

## A Report on "What is Religion For?" -- A Jewish Public Forum Seminar

**By Robert Rabinowitz**

"How can we keep alive an awareness of human interconnectedness and mutual responsibility, both at home and abroad?" This is the daunting challenge religious leaders and communities must take on in the aftermath of September 11th, according to a group of 25 academics, religious thinkers, writers, non-profit leaders and business leaders who met at a recent meeting at CLAL entitled "What is Religion For?" The participants, who came from a range of religious, academic and professional backgrounds (*see Appendix A for a full list of participants*), confessed to having grappled with many intellectual and spiritual issues, both personally and professionally, in the weeks after September 11th. Yet, as the thread of conversation wound its way around the meeting room, a consensus emerged that the attacks in New York and Washington were a vivid and horrific demonstration of a level of interconnectedness among individuals, communities and cultures around the world that has generally not been part of most Americans' awareness. Recognizing that this interconnectedness might require a new type of engagement with sometimes radically different ways of life and world-views, participants reflected on what they could do to prevent this moment of awareness from either fading or being used as a reason to build a more insular society or more insular communities.

The meeting, which was held on November 19, was part of a larger series of seminars sponsored by the Jewish Public Forum at CLAL exploring the future of religion in America. The aim of the meeting was to identify the most significant ethical, social, spiritual and political challenges of the post-September 11th world and to examine what role religious traditions and insights, institutions and leaders could play in addressing them. (*See Appendix B for the framing materials sent to participants before the meeting*).

As the group reflected together, two major themes became prominent. First, in a culturally diverse yet interconnected world, individuals and groups need to infuse their particular communities with openness to, and ways of engaging with, people who do not share those identities. For Nancy Ammerman, professor of sociology of religion at Hartford Institute for Religion Research, this meant that communities need to redefine themselves: "We live in a world where communities are going to bump into each other so that, at the same time that we are acknowledging the very particularity of the religious task that those communities set before themselves, we're also recognizing that we have to find new ways of dealing with differences." Shep Forman, director of the Center on International Cooperation at New York University, rephrased Nancy's challenge in more personal terms: "How can you know who you are, define yourself, but do so in full consideration of others who are part of a broader community of which you are also a part?"

The second theme was the widening of the boundaries of responsibility. As Libby Garland of CLAL pointed out, while the attacks on America made the way that globalization has connected people across the globe very concrete, it was also a forceful reminder of the huge inequalities that persist within and among different groups. Globalization's erasure of boundaries can, of course, induce feelings of vulnerability and fear. But the key task becomes, as Michael Gottsegen of CLAL put it, "to demonstrate that this very vulnerability makes us responsible for the wider human community. We ought not react by trying to put up walls and defend ourselves better against it." Several speakers emphasized that in such a globalized world, poverty and oppression in any part of the world are not just moral challenges. Americans also needed to come to terms with the fact that their wealth and privilege are threatened quite concretely by the deprivation of people in other countries.

CLAL's president Rabbi Irwin Kula pointed out that maintaining awareness of the porous boundaries between all individuals and groups is an age-old question posed by all spiritual traditions. Could this be "what religion is for" in a post-September 11th world? What practical actions could participants take -- whether through existing institutions and networks or by creating new institutions, whether they consider themselves religious leaders or not -- to maintain the heightened understanding of global human interconnectedness and mutual responsibility caused by the shock of September 11th?

Creating new places for conversations, among unexpected types of people, that generate conceptual breakthroughs is one step in this direction, according to Hamid Dabashi, chair of the Department of Middle East and Asian Languages and Cultures at Columbia University. He pointed out that the "enormity of the event [September 11th] cannot be assimilated backwards to concepts, categories and analytical frames of reference to which we are accustomed." Take, for example, the challenge of building relationships among different cultures. What do we really mean by such broad categories as "fundamentalism"? How do we take into account the poverty, oppression and instability that might better explain the attacks of September 11th? The challenge for churches, synagogues, mosques, and even universities is either to find new ways to talk about and confront global realities or to be rendered irrelevant. Dr. Dabashi also indicated that interdisciplinary conversations -- like those convened by the Jewish Public Forum -- force people to stretch beyond the ordinary ways in which they understand their work. They are a powerful means of generating the sort of new perspectives that are required at this time.

Jack Saul, director of the International Trauma Studies Program at New York University, pointed out that among the unexpected people who should be brought into these interdisciplinary conversations are the tens of thousands of refugees who have fled persecution and political violence in their home countries and are living in the US. Had America been listening to these refugees, we would have been more aware of the hatreds and passions that were revealed on September

11th and that took America so much by surprise. What strategies are needed to ensure that these and other voices that are not usually consulted become part of the public conversation?

While new kinds of conversation can stretch and enrich our understanding of the world, there are also methods that could add a powerful experiential dimension to this understanding. Ruth Messinger, President and Executive Director of the American Jewish World Service (AJWS), cited the volunteer programs run by AJWS in developing countries as an example. By "dropping people into the middle of worlds that they know nothing about," volunteers are exposed to radically different social arrangements, and religious and cultural practices. How, the group wondered, might such "immersion experiences" be more effectively integrated at all levels of education, both in religious communities and more generally? How could we ensure that such experiences are designed and framed to be truly expansive?

There are also resources and practices - "technologies" -- within religious traditions themselves that could help people to maintain awareness of other ways of life and of the necessity of crossing difficult boundaries. Ritual is one example. Rabbi Dov Linzer, head of the Modern Orthodox Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, pointed to the Passover seder which re-enacts the Exodus from slavery in Egypt in order to provide not just an understanding of the value of freedom, but also to transport participants into an experiential awareness of the Exodus journey. What would it be like, he asked, if communities and society at large were to draw upon particular traditions to create public and civic rituals that would keep the questions raised by September 11th alive? What sort of collaborations among religious leaders, civic figures and artists would be required to craft such rituals?

Rabbi Kula closed the seminar using another religious "technology" for expanding understanding: text interpretation. He invoked the story of Jacob and Esau. The basic assumption of many interpreters is that the brothers could not share their father Isaac's blessing. But, Kula said, a zero-sum world, in which only one group gets the blessing and in which one group's values or identity is defined in opposition to another, is just too dangerous after September 11th. It is hard to share a blessing when that blessing is seen to be scarce. But what, he asked, if we no longer experienced the world's blessing as a scarce resource? Rabbi Kula asked participants to focus, during a few minutes of silence, on how they could contribute through their own work to nurturing a society in which people no longer experienced blessing as a scarce good -- a world in which one people's truths do not exclude those of another.

By the end of the meeting, there was a shared sense in the room that the implications of the challenge that participants had begun to sketch out were huge. What kinds of changes in existing institutions and what new institutions would be needed? How can we ensure that groups like this one, representing a broad range of expertise and experience, will continue to meet given that their

work lives generally do not intersect? Of course, the November 19th meeting was only the beginning of a much more in-depth series of discussions that are required to address the challenges outlined. As Shari Cohen, director of the Jewish Public Forum, commented, "We judge our meetings not by the answers they produce but by whether participants develop new ways of asking questions and new ways of thinking about the impact they can have personally and professionally." From this perspective, the meeting was a great success. Participants generated new collective insights and new possibilities for programs and collaborations. CLAL intends to play a role in helping to develop them further and to make them a reality.

Click here for [participants' accounts](#) of the personal issues, both religious and more general, with which they had been grappling in the weeks after September 11th.

## *Appendix A*

### **What is Religion For?**

(a CLAL Jewish Public Forum Seminar, held 11-19-01)

#### **Participant List**

Nancy T. Ammerman, Ph.D.  
Professor of Sociology of Religion,  
Hartford Institute for Religion Research

Hamid Dabashi, Ph.D.  
Chair,  
Department of Middle East and Asian Languages and Cultures,  
Columbia University

Shepard Forman, Ph.D.  
Director,  
Center on International Cooperation,  
New York University

Ari Goldman  
Professor,  
Graduate School of Journalism,  
Columbia University

Rabbi Dov Linzer  
Rosh HaYeshiva,  
Yeshivot Chovevei Torah

Richard Lipton, M.D.  
Professor of Neurology, Epidemiology, and Social Medicine,  
Albert Einstein College of Medicine

Ruth Messinger  
President and Executive Director,  
American Jewish World Service

Rabbi Michael Paley  
Executive Director of Synagogue and Community Affairs,  
UJA Federation of New York

Jack Saul, Ph.D.  
Director,

International Trauma Studies Program,  
New York University

Robert Owens Scott  
Editor-in-Chief,  
*Spirituality and Health*

Judith Shulevitz  
Cultural Editor, *Slate.com*;  
Critic, *The New York Times Book Review*

Cecilie Strommen  
Visiting Pastor,  
Lutheran Church of America

### **CLAL Participants**

Rabbi Tsvi Blanchard, Ph.D.  
Director of Organizational Development

Rabbi Daniel Brenner  
Senior Teaching Fellow

Shari Cohen, Ph.D.  
Director, Jewish Public Forum

Libby Garland  
Senior Fellow

Michael Gottsegen, Ph.D.  
Editor-in-Chief, eCLAL and Senior Fellow

Rabbi Steven Greenberg  
Senior Teaching Fellow

Rabbi Brad Hirschfield  
Vice President

Leonard and Tobee Kaplan  
Board of Directors

Rabbi Irwin Kula  
President

Robert Rabinowitz, Ph.D.  
Senior Fellow

Donna M. Rosenthal  
Executive Vice Chairman

## Appendix B

**JEWISH PUBLIC FORUM SEMINAR: “WHAT IS RELIGION FOR?”  
NOVEMBER 19, 2001**

**“WHAT IS RELIGION FOR?”**

**JEWISH PUBLIC FORUM SEMINAR**

**NOVEMBER 19, 2001**

### **FRAMING THE SEMINAR**

Religious leaders and others who function as the spiritual and ethical leaders in our society face real challenges – both in the immediate and the long term. Even before September 11, we were in a significant transitional period in religious life in America. We were already facing real change in the ways in which Americans were making meaning in their lives – how they were finding a sense of belonging, a sense of connections to institutions and purposes beyond themselves, and how they were addressing the spiritual and ethical concerns in their lives.

After all, unfettered access to information, the decline of traditional forms of authority and the willingness to build identities from a multiplicity of traditions has allowed individuals to take control of their spiritual lives as never before. The very boundaries between work and family, private and public, sacred and secular are being redefined. At the same time new challenges – from the implications of advances in bio-technology and neuroscience to global instabilities and the gulf between the wealthy and the poor – demand new types of response from religious communities and leaders.

The crisis triggered by the events of September 11, and religion’s central role in it, only further accentuates these trends and the need to look closely at religion’s future, and how it does or could function to help address the important human challenges of the next period of time.

Obviously, a single meeting can only begin to address some of the pressing questions. We have designed the framing questions below to move beyond the common polarized manner in which religion has been discussed after September 11, and to address issues that have been left out of the public debate.

One common polarization in public debate is between secularists who argue that religion is at the root of most of history’s violence and religious thinkers who argue that the life of the spirit has been ignored in the hubris about human



economic and technological progress. A related polarization is between fundamentalist thinking on the one hand, and relativism on the other.

We hope to move beyond these polarizations, casting the questions differently. At the same time we hope to stay focused on the practical dimensions of these questions and how they play out in the lives and work of the participants in the room. The following two sets of questions will therefore frame and animate the meeting:

1) What are the ethical, social, spiritual and political challenges of this moment? What role can religious traditions, communities, institutions or leaders play in addressing them? The power of religion and religious impulses is evident in the actions of the terrorists and in their mass support, as well as in the outpouring of religious responses to the crisis – both within and outside of traditional religious contexts. This forces us to reexamine how we define the boundaries between the religious and the secular. Might religious wisdom, insights and awareness provoke new ways of addressing important societal concerns?

2) Fundamentalism has received a great deal of attention since September 11. But as we are horrified by, and fight against, fundamentalism in others, we need simultaneously to attend to the fundamentalisms inherent in our own communities and ideologies. Are extremism and fundamentalism innate possibilities in all religions? What factors aid and hinder the development of fundamentalist forms of religion (and here we mean both traditional and secular religions such as nationalism or capitalism)? How do we develop a commitment to pluralism, avoiding fundamentalism on the one hand, and moral relativism on the other? What shifts, in the way our institutions are set up, in our leadership, in the questions we ask, would be necessary to do this?

## **“WHAT IS RELIGION FOR?”**

### **Philosophy and Goals of Jewish Public Forum seminars**

All Jewish Public Forum meetings aim to move beyond the usual framings of important issues in order to generate new ideas. Our meetings are most often about developing better questions rather than about finding answers or policy conclusions. We do this by mixing people from a broad range of communities, professions and disciplines. It is our conviction that new perspectives most often come from interdisciplinary conversation, which implicitly forces people to stretch beyond the ordinary ways they understand their work.

We also utilize a range of methods for open, yet structured conversation to transcend the limitations of discussions that take place in other settings. Open conversation helps to overcome the sometimes overly formal nature of presentations-based meetings, while the way we structure the conversation allows the meeting to stay focused enough to avoid generalities. Our meetings are designed to engage and to stretch participants both personally and analytically. And they are based on the underlying claim that we do not make sufficient space in our lives for the kinds of longer-term and broader conversations that need to take place if we are to address the human, ethical, spiritual questions of the next period in American life. Such conversations are often too product oriented (as in business or politics) or too driven by theoretical or disciplinary concerns (as in academia).

Thus we aim on November 19 to begin an important conversation, which we hope will continue both at CLAL and among participants who meet in this setting.

We will have succeeded if participants: a) generate for themselves better questions with which to analyze the issues under discussion; and, b) come away with new insights about the way their institutions and the networks to which they are connected can address those questions.

The insights generated at this meeting will be disseminated by CLAL in several ways: they will feed into upcoming Jewish Public Forum seminars on related topics; they will be discussed at broader meetings we will be holding with rabbis and other religious leaders; and, they will be incorporated into CLAL's publications which reach a broad audience of philanthropists, community leaders, religious leaders, and opinion makers in academia, politics and beyond.

Jewish Public Forum Seminar

NOVEMBER 19, 2001

“WHAT IS RELIGION FOR?”

### Text excerpts to begin the conversation

The texts that we have included are meant to get you thinking in advance of the meeting.

#### I. Reading the world in new ways:

There are three fundamentally distinct ways to think about the future. The easiest is extrapolation—to conceive of a future that is an extension of the present and recent past. The second is to imagine what might be, independent of what is, or as free of influence from the present as one can become. The third is to cultivate awareness and reflectiveness—to become open to what is arising in the world and in us and continually ponder what matters most deeply to us.

The first is the easiest and by far the most common. It is also the most dangerous in a time of deep change. If indeed there are many aspects of our present ways of living that are not sustainable, such as the destruction of living systems upon which social systems depend, then there are few things more certain about the future than that it will *not* arise as a mere extrapolation of the past.

The second way of thinking about the future is the ostensible aim of this collection of essays. But I believe that it, too, holds hidden dangers. It is easy to engage in “reactive imagination,” focusing on some facet of the present situation that we dislike and imagining a world that is very different from this. However, this “negative image” actually offers only a disguised version of the present. It can appear imaginative when in fact it is not. It can be an unintended projection of ego, rather than a true expression of the course of nature.

“All great things are created for their own sake,” wrote Robert Frost. In these simple words, Frost expressed the timeless

sensibility of the artist, who looks deeply within and without, who takes responsibility for her or his creation while simultaneously experiencing an overwhelming sense of humility as a mere agent for what is seeking to emerge. This is the fundamental distinction between machine-age planning and the creative process. The former seeks to manifest human intentions. The latter seeks to align human intentions and actions with the course of nature.

Paradoxically, in this aligning lies real freedom and choice. “The free man [mensch] is the one who wills without arbitrary self-will,” wrote Martin Buber. “He must sacrifice his puny, unfree will that is controlled by things and instincts for his grand will, which quits defined for destined being. Then . . . He listens to what is emerging from himself, to the course of being in the world . . . in order to bring it to reality as it desires.”

This third way of thinking about the future is also a way of thinking about the present. In fact, the two are inseparable. We become agents of creating a future that is seeking to emerge, by becoming more aware of the present. This third way requires deep thinking about not only what exists today but also how it came to be this way. This third way replaces blind trust in human ingenuity with trust in life. Imagination, rather than becoming more limited, is actually freed and becomes the servant of awareness, which in turn requires a life’s work to cultivate.

In this third way, human and nature become integrated spontaneously. We become nature’s agent. There is no nature outside ourselves, nor ourselves outside of nature. In fact, the very word *nature*, pointing to something outside ourselves, becomes unnecessary, as it is for many indigenous people.

Several writers in this volume cite modern quantum physics as evidence of a deep change in understanding the universe that holds promise for creating a more sane way of living. We would do well to heed the admonishment of noted quantum theorist David Bohm: “What folly to think that we can correct the fragmentation of the world via processes that re-create that fragmentation.” This fragmentation starts when we see a world of corporations, institutions, and systems outside of and separate from ourselves. Ironically, only by recognizing that these are continually created by our daily acts of living will we start to see that they are also expressions of our own choices.

None of this should be taken to imply that an isolated individual can reshape a living human system or can rehabilitate

our collective capacity to choose. But it does imply a guiding principle: We produce what we do not intend because we enact systems that we do not see. And, learning to see is a life's work. Rudolf Steiner, echoing a sentiment of Goethe's, beautifully articulated the twofold nature of this work: "In searching for your self, look for it in the world; in searching for the world, look for it in your self."

Peter Senge, "Three Ways of Thinking About The Future," *Imagine What America Could be in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Marianne Williamson, ed., pp. 175-177

## II. A broadening notion of the religious?

The meaning of any specific activity in everyday life (say, cooking dinner) is given by the broader sphere of relevance in which it occurs (e.g., being a parent). Without this broader context, it will seem arbitrary, something that has no significance. But these spheres of relevance, in turn, have meaning only in relation to some broader context, and these contexts to broader contexts still. In other words, any set of activities must be related to something larger than itself in order to have meaning: cooking to parenting, parenting to having warm human relationships, warm relationships to a sense of living in community, or whatever. The solution to the problem of meaning, then, is to posit a hierarchical series of symbolic frameworks that give meaning and integration to ever-widening segments of life. Within this logic, questions about "the meaning of life" itself represent the most encompassing form of symbolic integration.

Robert Wuthnow, "Sacredness and Everyday Life," *Rediscovering The Sacred*, (Eerdmans, 1992)

Religion is not a discrete category within human experience; it is rather a quality that pervades all of experience. Accustomed as we are to distinguishing between "the sacred" and "the profane," we fail to remember that such a dividing up of reality is itself a religious idea. It is often an awkward idea, rather like someone trying to

carry himself over a stream in his own arms—a confusion of part and whole, form and function. There are no inherently religious objects, thoughts, or events; in contemporary culture so much of our world has been “contaminated” with the *mundane* we hardly recognize a quality of the sacred. This has been called the process of secularization or of modernization, but it may be something else, it may be a nearly inevitable consequence of a dualistic paradigm, a religious point of view that divides reality into two. Indeed, the words *mundane*—of the world, *profane*—outside the temple, and *secular*—of the temporal, indicate that whatever is “before the temple” is made of space and time (mundane and secular) and whatever is not of the world and temporality is that which is contained within the category of the sacred. However, that arrangement of reality means not only that *material* events and knowledge are devalued, but that *events* and *knowledge* altogether are devalued and deprived of the quality of the sacred.

**Lynda Sexson, “Boxes,” *Ordinarily Sacred*, p. 7**

### III. Religion as provocateur?

Just as social critics are often social thinkers (often historians, political scientists, and economists) who become public thinkers, and culture critics are often cultural thinkers (often scholars of literature or art) who become public thinkers, religious critics are often religious thinkers (often religious studies scholars or theologians) who become public thinkers. It is likely, however, that the best public intellectuals, particularly the best religious critics, rise not from these expected disciplines but from other disciplines or from no academic discipline at all.

I do not argue that America has no religious critics but that the ranks of the religious critics are thinned from two sides. From the religious side, openly religious thinkers tend not to function either as intellectuals or as public thinkers. Not only are fundamentalist, charismatic, and new age religious thinkers drifting away from intellectual worlds but so are their counterparts in mainline denominations. That is, while religious thinkers may be thoughtful, many ignore dominant intellectual institutions in America, like universities, university presses, and journals, as well as their fashions, such as their poststructuralist/ postmodernist attacks on theory. Nor do religious thinkers in America tend to function as public thinkers. That is, religious thinkers even in

academic worlds seldom attempt to establish the public roots and branches of their thought. If American religious thinkers—or any American thinkers, for that matter—have a theory of America, it is usually only implicit.

From the other side, duplicating this self-imposed truncation, the few surviving public intellectuals tend not to think religiously. Of course, many public intellectuals reject religious thought because, as Garry Wills and Steven L. Carter have noted, they are suspicious of conservative religious attitudes (just as they are suspicious of popular patriotic attitudes). Those suspicions are often legitimate, and those suspicious intellectuals are often important critics of religious critics. But public intellectuals seldom criticize their own suspicions. Further, they make them normative and impose them on all religious theory, refusing to take seriously even the critical definitions of religion generated by their colleagues in the university. “The prevailing orthodoxy among intellectuals in the West,” says Bzrezinski, “is that religion is a waning, irrational, and dysfunctional aberration.”

**William Dean, “Introduction,” *The Religious Critic in American Culture*, p. xv-xvi**

## JEWISH PUBLIC FORUM SEMINAR

NOVEMBER 19, 2001

### “WHAT IS RELIGION FOR?”

#### Pre-Seminar Question

Please write a paragraph or two in answer to the following question:

We have all been personally affected by the events of September 11, in our work and in our lives more generally, and have great personal stakes in the questions that event raised. What issues have you been personally grappling with – either in response to the question “What is religion for?” or more generally? Please try to frame this as a question or challenge for discussion by this group or for groups like this one?

Please e-mail your response to Robert Rabinowitz ([rrabinowitz@clal.org](mailto:rrabinowitz@clal.org)) by November 14<sup>th</sup> so as to provide sufficient time to circulate answers among participants prior to the meeting:



## Appendix C

**JEWISH PUBLIC FORUM SEMINAR: “WHAT IS RELIGION FOR?”  
NOVEMBER 19, 2001**

### **Key Societal Challenges after 9/11**

**(a partial list of the challenges identified by seminar participants)**

- How can we prepare ourselves, and our society, for living in a more dangerous world without panic or xenophobia?
- How do we move beyond a clash of world-views in which each side views the other as an enemy or as lacking in humanity?
- How do we defend liberal society in a time of war?
- How do we deal with the new political challenges without ignoring existing ones such as poverty, both at home and abroad?
- How do we widen our understanding of national defense in an era of global interdependency?
- The global capitalist system is based on movement of people, goods, capital & information. How can these be deployed for the benefit of all peoples?
- How do we ensure that our public conversations about issues such as race, religion and globalization are not polarized into a conflict between “us” and “them”?
- The attack on 9/11 has produced a new sense of community. Can we sustain a sense of community like this without relying on crisis?
- How do we capitalize on the current surge of interest in volunteering? Can it be sustained?
- How do we talk about mortality and the meaning of life without lapsing into easy answers?
- What are the ethical and spiritual steps that are needed to help break the cycle of trauma and violence?
- How do we talk about the complex issues raised by 9/11 with our children?

- If 9/11 marks the end of relativism, how do we distinguish between “good” and “bad” religion?
- Fundamentalism is not unique to Islam but poses a challenge for Jews and Christians as well. How do we embrace our religious traditions when they conflict with deeply felt Western ethical values?
- How can we create a dialogue of equals between the Islamic world and the West?
- How can we find ways to gather into communities of faith that are both open and rooted, and create practices that both strengthen community and deepen exchange between communities?