught there.

DM: But if you photographed New York as you saw it, they thought that would change how other people who saw your photograph understood the city and it could build a sense of solidarity, a sense of connection. So photographs had that political power. Now, one of the things that's really interesting about their politics of photography is that they were not interested particularly in photographing strikes or in photographing people who were dispossessed, or they definitely did not want to photograph those who were down and out. No, they wanted to photograph ordinary New Yorkers because they saw them as people of real dignity. So that was their political rationale. The Photo League gets started in 1936.

DM: It's a break off from the film and Photo League that had existed earlier, starting in the '20s. And one of its key criteria that led to the break off was that Sid Grossman and Saul Lipson said, "We want to let everyone have the ability to comment on photographs, to learn about photographs." And the professionals didn't want that. They saw it more as a cooperative. The Photo League remained a cooperative. When you joined, you gained chances to exhibit there were all kinds of social activities also. And I have to say, of course, that in 1951, it folds in the era of McCarthy because it's attacked and put on the attorney general's list in '47 and it just

can't survive. It's too dangerous for photographers and ordinary people even to be associated with something labeled communist.

JH: The range of photos is part of the story of the book. And I want to talk about framing perspective because you kick off the book by talking about reframing New York. You tell a wonderful story about Walter Rosenblum who had set out to photograph the entire city, la duly humbled. He progressively whittled his project down to a single block. And you quote him as saying, "I spent six months there, meaning the block. It was the most rewarding experience of my life." What did this book teach you about the choice to investigate truth by having to choose to frame either by zooming in or zooming out both metaphorically and in this case, literally?

DM: I have written about New York in other contexts. And New York Twos in other contexts. I have a book called Jewish New York that was a collaborative project where we looked at communal activities. We looked at politics writ large. What this book, Walkers in the City, let me do was to become intimate with the spaces of the city and with the men and women who photographed those spaces. I have a whole chapter in the book on Coney Island and part of that chapter deals with photographers like Morris Engel who lived and grew up in Coney Island. This was their beach. They're right down there on the sand with other folks and that's analogous to Rosenblum because he grew up on the Lower East Side and it was his neighborhood. But when he took the camera, he realized that he would learn much more not by trying to encompass all the bigness of the city, but to encompass the city through its most intimate dimensions on the street in its public dimensions.

DM: And I have a photograph that he has taken called Chick's Candy Store. It's from 1938 and it's a picture of these six guys. Well, actually one of them is a boy. They're listening to a sort of portly man who's got his finger pointed. He's expounding on something. It's not clear what in the world he's talking about. Maybe it's politics. Who knows? But they're all just listening. They've paused and there's a guy inside the candy store who's holding the door open and he's listening too one assumes.

DM: So here we have this oral dimension that's captured in the photograph. We can't hear the conversation, but we know that this conversation is occurring. And that's another one of the themes of the book is about talking because this was an era up until the '50s where the majority of New Yorkers didn't have private phones at home. So you wanted to talk to somebody. You had to go out street to meet them. So I think that zooming in has been really powerful for me, especially.

JH: I appreciate the zooming in and it does seem to be more preponderant among the photos in the book, but there are some really incredible landscapes, evocative, iconic landscapes of New York. And I wanna talk about architecture and the zooming out approach. You quote critic Suzanne Bloom, who says that, "Time changes images". And presumably she means that we relate to an image which itself is frozen in time differently as we ourselves view that image from different times as time passes.

JH: I think architecture and urban landscapes seem to illustrate Bloom's point with particular poignancy because they force us to see continuities and changes in the places we know from our own experience. In fact, when we discussed our first photograph, you pointed out that the place where the woman with the expression is standing may look quite similar today. Did any of these photos elicit in you a strong personal reaction in relation to your own personal sense of place over time?

DM: That's a really fascinating question because I grew up in the city on the corner of 16th Street and 7th Avenue. And I'm thinking about the photographs in the book and how very few of them actually capture the urban landscape of my memories of New York. It could be that the ones of Times Square are ones that come closest to what I remember with all the lights and the sense of drama. And yet, of course, the way in which people are there too in the square and the Louis Faurer photos that captured the incredible light and shadow of that. I remember that. Yeah.

JH: Street photography, I would imagine, seems to elicit a very particular set of challenges to the photographer, specifically from the point of view of privacy and consent. You subtitle a beach scene on page 96 with the observation that the photographer, Sid Grossman, gravitated to the Puerto Rican teenagers for their sense of joy and their willingness to tolerate the camera. Were there class overtones to the issue of privacy and consent, as well as presumably expectations of the era and the predominant culture?

DM: Oh, yes, there were class implications. Coney Island was for the working class. It was not a place that middle class people went very much. There were other beaches. Jones Beach gets developed in this time or the Rockaways that are further out and they tend to attract more middle class folks. And middle class people tended to see the camera more as an intrusion than working class people. Remember, middle class people could afford a camera in those years and they knew what it was like to be the person behind the camera, not in front of it. Working class people, they couldn't afford to own a camera, even though there were cheap ones. It wasn't widespread. And one of the practices of these Jewish street photographers was to go back to the same spots over and over again and they would give out prints. That was part of the reciprocity of being a street photographer.

JH: That's a great term, reciprocity. It implies a kind of ethical component as well, which brings me to the question of voyeurism. I wanna ask you what it means to you as the editor and author of this volume, but also to help us understand what it might have meant to the photographers themselves from an ethical perspective, from an artistic perspective. What did they take from that term and how did it affect their work?

DM: I think that there's a shift that occurs from the photographs that are taken in the '30s and '40s and then the photographs that are taken later in the '50s and '60s, even though they're all street photography. And in the early period, there is this reciprocity that street photographers see in relationship to the people they're photographing. When you get into the late '40s and '50s, the voyeurism is more present. There's a photograph in Coney Island taken by Leon Levinstein, who's not a native New Yorker.

DM: He grows up in Baltimore and comes to the city after the war. And he takes this picture of these two guys with tattoos, which at the time was a unusual thing to have, looking at two women. And in the middle of the photo, there's a guy sitting, smoking a cigarette with a hat on, who's staring intently at the photographer. Now, this is a voyeuristic photograph. Levinstein did not engage with the people. Levinstein took voyeuristic photographs.

DM: One way to get around that was to try to embed yourself, as Bruce Davidson did, with a group of people he wanted to photograph. So he hung out with a gang called the Jokers in the late '50s and took photographs of them. We might call that a kind of ethnographic stance. There is a measure of reciprocity. They agreed to his presence there. They agreed to him taking photographs that mitigates the voyeurism. But this is just a different feel from the earlier street photographers.

JH: I'd like to close out the interview by asking you what in the course of editing and writing this book surprised you?

DM: I guess I was surprised at the extraordinary richness of this photographic archive that by and large is not well known at all. And you sort of wonder, how did it happen that these gorgeous photographs, these incredibly revealing photographs, powerful, intimate photographs are just overlooked when you think about people who write about the history of photography. And so I spent years enjoying, looking at, savoring the photographs before I ended up figuring out which ones I would actually write about and how I would organize them. And the book is organized in a very idiosyncratic way.

DM: I have chapters on looking, chapters on leisure, chapters on going out, on waiting, on talking, and I suppose my penultimate chapter is on selling because that was done on the streets a lot as well. That's not usually how, what organizes a book of photography. So I hope that when people look at it, they get the same sense of, wow, there's so much here that even someone who knows the sort of photographic record of the '30s, '40s, '50s, even such a person would be really surprised.

JH: Well, I was surprised, but I wanna quote you about the experience of seeing these revealing, powerful, and intimate photos, as you call them. I found it utterly engrossing and delightful. And I wanna thank you for the incredible work that must have gone into it to congratulate you again on your award and to thank you for taking the time to talk about it.

DM: Well, thank you very much. And I hope people are tempted to go look at some of the photographs. They're gems.

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