THE JEWISH QUARTERLY REVIEW, Vol. 94, No. 1 (Winter 2004) 8–11

What Does It Mean to Be Photographed as a Jew?

JEFFREY SHANDLER

ON A FRIDAY in early August 1982, my classmates and I in the YIVO/ Columbia Summer Yiddish Program had just celebrated our *siyem-hazman*, marking the conclusion of six weeks of intensive study of Yiddish language, literature, and culture. Before heading our separate ways, we gathered in front of the YIVO building at the corner of Fifth Avenue and 86th Street to pose for a picture. As we lined up before the camera, an elderly couple suddenly rushed over to us from out of nowhere and shouted, "Take our picture! We're Jews, too! We're from the Bronx!" The photographer, one of the other students in the program, explained to them that this was a class picture and motioned them out of the way, and then we resumed taking our group picture.

At the time this seemed to be nothing more than a brief, comically awkward moment. But in thinking about it over the years, I've found it to be a revealing and, in a way, strangely moving interaction. What should we make of this couple's wanting to be included as fellow Jews in a group portrait, of their desire to be photographed as Jews?

Indeed, what does it mean to be photographed as a Jew? Since the mid-nineteenth century, shortly after the invention of this medium, photography has presented Jews, as it has many other communities, with the unprecedented opportunities and challenges of a new means of representation and communication. Jews' negative responses to photography may come to mind more readily, such as the resistance of some ultraorthodox Jews, to this day, to being photographed—whether because they understand it as a violation of the prohibition against image-making or because they regard photography as a problematic challenge to Jewish notions of modesty in public, or for some additional reason. There are other unpleasant associations some Jews have with the medium—the use of photography as a tool of anti-Semites to stigmatize Jews as a pernicious racial type; its use as an instrument of state control for the purposes of inventory, restriction, and at its worst, annihilation.

The Jewish Quarterly Review (Winter 2004)
Copyright © 2004 Center for Advanced Judaic Studies. All rights reserved.

The Hebrew Academy, The Luxor, Las Vegas, Nevada, 1994. Photo by Frédéric Brenner from *Jews/America/a Representation* (Abrams, 1996).

At the same time, photography has played an important definitional role in modern Jewish life, providing Jews—again, like so many others—with an important new way of experiencing modernity. Having one's picture taken is an inherently modernist undertaking, not only by dint of the technology required but also because of the various cultural protocols that surround taking pictures, which each community has evolved in response to this technological innovation. Moreover, although photography results in fixed, silent, two-dimensional images, their creation is a performative act. Photographs of Jews, therefore, might be understood not only as artifacts of Jewish life but as the product of modern Jewish performances.

For example, the many thousands of portraits of Jews taken by studio photographers in towns and cities throughout Poland from the late nineteenth century until the eve of World War II reveal how members of this community saw photography as an occasion to engage with the modern world. Their motives for this engagement were anything but uniform; they included the thorough embrace of modernity as well as efforts to resist or counteract it. Some of these portraits celebrate Jewish political or cultural activism; others commemorate life-cycle events or the bonds of family and friendship. Still others, aided by the studio photographer's costumes and props, provide their subjects with opportunities to indulge in fantasy. But uniting all the many thousands of these images—now cherished as memorials to the vibrancy of a lost world—is their subjects' use of this modern medium to enact a sense of self according to protocols distinctive to photography.

I thought about the incident with the couple from the Bronx, and its implications for understanding photography as a cultural expression of modern Jewish experience, when I began advising the French photographer Frédéric Brenner as he was preparing his series of photographs of American Jews, taken in the mid-1990s and eventually published as *Jews/America/a Representation* (Abrams, 1996). What distinguishes Brenner's work, especially the remarkable series of twenty-eight group portraits that comprise the first section of this volume, is the self-conscious attention to photography as a performative act. In Brenner's photographs—of Jewish women inmates celebrating a Passover seder at a maximum-security facility, of rabbinic couples perched on double beds in a department store, or of the student body of a Jewish day school in Las Vegas standing beside the sphinx outside the city's Egyptian-style Luxor hotel—the mise-en-scène is elaborately conceived, and the fact that these are staged pictures is readily apparent.

While Brenner is very much the impresario of his compositions, his subjects are both the inspiration for these images and the photographer's willing collaborators in their realization. These group portraits are reminders of the extent to which all photographs are the culmination of performances, whose participants include both those seen in the image as well as others behind the camera and off to the sides.

The extreme self-consciousness of Brenner's American portraits challenges the protocols of photoethnography; some viewers might not consider them ethnographic at all, given how "contrived," how "theatrical" they seem. But in all their deliberateness and artifice, they do document a sense of play that Brenner regards as a distinctively American sense of freedom and inventiveness with regard to the performance of identity. Brenner's American portraits also offer powerful demonstrations of many American Jews' special willingness to participate in the creation of such provocative images, to enact their Jewishness before a camera—a desire to be included in the picture as a Jew.