

A Technology of Spirituality: Rabbi Irwin Kula and the TED Conference

By Irwin Kula

Rabbi Irwin Kula, President of CLAL, delivered the closing address at the tenth annual TED (Technology, Entertainment and Design) Conference, held Feb. 23 to 26 in Monterey, Calif. Rabbi Kula was the only religious figure to address the sold-out conference, an annual event that has been described as a "who's who of tech movers and shakers."

The TED conference was founded by architect and author Richard Saul Wurman. The Industry Standard magazine calls it a "competitive, sometimes ruthless and always entertaining show [that] explores the convergence between design, high-tech and entertainment industries." Speakers at this year's conference included Amazon.com CEO Jeff Bezos, AOL-Time Warner CEO Steve Case, Sun Microsystems Chief Scientist Bill Joy, journalists Tom Brokaw, Art Buchwald, Arianna Huffington, and Forrest Sawyer, musician Herbie Hancock, television producer Norman Lear and author Ray Kurzweill (The Age of Spiritual Machines).

For Rabbi Kula, TED was an opportunity to explore the connections between religious traditions and a world of rapid technological, commercial and communal change. Even more importantly, it presented a challenge that has become central to CLAL: translating the particularistic language and wisdom of Jewish tradition for a wider, global audience.

Rabbi Kula discussed his experience at TED with Derekh CLAL.

Q: The same week as your TED speech you appeared on "The Oprah Winfrey Show." You said the experiences shared a theme. In what ways?

A: CLAL has traditionally been an amazing service agency for the existing institutions in American Jewish life. That grew out of two central insights of the post-Holocaust, post-modern world, thinking begun when Rabbi Yitz Greenberg founded CLAL in 1974. The first insight was that in the post-Holocaust world, the most important religious response to the devaluing of human life was the activist, philanthropic work that was intended to upgrade life. This "sacred secularity" naturally spoke to, and gave a privileged place to, the Federation forms of Jewishness: the volunteering, the fundraising, and the philanthropy. CLAL was instrumental in deepening how Jews involved in Federation work understood, and took pride, in their Jewishness.

The second insight was that the love of the Jewish people trumped all ideological and denominational differences. Pluralism was not only strategically necessary,

but religiously mandated. That's why we work with rabbis and rabbis-to-be from every denomination, to create conversations and build bridges.

Both of these insights-sacred secularity and pluralism-remain vital and they will continue to be central in CLAL's teaching. The question is how are we going to do that and at the same time move beyond those established institutional settings, in which we historically worked, to get at the majority of Jews who are not associated with institutions? Less than 40 percent of American Jews are affiliated with any of those institutions and the significant figure, if by affiliation we mean any commitment that more than marginally affects one's life, is probably closer to 25 percent. There are many more Jews outside the so-called community than inside the community. CLAL's teachings of pluralism and sacred secularity-widening the definition of Jewishness to reflect the lived lives of Jews-and CLAL's teaching method was never intended to be limited to people connected to existing institutions. That in some ways was an historical circumstance. CLAL's method and message is actually remarkably suited for unaffiliated baby boomers and Generation Xers who are suspicious of institutions and who see identity as something they construct themselves.

The question is where to position CLAL on the boundary between the "inside" and the "outside." We don't have the language yet for working on the "outside" that won't cause tension with those on the "inside."

Q: How does the TED conference work?

A: Richard Saul Wurman is the head of this conference-he's 64 years old, and with his beard and a scarf he wears like a talit all the time, he looks like a rabbi. He started TED 10 years ago with 50 people. He is an information architect, a genius in making information understandable. He had a phenomenal idea: to gather incredibly smart people in the cutting-edge fields of technology, entertainment and design-people who are inventing our future-and have them speak to each other. Now there are 1,000 attendees with over 50 speakers-scientists, engineers, technology wizards, venture capitalists, filmmakers and artists. Speakers are supposed to speak about whatever is cutting-edge in their field, for 15 minutes each, in two-and-a-half hour blocks, followed by two-hour breaks in a grand ballroom that is transformed into a Starbucks.

Q: How were you chosen?

A: The speakers were the leading people in technology, design and entertainment. I still don't know exactly how they invited me but I was invited to close the conference, to summarize and challenge. I was the only person who was officially religious in the room, which was very uncomfortable actually. When people would say to me, "What do you do?", I couldn't say I was in technology, or design. Maybe entertainment? I had to say, "I'm a rabbi."

It was so complicated, because for the first few days I never felt so small in my whole life. These people were talking about the way the world was going to look over the next century, in ways that were so profound that I was humbled and left feeling, "What does religion as we have inherited it, for the most part a product of the agrarian age, actually have to say to this moment? What does Judaism have to say to this new era that isn't either simply wrong, self-righteous, preachy or obvious?"

I felt I was getting strangled by my Jewishness, or at least by the ways in which we, "in the community," talk about Judaism and Jewish life. The hunkering down mentality, the hurtful obsession we have with intermarriage, and the fear mongering that everything is eroding; the consequent narrowing of so many Jewish conversations to discussions of what programs we can create to keep other people in the fold, rather than how to open up and liberate the wisdom of this 3,500-year-old tradition to be in conversation with the world. After a day of being dysfunctional I was almost ready to leave the conference and say I was sick.



Q: What changed your mind?

A: You can call it a religious moment, because I was face-to-face with my own limitations, and humbled by the extraordinary minds. Rather than focus on myself, I really began to listen intently. There were people like Ray Kurzweil, talking about the future of the brain in the year 2040 and how brain and machine will be integrated so completely, with our brains computing at one million times their current capacity, that that the questions we ask today about the difference between human beings and machines will be meaningless.

I heard Bill Joy, the chief scientist at Sun Microsystems, give a sweeping presentation on a truly wireless society in which locale will no longer be an organizing category in experiencing ourselves.

I heard James Robl, a professor of veterinary and animal sciences at the University of Massachusetts, who directs an effort to combine cloning with genetic engineering, talk about the evolution of the human species and the centrality of cooperation.

And I heard Keith Black, director of the Maxine Dunitz Neurosurgical Institute at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, talk about how the interface between technology and medicine will be as profound as that between technology and communication, and make modern medical "advances" seem barbaric by comparison.

What was strange was that at coffee breaks, people would come over to me, and as soon as I said, "I'm a rabbi," the same conversation would happen over and over again. "Oh, I don't go to church..." or "I've haven't been in church or synagogue since..." or "I'm not religious...." And this would lead to the most amazing conversations, in which leading people in technology would describe themselves as disconnected from religious institutions. This had nothing to do with being Jewish; this was across the board. This was both frightening and exciting.

Q: It sounds as if they left no room in their lives for spirituality or religion.

A: But they did. Because as disconnected as they said they were, so many talked of their yearning for purpose, connection, possibility and making a better world. These are all characteristics of a religious worldview. Some kind of shift begins to happen if you engage such people in conversations that are genuine. A common yearning and intimation emerges for new religious and spiritual paradigms. It's just that the pat answers of religious systems and their inherited myths are no more sufficient in the life of this new epic than bloodletting was after the discovery of the microbe. But the right conversations can renew a way of looking at the world that actually creates connection and deepens awareness of life. Unfortunately, there currently are no venues where those conversations happen. We're trying it with the Jewish Public Forum at CLAL, getting smart and influential Jewish "outsiders" in the room for open conversations, but it needs to be so much bigger.

Q: Why can't these conversations happen in Jewish institutions?

A: It's not just Jewish institutions. Institutions almost by definition become most concerned about their own survival and tend to assume that they have an inalienable right to exist. Moreover, their definitions of commitment tend to be those that ensure their own institutional existence. Leadership often sees its mission as getting other people, the "non-affiliated," to become like them. Leadership often slips into ownership, rather than what Robert Greenleaf calls "servant leadership." But genuine conversations assume all sides learn, grow and change. This is inevitably destabilizing to institutions. Of course, what every healthy institution needs is to institutionalize destabilization itself, by listening to new voices.

TED is the rare sort of conference where you can say anything and not worry about the tension you'd meet if you said it at "home." One of the rules at TED is to make yourself vulnerable.

Q: In your address you spoke of a "technology of spirituality." Can you expand on that?

A: What I tried to convey was that the entire conference had been traveling on two trajectories. The first trajectory, what I call the Brave New World path, was full of intellectual moments, with speakers coolly and rationally describing what's coming in breathtaking scope. Moments that made you say, "Oh, my God, what extraordinary knowledge! In medieval times they spoke of the Divine Mind, and we're actually accessing it!"

If the first trajectory was full of such moments of the mind, the second was full of what I called moments of the heart.

This was a group of people who don't cry easily, but again and again they cried, because the technology applied to certain human, quality of life purposes was so "miraculous."

For example, there was one story about a voice simulation device for the severely handicapped, like the one you see used by the physicist Stephen Hawking. Only this is an amazing upgrade, because it's for people who can't even put a pencil in their mouth to push the buttons. They showed a film of a 26-year-old young man who had never been able to speak to his parents. They put him in the device and the first words that come out are, "I love you mom." And now hundreds of people were weeping.

And then there's another story a technology wizard named Dean Kamen, who is President of DEKA Research & Development and who is 33 years old. He's such a genius that at 16 he didn't need to go to school anymore, but he had to expand his basement laboratory for his inventions. So he sent his parents on a month-long vacation and he had contractors come in and they extended the basement throughout the whole backyard. Then they put the turf right back on, so when they came it was exactly the same except that the basement had been extended.

Kamen built this wheelchair that stands up, don't ask me how (if you want to see a demonstration, go to <http://www.indetech.com/productfunction.html>). It has four wheels that split on top of each other, and it walks down steps. He also showed a film, of a 25-year-old young woman who was paralyzed in a car accident and her mother. The daughter is in the chair, which stands up so she can hug her mother. And the mother says to her, "This is the first time I have hugged you eye to eye since the accident." It was so joyous to see this and again hundreds of people were weeping.

And there were another dozen stories like this. And that's what made it so challenging. You had the near convergence of fierce intellectual energy and moments that were profoundly heartfelt. I say "near" because the two trajectories have not truly converged. What I described as a "technology of spirituality" are the practices and awarenesses that actually make these stories memory resident. Without it, they remain good stories-they make us sentimental and feel

good about ourselves, and then we go back to business as usual. But that's cheap sentiment.

Imagine instead if the psychological and spiritual ground inside of us shifted so that the decisions we make about the uses of technology flowed directly out of the kind of generosity of spirit reflected in these stories. Imagine being able to boot ourselves up each morning with this spirit, which would flow from a place of compassion, love, concern and a deep desire to mitigate vulnerability and affirm life.

But we don't have this technology of spirituality. Rabbis, priests, ministers and imams are not going to develop it on their own. It will only emerge in a new kind of conversation, across the boundary lines of visionary technologists and humble religionists.



Q: How did you attempt to cross these boundaries?

A: I said, "Technology is the Holy Ark of this era. In the bible, the Ark was a source of life and death. If you approached it in the right way, it was a source of life. But if you touched it, you would die. But that Ark is lost, and our new arks don't fundamentally engage people. Technology is today's Holy Ark. We can use it to radically upgrade life, or it can be demonic. The challenge is to bring into conversation the wisdom of inherited traditions like Judaism and the technology/science of the day.

"I'm going to try something here, to see if we can create a replicable practice that will generate the generosity of spirit we felt in this conference and the awe we experienced at the knowledge that was transmitted.

"Because this conference is about knowledge, I'd like us to meditate for a few minutes on the gift-the grace-of knowledge and the gratitude to be living at this moment. I want us to bring to awareness an insight, a piece of knowledge, that we will take away from this conference, and then teach it to the person sitting next to us." It was astounding. It was like a giant beit midrash. It was amazing to see this Jewish metaphor for learning being experienced in this global way.

About two minutes go by and I stop them (because if in 15 minutes you don't stop, they cut you off. It's not a Jewish conference). And then I said, "The next part of this practice is to make this intuition of knowledge as a gift accessible when we are not here. There's an ancient wisdom practice in Judaism in which we offer, three times a day, a blessing: Baruch ata adonai chonein ha'daat, 'Blessed is the One who in generosity gives us knowledge.' And I'd like you to chant these words to a Buddhist melody that I learned from a yogi who is raising

his kids Jewishly. I am using this melody as a way to recognize that no one religion is big enough to own this idea: that knowledge is a gift that can be evil or trivial, or that can speak to the deepest aspects of how we live our lives. This melody has helped me to more deeply access the intuition that the bracha is designed to invoke."

Q: And did they?

A: After about a minute, I stopped chanting, but the people just continued to chant the bracha. It was so moving that I burst out in tears at the bigness of what Jewishness could be. Again, these are not people who do a lot of crying and chanting in their professional lives. Here were hundreds of people from many different religious and ethnic backgrounds, all chanting a bracha in Hebrew from the Amidah that elevates and deepens the universal experience of the gift of knowledge.

Q: Did you accomplish what you set out to achieve?

A: It's a beginning. I wanted as a "religious spokesperson" to openly acknowledge that religion doesn't have the answers, but that in its inherited wisdoms religion can contribute to the building of a world that is more whole. I wanted to invite people into a new conversation in which solutions will only emerge through genuine listening. And I wanted to show how it's possible to imagine a Jewish, spiritual language that is global and that speaks to the broader public. In all of our particular communities we have private languages and we need them. They ground us, they root us. But the danger of private languages is that they become so small that you become basically irrelevant to anybody else.

I'm not trying to de-construct Judaism. I'm trying to figure out how Judaism can become bigger and wider and actually make a difference in a world more open than any we have ever lived in.

We have to position CLAL as having conversations crossing as many boundaries as possible. We need to figure out how to do that, to develop a way to speak beyond the inside. Once we do that, we'll see change in what we call Jewish life. And it's not simply that "they," the outsiders, will change and come into our communities, but that through these interactions with incredibly productive, spiritual people, we as insiders will change, and the borders of community will widen to include all of us.