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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 ([click here 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. ([Click here 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 the list of key societal challenges after September 11th generated by participants at the November 19th meeting.](#)

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.



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