

Jewish Public Forum Archive

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Interview with Dr. Shepard Forman

From its inception in 1999, the Jewish Public Forum was to be a different kind of Jewish institution. Seeking to generate fresh thinking about the social, political, cultural and technological trends affecting ethnic and religious identity and community, it is an unprecedented effort to broaden the conversation about the Jewish future by engaging leading figures in academia, business, the arts and public policy, most of whom have not been involved in organized Jewish life.

Dr. Shepard Forman is Director of the Center on International Cooperation at New York University. The Center conducts a program of policy research and international consultations on the management and financing of multilateral obligations. Prior to establishing the Center, Mr. Forman directed the Human Rights and Governance and International Affairs programs at the Ford Foundation, where he also was responsible for developing and implementing the Foundation's grant making activities in Eastern Europe, including a field office in Moscow. He has been one of the most active participants in the Jewish Public Forum at CLAL and has served as an informal advisor to the project.

In the fall of 1999, when the crisis emerged in East Timor, Shep wrote an article, "A Jewish Perspective on East Timor," that was published in *Derekh CLAL* and which was distributed to CLAL's network of traditional and

emerging Jewish leadership around the country.

Shari Cohen, Director of the Jewish Public Forum, sat down to talk with him about his lifelong concern – in his professional life and his personal life -- with the universalist and particularist aspects of Jewish identity. In particular, the conversation explores how the unusual experience of writing a Haggadah for the Makassae of East Timor, as part of his field work there in 1973-74, led him on a path that helped him better understand the place of Jewishness in his own life.

Dr. Forman received his Ph.D. in anthropology at Columbia University and did post-doctoral studies in economic development at the Institute of Development Studies in Sussex, England. He conducted field research in Brazil and East Timor and authored two books and numerous articles, including several papers on humanitarian assistance and post-conflict reconstruction assistance (available on the Center's Web site at www.cic.nyu.edu). He is co-editor, with Stewart Patrick, of *Good Intentions: Pledges of Aid to Countries Emerging from Conflict*, Lynne Rienner Publishers and, with Romita Ghosh, of *Promoting Reproductive Health: Investing in Health for Development*, Lynne Rienner Publishers. An edited volume, *Diagnosing America: Anthropology and Public Policy*, University of Michigan Press, examines the application of anthropological studies to social problems in the United States.

SC: You were called to participate in the Jewish Public Forum as a so-called outsider to Jewish institutional life. And you have expressed several times that you have repeatedly had ambivalent or even negative experiences with Jewish institutions. Yet you have also said that something brings you back and compels you to keep coming to the Jewish Public Forum meetings. I wondered if you could talk about your experiences with Jewish institutions and your vision of how your Jewishness might in fact be served by institutions.

SF: I guess my anti-institutional feeling goes back some time -- really to my childhood. And I guess the most vivid memory that I have of reacting sharply to it was when I was about 9 or 10 years old. My parents decided to move from the place that we lived in Boston to Brookline, Massachusetts because they thought it was a better community and had a better school. One way they convinced my brother, sister and me that moving was a good thing was to tell us that the apartment that they were renting was in front of a playground, with open space, playground equipment, sports fields and an ice skating rink in

winter. Then we moved and I started school and immediately realized that I had also been enrolled in Hebrew school to start preparations for bar mitzvah. I would go to school in the morning, get out at 1:30 and then hang around at the school and candy store --Irving's candy store -- next door in order to cross the street and go to Hebrew school from 2:30 to 5:00 every day of the week. And so there was no playground in my life -- there were interrupted friendships and a duality of my life that got defined for me very early on. And there is a continuity here in my thinking about services at the synagogue. The Hebrew school was non-informative and non-educational. It was rote learning and totally devoid of content.

SC: What year was that?

SF: Late 1940's -- 1947 or 1948. It was a conservative synagogue. In contrast to my secular education, this meant being contained in this other universe, which was in some ways thrust upon me -- it wasn't anything that I asked for. It was dry and rote and it meant learning a language that I thought had no utility. If I was going to learn another language, I imagine I should have learned Yiddish or Russian so I could communicate with my grandmother. But Russian and Yiddish became secret languages and I was asked instead to learn this other language that had no meaning for me.

SC: How did you see this paralleled in the synagogue?

SF: In truth, I have found a tremendous need to go to synagogue and each time I have moved somewhere, I have always become a member of the local synagogue. I start out with the intention of going to services -- beyond just High Holiday services -- and getting involved in the synagogue. But it always comes up empty for me.

I know enough Hebrew so that I can follow what's written and phoneticize it to a degree -- not 100%, probably 60% -- but I can't understand the language and so I end up reading the English text when I am in shul. But it has no meaning for me. And so I try and I go, but it does not reach me either in the head or the heart where it is supposed to be.

Now there are also a couple of institutional instances that left me very, very cold. I can remember once when I was younger on the High Holidays with my father. It was a very bad period in my father's life and he was struggling to stay out of bankruptcy. He had missed his membership payment at the synagogue - the same one where I went for these bar mitzvah lessons -- and no one had advised him, of course, of what was going to happen. But he and I went to

synagogue and there were other people sitting in the seats that my father had for 10 years – they were given away or sold to someone else and my father was so humiliated and embarrassed that he never went back until after my mother died 30 or 40 years later, when he was well into his 70's. Then he started going to a neighborhood shul again, but obviously some of the institutional antipathy stayed with me.

Years later, when my father died, not only did I not get a call from the synagogue to which I then belonged to find out about how to put together a minyan, but we actually got a computer-printed letter of condolence. The side with the holes in it that goes through the printer had not even been ripped off! My reaction to this cold and unsigned letter was: "What do I need this for?" It just brought back old memories and thoughts and I dropped out.

SC: You were rather reluctant when we first called you to participate in the Jewish Public Forum. We were asking you to contribute to this Jewish conversation based on your professional life. Can you reflect on that?

SF: I was actually pleased with the call because I thought I had run my course with the Torah study classes I was taking with CLAL; I didn't think that there was much more that I could get out of that, and yet I liked CLAL – I liked what I was seeing and I liked the kind of conversations around the edges. So when I got the call, I thought this might be interesting. But I was not so concerned about how the Jewish community dealt with itself as I was about how the Jewish community engaged the world. I think the religious community in general and the Jewish community in particular is not sufficiently engaged in the world at large. And the Jewish community had been more engaged in this way in the past. So I was really interested in how the CLAL discussion in the Jewish Public Forum could be externalized and how more outsiders could be brought into the conversation. But I was concerned about the balance between public policy within the Jewish context as opposed to how Jews and Jewishness could relate to and inform and improve on policy on the outside. I was also concerned about how religious, as opposed to multidisciplinary, the conversation was going to be. I think I said to you at the time that, in fact, if you were going to engage in larger issues, I would be interested. But I would not if it was going to be an internal Jewish conversation.

SC: By "internal" you mean a conversation that would be merely about Jewish continuity for its own sake?

SF: Exactly. And you probably remember that one of the things that I kept raising throughout that first year was what was the real objective here? Was the

real objective to position CLAL within a cluster of Jewish organizations? Or was it trying to do something more than that? But behind all of that -- and this is where I very much come down with what Nancy Abelmann said in your interview with her -- I obviously had this intense desire to connect and to connect with my own Jewishness. ([Click here to access the interview with Nancy Abelmann](#)). I also feel more and more overtly about this than I ever have in my past and there are reasons for that.

I grew up in a place where the restrictive covenants were still in place. There was at least one apartment building I walked past that explicitly excluded Jews as tenants. My father was at that time contracted by the Town of Brookline to run the waste system, and he would leave the town's incinerator and drive out the gate and right across the street was something called "The Country Club" which -- if I recall correctly -- actually had a sign on the gate that said "No Jews." So I grew up with some ambivalence in this community going to Hebrew school: Did I really want to be Jewish, or might it be better to be something else? But it also made me realize over time that we don't choose to be Jewish -- we are Jewish -- and we are also identified by others as so being. So you might as well figure out your place within that universe which both defines you and is being defined for you.

I think that leaves me constantly wanting to connect in some meaningful way. In some ways, the CLAL experience has been the most meaningful way that I've connected because it engages me not at a level of learning of the religion per se (which would be more important if I wanted to be a Talmudic scholar, but that is not my purpose). It engages me at a level where I think I can make a contribution. It helps me understand the relationship between my Jewishness and the dominant secular part of my life.

SC: There's the very interesting case of when you came to us when the East Timor situation was emerging in fall 1999. That is when Indonesian sponsored militias were devastating the territory after its vote for independence. You basically said: "This is outrageous that the High Holidays are coming up and there doesn't seem to be any Jewish response to this. Can CLAL write something?" We then put it back to you and said: "Well, you're a Jewish voice on East Timor. Why wouldn't you write the thing yourself?" I just wanted to ask you to reflect on that experience.

SF: I think that was very important for me, and I think very important in my relationship with CLAL. In some sense I was testing you, and you tested me back, and that was very useful because I was saying: "Well, if you really believe that the Jewish community can say something about these policy issues

outside of Judaism, here's an opportunity to do so. Here's one where you can make a critical difference." In fact, you came back to me and said: Well, I'm you – I'm the Jewish voice. You could give me the channels to express it, which I didn't have. But, you were saying, here is where I could fit in relation to a Jewish institution. I thought it was really quite remarkable. And I have to say you also had a tremendous impact because you did give me a space to articulate this, which I otherwise wouldn't have had. It's not the kind of thing that could have been done as an op-ed piece. Because you not only published it, but sent it out to Jewish organizations with a request for them to take some action. And they did. A Jewish delegation actually went to Australia and, I think, had a significant impact.

But besides confirming for me that there was something meaningful and authentic that I could do with CLAL, I came to the decision that this was a way for me to think about my Jewishness in relation to the rest of the world and in relation to my own professional and other interests. There are two things about the experience that moved me very deeply. One was the number of comments I got back from East Timorese saying that I understood what they were going through. And, of course, I had understood them because I was understanding them through my own experience.

SC: How did they see the piece?

SF: Because it got reprinted on the East Timor Web site. They picked it up and reprinted it and so that was very moving. The second thing that happened was that I got a call here one day just before Passover from a man in Canada who wanted to know if I ever finished the Makassae Hagaddah (see below) because he was planning his Passover seder and he thought it would be a nice thing to use. It sent me into a little bit of a guilt trip because I have not gone back and done the Haggadah although the East Timor piece will make some contribution. But here's how things can come full circle. Here's something that you had said to me: "Well, you are a Jewish voice." I had done something that I thought would be a Jewish contribution to something external and here something external was turning back in to make a contribution to that traditional Jewish ritual which, incidentally, is the only one that ever had any meaning for me. Passover was always very important to me because we did it with my extended family. It was always a very warm and wonderful occasion. The story of the Exodus does have meaning and, in some ways, it has influenced the choices that I have made in my career and who I am. It enables me to connect with people like the East Timorese and others who are suffering.

SC: Can you reflect back a little bit on the experience of the Makassae

Haggadah project? How did the idea come to you? What was the process like?

SF: We had gone to Australia in the spring of 1974, in a break from my 15 months of fieldwork in East Timor. While traveling in Australia, we realized we were there at Passover time and happened to be in Canberra. The Israeli consul actually convened a seder for Jews in Canberra. It was done in a public hall and there were a couple of hundred people there. We went with our kids who were three and five at the time. Something fascinating happened. We were sitting across from an elderly couple and inevitably got into a conversation -- about who we are, where we come from, what we were doing in Australia, etc. My wife Leona said she's from Brazil and that she was born in China. It turned out that this couple sitting across from us was also from China and they were friends of her parents! So there was this connection which is in many ways a very Jewish connection.

We went back to East Timor with a Haggadah from that seder. It was a very well designed Haggadah: the Hebrew was very well designed in terms of the type. The English was much simpler, but also nicely designed. There were drawings of the ancients and they looked very much like people in East Timor wrapped in their ikat cloths. I brought this back with me to East Timor, and I was sitting with my language teacher -- who was the ritual specialist, although I did not realize this at the time. We were sitting at my work table, and this Haggadah was there. My teacher was totally illiterate, but he began to look at the pictures and wanted to know what the book was. I explained to him that it was the book we use to teach our story to our children -- generation after generation. I said that it was done in two languages -- in the ritual language and in the daily language that we use -- hence the two different scripts. I said that it was done that way so the children who did not know the ritual language could learn and understand the ritual. He got very excited with this and asked more questions and then left and disappeared for a day or so before showing up again at my house. We sat down to study (I was doing language learning with him), but he clearly didn't want to talk about anything but this book. Then he said: "Could we teach you our language so that you could write it down so that my son could learn the rituals?"

Up until this point, I was having a difficult time doing traditional anthropology with these people. I wanted to do a genealogy, but the Makassae have a taboo about naming the dead. And I wanted to go and see their rituals, which are very elaborate, but their rituals are very secretive and they wouldn't take me. They kept talking to me about agriculture and household stuff, but they wouldn't talk to me about the essence of what I was there to study.

And so when they made this offer, I said: "Of course." If I could record the ritual language -- and I knew his son was studying Portuguese in school, since all kids were forced to by the Portuguese colonial authorities -- then I would be able to translate the ritual language into a language that the son could read. Makassae was an unwritten language so, although the son could speak it, he couldn't read it. This suddenly opened up a whole world for me. They invited me to learn the rituals -- to attend their marriages, their burials and their mortuary rituals. While they would bury the dead in a somewhat elaborate ritual, about thirty years later there would be a lavish mortuary ritual in which they dispatched the soul of the dead to the land of the ancestors. They agreed to let me do a complete clan genealogy on the condition that at the point that they thought it had gone far enough and said it was over, I would acknowledge that it was over. Then I would get a ram "whose horns turned twice" and sacrifice it at their holy site and thereby conceal the names again.

This went on for about four or five months. It was very rich, but a couple of things that happened were problematic. We had a wonderful dog -- he was very attached to me. On one occasion, I was going up to one of these mortuary rituals. It was a very mountainous climb up there. So I tethered the dog at home and I went up to the ritual. But the dog chewed through the rope and followed me. He got there just as they were putting the offerings down on the tomb and he ate the offerings! One of the people said what I thought was a joke at the time: "Oh! He, too, wants to go to the land of the ancestors." A few weeks later we made a trip to Dili for a few days and when we came back, the dog and our two cats were gone. We paid to get the cats back -- we offered a reward to get them back. But we never got the dog back. And I realized that the cats were a mask for what happened to the dog. It turned out the dog was eaten by our gardener. When we confronted him, he said: "well the dog was sick and he died." They eat dogs in this part of the world.

It turned out two things conspired to end my lessons -- both involved doing the genealogies. I suddenly realized that our gardener was the most direct lineal descendant of the man whose soul was being dispatched and whose offering the dog had eaten. So they were clearly taking back whatever this ritual substance was by re-devouring the dog. I mentioned to my teacher that I figured out this genealogical connection. Then, the very next day, there was a man taking a goat or water buffalo somewhere and I said to my teacher: Oh! He must be going to such and such a village. And he said: Yes. And I said: And this must be his relationship to that person in that village. He then said: Now you know what you need to know and you can write it all down. Of course, I wasn't really ready to write it all down. I thought I was just beginning to learn

what I needed to know. But that's how it ended.

They made me sacrifice a ram at a place that was said to be their place of origin. It was a very awesome place. It's really interesting how powerful religious beliefs can be. And maybe the more primitive they are, the more powerful they are. But you go to this very remote site in the mountains and there is nothing but a huge tomb in the middle made up of flat rocks. There are three or four rudimentary thatch houses on stilts and one of them belongs to Uru-Uato (Moon-Sun) who is their supreme deity, and the others were of Moon-Sun's various descendants. One houses a caretaker who looks after this sacred place. The Makassae origin myth is of a rock wren who kicks back the flood-waters and breaks his leg and lands in a tree. There is this tree that actually has a rock nestled in the crotch of a branch that looks like a bird. It's quite amazing. It's just an awesome feeling of something -- I think it's the power of belief, whether it's your belief or not -- you just feel that awesome power of belief.

SC: Well, it's a wonderful story. It is so interesting that the Haggadah was actually a tool for you to get your work done. How did you feel about this idea that they were so thrilled with the Haggadah as a technology, and about using this technology? Earlier in the conversation you mentioned that the seder was always an important aspect of Jewish ritual for you. This clearly could have been a moment of real pride for you, to have this technology that you could pass on. What did it feel like to be actually shaping the ritual of this other people?

SF: There were several things involved there. One -- I had the technology and I knew the technology worked because I tested it. I took some of the rituals that I had taped and I transcribed them phonetically. I gave them to his son to read and his son was able to read them back to the father. The father was very moved and very excited about that and so I knew the technology worked. I knew that I could transcribe and convey some of the rituals and interpret them. I did some articles as an anthropologist in which I described these peoples' beliefs and rituals and translated their ritual texts into English to make my case about what I called their "paradigm of life" -- what their religious and ritual beliefs were. But while I could do that in English -- I never had the command over the Makassae language to be able to do that in Makassae. What I thought that I would do was simply transcribe the rituals phonetically and give that transcription back to them. In fact I did some of that but it wasn't in any order to tell a story like the Haggadah does. I did it ritual by ritual. If I was attending a ritual, I transcribed it and gave it to my teacher. I never reconstructed it as a narrative in Makassae. I wasn't able to do that. In any case, I suspect that none

of it exists anymore -- that it was destroyed either in the invasion or afterwards.

I have no way of knowing because my teacher was killed in the invasion. After I left East Timor, I had one communication from him which was written in Makassae by his son -- so the technology worked. But the message was terribly sad -- a two-line letter: I forgot most of my Makassae, but I'll never forget this -- the translation was: "Please help us. We are hungry, everyone is dying." There was really nothing we could do -- we sent boxes of seed -- you do whatever you can. But I'm sure it never reached them in the midst of war in which a third of the population was being killed. I was discouraged and sort of gave up on writing the ethnography of the Makassae, which meant giving up on writing their Haggadah, and it was a real mistake because if you ever need a Haggadah, it is when someone is trying to destroy you as a people.

I became an activist and worked on human rights questions and never got back to finishing the Haggadah. But as I started to say earlier -- it was very presumptuous of me to think that I could do a Haggadah: I had the technology, but I didn't have the knowledge. I understand the system and how it's constructed, but in an abstract and analytic kind of way. I could do that in English -- I don't think I could do it in Makassae. And I didn't know whether the order was right. All I could give them back in Makassae was the transcription of what I had actually heard, but without contextualization -- without any format that could tell a story. This was OK for an anthropological audience, but would not provide them with a narrative that could be passed down. And so it was probably a bit of chutzpah in thinking that I could do it.

SC: You said earlier that the thing about Passover that motivated you was the liberation story. In this case, though, what you were imparting from Passover was a technology for continuity. What did that feel like in terms of your Jewish identity -- to be imparting this technology which was going to have the effect of potentially perpetuating the existence of this people?

SF: I think for me Passover was always very important because of its family content and because it was a ritual that I could understand. I knew what the story was about and it's so explicit that we are telling this in order to pass the essence of our being on to our children. Being at the seder in Australia, and the connection with my in-laws that came up in that context, gave me a further sense of the meaning of Passover and Jewish life. I realized that the seder really is intergenerational transfer, but it's also about community and identity. I think if there's anything that defines us as a people, it's the Exodus from Egypt and the return to our Jewish roots.

Thinking about the Haggadah in relation to the transference of culture and identity from one generation to another generation, and having it described so starkly in those terms regarding another culture, probably made me better appreciate what Passover means in Jewish life. It just depicted it very starkly for me. It is really a very functional instrument but one that does not require an extraordinary amount of analysis or interpretation to appreciate. It's saying very simply: Here is a people that lost their identity – they were kept captive – and they were being returned. What they are returning to, of course, is identity and Jewishness, and that's a very simple and very powerful message. I began to think about it in terms of the conveyance of identity to a people who are rapidly losing it.

The Makassae are a traditional society. After long periods -- 500 years -- of colonial rule, little by little, the cultural content has been wiped out. The children are learning another language and being acculturated to an alien system. And this man was so desperate to be able to convey something to his son that is so fundamental that he asked me -- the stranger -- to lend him this "technology." It just brought the purpose and meaning of this very simple communal event into very sharp relief.

The experience of doing a seder outside of our home was another facet of this. And it was convened by the consul of the State of Israel to allow Jews from all over, who didn't know each other, to share this very important and central ritual of Jewish life.

SC: One of the things that I was thinking as you were speaking is whether you would feel as free to write your own Jewish Haggadah as you would feel to write a Haggadah for another people. The analogy isn't perfect because, in this case, you were recording something as it was and what I'm asking is how at ease would you feel re-writing the Jewish Haggadah for yourself, which is an act of interpretation? That is in some ways what we asked you to do in writing the East Timor piece.

SF: This is the arrogance I was referring to before. I actually thought that I could write their Haggadah because I thought I understood their ritual and symbolism. And I think I probably do understand more about the ritual and symbolism of Makassae life -- because I studied it so intensely -- than I do about Jewish life. So I think I would feel much less capable of writing my own Jewish Haggadah and that's very paradoxical in a way. The chutzpah that I would have for writing someone else's and the humility that I would feel in terms of writing my own are peculiar. I'm not sure I know how to explain that, but maybe it's explicable by some of what has always troubled me in terms of my Jewishness. It was

Jewishness without content – it was something that was defined for me by my parents, by who I inevitably am, and by the identity that others imposed on me. But it never had any palpable meaning for me.

I think I also told you once that my mother used to light the Shabbos candles by looking out the window to see when our neighbor lit hers, and for a long time I thought that was just hypocritical. Then I suddenly realized: all she had to do was turn on the radio or look in the newspaper to see what time sundown was. I honestly think that my mother's going into my bedroom to look in our neighbor's kitchen window was her way of connecting. I wish I had appreciated that more when she was alive because then maybe we could have talked about some of this and it would have had some meaning for me. It was part of growing up in America where I learned there are two very distinct kinds of Jews. There are Jews who pride themselves in their Jewishness and who seek continuity. They are religious -- frum -- Jews. And then there are Jews like me. While my parents did not hide their Jewishness --they didn't change their name, they didn't try to be something else -- they emptied the Jewishness out of their lives and filled it with other things. I am a victim of that, but I don't feel victimized by it. But I certainly am a product of it and maybe, subliminally, the choice of anthropology was to lead me on this path of discovery in an attempt to understand that. Margaret Mead once said that the best way to understand your own culture is by studying another one. And yet she never turned herself to the formal study of American society and culture, but she had insights that she gained from her studies elsewhere. I don't think I'll ever turn my attentions to the study of Judaism. I tried it some ways and it didn't work for me, but I think working with the Makassae has given me insights into how Judaism has influenced my life. I understand something more about myself through this other thing. As I think about it, Nancy Abelmann's decision to go to study South Korea was part of a process of discovering who she was through the other. I think I took that same journey -- hers is a bit more complete than mine in some ways.

SC: What's interesting is you actually took a different pathway -- going into human rights work and doing some of the other stuff that you did subsequently. Earlier you linked it also to Passover and that seems like a very significant expression of Jewishness. My impression from talking to you on different occasions is that your human rights work often happened in a context with a lot of other Jewish people, with a lot of Jewish colleagues. And you were doing Jewish stuff in one way or another -- you were doing stuff that came out of your Jewishness. Is that the way you thought about it?

SF: I think part of it has been the search for something. For example, I've

always protected my time, and have not done very much in the way of social service that is extra- curricular, perhaps because that is how I defined my professional career. But it's interesting that I chose to do CLAL and that I also was on the Board of the American Jewish World Service for several years, which was a way of expressing my beliefs and values through Jewish organizations. There were many organizations through which I could have chosen to do this, but I chose to do it through Jewish organizations.

I'll come back to that question. First, I want to go back to something about Nancy Abelmann's interview and the generational question. Nancy makes a very important point at the end of her interview that is very closely related to what we were talking about in terms of the intergenerational passage of identity. She connects her search regarding Jewish identity to her young children. Her children give that search significance, and that's a very important point. Because I was thinking as I read that: If I had been more consciously aware of this when my kids were younger, might I have conveyed something more to them than I have? I mean my kids are experiencing Judaism much the way I did when I was their age – a great deal of ambivalence regarding feeling Jewish, not knowing how to engage, not knowing how to deal with it. Judaism is intergenerational and Nancy's connecting her own quest to her children I think will, in many respects, define how she thinks about her Jewishness in the future. This has come to me at a much later point in life, when my kids are grown. And so it was not a reflective part of my early parenthood and, therefore, they grew up in a household very much like the household that I grew up in. And, as I said, they have the same or similar sets of ambivalences and questions about their Jewishness and how it relates to their lives. This is compounded by the fact that they are both in interreligious relationships, and that's something that I think about a great deal – continuity. I don't worry so much about Judaism disappearing – I'm not on the number counting side of the equation. But I am concerned about the way in which it does put meaning into peoples' lives. For a long time, it didn't put meaning into my life, and I wonder how much meaning it puts into my kids' lives in face of all of the alternative sources of ideas and information and beliefs and feelings that people now have. Thinking about this -- in an explicit way with regard to her children -- gives Nancy something that I didn't have when I was working this through.

SC: What you say does relate to the other piece of the question: I would suspect that you imparted a great deal to them by virtue of the work that you were doing. I am just curious to have you reflect a little bit on whether you have thought of that in Jewish terms and whether in fact you might have imparted more to your children than you think. It's just a matter of how you name it.

SF: I've always believed that it was a simple matter of how you name it. I wonder about this now -- and CLAL has made me wonder about it. But I don't have the answers for it, that is, whether there is something specifically Jewish in the content of what I do. I think there is a set of values that I was raised with conveyed to me by my parents which ultimately comes from a Jewish background and tradition. And I probably conveyed that to my children, and it leads us to be socially committed people. But I always looked around and thought to myself: Well, there are lots of socially committed people out there. I have Christian friends who are socially committed and Muslim friends who are socially committed, and so what is the particular religious content of what we do?

There are people that share a general sense of values that come out of the Judeo-Christian tradition. These became near universal values. And it's the universality of those values which provides meaning and respectability and acceptability, and allows us to work on them in a common framework, which I think is important for humanity. And so I start to worry a little bit when we begin to define things in particularistic terms. I've never quite articulated this before, so I have to think about this as I am saying it. If we define our values and what we do in a religious idiom, or as having been framed and informed by religion, or as being derived from religion -- and I know you're not asking about Judaism only in religious terms, maybe even less in religious terms than others -- but if you connect it with something so particular, does it get you into a relativistic position in which ultimately the universality gets fragmented and you have a breakdown into a Jewish philosophy of rights, or a Christian philosophy of rights, or a Muslim philosophy of rights, or a Hindu philosophy of rights? You might search for the commonalities, but find more differences and specificities than commonalities. That would leave me intellectually unhappy and personally unsettled, and so I have to think about that a little more as a problem. The world in which I expressed my values has been the world of human rights and development, and I like to think of those as universal values that give everyone a stake in them. If you specify those values too much in terms of emerging from something particular, we might lose something important. I'm sorry to end on this ambivalent note, but that something important might just be an amalgam of a bunch of things rather than something specifically Jewish.

SC: I think that as a society we are currently trying to figure out a different way of thinking about the relationship between the particular and the universal -- whatever you call it: pluralism, multi-culturalism. I think we're actually in a period where we need to try to figure out, once again, how the combination is going to work. I don't think we have it yet.

7/1/2009

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