

CHRYSTIE SHERMAN: “OUR HOMES” IN ANOTHER PLACE
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Chrystie

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Nina

I'm Nina Freedman, and this is WHEREING. WHEREING explores where we are. It is dedicated to those who believe in the inherent right of belonging, and all the ways we feel we belong and connect, to ourselves, to each other, and the spaces that hold the stories where all of this comes alive. Where each experience of belonging is a work of art, created by chance or by design. Dare I ask, is belonging where you are, not what matters most? WHEREING is the spatial story. Welcome.

This week, the Jewish holiday of Passover begins. Passover is the story of exodus, migration, nomadic wandering, and the longing for a homeland. This episode, 'Our Homes' in Another Place', coincides with these holiday themes. We speak with Chrystie Sherman, a photographer who documents the loss of Jewish communities. Her work has been the subject of two fascinating projects.

One, titled 'Home in Another Place', is a collection of black and white portraits of Jewish people remaining in these communities, soon to be published. The second, the Diarna Project, meaning 'our homes', in Judeo Arabic, are archival photographs of Jewish places, antiquities that are destroyed, but where fragments of relics remain. Chrystie began her career in photography at Jim Henson Associates, and then as a set photographer for the PBS Children's Television Workshop Sesame Street and WGBH, Boston. Her focus then turned to photojournalism. Her work has been exhibited in the US and internationally.

Chrystie, it's a pleasure to have you here, today.

Chrystie

Thank you.

Nina

You have been working as a photographer for almost two decades, recording places that are disappearing, specifically, Jewish communities in North Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia. Your first project is titled 'Home in Another Place'. And, I just love that name. It's a collection of stunning, black and white portraits of people, that remain and survive in these places. You've been doing this work in the Ukraine in India, Tunisia, Cuba, Azerbaijan and Morocco. How, and why did 'Home in Another Place' begin?

Chrystie

Thank you for asking. It's an important question. I would say that it had a very serendipitous start. I joined a synagogue many years ago and the Rabbi who had a very strong arts background, before going to rabbinical

school, had creatively found a large amount of money, so that the members of the synagogue, if they chose, could explore their Judaism through art. Now, at the time, I had a very secular background, so I didn't know a lot about what it was like, to be Jewish. And, I needed to explore that. Also I had just quit a job as a photo journalist, and I was wanting very much to explore portraiture, which I had never really done, and I was afraid of it. I thought, okay, well, this will give me an opportunity to break down this fear, and try to find a way, a venue, to do the portraits. So what I did is, I decided to go to the Ukraine, and take portraits of small villages between Odessa and Kiev, and see how this came out. I would learn about Judaism. I would learn about my family. I would learn about portraiture, and I thought, now, this is a nice package. I'm going to do it. I spend a month, and I came back. It was just unbelievable to be doing this, I have to tell you. It was a new adventure for me, and every time we stopped at a Stetl, which is village in Yiddish, I would take my camera out. I would meet people. I would take their portraits, and we would move on to the next location. When I got home, and I looked over the contact sheets, I was shocked. There was a passion that came out, an energy, and I was really able to take very decent portraits, much to my surprise. And, I felt so energized by this topic, that I decided that, okay, I was in the former Soviet Union. Now, I'm going to go to Central Asia. That's going to be my next trip. And, so it just continued and continued. Every country was another adventure, and it was fascinating, and it allowed me to also, really get to know these countries. I have to say, one of the incredible benefits of this project, is that I would be traveling with my guide and my driver, all through the country, from one end to the other, and back. And I really got a sense of, geography and history, which added immensely to my knowledge of what I was doing.

Nina

The context.

Chrystie

The context. So I would say that's the first leg of my trip, I was really green and open to anything that was going to happen to me, and everything did happen to me. And I know I should write a book about it.

Nina

Absolutely, who knew would this would go?

Chrystie

Who knew? Yeah. So, since that time, just to finish answering the rest of your question, I've been documenting smaller disappearing Jewish communities in the diaspora. The photographs that I was taking in the Ukraine, and 10 years after that, which involved going to many different countries in Central Asia, India, North Africa, Greece Turkey, for instance; those portraits were a book project that I was working on at the time called 'Home in Another Place'; because these Jews and these communities had come from other places and they had been living where they're living for a long time. That was the issue. And now, there was this incredible race to try to capture these communities, before they disappeared, due to immigration, poverty, economic reasons, whatever. So I was trying to hurry to get this done.

Nina

Part of the research has been getting to know the people, who remains and why they remain. How did you establish the trust so that you could photograph them? And, what did you find out?

Chrystie

When we talk about trust, I think I'm going to turn it around to myself. I trusted that I could go to the communities of choice, and basically come away with images that would become part of my archive, to document these small and disappearing communities. I didn't ask anybody in advance. I just went. Maybe

that took chutzpah, but basically the whole project was about me taking a lot of chances, and just directing my own course here. Some of the compelling examples of communities that I photographed, each one has its own characteristics. One is India. Now, India, has a large Jewish community. The Jews in India have come from the Middle East, way back, as far as 70 AD, by boat. The exiles traveled to many places, and one of them was India, where they've lived all this time, almost a thousand years. There are three different groupings. The interesting thing about the Jews of India, is that right now, India does not feel like their home. They are a very religious group, and home for them means going back where they came from, even all these centuries later. I guess you could say now, that they actually have the monetary means to do this. India is a poor country, but the Jews of India have a little bit more money. They're in business, and they just feel, this is what they want to do, and there are very few Jews left in India right now. It's kind of astonishing you blink, and 10 more families have left.

Nina

It's interesting that the memory has stayed over the generations, that attachment.

Chrystie

What I've learned is the high degree, of religion in each of these communities, makes a very big difference. And, the Indian Jews are very religious, and so they're always thinking about going to Jerusalem, even though they're in India.

Nina

Interesting. Jerusalem is probably not their original home.

Chrystie

It depends. The Baghdadi Jews. There are three groups, there's the Cochini Jews and they're the ones that originally came from the Middle East in Yemen. Then, you have the B'nai Israel, and there's a whole story about them being on a ship wrecked boat, near Bombay, and, they came at a different time. Then, they're the Baghdadi Jews, who came more recently, and they were very educated, and well-to-do families. I think of all the three groups, they're the ones that are probably still there, but the others have wanted to leave. Another interesting community is the Bukharan community in Uzbekistan. And, I'm going to tell you a little bit about this one, just because for me, it is a puzzling situation. The Bukharan Jews came from Persia, around seventh or eighth century. And, they migrated up to what is now Uzbekistan. They have lived peacefully all this time, even through the dark period of World War II, where a lot of Ashkenazi Jews would come into central Asia, but they were not affected by the second World War. It was really incredible. And, if you would go to the community, you would see that it's very rich in heritage and in religion, and they've profited greatly from being a part of the silk route, in earlier times. More recently, the majority of the Bukharan Jews in Uzbekistan have moved to Queens, New York. They'd given up their beautiful homes with courtyard full of fruit trees, and they've moved to low-income housing in Queens. You ask, well, why are they doing this?

Nina

Why are they?

Chrystie

They're doing this because the grandchildren, the younger generation, is tired of the old world. They want to be part of the new world, and when they leave, the grandparents follow. Now you have this really old, rich community, that's now living in poverty conditions in Queens, New York. Now, this is their home. They're not going back. Over time, it will straighten itself out, but this is the deal, and they're very few Jews left in Uzbekistan. The third community that I wanted to cite as an example, are the Jews of the Ukraine. Before I

went to the Ukraine, I read a lot about it, like I read a lot about all the countries that I eventually go to. And, what I did learn is that the Jews in the Ukraine suffered centuries of pogroms and deprecations, which really diminished the communities and made them into survivors. That's how I found them, when I went to photograph in these shtetels. They were survivors. But, the interesting thing is that I found people that had remained very close to each other, and to the land. There are many Russians, and Russian Jews that have emigrated to other places, mainly the United States. But, I think, unlike the Indian Jews, they were really deprived of having any kind of religious life. So, I think that the community became the central focus of their lives, and they're also landowners, which you don't find much anywhere else. I think owning property is another reason why you do see large Jewish communities, in the Ukraine.

Nina

This is Nina Freedman. We are talking with Christie Sherman about 'Our Homes in Another Place', the photographing of small and disappearing Jewish communities.

Chrystie

One of the trips that I planned when I was on my second trip to India, was to make a side trip to Afghanistan and go to Kabul and photograph the last Jew in Afghanistan. And I thought, okay, my project is photographing small and disappearing communities. So, I have to go there. It was fraught with problems. He asked me to bring two bottles of scotch, which I managed to smuggle in, at great risk. He kept me waiting for three or four days, but, I was really wondering what it was like to be the last person in a very rich, long history of Jews, that originally came from Persia, that were now living in Afghanistan, and everybody had left except him. And, why was he staying? He didn't want to leave. He had children. He had a couple of daughters that lived in Israel, and maybe there was a wife floating around somewhere, but she was not in Afghanistan, but he was there. He lived in the synagogue in Kabul, which was pretty much destroyed by the Taliban, maybe 20 years ago. What I discovered, is, that he had become a celebrity, because he was the last Jew, and everybody wanted to come from far and near, to interview him, to take his photograph, and to do what I was doing. He was cashing in on this sort of singular status that he had, and he gave me a very hard time. I gave him a very big tip when I was there to take his photograph. It was a hundred dollars, and he threw it on the ground and he said he wanted more. After I only shot two frames, he locked himself into his office and didn't come out. And, that was the end of my my photo shoot with him. But, It was it was a really incredible experience. One really lovely little detail is that, the portrait that I did take of him, he was sitting next to his rose bushes, and his rose bushes were really important to him, and they were his family, and they were where he belonged. He belonged in a synagogue, with this rose bushes, and with his audience. And, that's what being the last Jew in Kabul meant. And, I found that out.

Nina

In retrospect, it's an amusing story. At the time, it tarnishes the experience, I would imagine.

Chrystie

It was unexpected, but I didn't expect for everything to be the same.

The other community that I was so interested in - I have such warm feelings about this community. It's called the B'nai Ephram, in India. It is a fascinating story of a group of about 50 families, who in the mid 20th century, the head of the community decided to reinvent their low class, untouchable status, and to become Jews. This was a very bold move. They were on the lowest rung of the ladder, and they probably saw other Jewish communities in India doing much better than they were. So, they wanted to be part of this Jewish community. They gave themselves the name of the B'nai Ephram, which is one of the names of the 12 tribes, and they have truly changed their identity over the years and they're now living like all Jewish communities that I've experienced and photographed, sort of insular religious lifestyle. They are a community, and a

community with purpose, and it's very beautiful. They were incredibly moved that I came to photograph them. I stayed in their community for five days, and I got to know them very, very well. For me, this was an incredible experience.

Nina

At the beginning. Were they welcomed in to the Jewish community, when they decided to reinvent themselves? Because, they would have had to have been educated in the customs, the rituals, the religion.

Chrystie

They've done all that.

Nina

On some level, they must have also been welcomed.

Chrystie

Some Jewish groups, because they have no right DNA, they won't acknowledge them at all. Then there are other Jewish groups that do recognize them as being Jewish, because they're leading a Jewish life, and they just have a more open perspective on the situation.

Nina

Did they convert ,or they just gave themselves a new name?

Chrystie

Well, they are converting. They're not going to Israel, but they are converting, for sure.

Nina

Well, maybe they have a different definition of what that means.

Chrystie

They celebrate all the Jewish holidays. They celebrate Shabbat. They're kosher. They live a full Jewish life.

Nina

I'm thinking, it's the reverse of what happened in Germany.

Chrystie

Yeah. Right. In the sense that..

Nina

People try to rid themselves of the Jewish identity, and integrate it into non Jewish identity.

Chrystie

Right. Exactly.

Nina

It's very rare that you hear it going the other way.

Chrystie

Well, this project that I've been working on for such a long time, has many surprises, and I think that's one of the really beautiful parts of it, is, that it's very diverse and it has colorful, unusual stories to it.

Nina

This is Nina Freedman. We are talking with Christie Sherman about 'Our Homes in Another Place', the photographing of small and disappearing Jewish communities.

Chrystie

Chrystie, you're also working on the Diarna project, and Diarna is a Judeo Arabic word, and means 'our homes'. This project is centered in North Africa and the Middle East, and it has also taken you into Syria, where you have documented places that have since been destroyed by the war there. Can you tell us about the Diarna project?

Nina

Yes. The Diarna project is housed in the Center for Jewish history. They were in touch with me, because they wanted to hire me as a photographer. But, what they're doing is very, very different than what I was doing, because instead of photographing people, their endeavor is to digitally document Jewish sites and antiquities that are historical and culturally endangered. It's the flip side of 'My Home in Another Place'. These two projects, that I'm working on now, together, they're called Lost Futures- Journeys into the Jewish Diaspora. I would say that the Diarna project, is amazing. I didn't go to Syria for Diarna, but they have picked up all my photographs there. And, it was another kind of scary situation. I was in Tunisia, doing portraits and photographing sites. And, I took some time to take a trip to Damascus, and just take my chances on whether or not I could connect with the Jewish community there. I had a lead. There was an antiquity shop, that was the last Jewish business in all of Syria. I was very lucky, and I met immediately with the owners of the store, and they took me to various synagogues in the area of Damascus. I was able to get a lot of beautiful photographs. It turns out that one of them was destroyed by Assad, and it no longer exists. So my documentation of it was historical.

Nina

It was extraordinarily beautiful from the photographs.

Chrystie

More recently, I was in Tunisia photographing 35 synagogues, most of them have been shuttered for years. That was an incredible archive of history, Tunisian Jewish history, that has now become a really important body of work, because nobody else has done it. And, it's also interesting, that even the heads of the Jewish community, are not interested in saving these incredible relics. So, someone's got to do it. Diarna has really come in, and tried very hard to take charge of this.

Nina

You're the perfect person to be a part of that.

Chrystie

Yeah. I'm very willing.

Nina

And talented. In 'Home in Another Place', the texture of the portraits seems to be almost a part of the fabric of the setting. There also seems to be a silence that I feel, when I look at the portraits, and a simplicity, and the history is etched into the faces of the people. In the Diarna project, most of the photographs are traditional sacred sites, such as synagogues and cemeteries. These are also portraits, but without people. Because of your creative eye, we see the people by the absence in the site, and their traces on the walls of these abandoned buildings. And, they're also quiet. I'm moved by a lot of your photographs, but I'm particularly moved by one of them, which is a very large menorah, which is laid flat on the ground, that's made out of broken tombstone fragments. In itself, it's a reconfigured memorial of a communal tradition, right? It's a fascinating work, and the photograph is incredible. You started to touch on this a little bit earlier, about how you think about the photograph in advance. I'm wondering if you could say more about how you create these photographs, and what you look for. What I mean is, how do you reveal the essence of the sacred? The history, and the absence that I was just talking about, because it's not just a photo of an archeological site, right? It's so much more than that.

Chrystie

Well, I'm glad to answer your question, but I wanted to mention, about the menorah.

Nina

Yes, please.

Chrystie

There used to be a large Jewish community there, which no longer exists. We went to photograph that cemetery, and this was another, incredible surprise. When you walk in the front gate, it's pretty much in shambles. And, then you go further in the back, and you do see the menorah that's made out of broken tombs, the chips and the small pieces. It turns out, that the family that runs the cemetery is Muslim. Many cemeteries, all over the countries I've traveled to, are maintained by Muslims. The young man that showed us into the cemetery said, 'my father made this'. He said, 'my father really wanted to express how much he loved the Jewish community when it was here, and he felt very close to it'. People came in after the Jews left and broke up all of these tombs, and left everything, looking like a mess. He said it was so disrespectful, and he wanted to straighten that up and make it really nice. And, aside from the big menorah, he made all these little pathways out of pieces of tombstones. He was gifted, you know, he had a really artistic sense, and he made his own contribution to his community. It was stunning, and surprising, and my guide and I can honestly say, that it took our breath away, when we saw it.

Nina

It was huge, right?

Chrystie

It was very big.

Nina

It's almost like a big room.

Chrystie

Exactly. To answer the rest of your question, are you wanting to know how I feel about the photographs, that I'm taking?

Nina

There's a haunting beauty and something sacred about these photographs, and you capture that. I'm wondering how you do that?

Chrystie

Well, I'll tell you something. It is interesting, and that is, the soul of why these photographs are successful, because somehow, I'm able to connect with the subject, whether it's static or whether it's live. When I'm actually taking the portrait, I have to pay great attention to who I'm photographing, what that person looks like, where I'm taking that photograph, because the background and the sitter, they have to tell a story. If there's no story, then the portrait is useless, as far as I'm concerned. With a Jewish site, like an old shuttered synagogue, sometimes, I'll go into one of these synagogues and get the feeling that even though nobody's been there for 40 or 50 years, you may see a Talit, a prayer shawl, that's still lying over a bench. And you just pick up in your imagination where that community left off. When they closed the door for the last time, and they left everything just the way it was. It gives me goosebumps to think about it, because that is another portrait, as you said. It's so moving to take these photographs. Sometimes, I'm crying while I'm taking the picture, because it's just the awesome beauty of where I am. I mean, even though these places have really been destroyed by time, and by others that have wanted to show their animosity towards a Jewish community, you really do feel very emotional by looking at it, and old and decrepit can be beautiful. I spend a lot of time. When I do a portrait, I'm usually there for two or three days, because it's important to get to know your subject matter.

Nina

It's a very precise listening that you do.

Chrystie

Yes, exactly.

Nina

You hear the space.

Chrystie

I hear the space. Yeah, that was very beautifully put. Thank you.

Nina

That's wonderful. I saw that you don't date your work.

Chrystie

I've made a choice not to date it, because I do want the images to stand on their own, as timeless portraits. That's really important, because I'm really photographing an era.

Nina

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Nina

I wonder if, as you cross through all these countries, you might be thinking about the land to which one belongs, and the feeling of birthright and exile, and, I imagine one can't help but contrast the experiences and the stories that you witness, with one's own personal, or your own personal story of family migration and the questions of home and belonging. So, you spent most of your childhood in a farmhouse in Vermont, later moving to New York and the West coast for work. I'd like to read an excerpt of something you recently wrote titled 'Land', if you'll allow me to do that.

"We moved into an 1850s farmhouse that my father restored mostly by hand. While tearing down the walls to install new insulation, we found troves of old bras and girdles, newspapers, horse hair, and other odd clothing, as was typically used to insulate, in those days. It was my first thrilling anthropological experience. Long after I had left home, in a burst of creativity, my mother sold the farm house and most of the land, and built her dream house just down the road. Both houses are visible to each other with a field in between. I'm sad to think that sometime in the near future, the new house will have to be sold. And lately, I've been pondering. What, and where is home? I live in New York city and spend a great deal of time in Vermont. But, as I scan the familiar horizon from the front porch of the house, I asked myself, where is my true home? In conversation with my oldest friend and her daughter. I caught myself saying. I am home, when I am away from home, but, did I plan it right? Has Kansas been here all along?"

So, Chrystie, the intrepid, creative global traveler that you are, sitting on the porch of your beloved family house in Vermont, which will be sold - you are immersed in the soup of history, and the stirring of these universal questions. What has your work taught you about this? Is Kansas with us, wherever we go? Or does it ultimately live in the portrait, alive, or imagined?

Chrystie

First of all, I'm very glad that you read that. What I've learned about home, is that a home for me is, as I said, when I'm not home. And, what that made me realize when I was thinking about it, is that I take my idea of home with me wherever I go, because I love being part of the world. It means more to me to be out in the world, doing what I'm doing, than to be sitting in my apartment, that most people would call their home. So, I would say my home is the feeling that I get of knowing that I can do my work, and that I can go into the world, and that I can find my home, doing these things.

Nina

What I'm wondering about is, it seems that when you're traveling to these places, there's such a deep connection with the sense of home in that place, that you become part of it. And then, these memories build together. It's a very specific kind of experience. You're not a tourist. You're looking at home. You're picking very precise communities that are strong, even though they've disappeared.

Chrystie

I'm very focused on what other communities, what their idea of home is, and how they're living out the idea of home and belonging. But, I do feel that, when I go to these communities, when I'm working, I'm taking my home with me. That I'm my home. I have family, and I have a lot of friends, and I have an apartment, but I don't feel the sense of belonging and home, the way I do when I'm away from home, when I'm working. I'm trying to figure out what other people are doing with the same notion. They're searching for their next destination. I know what I am. I'm an American citizen. I'm Jewish. That's my home and that's my belonging to my community, but, I still feel like the stronger bond is when I leave and I go and I do my work, and I'm

focused on other people's lives. And the objective is to make a documentation of these homes, that are going to be on the way out, sooner or later.

Nina

I'm wondering if it also has to do with being very creatively alive.

Chrystie

Definitely, creativity is the engine, that makes me move. But, people feel anchored to a lot of different things, to money, or to properties, or to religions, or to whatever. And, I don't feel very connected to any of those things. I feel connected to my art. It has led me into this place. I feel really grateful that I'm doing what I do. I feel like I have purpose.

Nina

Right. I understand. Yeah. Before we close, is there anything else that you want to share?

Chrystie

Well, I super appreciate that you've wanted to have this conversation with me.

I had an experience when I was in the Ukraine, and my guide in Kiev took me to Babi Yar, which was a site where there was a huge Jewish massacre by the Nazis in 1941. I remember I had sandals on that day, and I was standing over this ravine. I had this realization while I was standing there, that what is important, what makes a big difference, is where you were born, and when you were born. I was born in the United States, and I've had all my needs met my whole life. I'm extremely grateful for the timing of my life, and where my life has played out. It's given me opportunity, and a lot of free space to make my own decisions, about what I want to do. I don't know why I'm dedicating my life to this area that I am, but it gives me pleasure trying to save a little bit of history from disappearing. We need to protect our history.

Nina

So beautifully said.

Chrystie

Thank you.

Nina

Chrystie Sherman. Thank you so much for being here today.

Chrystie

Oh, you're so very welcome, Nina.

Nina

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