

Journalism, Judaism and the Search for a Third Language: An Interview with Jay Rosen

INTRODUCTION

From its inception in 1999 the *Jewish Public Forum at CLAL* was to be a different kind of Jewish institution. Although it would engage in Jewish conversations talented individuals outside of the usual Jewish organizational channels and affiliations, it would not engage in "outreach." "Outreach," well-intentioned as a means to share and spread the influence of Judaism's inherited wisdom tradition, has too often come to mean a Jewish movement or organization's efforts to make "them" look a lot more like "us."

Instead, the Forum imagined a new kind of Jewish conversation, in which those affiliated with Jewish institutions and those with fewer obvious communal ties would learn from one another, in an encounter with the potential to effect change on all sides.

One of the earliest and most enthusiastic participants in the Forum is Jay Rosen, chair of the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication at *New York University*, and the former director of the Kettering Foundation's *Project on Public Life and the Press*. Jay's 1999 book, *What are Journalists For?* (Yale University Press) is a chronicle of what became known as the public, or civic, journalism movement. A response to journalism's eroding public and self image in the 1990s, the movement was an attempt by a number of reporters and editors to upgrade the detached, objective ideals of the journalist's profession so that it would become more responsive, more proactive and more able to bridge the wide gaps in American public discourse.

In March 2000, Jay sat down with CLAL faculty for a conversation on the joys and challenges of trying to build a movement for institutional re-imagination. In the conversation that follows, he expands on those and other themes.

CLAL: You were invited to take part in CLAL's Public Forum as one of the so-called "outsiders"--a Jewish academic with few if any of the organizational affiliations we associate with so-called Jewish insiders. Why did you agree to take part?

JAY ROSEN: Well, I made an astonishing discovery when I came into contact with CLAL: that there was this thing called the "Jewish world" that defined me outside of it. Of course, I then learned the common sense meaning behind the phrase, and I have no trouble agreeing that I am not a member of that particular club. But this discovery of a "Jewish world," from which I was specifically excluded, was a fantastic revelation to me.

I always took it for granted that there were many Jewish worlds. Zabar's may be one, although some would call that "Jewish lite." The world created by the New York intellectuals in the 1950s--Lionel Trilling, Norman Podhoretz, Norman Mailer, Alan Ginsberg, Hannah Arendt--was an intensely Jewish world, and not at all "lite." Even today, journalism and cultural criticism in New York are Jewish worlds, in some significant degree. So is politics, especially Democratic Party politics, on the Upper West Side. And medicine along hospital row on the East Side. Think of stand-up comedy as an art form: still a very Jewish world, although not exclusively so. Or psychoanalysis. It's not just that Jews populate these worlds in large numbers, but there is much that is distinctively Jewish about them. As I said, this all seemed self-evident to me.

I saw CLAL and its concerns as just another, quite interesting, and quite contentious "Jewish world," with a rather high concentration of well-educated, argumentative, probably neurotic but certainly committed Jewish men and women who know a lot of things I don't. I am comfortable and easily engaged in that kind of setting, so I agreed. All Jewish worlds interest me, which is another way of saying that I like living in New York.

But there was one other factor: CLAL is an "in-between" thing. It's sort of an academic organization, it's sort of a service agency. And it stands between the educational and (in your phrasing) Jewish worlds. The great advantage of a group like that is that it's always possible the organization itself represents a third world.

As a journalism professor with a Ph.D., I'm constantly moving between the academic culture and the professional culture of the press. The disadvantages there are obvious. Who are you really? What is it that you actually do? What is your agenda? Where do your ultimate commitments lie? These questions will always arise. The advantage is that an in-between position demands the development of a third language. In my case, not "journalism" nor standard scholarship, but some hybrid of the two. I have found that a demanding task, as it must be for CLAL in its own in-between work.

CLAL: When CLAL speaks of a "third language," we were inspired by Walter Benjamin's use of the term. One of our faculty, Tsvi Blanchard, describes it as connecting "the experiences of American Jews to their inherited traditions and texts, enabling participants to see their work, family and leisure through a new Jewish lens, and transforming the Jewish tradition through the encounter."

JR: Walter Benjamin's life and times: now there was a Jewish world. In fact, all those in his position who thought they were living in a German world learned the truth of that deadly illusion. There is hardly a week in my intellectual life when I don't think about that.

My book is not written in the language of professors who talk about democracy, modern life, media, culture and society, and it's not a newsroom book either. It is an attempt to speak, illustrate and otherwise refine a third language. And public journalism is a name for the effort to find that third language, to make it work in practice.

CLAL: There seems to be another parallel between your work and ours. For many years CLAL has spoken of a "Third Era" in Jewish life, a major paradigm shift to rival the one that followed the destruction of the Second Temple and the ascendancy of rabbinic Judaism. You present a portrait of the world of media as undergoing a similarly profound shift.

JR: It seems to me that in the Jewish world there's a cultural shift happening. Whether it qualifies as a third--or thirty-third--great era I am not qualified to say. But Arendt once wrote about this experience, which she described as "no longer and not yet." In other words: an in-between time, as against an in-between space or position. When I listen to CLAL people discuss troubles in the organized Jewish world today, that phrase seems to apply. Not longer this, not yet that.

In journalism, the entire technological and commercial platform of the profession is coming apart and being reconstituted in cyberspace. The past is not going to be like the future, but we don't know where we will be in five years. There is something profound and mysterious about such moments. When things are so much in motion, the "possibility of possibility" returns, for those who may be alert to it.

CLAL: You've said that there is something Jewish about your book; in fact, part of the book was excerpted in "Tikkun" magazine. Can you define what that "something" is?

JR: I didn't discuss it at in the book, but I did a bit in the "Tikkun" piece. For me the answer begins with the notion of tikkun olam. That is the link between my work and the whole Jewish tradition--the repair of existence, addressing the "brokenness" of things, including the social arrangements we live under, including our democracy. Now a commitment to repair is by its nature a political commitment cutting across ideological lines. It must be, since those divisions are one of the things to repair. So if you are primarily invested in that way, you are inevitably involved in a project of pluralism. Repair work must be done among the many factions that disagree.

I am also interested in repair as a member of a particular post-'60s generation. My older siblings were caught up in upheavals at that time, while I was a youthful bystander. My political education began later, with Watergate. I got hooked on the story while still in high school. Like everyone I wanted to find out what happened, and what would happen once the facts came to light. As it turned out, Congress, the courts, the press and the American people successfully got to the

bottom of it, and the crime was exposed. I got caught up in the Senate hearings in 1973, encouraged by the simple fact that everyone there wanted to know what I wanted to know. Our public institutions worked, and this was my very first political experience.

Watergate is often seen as a disillusioning event, or a confirmation of what the '60s kids knew all along: that Nixon was a crook. But that interpretation is another example of the arrogance of a particular generation, born at the right time, but mistaking its own experience for the full reality of the times. As a teenager, I was very much inspired by Watergate, which got me interested in democracy. It seemed to me then, and seems to me now, an exemplary act of public repair.

I am also inspired by and greatly admire the decision made by many people in the '60s to commit themselves to social change, something I came to understand well after the fact. But it seemed to me that all the prospects for social change in the world in the '80s and '90s, when I came of age as a thinker, were unachievable through any left-progressive coalition. It simply did not have the support of the country and so to work for change you had to begin to engage a divided body politic. That in turn involves the repair of public discourse, which is an inherently political act. But it's not the program of Trent Lott or the politics of Michael Lerner.

So I remain at something of a distance from that kind of politics, although people are constantly trying to impress upon me the ultimate wisdom of their insistence that everything is inevitably political--meaning: no ideology-free zone. I know that. Nonetheless, I also know that reviving public discourse is work that engages all sides. And I do call it repair work, which is what my book is about: the broken connection between press and public, and what might be done about it.

CLAL: Give an example of that sort of public discourse--or its absence.

JR: A number of organizations say they detect a left-wing bias in the media and they do an energetic job of analyzing it. And there are similar groups on the left on the lookout for things that the left complains about. It would be interesting to see if they could do joint projects, since I suspect that, despite their wildly different starting points, they have many complaints in common. It would be interesting, but probably it will never happen, because activists of this type are rarely active in the repair of public discourse. They are committed to a political position and using public discourse to win. They have an instrumental view.

In practice, of course, the symmetry of complaints from the left (you're biased against us) and complaints from the right (ditto) persuades many journalists that they're steering straight down the middle. The battlers don't see that, joined together by the targets of their critique, they are losing the battle against cynicism and complacency in the press. If someone tried to do something about that peculiar problem, he or she would be involved in a political project. Would it be

left politics, or a right politics? Neither, of course. It would be a public discourse project. And that's what the Project on Public Life and the Press was, when I ran it from 1993 to 1997.

CLAL: We were struck by the parallels between your advocacy of public journalism and CLAL's advocacy for social change within the organized Jewish world. One passage about the resistance to public journalism was especially apt. You write:

"Public journalism became an experiment upon the press as much as a movement within it. Responses often illustrated the ingrained and reflexive attitudes that prevented the profession from responding in a more daring fashion to the troubles in American democracy. Among those attitudes were an essentialist view of the journalist's task that afforded little room for experimentation; a narrow reading of press history that allowed tradition to speak against reform and renewal; a frozen image of what journalists were for that disabled civic imagination in the craft; a quest for innocence amid the entangling forces of the media age, which disallowed any view of the press as a political actor with decisions to make about the aim of its actions; a desire to keep a firm distance between the press and a navel-gazing public, from which the serious professional had much to fear." (p. 206)

JR: Thank you for quoting that. I was smarter about journalism after I tried to change it. I had a much deeper appreciation for what was great about it, for what was hard about it, for how we mistreat our professionals, including news people. Most of them don't do it for the money, or glamour. Truth turns them on more than money, and what they do isn't that glamorous. So I try to respect journalists, even when I do not respect some of the claims they make about their work.

There was a lot of resistance to public journalism's "third language" and its open infiltration into the press. People who are masters of their profession's mental equipment are not inclined to relinquish it. Some will not even accept commentary from outside, declaring the equipment faulty in this way or that. But public life is full of these kinds of fights for intellectual respect--it's quite a normal thing. And I can easily see myself falling into defense mode, unable to spot where I have an assumption or two wrong. Still, when an idea you helped to wrought is called "intellectually flaccid" and a "fad" on the editorial page of the New York Times, it does make you wonder what kind of language games are at work. (See p. 231.)

CLAL: You've described your Jewishness so far in political, or public, terms. How would you describe it in personal terms?

JR: The more I learned about tikkun olam, and the history of the modern world, the more I began to drop any illusions I once had that I was anything but a "Jewish" intellectual. If someone asked me at gunpoint how I define myself

professionally, it would not be professor, author or director of this or that thing, it would probably be "Jewish intellectual." If I flatter myself that way, then this too is Jewish, I would think.

But that does not really answer your question. I do not belong to a synagogue and I do not pray. My wife was raised as an Orthodox Jew. I was married in a white coat, in an orthodox ceremony conducted by Tsvi Blanchard of CLAL. Music by a klezmer band and Van Morrison. I have a three-year-old daughter and her mother says the Sh'ma to her every night before bed. My child knows the words, I do not. If I could, I would eat at Ratner's or the Second Avenue Deli four nights a week. My Jewish education is minimal, virtually nothing. But I am conscious of leading a Jewish existence, and so all treasures of the tradition I consider mine--in theory.

As a student of the media and commercial culture, I am impressed with its power to uproot and dissolve just about everything. Which makes me ask myself: what cannot be dissolved? My daughter, only three, is still protected from the media's subtle theft of experience. But I know her day of contact with American culture is coming. If I don't want to lose her (to it), I will have to find her something stronger, better, deeper, longer, truer, and more authoritative than "it." Here, my duties as a professor and my duties as a parent are the same.

Once, perhaps, it was possible to think that Enlightenment, Reason, Culture, Modernity were suitable grounds for our being, and our children's being--quite enough, in other words. But when Walter Benjamin took his life, in flight from the Nazis, it could not have seemed so. As well all know, Germany was educated. Steeped in culture. One capital of the modern world. That very Jewish crowd, the New York Intellectuals, taught me that nothing is more important to your thinking life than the way you learn to think about the twentieth century, and its horrible record of ruin. There is something twisted about modernity, twisted away from any human mooring. Everything says that to me, yet I am not an anti-modern, or even a traditionalist.

Thus do I find myself, a secular man, telling Sylvie about God, and listening to her tell me. I'm making it up, to prevent myself (and her) from being unmade. I suppose that's why I used a question as the title for my book: what are journalists for? If that's not a Jewish trick, then what is?