Jewish Cultural Aspirations

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My connection to Judaism has always informed my life and my work. In the 1970s, when I was living in New York City, I was fascinated by the Lower East Side and its history of being one of the principal areas of settlement for Jews as they immigrated to this country around the turn of the last century. The first Jews came in 1650 and by 1920, the area contained the largest Jewish community in the world.

Equally fascinating for me, while living on the Upper West Side, was a group called the New York Havurah. The members of the Havurah were committed to practicing Jewish traditions in new and alternative settings. The Havurah had no affiliations, either with a particular synagogue or with one of the movements within Judaism. Members were committed to traditional Judaism, but were concerned with making it more democratic and egalitarian, and less institution-bound.

These were the subjects of my first two portfolios. Other photographers advised me not to concentrate on Jewish themes; they warned that I would get stigmatized as the “Jewish” photographer. I remember thinking, “Wow, that would be great.” Only one photographer, the Israeli Micha Bar Am, urged me to pursue what captured my attention and imagination. I have never regretted following his advice and being labeled as the “Jewish” photographer.

Several years ago, I came to understand that digital imaging and imagery were altering the medium of “professional photography,” radically and
permanently. With the advent of new and better generations of digital cameras and a wide variety of software programs available for editing and manipulating photographs, anyone, it seemed, could create their own art, even their own commercial photographs. In fact, I began to wonder if there was still a place for me as a photographer. This led me to step back to study and explore how the digital revolution could be applied to my photography in a way that made sense to me. Many factors can differentiate a photograph from a snapshot. One that is important to me is a consideration of “perspective.” What happens when you change the angle of view, or walk around to the side, or even to the back of your subject? How do the meaning and the mood of the photograph change? An essential exercise in the classes that I teach is to have my students shoot what they see, and then change something like the camera angle and/or the perspective, and shoot the same scene again.

About four years ago I came across the multi-image panoramas of Israeli photographer Barry Frydlendar. I was intrigued because of what this technique enabled me to do with perspective by flattening a circular, panoramic plane of as much as 360 degrees. Previously, I had always respected the frame, the borders of the photograph. If the image had to be cropped, then it was not good enough. Constructing a panorama of many images was very different from my previous work, and almost antithetical to my ideas about the frame. I now had to ask myself: “What would happen to my photography if I strung together multiple images?” Additionally, once I made the leap to more than one image in the same frame, “how would the order of the images, or the timing of them, affect the outcome?”

I found that there were several photographers working with this technique, most dealing with nature or some aspect of the landscape. Not many included street scenes with people. Variations included harsh edges between the sections of the panorama, or softened edges. Seeing their work helped me formulate a starting point. After a number of months of experimentation, I arrived at a method with which I felt comfortable.

The technique I prefer involves shooting many overlapping images of a scene, continuously, up to 360 degrees, but not necessarily a fully circular view. This might involve ten to twenty, or even more, images for a single setting. I then stitch them together into a panorama so that the junctures between the images appear seamless. I also leave the outer edges of the panorama alone, not cropping to make them even (an homage to my previous way of working). Another way I like to work is to revisit a particular place on subsequent days, shooting from the same spot, and then selecting the “slices” that I want from
each day, before blending the images together. With this approach to visualization in mind, I began to look for appropriate subjects that would especially benefit from this new technique.

I have always felt close to Israel. In college, I participated in the American Friends of Hebrew University junior year abroad program. Whenever we can, my wife, Isa, and I travel to Israel from Los Angeles, where we live. I am proud of my past images of Israel, single frames capturing an instant in time; hopefully my vision as an artist made them more profound than the details contained within the frame. As the late photographer, Gary Winogrand, famously articulated: “The photograph should be more interesting or more beautiful than what was photographed” (Diamonstein 187).

I always find Israel inspiring. The blend of cultures is exciting. The vistas are remarkable. The colors and the light are unlike any other place I have ever been. Also as a Jew and a photographer the subject of Israel allowed me to explore in depth the Jewish preoccupation with time. The concepts of time and timelessness and their self-conscious juxtaposition seem to me to be central to Judaism. The tradition has many ways to view time simultaneously on synchronic and diachronic levels, as is implicit in a phrase like “We came out of Egypt” rather than “Long ago our ancestors came out of Egypt.” With those thoughts in mind, I set out to think and work in the new panoramic format.

As I began to experiment with this technique, I noticed that people would appear as many as three or four times in the panoramas due to their walking through the scene as I was shooting the overlapping images. The Helicopter Crash Memorial, 2011, is one example of this (fig. 1; Pl. XV). It seemed to me, at first, that this presented an image of past, present and future, all at the same time. One of my mentors, after looking at some of the panoramas, suggested that I read some philosophers who speak about a tenseless time, and who raise the question, “Can we actually experience tense?”

Figure 1. Bill Aron. The Helicopter Crash Memorial. 2011. Digital Panoramic Photograph. Courtesy of the Photographer.
Our conventional expectation is that time passes. Time is transient. Viewed in this way, one might argue that there is no enduring present. As soon as we perceive the present, it is past. The present has no duration. In the image *Market Day Outside the Damascus Gate*, 2011, the group around the man in the yellow shirt appears three times (fig. 2; Pl. XIV). Which is past, which is present, and which is future? Are they all past because they are recorded in a photograph?

There are a number of philosophers\(^1\) who think and write about competing notions of time. A group called the “Presentists,” or A-Theorists, claim that the use of “tense” is essential to all discourse about time. The distinctions between them are essential, and all time involves an ordering of change; for example 2011 is always before 2012. An event is first part of the future, then the present, and then the past. That which has been perceived is in the past, and that which will be perceived is in the future.

Another group called the “Eternalists,” or B-Theorists, grant equal reality to all tenses. Our conventional notion of time, they say, is merely a subjective, and fabricated structure to understand “before, now and later.” They wish to eliminate all talk of past, present and future in favor of a “tenseless” ordering of time. Tense is obliterated. The people walking through the image are doing it in the present, or the past, or the future. There is no tense to what they are doing. One philosopher, in writing about the “Unreality of Time,” concludes by
stating that “Our ground for rejecting time . . . is that time cannot be explained without assuming time” (McTaggart).

This understanding of conflicting notions of time, of putting past and present in the same image, has enabled me to once again see Israel in a new and different way. Visitors to Israel often remark on how eternal it seems. The trees, rocks, buildings, and even shadows bear witness to history. Digital photography has enabled me to convey that sense of the eternal by revealing what our eyes and brain cannot fathom on their own. A photograph always has to be a visualization of the past, as that scene was when it was present. The panorama, by combining the same people as they are photographed at several different points in time, embedded within the ancient environment, conveys that sense of past and present together, and gives a visualization of the timelessness of the entire scene.

In summary, I began this process by attempting to find a new “place” for myself as a photographer. I found that place by standing still and having time move around me.

The Norwegian poet, Olav Hauge, said it best, I think:

Today I saw
two moons,
one new
and one old.
I have a lot of faith in the new moon.
But it's probably just the old (61).
Notes

1. For the following discussion, see, e.g., McTaggart.

Works Cited

_____. Damascus Gate. 2010. (See Pl. XIII)
_____. The Helicopter Crash Memorial. 2011.
_____. Market Day Outside the Damascus Gate. 2011.
_____. Western Wall Plaza at Night. 2010. (See Pl. XVI)