



## Judah Passow sees Britain

Photographer JUDAH PASSOW, best known for his photos of the human story behind the Middle-Eastern conflict, has more recently turned his camera towards British Jewry. **NO PLACE LIKE HOME – PHOTOGRAPHS BY JUDAH PASSOW** is shortly to open at the Jewish Museum London.

### Passow showed his photographs to distinguished fellow-photographer DOROTHY BOHM

Judah Passow was born in Israel, his parents moving to New York when he was an infant. He studied Film and Television at Boston University. In his twenties he moved back to Israel and worked as a photojournalist for the magazine of the *Jerusalem Post* for seven years before moving to London. He and his wife Alene Strausberg, who is a painter, have lived in Highgate, London since 1978.

As a professional photographer for 70 years and Associate Director of London's Photographers' Gallery for 15 years, I have had the opportunity to see the work of many photographers, and I have long been an admirer of the work of Judah Passow.

When Judah showed me the photos to be exhibited at the Jewish Museum I was impressed by his very humanistic but not sentimental approach in portraying 12

Jewish communities in Britain. He had very carefully researched his topic before spending 18 months visiting and photographing these communities.

Judah is a fine portraitist and the project of portraying British Jewry was a task which obviously intrigued and fascinated him. His photographs convey his understanding and respect for his subject matter, as well as humour. He made wonderful and moving images in an old age home in Brighton. There is a picture taken in a Reform synagogue in Birmingham of a youngster running past a Tree of Life honouring the deceased. I liked the pictures he took of women rabbis. One study shows a woman rabbi at a Reform synagogue with her Muslim equivalent in an interfaith study of the

Torah and the Koran. Then there is a wonderful study of the yeshiva boys in Gateshead. He captured the only Jewish bagpipe band in Glasgow. We also see a Jewish policeman in Liverpool.

The way Judah uses space in his 16 by 12-inch sized prints is very effective. Sometimes the subject matter is placed in one corner with a lot of space and yet the subject dominates the picture. I very much liked a picture he took in an Orthodox synagogue of a man quite alone praying and a little girl dressed for Purim just peeping in to see her Dad.

I wish the forthcoming exhibition, which was funded by the Pears Foundation, much success and feel certain that visitors will appreciate and enjoy the pictures on show.

## JUDI HERMAN finds out how Passow chose his shots and the stories behind the photos

“You develop an idea, imagine a certain kind of photograph and set off on a journey hoping like hell that you’re lucky enough to catch it”, admits Judah Passow. “There’s no way you can control what you’re going to find when you walk into a situation in this kind of photography. There’s a wide gulf between your imagining a frame and being lucky enough to find it. There’s an element of luck. You can stand there for hours before exposing a frame”.

Passow describes his project as “a visual conversation with the Jewish community – an opportunity to examine and reflect on what it means to be British and Jewish in the 21st century.

“I was able to work on this project as both insider and outsider. I’m not British and one of the things I wanted to explore was how the British Jewish community gives expression to its Jewishness as British people. Is there a British version of being Jewish? And the outsider in me was able to approach that question with a lack

of preconceived notions.

“On the other hand being Jewish made me an insider. I was photographing something that on one level was intensely familiar to me. There were moments of connectivity between myself and what I was photographing, emotional moments that could only be the result of an insider’s knowledge.”

“Once I had a definition of what it was that I wanted to do I had to develop a roadmap: where to go, who to see, what I was going to be looking for when I got there. I had to have answers to all these questions before I got on the train at Euston station and headed North.”

Was everybody happy to accommodate Passow? “No, inevitably with any project of this scale there were bumps along the road.”

You can actually feel the atmosphere in a photograph entitled Morning Torah Study. An Orthodox scholar with folded arms and distinctive garb sits by himself, balancing the ‘Start your day the Torah Way’ sign embroidered on a cloth fringed like a Torah mantle on the other side of the table. “That’s in Manchester in the ultra-Orthodox community in Broughton Park.

“That photograph is in the category of something that I really wanted and was really lucky to get – because a huge row broke out; people wanted to throw me out, it got very ugly. That’s why he has that expression on his face and arms folded – he’s reacting to all hell

breaking loose at the far end of the table, which is where I’m standing surrounded by four or five other extremely Orthodox men trying to get me to leave.”

Passow broke the project up into a series of subthemes ranging from philanthropy, “How do we as a community give money? How do we raise it and how do we give it?” to communal taboos. “Things we don’t like to talk about. I took photos in a battered women’s refuge. There’s a photograph that looks into the issue of abused women. I took a photo of a Jew in Wandsworth prison.”

An important theme is milestones in our lives: births, deaths, barmitzvahs, batmitzvahs, weddings. “I got in touch with rabbis in different congregations around the country. I wanted an Orthodox wedding, a Liberal wedding, an Orthodox barmitzvah, a Liberal batmitzvah, a Reform batmitzvah. One sub-theme I was interested in was the growing visibility of women in the pulpit, the ordination of women rabbis as an expression of 21st-century Judaism”.

This all seems like a huge departure from the work Passow has done before in conflict zones. “First and foremost this is photojournalism, the photography of asking questions, and in that respect it’s no different from any of the other work that I do. The locations may differ but the objective is the same: to explore an issue by asking questions about it”.

One illustration of the philanthropy theme is an affectionate image depicting the wary concentration of bridge players at a fundraiser organised by Jewish Care. Passow explains that his methodology is to ask permission from the organisers and then try and work in a very discreet manner. “If someone asks, I explain I’m photographing a project for the Jewish Museum. I don’t use a flash or walk around with much equipment. I dress the way they do. It’s very easy to lose yourself in a crowd that size and conduct yourself in such a way that you’re not drawing attention to yourself when you’re taking pictures”.

He approached Jewish Care and asked for access to a variety of their fund-raising activities. So there are also pictures of a men’s business breakfast, an Essex women’s brunch, and Jewish Care’s annual fund-raising dinner. Perhaps unsurprisingly, a theme of enjoying food while fund-raising emerges!





"We're no longer outsiders. On the contrary we're very much insiders, inside the larger community inside the community called Britain. This is a Jewish policeman who heads up a unit in Toxteth in Liverpool that chases around after teenage burglars. We'd been called out to an armed robbery and he pulled his car up on a street corner where there were these two kids and we started asking them about what they knew, what they'd seen. He's just questioning them about a robbery we'd been called to investigate". The police chief's face is clear and engaged, but we don't see the hooded youth's face at all. The rain glistening on the police chief's mac and the youth's hoodie speaks volumes. A policeman's lot is clearly not a happy one ..." This is a working picture!" exclaims Passow. "Something that's happening in real time. This isn't set up!"

"As well as having a Jewish theme I needed to build something into the photo visually that would stamp it as being from the Scottish Jewish community. I wanted a bit of Scottish Nationalism. In the two weeks I was shooting up there, somebody said at dinner, 'We've got the world's only Jewish bagpipe band here in Glasgow'. It comes out several times a year, but their biggest outing is Remembrance Day which was one of the things I was up there for. They all turned up in their kilts and got their bagpipes out of the boots of their cars got into formation and marched off to a World War II memorial" As the piper is foreshortened in the foreground, the woman in the background becomes a focus of the image and "The tartan that she's wearing is the same tartan as on his kilt and bagpipes, it's a Jewish tartan, specifically designed for the Jewish community".



NO PLACE LIKE HOME - PHOTOGRAPHS BY JUDAH PASSOW runs at the Jewish Museum

Yeshiva boys in Gateshead. There's so much energy and excitement – the students don't just sit and read the books. "No, because that's what studying Talmud is all about. The perpetuation of this tradition in Judaism of argument, disputation, discourse, critical thinking, not just sitting with your nose in a book and reading. Studying Talmud is about what happens after you've done the reading.

"I wanted to photograph in a particular yeshiva in Gateshead, the largest in Europe, one of the great seats of Talmudic scholarship in the world. And the rabbis there refused to let me in. So this photograph is from another yeshiva in Gateshead. I was able to get in because in a conversation with the Rabbi who heads that yeshiva, the night before at a dinner I had been invited to, when I explained to him what I was doing, he was more than happy to open the doors of his yeshiva".



Rabbi Laura Janner-Klausner at North-Western Reform Synagogue with a young candidate singing her portion from a Torah Scroll, rehearsing for her Batmitzvah . Both women display great concentration and dignity. This was indeed Passow's community of choice for his own son's Barmitzvah, although he counts himself as a secular, non practising Jew. "I have a particular and personal definition of my Jewishness. My identification with my Judaism is cultural, social and political, it's not a ritual-based identification".

London in Camden Town from 1 February to 5 June 2012. See WHAT'S HAPPENING page 29