

# Capturing History: The Photography of Chim Museum Midrash Method Guidelines

“Chim picked up his camera the way a doctor takes his stethoscope out of his bag, applying his diagnosis to the condition of the heart.”

-Henri Cartier-Bresson

## 1. Background

The exhibit “Capturing History: The Photography of Chim ” is the result of a request by Chim’s niece and nephew - Helen Sarid and Ben Shneiderman- to Beit Hatfutsot. The exhibit documents the life of Chim, a pioneer of journalistic photography and a founder of “Magnum”, in chronological order and through six spaces: his childhood in Poland, Paris, the Spanish Civil War, World War Two, his time as a celebrity photographer, and the young Jewish state of Israel.

### About Chim:

The famous photographer named Chim was a man of many names. He was born in Warsaw, Poland in 1911, and was also known as Didek. In 1933 he began working as a news photographer in Paris. For his work, he signed the name Chim - an abbreviation of his surname, which was easier for the French to pronounce, and also to help blur his Jewishness. During World War II he came to the United States as a refugee and changed his name to David Seymour.

This multiplicity of names reflects the influence of history and antisemitism on Chim's personal and professional identity. His insightful photographs document some of the major political upheavals of the twentieth century. Tragically, both he and his parents were among the many victims of the wars he devoted his life to documenting.

### Themes for the exhibit that are important to consider:

**Jewish Peoplehood:** The exhibit has links to all of the peoplehood pillars.

- **Historical memory:** Chim captured history, and questions of memory and history are central to his work and exhibit. Chim was a creator of historical memory, in a new medium of his time, but which is central to our thinking about the 20th century: photography. Questions of establishing memory and historical spaces can be discussed here. In addition, Chim's personal story is tangled and influenced by collective historical events - he was in Paris during the awakening of the ideological movements, he traveled to Spain to document the Spanish Civil War, and his parents were killed in the Holocaust. In Chim, the points of contact between the individual and the collective receive a visual dimension.
- **Creativity:** Chim is a photographer, and although his work is intended for documentation and the press, it is still aesthetic, telling a story, and it is part of the world of Jewish creativity.

- **Values:** Compassion as a value- Tikkun Olam and equality motivate all of Chim's work. Thus, his photographic gaze is almost always directed at the oppressed, the nursing mother, and the children. He viewed his photography of the Spanish Civil War as his form of action for the values of the Republic, and thus created "Magnum", a cooperative photography agency, in which photographers retain copyright to their works. Due to the nature of his work Chim was invited by UNICEF to create a book about children affected by World War II.
- **A multifaceted connection to Israel:** Chim's connection to Israel was profound, and in the 1950s he visited it several times in the years before his death in the Sinai Campaign. He photographed pioneers, soldiers, and children here, but also uniquely for his career - landscapes. Chim was killed during the Sinai Campaign by Egyptian fire.
- **Hebrew and Jewish Languages:** Chim's family owned the Central publishing house, which published Yiddish literature.
- **Jewish lifestyle:** The exhibit features 60 printed holiday cards from Rosh Hashanah that he created for the publishing house. Photos include the custom of *tashlich* and a wedding *chuppah*.

**Breakthrough:** Chim worked at a time when the means of photography were not only very different technically (film, development process and printing, etc.), but also not as available as they are today. He was a pioneer of journalistic photography and one of the first to use a 35mm camera, which allows for faster and easier photography. He used his knowledge as a chemist (he never studied photography, just chemistry and graphics) to be one of the most successful photographers in the world. He was one of the first to take pictures in color, but news agencies and galleries did not yet have the capacity to print them in color. Therefore, for years his images were developed in black and white, without anyone knowing that they were actually photographed in color.

**The power of photography / story:** Although photography was becoming more available in Chim's time, it was still much less available and less common than it is in our time. This fact affects the importance of each frame. Chim saw himself as a storyteller through images, and sought to create strong images that captured an entire story in one moment.

**Photography as political activism:** Chim viewed his role as a photographic journalist as an instrument for promoting an agenda aimed at informing the public of what was going on in war zones. He was able to direct the lens to its consequences, and bring the price paid by the voiceless victims to the public's attention. He tried to take action through Tikkun Olam in his photographs, and was able to change reality and "move the comfortable" by turning the gaze and the perpetuating of the moment.

**“We are only trying to tell a story. Let the 17th-century painters worry about the effects. We’ve got to tell it now, let the news in, show the hungry face, the broken land, anything so that those who are comfortable may be moved a little.”**

**-Chim**

**Tour Structure:** The gallery in which the exhibit is presented is divided into two spaces by a "wall" of large photographs of Chim and his family on a glass divider placed in the center of the gallery. On either side of the gallery, in 2 locations, there are projectors that show a series of pictures on the floor. In the space next to 'Paris' and Chim's childhood portraits, his photos from Mexico are displayed. In the 'Israel' area, two more photos of Israel are projected. This division creates two spaces in which groups can be assembled: Chim's early life - with his career in front of him- and in Israel, where his life and career culminated.

A tour of the exhibit can be conducted in the following order:

- Entrance (first space / outside the exhibit in the opening panel)
- Analysis of multiple images (first space)
- Scatter with a prompt question
- Regroup (second Space)
- Summary (second space)

The following is a proposal for a possible tour that begins with Chim's childhood and runs through the gallery in chronological order (you can also guide the gallery in the opposite order)

### **Intro:**

**Possible questions:** Who has taken a photo in the last hour? Who has taken a photo today? Who has taken a photo this week?

Do you know how many pictures you take a month on average?

What is the most important picture you took this week?

Try to imagine yourself as a photojournalist and choose a photo you have taken recently. Describe it and explain why you chose it.

Chim was a Jewish photographer at a time when only a few people had cameras. When people used to film with a 36-mm film, in order to see what you took, you needed to go through a long development process to print the picture on special paper.

You could say that Chim was a storyteller. Chim realized that his camera and his eye had a lot of power. He was able to use this power because he could tell a whole story in one strong, precise frame.

### **Biographical background on his childhood:**

Chim grew up in a secular home, which had a place both for Jewish culture and for European culture. His mother, Regina, was the secretary for the Hebrew newspaper

*Hatzfira*, edited by Nahum Sokolov. His father, Benjamin, was one of the owners of the important Jewish publishing house, Central, which published books in Hebrew and in Yiddish. In the early years of his childhood, the family fled their home and wandered through Poland against the background of the First World War and Polish political instability, but in 1919 they returned to Warsaw and their home became a center for intellectuals, writers and artists.

**Analysis of 2-3 images together with the group:**

Discuss what kind of atmosphere / feeling a photo evokes.

**Historical Context and Subject:** Historical Events, Portraits, Color, Black / White.

**Perspective:** Where does the photographer turn the lens? Who and what does he choose to photograph? From what angle?

**Composition:** What is in the foreground of the picture and what is in the background? What is in focus and what is blurred?

**Zoom Out / In:** What is the photographer focusing on and how far away is it? What story does this picture tell? Who is at the center of the story?

**Scatter throughout the gallery with a task** (emphasize to the participants that after about 5 minutes, you will regroup, and they will be invited to share the photo and the content it expresses to them, related to their personal story):

**Possible questions** (more questions for the various school programs below)

Choose an image that excites you, and why?

Choose a photo that intrigues you, and why?

Choose a picture that is relevant today.

Choose a photo that you find challenging

Choose an image that expresses a value that you want to promote as teachers / officers.

Choose an image that teaches you something new about a historical event.

**Reconvene to discuss and analyze the selected pictures together:**

After the participants have toured the exhibit freely, choosing compelling works for them, take them in a certain corner, or ask if there is anyone willing to start sharing his / her personal story with the group. Lead the group among the various works according to the choices and participation of the participants. Create a track where the participants themselves lead the group and explain why they chose one piece or another as representing the value they want to promote. Next to each piece, ask if someone else has chosen the work and why.

Use the images to develop understanding about the periods in Chim's life and the exhibits that were not covered in the first part of the tour. Also, add questions to the discussion (using the tools we used initially, through a historical context, perspective or composition) such as:

What is the purpose of the picture?

What story is there, and what does he want to bring to attention?

What is an important aspect of this picture? And more ...

**Possible tour summaries:**

Relevance to our lives: Do you think photography has the power to change public opinion today? Is there a picture you encountered during a news / newspaper / news site that affected you? Is the role of a press photographer important today?

**Values and Motivation:** Notice how Chim's values have driven him throughout his life. What values did he believe in? What did he want to arouse in viewers (refer to the relevant quote)? How did he see his photography?

**Chim the groundbreaker:** What is the best way to emphasize the unique life story of a person who, sometimes coincidentally and sometimes intentionally, was at almost every major struggle of the first half of the 20th century. Chim was also a groundbreaker in the medium of journalistic photography by turning his photographic gaze on the oppressed, and by the creating Magnum to preserve the right of copyright (among others).

**Additional questions for instruction and questions for the various school programs:**

You are given the option to open an exhibit on the subject of photography:

Try to imagine yourself as photographers who are asked to choose one of your photographs for the exhibit. Choose a photo you have taken recently. Describe it and explain why you chose it?

What are the criteria by which we will examine the photographs we chose?

Try to figure out if your photograph meets the criteria (listed below) of news value and of photo quality.

What is the uniqueness of photography versus a painting, book or article?

What are the advantages of photography? What are its dangers?

What types of photography do you know of?

By what means and techniques can photography be enhanced? Angles, black/white or color, symmetry etc.

**Photo analysis criteria:**

**News value:**

The commemoration of the moment - to what extent is the immortalized moment truly dramatic and significant?

Storytelling - Does the photo tell a story?

The news context - how much does the photograph represent the event itself?

Impact on the reader - did the photo leave an emotional impression on you?

Exclusive - How original is the photograph and is it different from all other photos?

### **Photo quality:**

Composition - What elements did the photographer choose to include in the photo and where is the focal point in relation to the rest of the components?

Photography angle and atmosphere - To what extent does the photograph illustrate the atmosphere of the scene and the feelings of those in it? (Close-ups, facial expressions, etc.)

Technical quality - is the photo focused, sharp and clear?

Remember, in order to be a press photographer you must be present at the event and take pictures from the field. In this way, your role is both photographer and journalist. A role that requires a sharp eye, artistic talent, and keen senses to identify the story.

### **Questions for the various programs:**

#### **Roots/ Shorashim-**

What can be learned about Chim, his family and his roots from the exhibit?

Which photographs remind you of your family photos?

What historical events can be identified from the photographs and objects of Chim?

Types of stories: family, historical, personal, human, portraits, and more.

Name some of the personal and collective events in his photographs?

Find an object that illustrates something from Chim's personal story? Book, document, camera, photo ...

#### **Identity Program (Teudat Zehut) -**

Choose a photo in the exhibit that expresses your Jewish-Israeli identity.

Choose a photo in the exhibit that reflects your personal and collective identity (reflecting the intersection between the individual and the collective).

Chim's photographs contain many different elements of identity - language, values, lifestyles, Israel, tradition, memory.

How do these elements and the photos you chose express your identity?

#### **Leadership -**

Pay attention to Chim's shooting angle in some of the pictures that depict war stories - Who does Chim choose to photograph?

Who are the real heroes in his photographs? How did he choose to display their bravery? How brave are you?

Who are your heroes that you want to photograph or have photographed? How brave are they?

Who are the heroes of our day? How are they documented today?

#### **A program for values, together we can change the world -**

Choose a photo that reflects one or more values in your life. What are the values you have seen in Chim's photography?

Is there a photo that stimulates motivation and a desire to act and change? why? Act in what way?

What photograph do you think expresses the value of Tikkun Olam?