

The *Mix*

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IN BROOKLYN

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RABBI Y

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Mishpacha

A Potpourri of Encounters and Impressions

On Site



Go Ahead, Shoot Me

You've staked out your spot, created your frame, and now you're waiting... and waiting... for that decisive moment

“I’m like a fly on the wall,

but an educated fly,” explains photographer Ouria Tadmor, as we stand on a sidewalk in Meah Shearim.

I try to look fly-like.

Too late. The passerby and I have exchanged glances. It was just for a second but that’s a no-no, according to the rules of street photography, an art form that is as old as photography itself.

Why am I getting a lesson in street photography? Jerusalem is an immensely photogenic city, yet because its best-known landmarks and neighborhoods have been photographed so many times, it’s hard to get a photograph that is truly one of a kind. Street photography is therefore another way to approach the subject. In fact, devotees say it’s one of the best ways to get that image that says something fresh about a place — as well as a photograph that reveals something about the person behind the camera, who is also unique.

It’s All about Waiting *Mishpacha* readers may not know the name, but they’ve been seeing Ouria Tadmor’s photographs in the magazine for years. When he’s not on assignment or teaching photography, he likes to wander through the streets of Jerusalem with his camera. But though his gait may be relaxed, his eye is always on the alert. What exactly is he looking for?

First, it might be helpful to explain what street photography is not. It’s not studio photography, where the subject is brought to the photographer’s workplace and told what to wear and how to sit and where to look, while the photographer adjusts the lighting and backdrop accordingly. It’s also not photojournalism, where the photographer is on the lookout for a big, newsworthy event, such as “the handshake” between two world leaders or firefighters bravely battling a blaze. Nor is it landscape photography, where the idea is to get that technically perfect shot of a famous city landmark or natural scene.

What is it, then?

“Street photography is about capturing daily life as it is happening,” Ouria explains. “The subject is the regular things that you experience in the public spaces of every city — walking down a street, waiting for the bus, shopping at the open market, people working. Time is perhaps the biggest ingredient in street photography. You are capturing a moment that will never happen again.”

Our workshop begins with picking a spot, where we will wait for “something to happen.” While we’re waiting, and before we even take out the camera, I learn the first rule of street photography: Look.

We look at the buildings and their shapes. We notice where there is light and where there is shade. We see the people passing by. As we look, we are deciding how to compose our frame. Once we know what the frame is, we can adjust the settings of the camera accordingly. Then we wait some more.

“Street photography is 99 percent about waiting,” says Ouria. “We are waiting for the decisive moment to happen.”

The term “the decisive moment” is also the name of a photography book by Henri Cartier-Bresson, one of the most famous practitioners of street photography. In a 1957 interview with the *Washington Post*, Cartier-Bresson explained an important difference between photography and painting: “There is a creative fraction of a second when you are taking a picture. Your eye must see a composition or an expression that life itself offers you, and you must know with intuition when to click the camera.



“You are capturing a moment that will never happen again”



▲ We know it’s the Torah that keeps Am Yisrael full of life and vitality; for me, this photo says it. I love the contrast between the rundown buildings — rendered timeless by the blur — and the youthful energy of this *bochur* hurrying off to his *shiur*. Ouria had only a few seconds to adjust the camera’s settings so that it was the *bochur* who would be in sharp focus. We were thrilled when the photo came out just right.

▲ You might think there’s never a dull moment at the Machaneh Yehudah *shuk*. That might be true on a Thursday afternoon or Friday morning, but other times you can wait and wait... and then just when you’ve decided it’s time to move on to a different spot, everything falls into place.

The first step is to compose your frame and decide where the focus will be. Here, it’s the two workers standing to the left of the frame that have caught our attention: the intensity of the seated person and the wary expression of his companion, whose folded arms seem to speak louder than words. The three blurred figures at the right of the frame have their backs to us, yet they seem to both anchor the shot and add a sense of motion. And note how our eye is led past them to the man in the background with the raised arm. As Ouria mentions, our eyes get bored quickly, so a successful photo will give several places to look, each with its own little story.

▲ Unless you are scheduling your photo session in the early morning or late afternoon, you have to decide what to do about those long shadows created by the strong Israeli sun. In this shot, rather than try to avoid them, Ouria has given the shadow of the man pulling the hand cart a prominent place.

“That is the moment the photographer is creative. Oop! The Moment! Once you miss it, it is gone forever.... Life is once, forever.”

A Tale of Light and Motion While street photography sounds like it is concerned with the grittier aspects of life, its tone and style can actually be quite diverse. Cartier-Bresson’s spontaneous photographs have a formal composition that is as pleasing to the eye as anything painstakingly created in a painter’s studio. The photographs of Matt Stuart, a contemporary London street photographer, are appreciated for their wit and gentle humor. The subject matter, though, remains basically the same.

“It can be someone going by on a bicycle, or someone walking quickly with his coat floating in the wind,” says Ouria. “If there is a contrast between this person and someone who isn’t moving — or there is a contrast between the background, which is static, and the person in motion — a tension is created between the two. That body language will create interest in the photo.”

Ouria, who grew up in Yavne, has been living in Jerusalem for 13 years. His family on his father’s side — a branch of the Abulafia family — was expelled from Spain in 1492. They came to Eretz Yisrael and settled in Tiveria. Ouria is the 16th generation to live here. To me, a history writer, that’s interesting. Less clear is why I should be interested in someone riding a bicycle, a moment when nothing momentous is occurring.

“People like to look at other people,” Ouria explains. “Photography is so powerful because it tells a story, not in words but in visual language. It’s a story that is told through the eyes. But there is always something missing in a photograph, something unknown, and so we fill in the

THE SHOT that got away

When Ouria was studying photography at the Musrara Art Institute in Jerusalem, it was still the era of film. “No one took digital photography seriously,” he recalls. “But by the time I graduated, film was over.”

Yet even though today all sorts of technical effects are at everyone’s fingertips, he says that the ease of accessing those effects comes with a price tag. There is a danger that the special effects will take over, at the expense of the foundation of good photography: interesting subject matter and excellent composition. Therefore, the workshops he gives — which are for tourists who are in Eretz Yisrael for just a short time, as well as Israelis — don’t concentrate on the trendy, technical side of photography. He’ll show things such as how to adjust the camera settings for the differences in light, but the emphasis is on the timeless, how to make a good picture.

What if you wait and wait and the decisive moment doesn’t happen? Or those great shots you think you’ve gotten turn out to be not so great after all?

“It’s all a learning experience,” he says. “Even the unsuccessful photos are making your brain sharper and teaching you something. The workshop consists of two parts. First, we spend about three hours learning how to do street photography. Then in the evening we meet again to look at the pictures. And we learn the most from the bad pictures. The ones where you look and say, ‘If only I had pressed two seconds before...’”



“Some people will be interested in how the different breads are stacked, while I’m interested in the workers, the way they look when they shout to attract customers”



We didn’t really wait that long on Rechov Meah Shearim for something interesting to happen, but when you’re waiting and you don’t know if something will ever happen, even 15 or 20 minutes can seem like a long time.

Why were we waiting *davka* there? Every photographer has his own quirks and preferences. I’ve never met a staircase that I didn’t like. I also liked the way the light-colored buildings at the top of the stairs led the eye upward and created a sort of backdrop for a makeshift stage. All that was missing were the people.

So we waited some more, and a few *aveichim* came down the steps. To be honest, what was happening in the frame wasn’t terribly exciting. But then this young *chassid* appeared at the top of the stairs, and I just knew something was going to happen. The *bochur* looked down at the steps for about two seconds, apparently deciding whether to walk down sedately or let his inner exuberance shine through. And then he was off. We caught him skipping down the stairs just in time — the moment when he was about to touch the ground.

missing information with our imagination.”

In addition to the story element, a good photographer will make his photograph interesting through the skillful use of composition. For instance, all artists know that the eye loves the shape of the triangle. Therefore, when there is an opportunity to include a triangle — it could be a triangle of light on the pavement, a triangle formed by a gesture, or a triangle formed by three people sharing the frame — photographers rejoice. Diagonal lines are also welcome, since they lead our eyes through space. One thing that is not interesting for the eyes, says Ouria, is placing someone or something exactly in the center of the frame.

“Our eyes are made for working quickly,” he explains. “Think of when you drive, how the eye has to dart from place to place. But photography is a still image; it’s just a snapshot of reality. So unlike painting, where the eye might linger on the brushstrokes or the unusual use of color, the eye gets bored very quickly with a photograph unless you give it places to go. When you create some kind of movement for the eye, through triangles or diagonals or other geometrical elements, then the eye can have fun traveling through the frame.”

Zoom-less in Jerusalem

Street photography may be concerned with the spontaneous — the moment that just happens, without being staged — yet it is far from an impersonal art form. As part of my workshop, we walk through the *shuk* at Machaneh Yehudah. The goal is to find something interesting, but with so much going on, how do you decide what to shoot?

“You need to find what’s interesting to you,” says Ouria. “Some people will be interested in the different breads and how they’re stacked up on the tray, while others will be drawn to the colors of the fruits. I’m interested in the workers, the way they look when they shout to attract customers, the way they stand when they’re taking a break. While I was learning about photography, I spent two years just photographing the *shuk*.”

Although today Ouria is seldom without his camera, he wasn’t born with one in his hand.

In fact, his introduction to photography was through a book on the subject that he received as a bar mitzvah gift. A year later his father bought him a used camera.

“This was the early 1990s and I got a Pentax. The camera was from the 1960s — they used to build cameras that lasted. Everything was manual. There was no zoom. I loved it.”

Today he uses a digital camera with all the bells and whistles for his magazine work, but he still prefers to use a simple no-zoom camera with just one lens when he’s doing street photography.

“We don’t have zoom in our eyes,” he comments. “We see what we see. When I have just one lens, I know the frame. I know what the camera can see. I have the borders in my head. This lets me plan ahead. With any art form, when you create a frame or a border and you work only within this frame, you become more creative. But when I have a zoom lens, I’m not planning ahead. I’m reacting. It’s a different state of mind.”

Ouria is also a big fan of black-and-white photography, even though it isn’t so popular today. “Reality is in color. When I transfer the image to black and white, I create my own world within the picture. I’m creating an alternative reality.”

Invisible Man While the photographer is busy creating his own reality, what about the people who happen to walk into that frame? Do they mind becoming part of a complete stranger’s world, forever? Has he ever had his camera smashed, for example?

“One of the things I teach in my workshops is how to blend into the streets and be invisible, so people won’t be angry with you,” he says. “You’re not hiding. If you try to hide, people will get suspicious. You want them to ignore you.”

One way he does this is to stand or sit in the same place for several minutes before he starts shooting his photos. One thing he doesn’t do is aim his camera directly at a person. “Again, you don’t want the person in the center of your frame,” he reminds me. “You have created your frame



“Anyone can take a good photo of the Kotel. The goal is to take a photo that no one else could have taken”

beforehand, and you’ve looked ahead, to see what’s coming. The person just happens to walk into your frame.”

You also don’t want to make an abrupt movement when you bring the camera up to your eye. If you do that, says Ouria, people will think, “The Tax Authority!”

“The biggest mistake that most amateurs make is that after they take the picture they look down at the screen. Then they can’t resist looking back at the person they’ve just photographed, which makes the person nervous. If you ignore them, they ignore you.”

I saw the truth of this while we were standing on one side of Rechov Meah Shearim. On the other side of the street a panorama of Jerusalem life passed before our eyes: the elderly chassid making his way slowly and regally down the street, the *litvish yeshivah bochur* rushing to a *shiu*, the traditional Yid weighted down with his shopping bags. Perhaps it’s because cameras are so ubiquitous in today’s life, but no one paid us the least bit of attention as we waited, with camera in hand, for that “decisive moment,” Jerusalem-style.

Your Jerusalem Although his workshop is about street photography and

not about photographing landscapes, I still want to know how to get that great shot of the Kotel. Not the one that you’ve seen a zillion times. The one that gives you the chills.

One tip he gives is technical and has to do with light. “We can’t ignore light in photography. Photography is a Greek work that means drawing with light. Just as a painter works with charcoal or oils or watercolor, light is the photographer’s medium. You have to work with it. For instance, when the light creates long shadows, you have to work with those shadows and incorporate them into your composition. But you can choose when to photograph, and if you want a daytime shot of the Kotel you have to go before 9 a.m., when the sun is still behind the wall. Otherwise, the shadows will ruin your picture.”

You can also shoot at night, because the Kotel is lit with artificial light, says Ouria. You just have to shoot with a low shutter speed. If you’re not using a tripod to steady the camera, you can lean your arm against a *shtender* to avoid camera shake.

“But anyone can take a good photo of the Kotel. The goal is to take one that is ‘your’ photo of the Kotel — a photo that no one

else could have taken,” Ouria continues. “How do you do that? Let’s talk about landscape photography for a moment. It’s much easier to make a good landscape painting than a photograph because when you paint you are putting on canvas your impressions of the scene and no two people will ever paint the scene in the exact same way.

“But a photograph is so close to reality that anyone standing in the same spot could take the exact same picture. So you have to really work hard to understand your impressions — what you find interesting about this spot, what it means to you — and then try to convey that through the photograph.

“Ansel Adams was a great landscape photographer, but his photos aren’t about the landscape. They’re about what he wants to say about the landscape. He worked an entire lifetime to put his impressions, his emotions, into his landscape photographs. So to take your photo of the Kotel, you have to first think about what best expresses your emotions, what you’re interested in.”

Then you just have to wait, and daven, for that decisive moment to arrive, that image that says, “This is my Jerusalem.” ●



▲ How do you know what will make an interesting photo? One thing to look for, says Ouria, is contrast. In this photo, that contrast is provided by the difference in body language. The chassid closest to us was totally relaxed as he checked his phone messages. He was totally oblivious of both us and the other chassid, who was so tense as he dashed down the sidewalk that he didn’t notice us either.

Part of Ouria’s workshop includes going over the photos you’ve taken and learning what works and what doesn’t. Often the difference between the two is a matter of just a few seconds. In this photo, we caught the man on the bicycle too late. But even though that moment is gone forever, fortunately, life is full of decisive moments — if we just open our eyes and learn how to see them. ▶

