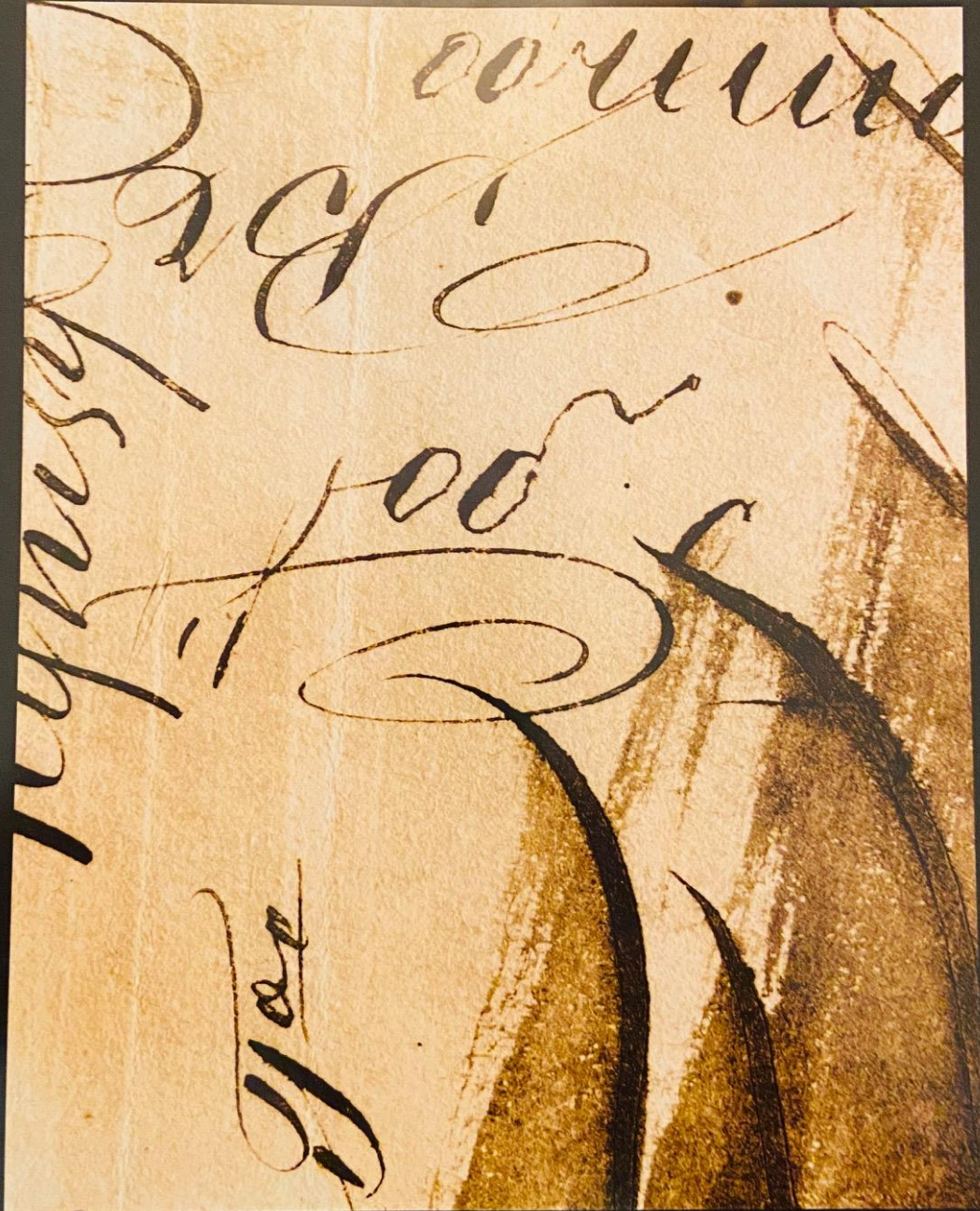


# Hand to Hand:

Photographs by Zeva Oelbaum

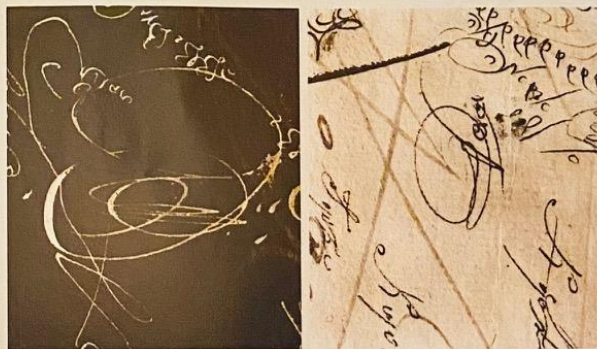


Philadelphia Museum of Jewish Art



## Hand to Hand: Photographs by Zeva Oelbaum

A photographer of expansive interests, talents, and accomplishments, Zeva Oelbaum focused her camera on a single entrancing subject—yet one previously unexplored by either artist or scholar—when creating *Hand to Hand*. First as a child too young to read but alive to visual delights and sensitive to the lives and lessons of *things*, and later as a photographer with a unique ability to cull beauty and meaning from found objects, Oelbaum found lifetimes of inspiration in old Hebrew books stored in her parents' basement. These books testified to her family's heritage of scholarship and the search for spiritual and practical sustenance that brought them from Eastern Europe to Palestine to America.



*1819 Medzybizi 1*, 2006, diptych, toned gelatin silver print, each 10 x 8 inches.  
Courtesy of the artist and Hirschl & Adler Modern, New York.

But it was not the books' printed pages—venerated tracts by great sages—that beguiled Oelbaum. Instead, it was constellations of notes, jots, signatures, scribbles, and doodles found in the books' endpapers and margins that captivated her. Ephemeral in intent, if consciously considered at all, these marks persist as legacies of generations of yeshiva students (a *yeshiva* is an institution of advanced Jewish learning) who, with paper dear, used the books' endpapers to make notes, practice their signatures and penmanship (at a time when both were meant to be beautiful and expressive of individual character), or simply clear clotted ink from pen nibs.

Oelbaum transforms these commonplace marks into compositions that are lyrical and elegant. Oelbaum does not manipulate her sources to create her layered images; the montages we see are collages of disparate times, places, people, and thoughts.

Although all but illegible, what is documented in Oelbaum's photographs poses questions. What distinguishes mark-making from written language—or art? Considering these questions, we remember that in many cultures—particularly those of East Asia—calligraphy resides at the core of art-making, and recall the graffiti-like gestures in the paintings of Cy Twombly, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and other modern and contemporary artists.

Oelbaum's sepia and golden tones remove us from the present. They remind us of our ancestors. The Babel of languages babbling in Oelbaum's photographs speaks of the Jewish Diaspora: thousands of years of movement—forced, more often than not—from one country to the next. Our forebears led polyglot lives. An example: for 19th-century Lithuanian Jews (as were some of Oelbaum's ancestors), Yiddish was for everyday, Hebrew for the sacred, Russian for things official, German the language of much Jewish scholarship, and German, Lithuanian, and Polish all helpful to know for purposes of trade.

Kabbalistic mystics—Oelbaum's father's family comes from Safed, the center of Jewish mysticism—taught that God created the world by using the letters of the Hebrew alphabet as metaphysical building blocks. Judaism is a religion centered on a book—the Torah. Its words have sparked millennia of writing, study, and debate. Learned authors of scholarly tomes strive to communicate new insights with clarity and grace. Students seek to find meaning in the words cascading before their eyes—and, perhaps, to leave their own mark along the way. The written word is Zeva Oelbaum's inheritance and inspiration; she captures it on film, creating photographs as unexpected as they are, in a word, beautiful.

Matthew F. Singer  
Curator, Philadelphia Museum of Jewish Art

**COVER:** *1860 Warsaw 5*, 2006, toned gelatin silver print, 10 x 8 inches.  
Courtesy of the artist and Hirschl & Adler Modern, New York.

**BACK COVER:** *1764 Karlsruhe 5*, 2006, diptych, toned gelatin silver prints, each 5 x 4 inches.  
Courtesy of the artist and Hirschl & Adler Modern, New York.

**OPPOSITE:** *1764 Karlsruhe 4*, 2006, diptych, top: sepia and gold-toned gelatin silver print; bottom: sepia-toned gelatin silver print, each 5 x 4 inches.  
Courtesy of the artist and Hirschl & Adler Modern, New York.



## Words, from the Artist

As early as I can remember, I loved looking at the fragile volumes of Hebrew books relegated to my family's basement in Kansas City, Missouri. Printed in Latin, Russian, German, Polish, Aramaic, and Yiddish, the books came in all sizes and shapes. Since my parents neither looked at nor spoke of the books, I regarded them as my own.

My father had come to the States from Safed, the center of Jewish mysticism, in the late 1920's. His family had lived under Ottoman rule in Palestine since the early 1800's. My mother's parents had come to America from Lithuania around 1905. My parents didn't speak much about the past. I grew up in the dark about much of my family's history. But these crumbling books connected me to other times and places. I imagined how they had traveled from hand to hand across centuries and continents, like portable identities.

A few books always captured my imagination. One book had endpapers of lovely hand-painted floral wallpaper. Another had beautiful blue pages; its endpapers were a jumble of impossibly exotic and unselfconscious handwritten marks. Since I was only five or six years old when I first saw the books, it didn't bother me that I couldn't read the scribbles. I couldn't read, period. I only knew that the exuberance and energy of these markings made me happy.

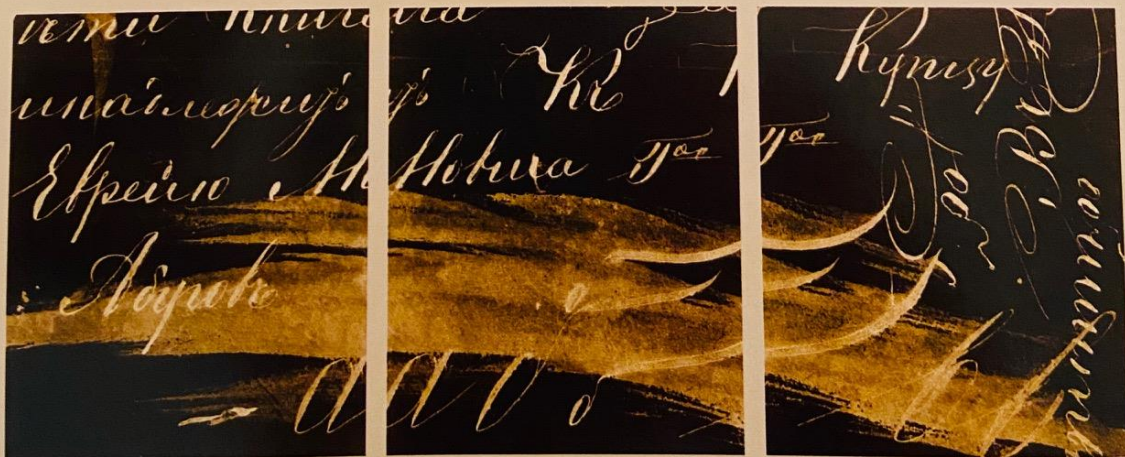
As a photographer with a degree in anthropology, I have always been intrigued by found materials and artifacts. My interest in these family books reemerged in 2005. I unpacked them, and was struck by the power they still held over me. I photographed and researched these family books and searched for other timeworn Hebrew books with scribble-filled endpapers. This journey took me from the Hebrew Union College in Lower Manhattan and the Jewish Theological Seminary in Upper Manhattan to the insular world of Hassidic Brooklyn, with countless stops between.

I discovered that the book with the wallpaper belonged to my father's grandfather and was a Kabbalist tract. My great-grandfather, a member of an important Hassidic dynasty, moved the family from Galicia to Safed in the early 1800's to pursue the study of the Kabbalah. This past had remained hidden inside a book for more than a century.

The book with the blue pages and scribbles had been used in various yeshivot in Lithuania for more than 100 years. In them, generations of students scribbled their names and notes evoking everyday life.

Each book and its contents—from exactly printed pages of scholarly tracts to a daydreamer's doodle—tell a unique story. When placing the somnolent pages of these ancient books beneath the lens of my 4 x 5 studio camera, I feel that entire worlds are awakened. Lines and splotches are transformed; their existence in the liminal space between the mundane and sacred is illuminated. Objects taken for granted—exiled to basements or destined for trash-bins—contain knowledge of who we are. What was hidden is now revealed.

Zeva Oelbaum



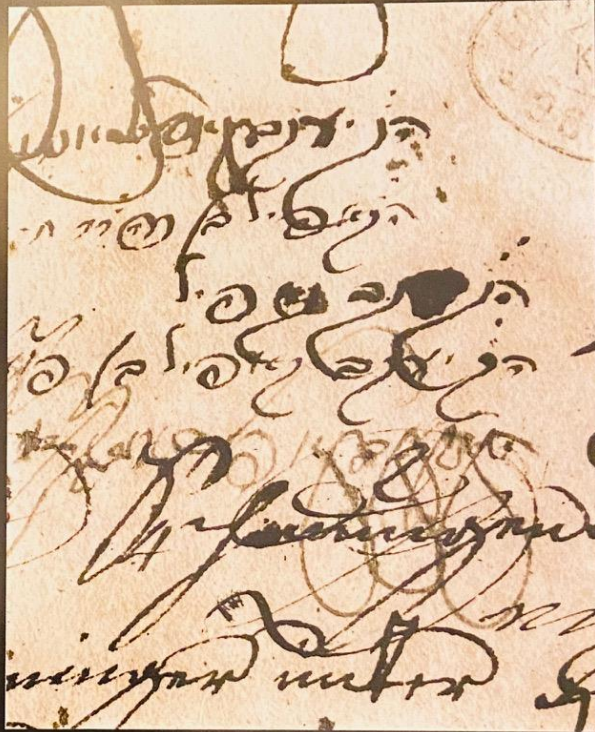
1860 Warsaw 1, 2006, triptych, toned gelatin silver prints, each 40 x 30 inches.  
Courtesy of the artist and Hirschl & Adler Modern, New York.



## The Lives of Jewish Books

Every book has a life like a person's. And a Jewish book's life is like that of a Jew. That life begins with a creator—its author—and continues through the work of scribes and printers; parchment- and paper-makers; artists, illustrators, and designers; bookbinders; and book-dealers. And even after its production, the book's life persists through the stories of its owners and the journeys those owners took—sometimes by choice, often by decree or coercion—carrying their books with them from land to land. Especially in these after-lives do Jewish books come to resemble Jews most closely.

An example: In 1272 C.E. in the Bavarian town of Wuerzburg, the scribe Simhah bar Judah completed a magnificent two-volume Mahzor, or holiday prayer-book. The Mahzor remained in Wuerzburg until the town's Jews were expelled in the mid-fifteenth century. The book then made its way to Worms, Germany, the great center of Ashkenazic Jewry. For nearly four hundred years, the cantors in Worm's famous Rashi Synagogue (so-named because the great scholar studied at the yeshiva attached to the synagogue) prayed from the Mahzor, as we can tell from the florid signatures, cramped dedications, and tiny annotations they left on the first and last folios and virtually every margin of the book. On November 9, 1938—Kristallnacht, the "night of broken glass" when Nazis destroyed countless Jewish synagogues and businesses, killed hundreds of Jews, and sent thousands more to concentration camps—the Rashi Synagogue was torched and, it was believed, the Mahzor was destroyed. In 1943, however, the Mahzor unexpectedly surfaced in the town's Gestapo headquarters, and Friedrich Illert, the German archivist of Worms, hid it until the war's end. In March 1957, the German government presented the Mahzor to the State of Israel, where it resides in the Jewish National Library in Jerusalem.



1764 Karlsruhe 1, 2006, toned gelatin silver print, 5 x 4 inches.  
Courtesy of the artist and Hirschl & Adler Modern, New York.

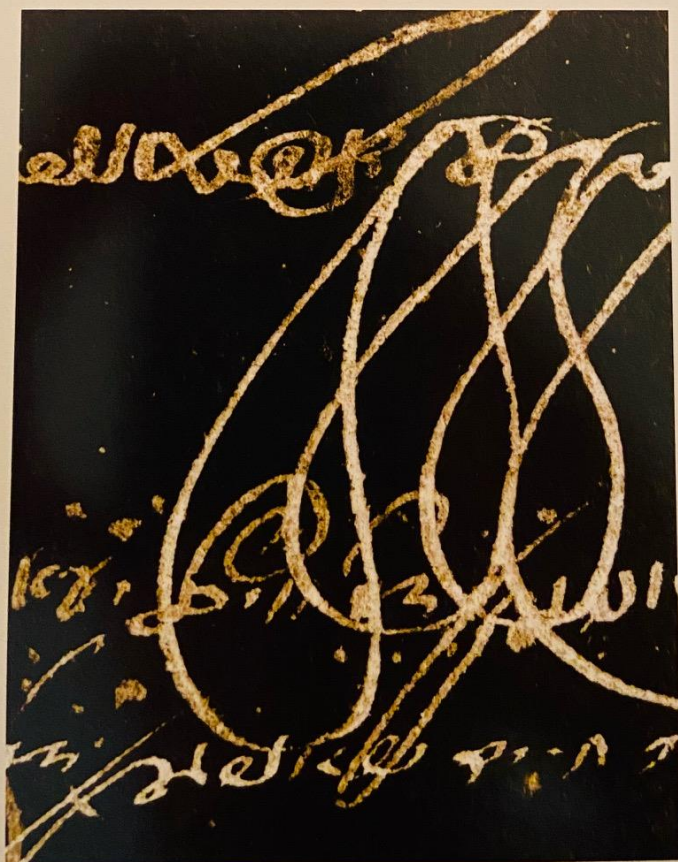
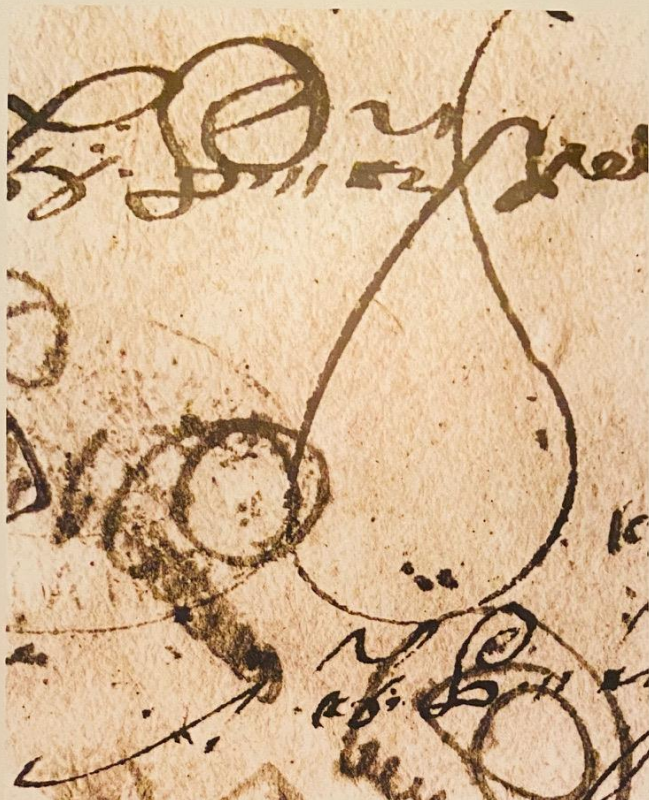
Simhah bar Judah's Mahzor led (and leads) a remarkable, almost paradigmatically, Jewish life. Yet behind all the books whose endpapers Zeva Oelbaum has photographed lie comparable, if not always so dramatic, stories. Their signatures and scribbles testify to the same kinds of geo-cultural peregrinations. Their multiple languages—Hebrew, Yiddish, Polish, German, Russian—speak to the political, social, and geographical dislocations of Jewish history.

The earliest Jewish texts were written on parchment scrolls, as the Torah is to this day. By the 1470s—just some twenty years after Gutenberg printed his famous Bible—Jews had avidly taken up the printing press. The books that Oelbaum photographed come from a period—the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—when the printed book was a ubiquitous presence in Jewish life. Those from Oelbaum's father's family, from Safed or Jerusalem, may have been printed by Israel Bak, the first printer in Palestine; those from her mother's Lithuanian birthplace were very likely published in Vilna in the publishing firm of the widow Deborah Romm and her two brothers-in-law. Wherever they originated, the pages of these books were soon marked by the human hands of their readers. Ephemeral as they seem, these markings—signatures, doodles, hand-writing exercises—inscribe within these books the personalities of generations of readers. By focusing on their elusive strokes in her profoundly moving and elegant photographs, Zeva Oelbaum restores to *our* lives the untold lives of these all but discarded books.

David Stern

Ruth Meltzer Professor of Classical Hebrew Literature, University of Pennsylvania

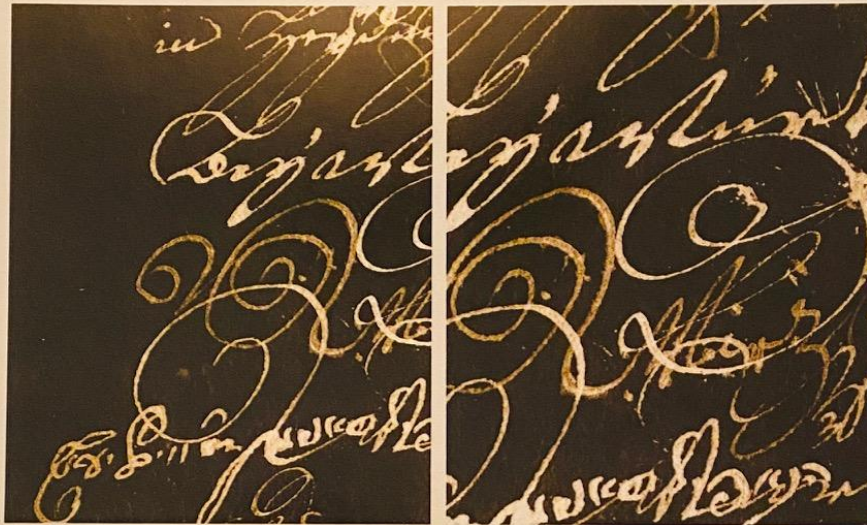




# Hand to Hand:

## Photographs by Zeva Oelbaum

March 26 – May 26, 2009



**Philadelphia Museum of Jewish Art**  
at Congregation Rodeph Shalom  
615 North Broad Street (at Mount Vernon Street)  
Philadelphia, PA 19123  
*Entrance and parking on Mount Vernon Street*

**Monday – Thursday: 10 – 4**  
**Friday: 10 – 2**  
**Sunday: 10 – noon**

*Hours are subject to change; please call (215) 627-6747 to confirm*

**The Philadelphia Museum of Jewish Art is dedicated in memory of Jacob C. Gutman.**

Gail S. Rosenberg, Chair  
Joan C. Sall, Director

Presenting contemporary art that illuminates the Jewish experience, the Philadelphia Museum of Jewish Art (PMJA) has, since 1975, presented solo and group exhibitions of work in the broadest range of mediums by artists of diverse backgrounds. The PMJA is located within Congregation Rodeph Shalom.

*Zeva Oelbaum is represented by Hirschl & Adler Modern, New York. Curated by Shelley Farmer and Debra Wieder, Hand to Hand: Photographs by Zeva Oelbaum was first shown at Hirschl & Adler Modern from March 22 to April 21, 2007.*