

A recent article in *The New York Times* asks whether there is a “Jewish eye” in photography. The question is provoked by “New York: Capital of Photography,” an exhibition curated and introduced by critic Max Kozloff last year at the Jewish Museum in Manhattan. The exhibition makes the claim that an astonishing number of the artists who have taken the city, its streets, vistas, and peoples as their subject have been Jews. The *Times* reviewer, Richard B. Woodward, is skeptical that Jewishness is something you can see in photographs made by Jews, or that it qualifies for recognition as an aesthetic (or ethno-aesthetic) category. Nevertheless, the claim remains tantalizing, not easily swept away. Indeed, the number of Jews among leading photographers in the United States and Europe, and in the photographic industry in general, makes a compelling case for a predominance of figures of Jewish descent, with Jewish names and perhaps something that can be called Jewish sensibility or “Jewish eye” in the broad field of photography. Once the list of names is laid on the table, there’s nothing to quarrel with here, only a social and historical fact to mull over.

Some six years before the Jewish Museum show, George Gilbert published *The Illustrated Worldwide Who’s Who of Jews in Photography*, a compilation of names and capsule biographies and brief essays on subjects ranging from the invention and technical development of the medium to its retail component, from photojournalism to studio and fine art photography, to historians and critics (what he calls “the intellectualization of photography”). Everywhere, in every branch and division and corner of the medium’s history, we find Jews making significant contributions, achieving important names for themselves. Mr. Gilbert clinches the case with a delightfully straight-faced appendix of “The Names That Changed,” pseudonyms like Arthur Fellig as Weegee (one of the more flamboyant examples), or Andreas Friedmann as Robert Capa and Gyula Halasz as Brassai. The need to tone down or disfigure the Jewishness

of such names goes without discussion, perhaps too obvious to warrant comment. The book settles for a one-dimensional assertion, a kind of honor roll of Jewish “achievement.”

Between Gilbert’s compendium and Kozloff’s didactic exhibition, evidence piles up that Jews have made a difference in the multiple aspects of photography: invention (Herschel), history (Gernsheim), criticism (Sontag), the retail trade (B & H), and of course picture-makers (this list is long and deep). It’s natural to wonder why. Ease of entry for young immigrants without higher learning and seeking a living offers one plausible answer. Was there something else, an inner need among

young Jews, mostly children of second- and third-generation immigrant families, that photography satisfied? Posed this way, the question can lead usefully into the unexplored intersection of personal, ethnic, and the larger social history.

It would help if we had memoirs and oral histories, records of how the photographers themselves believed or disbelieved that their identity as Jews mattered in their photographic work. Most were probably already secular Jews, already detached in their minds from the shtetl traditions of their parents and grandparents, and from the religious practice and even the

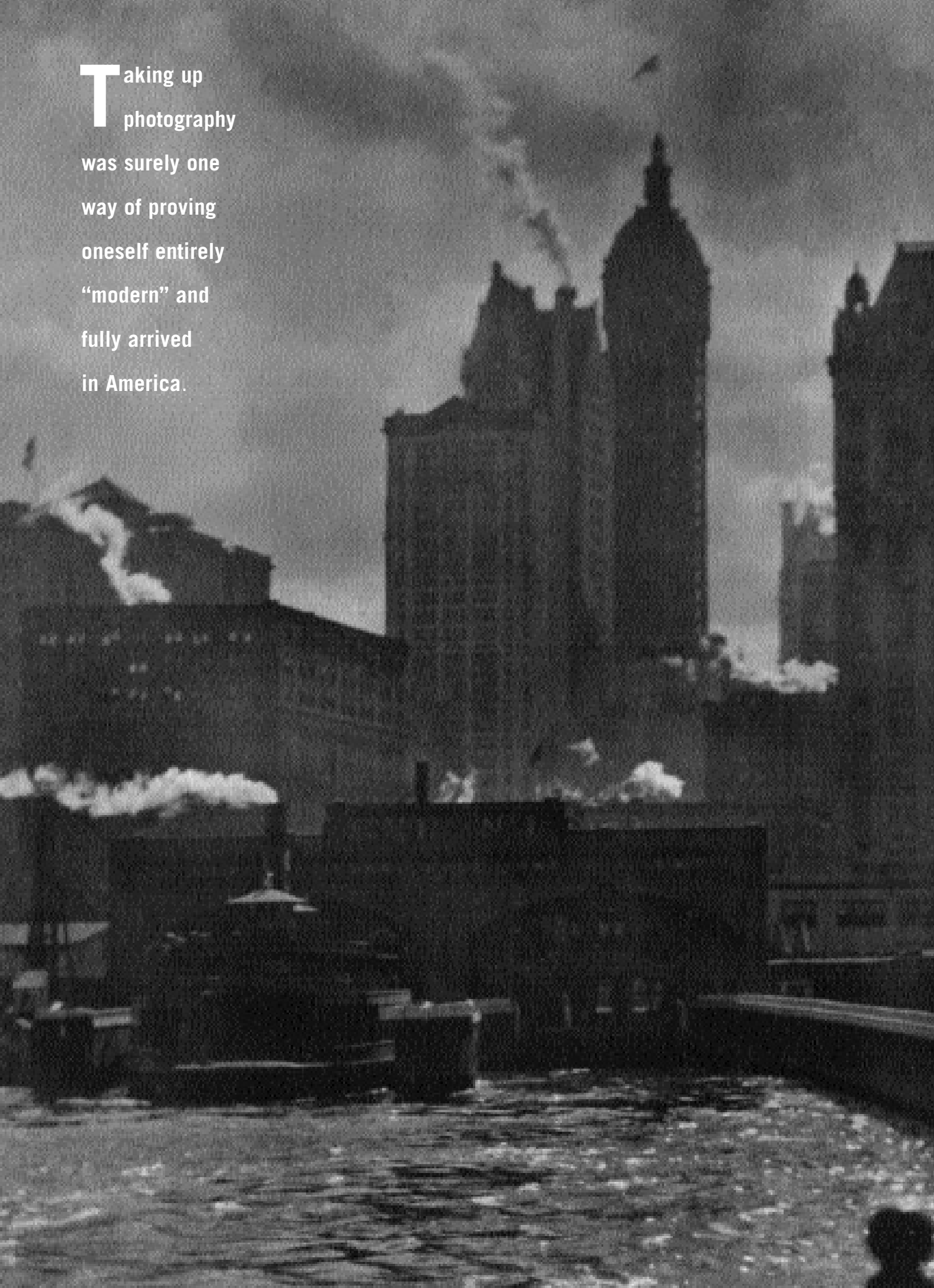
Yiddishkeit that had already begun to weaken in Europe before the great immigration of 1890 to 1920. The Enlightenment, or Haskalah, of the eighteenth century as well as emancipation, the winning of civil rights in nineteenth-century Europe, opened a full range of modern vocations for Jews well before immigration, though restrictions hampered access to professional training.

Modernization was an uneven process. While Jews burst out of the mental as well as physical ghetto, old traditions and social patterns remained in place. The Talmudic tradition of “the book,” the hermeneutic habit of interpretation, the fervor of the cheder and its heated dialogues over the meaning of esoteric texts remained a powerful memory that may well have

The Claim of a Jewish Eye

by Alan Trachtenberg

Taking up
photography
was surely one
way of proving
oneself entirely
“modern” and
fully arrived
in America.



influenced modern, secular Jews to choose the professions of law, scholarship, and literary criticism. From long ago Jews were doctors, students, musicians, handlers of goods and money; Old World habits survived the sea change of immigration and helped shape Jewish vocational choices in the new “Promised Land.” Taking up photography was surely one way of proving oneself entirely “modern” and fully arrived in America. It entailed mastering a technical process that required a modicum of scientific savvy, knowledge of optics, light, chemistry, the physics of the camera itself. The camera as instrument of a certain kind of assimilation and acculturation needs looking into.

Is there a Jewish way in photography, a “Jewish eye”? The question both intrigues and amuses; it seems foolish in its blithe and not a little discomfiting essentialism, troubling in the way it evokes stereotypes. But it’s also a compelling invitation to think at a deeper level about the meaning of “Jewishness” as a quality of being—something existential, indelible, definitive, a historical rather than genetic term. There’s a terrain of rubble to be cleared away before we can get to the heart of the deeper question. Consider “Jew’s eye.” The words have an old history as a snide metaphor. Among Gentiles, Jews were thought to know better than others the “worth” of things. The trope has its origins in the preponderance of Jews among money-handlers and merchants, among the very few post-Diaspora roles permitted them in their heavily circumscribed and regulated life in medieval and early modern Europe. “Jew’s eye,” according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, meant “something valued highly,” as in “worth a Jew’s eye.” What has value in “a Jew’s eye” is value itself, the transformation of things through the alchemy of finance and commerce into “worth.” Photographs



Is there a code that can decipher Jewish perceptions, Jewish desires to picture certain subjects in certain ways? Photographer William Klein remarks: “If you look at modern photography you find, on one hand, the Weegees, the Diane Arbuses, the Robert Franks – funky photographers. And then you have people who go out in the woods. Ansel Adams, Weston. It’s like black and white jazz.”

also confer value through metamorphosis; to take a picture of some thing or person is to turn what the eye sees into a tangible image, an object of new value. If photographs are tokens of worth, can we say that there is something Jewish at the very root of photography? A sobering thought.

“Jew’s eye” calls up, too, the even older superstition of “evil eye.” Jews and Gentiles alike held to a belief in the preternatural powers of the eye, the glance, the penetrating look that can alter what it falls upon – again, the way a photograph changes an object or person into an fixed image, turns it into something it was not. In the Middle Ages, Jews were believed to possess such an eye as a birthright, granted as the gift of Satan. We should be concerned that “Jewish eye” even today may call up intimations of the same vile superstitions that twisted the minds of pogromists in dark times lasting through the unspeakable Shoah of the mid-twentieth century. Photography, too, associated with alchemy, had its veil of

superstition, its aura of “black magic” and “black arts,” its taint of demonism. There’s no escaping the underside of grim implication in the convergence of “Jew” and photography.

If, in another register, we bring Kabbalah into the picture, with its mystical light symbolism, its garments of light and emanations of splendor, the convergence becomes even further complicated. Is the Jewish presence in photography something hidden, like the mysteries of Kabbalah? Are Jewish photographers, those who embrace the name, really Kabbalists, seeking answers in numbers and patterns and mirrors and cryptic words? Is Jewish photography a covert quest for Shekhinah, the spirit shining forth in the radiance of things, the female form of the Divine Presence? (Leonard Nimoy’s recent book, titled *Shekhinah*, gives this fancy a palpable form: photographs of a nude with a veil of light swirling around her body.) Or is it the enchantress Lilith who entices Jewish photographers, Shekhinah’s demonic counterpart, the lustful seducer of men, associated with “the evil eye”? The claim of a “Jewish eye” opens doors of delicious as well as chilling speculation.

Let’s speculate that, Jew-haters aside, there is such a thing as a “Jewish eye” in photography. How would we recognize it? It may take alchemy itself to distill that eye from actual photographs. Is Jewishness a palpable photographic quality? Does it take an initiate to unlock the secrets of Jewishness as they radiate in such Sephirot as camera point of view, focal length of lenses, contrast of light and dark? Is there a code that can decipher Jewish perceptions, Jewish desires to picture certain subjects in certain ways? Photographer William Klein once remarked to a *New Yorker* interviewer: “I think there are two kinds of photography – Jewish photography and goyish photography. If you look at modern photography you find, on one hand, the Weegees, the Diane Arbuses, the Robert Franks – funky photographers. And then you have people who go out in the woods. Ansel Adams, Weston. It’s like black and white jazz.” The words may bring a smiling assent, but what do they mean? How can you counterfactual this claim, as logicians might ask?

Klein’s raffish remark underlies the entire argument for a New York “Jewish sensibility” as described in Max Kozloff’s introduction to the Jewish Museum show. The essay expounds “funky” expansively. Jewish photographers of New York are “restless, voracious; they give the impression of being always in transit yet never arriving.” Kozloff speaks of the photographers themselves but obviously means their pictures and the qualities he detects in them. Artists like Walker Evans and

Berenice Abbott – he politely calls them “Gentile photographers” – are more settled in their ways; “they radiate a proprietary nonchalance when they picture the city.” This is true even of black Gentiles like Roy DeCarava, whose pictures display a “steady emotional compass” not evident in Jewish photographs. Moreover, in one of Kozloff’s more dazzling claims, the Jewishness of Jewish photographers of New York appears also in the fact that, with certain exceptions in “a few small passages” in the work of Shahn and others, “they did not depict other Jews. It was never so much a question of affirming the presence of the tribe as it was of disseminating what amounted to its ethos.” This is a curious remark that may explain the strange absence of Jerome Liebling’s pictures from the show.

Is there a hint here, in “disseminating its ethos,” of the old yet undying belief in a “chosen people,” an idea of Jewish election and exceptionalism, even a mission to the world, the camera replacing the Torah as Jewish truth? If so, it’s most likely unintended. Yet the force of the claim of a “Jewish eye” inevitably thrusts in that direction; Kozloff properly wants to bring his argument back to history, to Jewish photographers aware of the complex relation of Jews to America. On these grounds, I think the argument can lead somewhere. We know too little about how cultural inheritance, even when rejected, works its way through the nervous system into muscular



Ansel Adams, *Aspens, Northern New Mexico*, 1958. © Ansel Adams Publishing Rights Trust/CO.

reflexes and reactions of the eye. There are many ways, conscious and unconscious, of being a Jew.

If Weegee and Helen Levitt are first-line examples, as they are in the Museum's exhibition, some sharp distinctions are called for. Yiddishkeit is what I suspect Klein and Kozloff mean by "Jewish sensibility," a community of values, beliefs, rituals secular and sacred, styles and habits of thought and speech and gesture. A way of being-in-the-world, a shared culture, Yiddishkeit probably does come into play in the work of many photographers connected with that culture, especially its secular humanism, its liberal and socialist proclivities. But Yiddishkeit, derived from the Old World shtetl experience of first-generation immigrants, doesn't exhaust the possibilities. There is the German Jewish line and the Middle European line, Stieglitz and Strand and Capa and Modell, for example, for whom Yiddish may have been both arcane and alien. And if being at ease on city streets, flowing with the crowds yet standing apart, defines the genre of "Jewish sensibility," how do we

Photographs confer
value through
metamorphosis; to
take a picture of some
thing or person is to
turn what the eye sees
into a tangible image,
an object.

place Baudelaire's essay of the 1860s on "the painter of modern life," which defines the type long before Jews, as Kozloff argues, "invented" street photography?

Like all ethnic minorities in the United States, Jews have taken special pride in stories of achievement: look at the number of doctors among us, of lawyers, professors, publishers, popular artists, and now photographers, not to say

business people; calculate our average income levels, and it's clear how well Jews have secured a place for themselves here among the Gentiles. In achievement lies safety and peace of mind; stories of "making it" in the American *galut* are of victory against all odds, a "promised land" where, for a change, promises do come true. Jews are not unique in this; ethnic minority status fosters the kind of group self-consciousness that anxiously seeks evidence of acceptance, of tolerance and recognition, and finds what it needs in the familiar litanies of Jewish or African American or Italian success. Such stories mask underlying insecurities. It's a global phenomenon wherever societies are



Helen Levitt, *New York*, c. 1940. Photograph loaned by The Jewish Museum, New York.



Paul Strand, *Wall Street, New York*, 1915. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. © 1971 Aperture Foundation, Inc., Paul Strand Archive.

divided between dominant and minority populations. But it's especially true in America, where the official norm of toleration coexists with discrimination and bias.

Alfred Kazin, whom Kozloff recruits in support of his argument about a Jewish way of taking to the streets, remarked in a symposium in 1944 that American Jews should stop “confusing the experience of being an immigrant with being Jewish.” And on the same occasion Isaac Rosenfeld said what many of the photographers identified by Kozloff would likely assent to: “the very simple state of being a Jew should carry no more of a man’s attention than any ordinary fact of his history.”

Seeking Jewishness in photographs is different from asking what the consciousness of Jewish identity (or its lack) has meant to photographers in their ordinary working lives. How many have taken their Jewish descent as a privileged condition, a secular “calling” or “chosenness”? It would be interesting to take a poll. Maybe there are other Kabbalists besides Nimoy – do Gary Winogrand’s famous quirks of superstition qualify him? – but not likely. A more philosophical Jewish mysticism probably affected Alfred Stieglitz’s work. Polling and probing may supply more evidence of such elements as guiding outlooks of Jewish photographers.

In fact, Jewish socialist humanism seems a more plausible consensus among the generation of the Photo-League at

least, the 1930s group of socially conscious documentary photographers based in New York. To choose documentary or street or reportage photography as a vocation is to choose to study contemporary American society and culture as a vocation, a way of focusing your attention, your creative and critical abilities, on the here and now. You commit yourself to confronting unstaged reality. It’s a way of connecting and disconnecting at the same time, like any enterprise of study, like reflective thought itself. For Jews, that choice may come out of a pressing need to identify with a world in which you feel partly a stranger and partly a “type,” a way to overcome or to assert your alienation and your exile. Or out of a political hope, or love of excitement, or plain voyeurism. Whatever the bent or affinity or aversion of particular photographers, we need more rigorous evidence before reaching conclusions. William Klein’s remark is just that, an idea that may or may not have shaped his work and filtered into his pictures. To the question of whether there is a Jewish eye in photography, we can reply – Jews always answer questions with questions, no? – What does it look like and what does it see? **PT**

Alan Trachtenberg is Neil Grey Emeritus Professor of English and American Studies at Yale University. Among his books is Reading American Photographs: Images as History (1989).