

Panel Discussion: The Jewish Voice in the Public Square
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Rabbi Larry Hoffman (HUC-JIR)
Professor Riv-Ellen Prell (University of Minnesota)
Richard Harwood (The Harwood Institute)
Moderator: Valerie Strauss (*The Washington Post*)

Rabbi Zemel: [00:02:30] Synagogues try to do many things. We perform acts of love and kindness, mitzvot of Tzedakah, meals to the homebound, underwear for the homeless. In our community, we've just welcomed the refugee family from Afghanistan that we're sponsoring. I think synagogues also help locate us in time, [00:03:00] the weekend Shabbat, the season through our holidays, the month through the new moon, the year through Rosh Hashanah.

Synagogues help us measure our lives through birth, Bar and Bat Mitzvah, marriage and mourning. I like to think that synagogues should also be places that help locate ourselves in the world in other ways. Don't we all need help thinking through the events that impact our lives as they shape the world around us? How are we to respond?
[00:03:30] How are we to think?

A critical role of our duty as in my belief is to help us understand the world. I, therefore, began to think about this afternoon's panel very shortly after the election last November and continued thinking about it as the months went by. This afternoon, we have three amazing speakers and a remarkable moderator. I am exerting what is for me is great self-discipline and this is a boast, [00:04:00] by restraining myself and not introducing our three panelists and this is very difficult for me as I hold each one of them in such high regard.

A few years ago, after I introduced a guest speaker, a person of whom I was in great awe, one of you came up to me after it and simply said to me, they would like to be present where I'd ever introduce the Mashiach. I love that line when I wrote it.
[00:04:30] I love that line when the person said it to me.

So this is the reason for my great restraint except we've just change things or we were talking beforehand that I'm going to give a brief introduction of the speakers. I thought that made the whole thing even better. First, I'm going to begin by introducing, Valerie, who will moderate our afternoon.

Washington is a city of journalists. It is actually a city that draws to it among the greatest journalists in the world and Valerie Strauss is [00:05:00] one of them. She had spent an outstanding career at the Washington Post, covering everything from metro to foreign news. For many years now, Valerie has been covering education, which she says she has

covered for at least as long as I went to school, from kindergarten through grad school, according to her bio.

She says she takes a wide view of a constitution education topic, anything that she happens to be interested in and she writes, "I tried to mention the Beatles or Bruce Springsteen whenever it makes even the slightest fit of sense to do so."

[00:05:30] Valerie, for me, is very frequently the person that asks the and here it's capitalized, T-H-E, insightful, challenging, no nonsense question when we have guest speakers and I'm sitting with you listening. I've learnt to look the other way during as the rabbi. So she's a natural for us this morning.

Our other three speakers are simply people that I held an extraordinary esteem. We all know that Larry Hoffman has been with us so often. [00:06:00] I think in many ways, Temple Micah is Temple Micah because of the profound influence he's had on me, on our other rabbis here. When I say Temple Micah, I mean, the best, best, best parts of Temple Micah are Temple Micah. Anything that's disorganized and not so great, please don't look at my teacher for.

Riv-Ellen Prell, from the time I met her, is simply an extraordinarily, wonderful, insightful, bright person. She animates compassion in life and [00:06:30] wisdom. I think she understands the texture of American Jewish life better than anybody I've talked to. Her writings are brilliant. Her book about American Jewish women is really about the American Jewish experience. She simply is someone that we all want to learn to from.

Rich, Rich Harwood, we all know so well as a member of our own community. He understands the American street, American main street. He understands America [00:07:00] better than anybody I've spoken with in my life. So as they're each speaking, the format will be each one of them will speak for eight minutes, eight, eight, eight. Rich will address what's happening in America now and the place for a new voice that speaks to people's concerns.

Riv-Ellen will speak to the Jewish voice and the common good. Then Rabbi Hoffman will speak to the nature of religious contribution and the rules needed for it to be [00:07:30] voiced in the public square. Valerie, of course, will be our wonderful moderator, keeping everything organized. Finally, one last ground rule for you, we've passed out note cards for your questions. Please pass them to the outside aisle where they'll be collected and curated. As you've written them, they'll be collected from the outside aisle only.

Please do not cross in front of the camera. We were scold the last time when we had the camera here, people crossed in front of the camera. It doesn't make the visual [00:08:00] as professional as we want it to be, even though we know that each of you is really beautiful and handsome and deserves to be in full camera mode. Thank you all very, very much for being with us this afternoon.

Valerie: Thank you, Danny. Thank you, everybody, for coming. It's a pleasure for me to be here with this remarkable brain trust behind me. It makes my job as a [00:08:30] moderator very, very easy. I can sit back, listen, come up with a few questions. Hopefully, possibly, start a little bit of a fight, excuse me, I mean, spirited debate. We can then bring you all in because that's the most important part. We really want to hear your voices.

When Rabbi Zemel sent me the subject of this discussion, the Jewish voice and the public square, the questions as in good Jewish tradition and a good journalistic tradition just [00:09:00] jumped off the page. I hope we can hear some discussion of some of these questions during the discussion.

First of all, the Jewish voice. What's the Jewish voice? Is there a Jewish voice? Are there many Jewish voices? Whose are they? What do they say? Is there a threat that runs through them all, the ethics, the morality of Judaism? The public square, what's the public square today? Do we talk [00:09:30] to each other? Do we talk to other people? How do we do that? There's so many different platforms. Is there a public square?

Then there's an unspoken part of this title that's not mentioned, but it's why now. We're having this discussion. As Rabbi Zemel said, eight months after, a historic election that is affecting this country enormously and we're having it now and so the question is, do we ignore the time that we're in? [00:10:00] Do we ruin the podium? I will refer before we get started. I'll just refer to some words from Rabbi Zemel's brilliant Rosh Hashanah sermon. If you haven't heard it, you can read it on the website.

He said, "Dear friends, our souls are on trial. What are we doing? What should we be doing? What do we learn from our past in order to enter the future, to what are we called? Now, before I go any further," and that was him speaking. "Now, before," he goes, "I go any further, I want to [00:10:30] be clear here is what I'm saying from this pulpit this morning is this politics. No, this is not politics. Our current national travail is deeper, more complicated, more elemental and basic, even primal."

So what do these times demand? What is the Jewish voice? What should we be saying? What should we be doing? These are the kinds of things I hope we're going to talk about. With that, I'm going to introduce our panelists and then we'll go as Rabbi Zemel said. We'll go one after another after another. Then they [00:11:00] will all have a conversation and we'll bring in your questions.

You all know Rich Harwood, one of the Temple Micah's most brilliant resident intellectuals. He's president and founder of the Harwood Institution, which is based here in D.C. and it does remarkable work helping communities find innovative ways to prosper and grow. He works in every single state, plus in 40 countries. His impact is enormous.

Riv-Ellen Prell, you may be less familiar with. She's a leading anthropologist to researchers [00:11:30] and writes about community and the impact of gender and class

on Jewish life. Professor emerita of American studies and immediate past director of the Center for Jewish Studies at the University of Minnesota. Her articles and essays concerning American-Jewish culture and history have won multiple awards, including a national Jewish book award.

She currently has curated an exhibition titled, A Campus Divided: Progressives, Anticommunists, Racism and Antisemitism at the University [00:12:00] of Minnesota. This exhibition sparked the president of the university to appoint a committee to reconsider its history.

You all know Rabbi Larry Hoffman, the spiritual grandfather of Temple Micah. His work uniquely informs the debate about Jewish thought and practice and life today and where it should be going. [00:12:30] He has written dozens of books. He's won two national Jewish book awards. A couple of his books are widely used by churches and synagogues as guides to organizational visioning and liturgical renewal. I can tell you that every time I hear him speak, I learn something important from him and I'm really delighted to have him and the others with us today.

So we're going to start with Rich. He's going to come up, then Riv-Ellen Prell and then Larry Hoffman.

Rich: [00:13:00] Good evening. Thanks, Valerie. Thanks, Danny. As I was thinking about this panel on my way back from Alabama recently and then from Ohio, the thing that I hear most from our fellow Americans is this that amid all the confusion and the noise that we hear, there is a deep yearning among us to believe that we can come together and get things done together and that we can renew our can-do spirit.

I believe [00:13:30] that today, more than at any other time, at least in my lifetime, we need a voice that calls us back to this belief. We need a voice that calls us back to a can-do spirit. I happen to believe it is a Jewish voice that we need to call us back as Jews and as Americans and particularly, as American Jews.

Now, why now? There is more noise and confusion in our land and I think we have ever experienced, again, in the last 30 or 40 years, [00:14:00] our norms are up for grabs, our rules are up for grabs. The mechanisms that we have to solve problems have atrophied and dissipated and gone by the wayside. We are left as Americans, I believe, not simply with a political problem, but a psychological problem of so much noise and confusion coming at us that it's hard to process which actually is happening.

As it's happening, we're hearing arguments about how to fix it. If we simply had elected [00:14:30] a different president, our problems would have been solved. If we simply, if we had simply spent more money or spend more money on our next campaigns, our problems would be solved. If we simply got more billionaires to come in to the public square and shape our politics, our problems would be solved. If we simply raise our voices louder, our problems would be solved. If we simply advocated better and join

more causes and supported them with our dollars and our [00:15:00] voices, our problems would be solved.

For the American people that I meet across our country, this noise and confusion is debilitating. It's disorienting. It's weakened our confidence and our capability to come together and solve problems together and to renew our can-do spirit.

Here's the problem. The more noise and confusion we have in our public square today, the more we double down on these misguided solutions, right? The more we think that if we just do more focus group [00:15:30] research and find out what will turn on voters, the better off we'll be. The more we advocate more strongly for our cause, the better off we'll be. The more we raise more money or get more money from billionaires to support our causes, the better we'll be.

Here's the thing. As I've been doing this work for the last 30 years, I think there's something else happening in our society that is more profound, that is deeper, that is more important than the way in which our current debate has been framed and [00:16:00] is leading us down the wrong path. That's this. Every year or every three years over the last 30 years, I've taken a walk across the country and talked to Americans in depth about their lives, their hopes, their dreams, their fears.

In 1990 when I started this, the debate was about politics, the news media and special interests that had taken our politics hostage and people felt pushed out and impudent, right? What happened over the next 30 years as I took a walk every three years is that [00:16:30] message began to change. Slowly but surely, it moved away from people talking about politics to a depliment about our inability to solve problems, to 9/11 when we had a false start about coming together when we sang songs at ballgames, right? This false sense of patriotism to now when you talk to people, they don't even talk about politics.

What they're talking about is that our society has ripped apart, that our social cohesion no longer exist and that they're worried about our lives, [00:17:00] our futures and the ways in which we're going to relate to one another. It seems to me that our central challenge right now is a human challenge, a human challenge, not simply a political challenge, a human challenge. It has certain elements that are really important.

One is that I think our fellow Americans, as I talked to them and worked with them across our country, there's a sensible loss of control over our lives and our ability to shape our common futures. [00:17:30] There are grievances that now fill our public square from all sides. Now, you may think that it's black lives matter or Native Americans talking about the keystone pipeline, but it's all of us. It's Muslims who fear retribution from terrorism. It's middle class folks who fear that they can't send their kids to college any longer. These grievances are coming from all directions and the problem is we're not talking to one another. We're talking pass one another. In our grievances, [00:18:00] we're digging in and seeing each other as the enemy.

Most people no longer feel seen and heard. They feel their concerns have been pushed aside. They've been ignored. They've been discarded. They feel as though they've been lost. They feel as though elites and professionals had taken over our public square and diminished the room for us to have a say and to have our lives shaped in a way that is meaningful and purposeful and that reflects our real aspirations [00:18:30] for the types of communities and lives we want to have.

We've lost faith in our institutions. Here's the thing. These institutions were designed to help us advance our lives. So when we lose faith in these institutions in their ability to shape our lives, we lose faith in our own collective ability to do what we believe needs to happen. The other is now feared, right? The other is now feared.

What I can tell you is when we think [00:19:00] about the other in our society, oftentimes, we think about the refugee, we think about different groups. What I can tell you in Alabama, we in this room are the other. The elites in Washington, D.C. are the other. In other communities, it's the white working class is the other. In other communities, it is the black lives matter folks are the other. In some cases, it's refugees. Everywhere we turn, someone else is classified as the other [00:19:30] and we're not talking to one another.

Lastly, let me just mention that in this human challenge, people feel as though they've lost a sense of dignity. Now, someone said to me the other day, we've lost a sense of respect for one another. My response back to that individual was, "There is a fundamental difference between respect and dignity. Respect is earned overtime and we afford it to someone. Dignity is an intrinsic value of being part of humanity that you are afforded simply because we are [00:20:00] here and we are created in God's image."

So as people talk and as I hear them talk in their communities, what they feel is that their dignity has been abridged, has been denied. When our dignity is denied, we retreat and hunker down. I have one minute left. It's what I'm being told. I thought I was just getting started.

So here's the thing. Why the Jewish [00:20:30] voice? Now, I've got two scholars behind me who are going to make the case from different perspectives. I'm going to make the case from the perspective of someone who walks across the country a lot and talks to folks. We need a Jewish voice because within this human challenge, the Jewish voice speaks to the notion of a human spark, which is part of our faith.

We need the Jewish voice because we believe that we are not whole as individuals until we are part of something larger than ourselves, part of our community. [00:21:00] We need the Jewish voice in our public square because when we save one life in Judaism, we saved the world. We need the Jewish voice in our public square because we are not here to create more divisions between and among us, but we are here to repair breaches that keep us apart from one another.

We need the Jewish voice because if nothing else, Judaism speaks to the notion of dignity of each and every individual regardless [00:21:30] of where they are from, regardless of their wealth, regardless of where they live, regardless of their education level. You have dignity because you are created in God's image. We need voices in our public square that pierce the noise and confusion and help people create a sense of coherence about their lives, to make sense of them, a sense of meaning about what's happening. We need a Jewish voice because we need more than ever before, [00:22:00] at least in my lifetime, we need a sense of possibility that is rooted in the Jewish faith. Thanks.

Riv-Ellen: Well, given the shortness of time, I regret that I can't do what I most would like to do, which is to thank all of you for both creating this wonderful conversation and for [00:22:30] inviting me. If I had more time, I'd like to say a lot about Rabbi Zemel, the community you've created. I knew him when he was just beginning this and each time I've been back, it's extraordinary, but I have no time.

So we find ourselves in a moment that requires great personal courage to address injustices and not to give up in the face of wave after wave of outrage over loss, policies and domestic and international [00:23:00] leadership. I often find courage from others who have acted before me. In that spirit, I remembered a courage stand taken by Abraham Joshua Heschel, not in his iconic role as a civil rights activist most famously and subconsciously pictured walking across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in 1965 on the Selma to Montgomery March with Dr. King and many others to demand voting rights for African-Americans.

Rather, as I [00:23:30] considered the question of a Jewish voice in the public square, I thought of Heschel's stand on America's involvement in Vietnam, one that was hardly popular or praised. Neither his colleagues at the Jewish Theological Seminary nor his orthodox friends supported him. Leaders in the reform movement did, but they did not share his Jewish practices.

Heschel's biographer, Ed Kaplan wrote that Heschel joined the antiwar movement in 1965 as a result of a period [00:24:00] of contemplation in which he came to believe that sacred values could not support the United States attack on North Vietnam in the name of anticommunism. He specifically cited Leviticus 19:16, "You shall not stand idly by the blood of our neighbor," as crucial to his decision.

Heschel was among the founders people not always in full agreement in 1966 of the National Emergency Committee of Clergy concerned about Vietnam, which combined what [00:24:30] they called piety and political action. He did not agree with some of the political approaches of the radical Catholic priest, Daniel Berrigan, nor did he share the same Judaism of Reform Rabbi Balfour Brickner. Presbyterian Minister William Sloane Coffin, his strongest ally, made actually a good faith effort to convert him to believe in Jesus.

They formed an alliance, nevertheless, to address the nation's moral crisis. Rabbi Heschel did not [00:25:00] ask if there was a Jewish voice in a time of political crisis. He asked what his Jewish voice was and set about to create change. He did not question whether others thought that his commitment was authentically Jewish. He did not imagine that his ideas would be embraced by all of his rabbis or colleagues. What his Jewish voice demanded of him was he take a stand in opposition to those in power and [00:25:30] to look upon a dominant culture critically and actively.

Abraham Joshua Heschel should remind us that our future depends on creating relationships with people we might differ from in many ways, but with whom we share some fundamental values. The stakes are too high to miss the reality that seeking a common ground that all Americans or all Jews agree upon is less [00:26:00] important than fighting fights that must be won with our allies.

The sociologist, Arlie Hochschild, undertook an impressive scholarly effort, which I know a number of you have read when she went to Louisiana, the most polluted state and one of the most conservative in the nation in order to understand tea party members, politics and values empathetically to use her word. Other scholars who studied the [00:26:30] tea party members in the north, not the south, discovered identical attitudes. She did her best to imagine what values her friends in Berkeley where she lives and her tea party friends in Louisiana might share with the hope of finding common ground as Americans.

She suggested both groups believe in hard work, concern for family and a commitment to help others. Contrary to her purpose, Hochschild's search for empathy no matter how [00:27:00] admirable convinced me that there is little or no common ground on which alliances for political change could be found. The tea party members' lack of vocabulary of justice largely is the result of disinterest in the common good and in their insistence that freedom and individual opportunity in the free market must be foundational for American life.

Hochschild describes their sense of injury, their [00:27:30] obligation only to those in one's church or family, their conviction that the poor are undeserving and that African-Americans have had every opportunity to succeed. For most of them, there is no injustice for other Americans, only personal failure and governmental overreach.

While Jews may interpret justice differently from one another, there is no question that justice is a central tenet of Judaism. A 2013 [00:28:00] survey of American Jews found that 56% of all Jews and that means from the ultra orthodox to the completely secular in the US believe that, "Social justice and working for equality is essential to my being Jewish."

The number was as high as 65% in some denominations, particularly yours and higher for all women across denominations. How we understand justice will be the crucial

dividing line [00:28:30] in Jewish responses to the public sphere. I would argue that we are better off to focus on voter suppression rather than the common values.

We need to stop being intimidated by pundits who insist that real Americans hate urbanites and cosmopolitans who care about racism and immigration and women's rights and focus instead on allies who share a vision for a just society with an economy that supports work [00:29:00] and housing.

We need to fight, to first let those who are entitled vote and then convince people there is something worth voting for, rather than insisting that these issues cannot move voters. If we argue that justice is a strong religious and cultural foundation for Jews, we cannot claim that a Jewish voice would follow from that.

The simple fact is that Jews have always faced a vision by religion [00:29:30] and politics in the modern world. Jews who have been active in the public sphere, who have called their organizations the Jewish Labor Committee or Jews for Urban Justice or the Republican Jewish Coalition, among hundreds of other such organizations have disagreed sometimes violently with one another.

What they have done was to seek out allies with whom they could build coalitions to gain power for their issues. That remains what Jews concerned for justice [00:30:00] in 2017 must do. American Jews difference from one another grows with every generation. The 2014 national Jewish population study reveals some striking changes in American Jewish life. The number of United States adults who when asked their religious affiliation say they are Jewish has declined by about half since the 1950s and now constitute a little less than 2% of the population.

People who describe themselves as [00:30:30] Jewish with no religion have increased. 30% of Jewish millennials have "no religion". Reform Jews are currently the largest denomination, but that number is very misleading. Orthodoxy with its many internal differences is the smallest denomination, but their population is younger, their families are larger and I'm sorry to say as a Conservative Jew, their children remain Jewish. They're committed far more than the children of other denominations.

Like [00:31:00] all other aspects of American life, Jews, too, have become highly polarized with not much of a middle. The inevitable growth and strength of Orthodox Jews in future decades and the diminishment of Liberal Judaism is a fact of life. Orthodox Jews tend to be more politically conservative. That reality underlines the urgency of asserting a Jewish voice driven by a commitment to justice, to a public [00:31:30] square that acts for the common good. It also intensifies the need to find allies in that struggle, which can be complicated by some parts of the left wing of American politics, which challenges many Jews.

Another Jewish voice I have been thinking of lately is Nachman of Breslov, known as Rebbe Nachman, who died in the early 19th century, the founder of Breslov Hasidic Dynasty. He left to his followers a beautiful [00:32:00] aphorism for facing the challenge

of drawing closer to God. It has found a place in the music and liturgy of many non-Hasidim. He said, "When a person must cross an exceedingly narrow bridge, the general principle and the essential thing is not to frighten yourself at all. We need not frighten ourselves and one another. I believe in saying that there will always be multiple Jewish voices [00:32:30] in the public square and that we should courageously inhabit our own. We need to make the right fight for justice and like King, Heschel and all those people of faith who came together to make that frightening march over the Edmund Pettus Bridge, we cannot be [00:33:00] afraid."

Larry : The question is not whether religion not to have a voice in public debate because it already has one. In my view, rightly so. Religion with no public voice becomes purely [00:33:30] pastoral and forfeits its prophetic mission. The public with no religious voice becomes purely secular and forfeits the wisdom of centuries.

So I've been asked to discuss the rules that should govern religion's voice in public and what exactly religious wisdom is in the first place. As background, I want to consider some Jewish wisdom and what we mean by a public. Jewish law offers three words for [00:34:00] it, rabbim, tzibbur and kehillah or kahal the many contrasts with yachid, individual. In legal matters like a signing ownership to lost property, depending on whether it is lost in one's private domain, yachid or the domain of the many, rabbim. So rabbim is the many, the multitude, the crowd.

A better term is Tzibbur. [00:34:30] That's the national public, which is to say a crowd, but bonded together by a common identity. A tzibbur, a public gathers in a kehillah, an organized community or a kahal, a congregation, to petition God and to consider public needs. It delegates authority to Shaliach Tzibbur a communal agent, who must have the requisite skills, but also interestingly, flawless character and can be replaced [00:35:00] for malfeasance.

Jewish law prohibits interrupting prayers at certain times, except for [inaudible 00:35:09] tzibbur, the needs of the public, which say presidents. So Judaism, you see, distinguishes the crowd from the public, which is to say a crowd, but with an identity, either proactive. We convene to clean our neighborhood or reactive, a hurricane brings us together to rebuild.

Add [00:35:30] now the wisdom of American philosopher, John Dewey, who says that human beings connect purposefully to do business, to share property, fall in love and so on, activities with direct and indirect consequences. You and I play chess. I win and go home happy. You lose and go home angry. Direct consequences only. If however in your anger you kicked your neighbor's dog, we have an indirect consequence. [00:36:00] A public says Dewey is a group of people with common interests derived from indirect consequences, depending on the interest and the consequences. Therefore, there are many publics, neighborhood, cities, countries, communities, ethnic groups and so forth. Crowds obey pre-programmed instincts like fight or flight. Publics have conversations.

[00:36:30] Now, my first question, what rules govern religion's voice? The rule I offer is this. As there are many publics as we saw, so there are many conversations. The religious voice must respect the makeup of the public, where the conversations occur. With this synagogue _____, for example, I could just quote ???[inaudible 00:36:56] and leave it at that. Assuming a larger public, I must [00:37:00] relate my Jewish insight more broadly as I did a moment ago as an example, starting with Talmudic terms for crowd and for public and then citing American philosopher, John Dewey on the very same thing. So see how these two views get individually richer in the presence of one another.

Now, the second question, what exactly is the religious contribution? [00:37:30] It's more complicated than you think. Matthew Arnold, master 19th century poet and critic once defined human culture as a whole as the best that has been said and thought in the world. I love it. Surely, what religions offer most and best is exactly that. Memorable stories, [00:38:00] touching anecdotes, poetic speech, soaring ideas, that's part of the best that has been said and thought in the world.

The quality of mercy is not strained says Shakespeare's Portia, so Shakespeare gets a place in the public square, but so as Ecclesiastes, "To everything, there is a season," and the Talmud, "We're made in the image of God," and the gospel of Matthew, "Let the little children come to me, for the kingdom [00:38:30] of heaven belongs to such as these," and the Quran, "Kind words and compassion are better than charity followed by insult."

Any one of these may or may not be truths, but they're certainly images, artistic instructions that help us think about whatever the truth is and that's what religion offers. Picasso's Guernica, [inaudible 00:38:56] the Gettysburg address, the gospel parables, Talmud and Midrash, [00:39:00] Jane Adams on immigrants, Jane Jacobs on cities, Mother Teresa and Meister Eckhart, [inaudible 00:39:06] and the Buddha, even the New Yorker cartoons and the Washington Post. These are all among the best that has been said and thought, but also shown and heard in the world.

So here's my point. Religion does not offer [00:39:30] truths so much as it offers conversational models for thinking about the truth. We make progress as philosopher, Richard Rorty, not by arguing better, but by speaking differently. So more than the public square needs better arguments, it needs ways of thinking and speaking together differently and religion is one of these ways.

[00:40:00] Religion is an art form, a rolling conversation about everything, actually. Religion, triumphant, speaking absolute truths cuts off conversation, but religion as artistry protects the conversation from getting cut off. Society sorely needs public conversation on the right, the good, the decent and the proper. Think [00:40:30] then of religion, not just as what we believe, but the images in which we say it as the longest running and still ongoing high as human conversation. Religion contributes to the deep and disciplined appreciation of the democracy that we so love.

Valerie: [00:41:00] That was amazing. Thank you all. If you have questions and I hope you do, it would be a good time to pass them now and we're going to talk and then we will start bringing your voice in. Thank you. That was really powerful from all of you. You [00:41:30] can't hear me? Okay. Can you hear me now? Okay. Let's start off first. I'd be interested in not a question of words, but you talked about, Rich talked about the Jewish voice and Riv-Ellen talked about a Jewish voice, many Jewish voices. So I'm wondering if you two feel like you aren't arguing in conflict. Rich, you want to go first?

Rich: [00:42:00] Actually, I don't think that's the point we're in conflict on.

Valerie: Okay. Then what it is?

Rich: I don't believe in a singular voice in anything. I mean, our public square is made up of many voices. We're a pluralistic society and I think too often we get this notion that we're seeking harmony, when in fact, I think what we're really trying to seek is the exchange of ideas as Larry was talking about.

I actually think where there might be some conflict is that Riv, if I understood you correctly was saying, [00:42:30] let's gather up our allies and fight our fight and see if we can win through the exercise of power. My point of view is just to join an argument here.

My point of view is that we face a fundamental choice in our country. We can stay on the path of a status quo, where we try to divvy up the public square and win by the power of our voice, the power of our money, the power of our crowd or we can choose an alternate path [00:43:00] of possibility and hope where we actually have a greater exchange of ideas, where we make a commitment to see and hear one another, where we afford people not simply respect, but dignity, where we work from a point of view of shared responsibility that we can go alone on our own, that we need each other. I think to take that path requires us to engage with a different kind of intentionality, a different mindset and a different set of practices if we want to make progress in the [00:43:30] public square together.

Valerie: Riv-Ellen?

Riv-Ellen: So two points largely speaking as a social scientist, meaning, looking at how the world is and here are the two points I would make. I think it's a tremendous problem to ever say that there is the Jewish anything for multiple decades. Scholars have really referred to Judaism's and American Judaism's [00:44:00] as well. If we can acknowledge that pluralism, that's very important and to understand their significant differences.

So what interests me, of course, I'm very moved by what you spoke about and very taken with it and valued it very much, but what I'm thinking about is the most recent study in Wisconsin. It shows that 4,000 voters were not allowed to exercise their vote. That was much more likely to happen to African-American [00:44:30] voters than white

voters. 4,000 votes would have been the difference between how the state of Wisconsin went. 40,000 voters elected Donald Trump in three states.

Every time I hear and I say this with sincerity, the inspiring things that you're talking about and to read and goodness knows the democratic party certainly deserves to be beaten up at any possibility, but every time I hear that, I think about voter suppression. [00:45:00] So I can be moved and believe as an Americanist, as a scholar and a citizen in many of these ideas. I would do anything I could to foster them. I think first, we really have to talk about voter suppression and the fact of what is happening in the justice department and the fact that we already are looking at changes in voting rights that have been critical to [00:45:30] American citizens and their right to vote.

This isn't about my voice should be louder or if we just had more dollars, we're really talking about the exercise of citizenship in the United States. For me right now, that is the thing that I care about deeply, but secondarily, what I also said is we want people to vote because they believe that there's something to vote for because some of the drop-off in voting that we saw in the 2016 election came from [00:46:00] people who felt that they had been so marginalized by the economy that they had no reason to vote.

So again, we're looking at a crucial thinker in how to imagine the nation, which we need deeply. I say that with tremendous respect for you and I'm just here as a hard-nosed social scientist, even though I don't even do statistics, but as a hard-nosed social scientist saying, let's talk about the right [00:46:30] to vote being in danger in this country before we talk about anything.

Valerie: Well, it's one of the issues that we're dealing with and we do have to deal with the world as it is, not the world that we could have-

Riv-Ellen: We should do both. We should do both.

Valerie: Well, at this particular moment, I think that we need to deal with the world that we have. Before we come back to you, I would like to ask Larry. I'm a little bit of a literalist. [00:47:00] When we talk about a conversation and we talk about voice, there's individual voices, there is a synagogue's voice. What is the role of the synagogue? For example, doing what Riv-Ellen was talking about, taking some social action to exercise the Jewish voice in something that a synagogue thinks is important, where is that? Frankly, I haven't heard much since in the last year from [00:47:30] synagogues on a collective basis about what's going on.

Larry : I didn't expect that question.

Valerie: That's my specialty.

Larry : Yeah. Well, you are a good questioner. All right. First of all, I address the issue, I try to address the issue of what religions have to add to the public conversation. That did not address the issue of what's justice and what we ought to be doing. [00:48:00] One of the

things Judaism, I think all forms of Judaism does say is that what we do matters. We're a religion of doing and the halacha or whatever ethics are and we may differ on any of those, but at least we do things.

So what we say is one thing, what we do is another. We follow our conscience. Congregations or organizations they develop a common conscience and they develop there [00:48:30] for a larger ability to act in the world than with any individual has. Congregations also however, have a variety of voices and develop a conversation among them. That will ultimately lead to what we do. Ideally, however, congregations recognize the diversity within them and even within Judaism, congregations recognize that we have different ways of talking to one another.

All the more so than in the public square. Our group and somebody [00:49:00] else's group, there's so many more conversational voices. So my question is, how are we going to talk to one another? Even as we go about doing what we think our conscience is, the congregation will exercise its conscience and it should and it's a major role in doing it because a group can exercise a greater impact than any given individual. At the same time, it's important I think for a conversation to develop a public ability to speak clearly and to listen.

My question is, what is that ability? What are we saying? [00:49:30] My point simply is that if we are saying truths, then I'm right and you're wrong or you're right and I'm wrong and we can only decide that we'll hunker down and we'll prove each other wrong. That's not a conversation. That's an argument and it gets us nowhere.

If however we think that what we speak is imagery and artistry and different ways of thinking about the truth, then I get to listen to you differently because your picture doesn't look like my picture, but it's a picture. Congregations then do two things. On the one hand, they allow us to act together in ways that any individual can and [00:50:00] have more impact than any individual can. At the same time, they ought to develop our ability, our artistry to speak differently, to listen better and to develop a higher level of offering imagery that impacts others beyond ourselves.

Valerie: Yes, the idea of we talk beyond each other, one person has one truth and one person has [00:50:30] another truth, there are some things that are objectively true and some things aren't and we are being confronted with objective untruths everyday. So Rich, how do you deal with this world, the world of Donald Trump-

Rich: The world I'm dealing is Eastern Kentucky.

Valerie: ... that he's done here, how do you do that?

Rich: Yeah. Let me tell you about Eastern Kentucky because that's the world I'm dealing with, right?

Valerie: Okay.

Rich: The world I'm dealing with is Eastern Kentucky that voted [00:51:00] 70% for Donald Trump that according to all of our preconceived notions and biases, we would have a list of characteristics of the people who might live there. Here's the real world they live in. They have an opioid crisis. They have more people dying from drug overdose than are dying in any other way in our country. It's happening in states throughout our nation.

We have a fundamental choice in the real world, not in ideal world [00:51:30] because I don't have time for ideals because people are dying, kids aren't getting good education, people don't feel safe walking down their streets and the question for folks in Eastern Kentucky is how do we come together and solve this problem in a way that makes sense.

Now, we can have an abstract conversation about that, we can have a conceptual conversation about that, but what I can tell you is when people get in a room and start talking about it and not pointing fingers at one another and not taking positions as Larry is suggesting, [00:52:00] which is a self-righteous position when people believe they are right and everyone else is wrong.

When we can actually frame a discussion about what kind of community do we want to live in and what is it going to take for us to ensure that not another individual dies from an opioid overdose, then I can tell you people actually can come to some common ground about what they want to do. Do they believe and agree on everything? No. Is the religious community helping them come together? No. It's actually dividing them even further for without a question. They're one of the biggest [00:52:30] challenges in that community.

Are they able to come together and define some set of common aspirations and some common pathway forward that enables them to have some deeper sense of possibility about their futures? Absolutely. That's the real world. We can decide whether or not we will get mired in arguing over everything that's happening around us. This is what I believe in the real world or we can choose to begin to solve problems in our local communities, which is where [00:53:00] greater trust exists, greater relationships exist, people can kick the tires on things.

We can rebuild our sense of belief in one another and our sense of can-do spirit and begin to change things, but last thing I will say because I know I'm short on time here, but if we insist on taking on every national issue that is unsolvable and intractable at the moment, we would remain mired in going nowhere. I think we have a choice in our country right [00:53:30] now, do we want to remain mired and going nowhere or do we want to start taking action on issues that actually affect people's lives? I choose the latter.

Valerie: I have one more question. I'm going to ask Larry a question and then we'll go to these, I think. Do you think we live in a world where we can ... In this country right now, can we do what you're talking about or can we do what Rich is talking about? I know we can do

what Riv-Ellen is [00:54:00] talking about. We can focus on a single issue. Can we get people in a room? I know you do it on a local level, but we do face a crisis in Washington, that's not a local level that we can't really ignore. So you're saying we can ignore it.

Rich: No. I'm saying that the way in which we're going to make the most progress in Washington, D.C. is by demonstrating action locally. That role is up into a greater force and a greater [00:54:30] sense of what is possible in this country. I'll just say lastly, if there's a single lesson from American history, it is that when people get together in local communities and start to create change. It always grows up to a larger change in our society. It seldom comes from Washington, D.C. on its own.

Valerie: What do you think we can do what you're talking about?

Larry : I spent a better part of my life fortunately to not of my own virtue, but purely through happenstance, sitting down [00:55:00] and talking to people who believe different things than I do. I may have taught at the University of Notre Dame and I heard people making sentences made no sense to me, whatsoever. I thought that they were just wrong, obviously, and I couldn't believe that they believe what they believe.

I've been in Protestant settings as well. I worked for the Navy for a year and I met mostly evangelicals working for the Navy, for pastors, who said things that just stuns me. Some of them hadn't met Jews. I mean, they couldn't [00:55:30] believe what I had to say. So either I have to say I'm right and they're wrong. In which case, "Goodbye. Nice knowing you," or else I sit down and I say, "What are you talking about? I really want to know deeper." Then they begin telling me their stories.

I mean, they tell me a story about why whatever they said made sense to them. I still may not agree with the way they frame it, but their story moves me. When they use a word or an expression and I say, "That's interesting," and I use one and they say, "Why did you say [00:56:00] that?" at least we're in a conversation.

So I think even as we move forward and do the things that we have to do for justice and so on and I do believe that and even as we insist that there are absolute truths, I'm not a relativist at all. I think things are right or things are wrong. Gravity actually happens, but even as I would insist on that, I also think it is enormously enlightening to ourselves and we go deeper into ourselves, also, if we just [00:56:30] listen to other people and ask them, "Why do you say that? Why do you believe it?"

Now, if we think that what they're saying must be either right or wrong, it's a zero sum game, then it's all over at the start. We have to prove we're right. That's it. If we imagine that we're just sharing stories and different ways of talking, but the one thing that we do share, which is the human condition, then I'm able to listen to them and they can listen to me and we begin making common sentences and we just nod and we can say, "That is really interesting. I'll take that home with me."

[00:57:00] So I think at the same time, we do what we have to do, exercising our prophetic conscience. We also can in fact further conversations across divides and help ourselves and others understand that these different ways of telling stories about the human condition are enormously enriching one to the other.

Valerie: I'm interested, Riv-Ellen, if you feel that there's a tension between what you were talking about, which is that sometimes there's people with whom you have nothing in common [00:57:30] and you need to go and find your allies to exercise your voice and what they're saying about it. Is there a tension on that?

Riv-Ellen: Just a couple of thoughts. So I would like to mention the first amendment for as long as we do have a separation of church and state, I do not want congregations to be the place that we do politics. I think what congregations can do and I think Larry eluded to this in effective ways, I can tell you that in my own community, it [00:58:00] started at the level of leadership is between rabbis and imams.

They study together. In my own community, we are joined on [inaudible 00:58:12] every year by a number of Muslim groups and we join them as many of us do at the end of Ramadan. Some of that was very challenging around Middle Eastern politics, but with the election of Trump, with a very powerful [00:58:30] sense of each of our communities really facing dangers of one or another kind, there's just more and more opportunities for connections with one another and not just among its leadership, but in a lot of different ways, women's groups, other groups.

This really follows I think on what Larry is trying to say, which is how can a religious community address political issues in some sense? It's with that kind of shared [00:59:00] humanity, shared time together, which when one or another of our communities have experienced attacks on mosques or attacks on Jewish schools, we have been in the forefront of responding to one another. It's a really wonderful example of something we would not specifically call political, but of course, it is political. More importantly, it's about building very important connections on which we are not going to always agree.

I think what Rich [00:59:30] is saying, I think Rich and I probably don't really disagree very much, but we are really talking about what can happen at various levels. I think the hardest part of this conversation is that we can't mush all the levels with one another. What happens around a community problem like opioids, which is a tragedy, particularly in the places that were most powerfully supportive of Trump, but about which we all share a lot of compassion and concern and [01:00:00] that other thing.

I love that work. I think it's crucial, but neither am I willing to tell you that I think voter suppression is only a Washington problem. I think it's a problem in every district. So just as we move through this incredibly important conversation, just remember, we're talking about different issues at different levels and I don't want politics done in this building because I am really supportive of the separation of church and state.

By the way, I come from the state of Minnesota, where Michele Bachmann [01:00:30] prayed with a community of evangelicals about whether or not she should announce and she announced in her church and I don't support that. I think this is an issue we should all be very frightened about.

Valerie: So the issue of voter suppression, you don't think that's politics?

Riv-Ellen: Do I think that's politics?

Valerie: Yeah.

Riv-Ellen: I'm trying to say I think that's local. I think it's-

Valerie: Do you think that's political?

Riv-Ellen: ... state. Of course, I think it's political, but I'm not willing not to be [01:01:00] too argumentative, which I am notorious for. I am not willing to say that opioids is an important community level problem and voter suppression is some kind of a national one.

Valerie: Isn't that a political problem, opioids?

Rich: Sorry.

Valerie: Isn't the opioid crisis political?

Rich: Well, it's political in a small pea way in the sense that how we solve problems collectively is a notion of politics. That's what politics really, essentially is about is how we solve problems and create the kinds of lives we want [01:01:30] and that there are some things that we can only do together that we can only achieve together. That's what politics was invented for.

So my argument is this that there are things that are necessary. I agree with Riv on voter suppression. Not a single individual should be turned away from casting their ballot during election.

Valerie: Right. I understand that, but my point is that we like to say we want to keep politics out of all of this, but politics is how this country runs. Politics [01:02:00] is-

Rich: I think there's a difference between what Americans have come to understand as politics, meaning the polarization of political parties.

Valerie: Right, but that's not ... Just because that's the understanding, that doesn't make it true. So the opioid crisis-

Rich: It makes a part of the reality.

Valerie: ... is also a capital P problem. It's not just a small P, right?

Rich: It is, it is, but I think my point on the opioids is this, that right [01:02:30] now, we can't ... It's very difficult. I would love to find a way to solve the polarization problem in congress, but here's what I know. I know we can solve it locally on the opioid crisis notwithstanding-

Valerie: We haven't.

Rich: No, but communities can come together and start to work on this, notwithstanding the real politics that are involved in it. I think that's an opportunity for us to demonstrate that we can come together and get things done.

Valerie: I think sometimes people [01:03:00] use the notion of politics. We can't do that because it's politics as an excuse not to get involved.

Rich: I'm not saying that. I'm not saying that.

Valerie: I know you're not, but I really know you're not. All right. Let's start with your voices. This is for Larry. Where was the rabbinate during the election when Christian clergy were so vocal? What specifically should rabbis and other Jewish leaders be doing now?

Larry : Are you sure that's for me? I mean, you know?

Valerie: Yes, that's for you. I would have given this to you, [01:03:30] anyway, but this person wants you to answer it.

Larry : So tell me again. Where was the rabbinate?

Valerie: Where was the rabbinate during the election when Christian clergy were so vocal? What specifically should rabbis and other Jewish leaders be doing now, presumably about the Trump crisis?

Larry : Well, if I knew that, we wouldn't have to meet here. I think that's complicated and also simple. Complicated because I don't know exactly what rabbis should do or what priests should do or what anybody individually [01:04:00] should do. It's complicated matter. I know that we need to keep our conscience and I think rabbis need to do that and have done that.

I collected any number of great sermons of which Rabbi Zemel is right at the top of the list. I have people who actually spoke out recently and did so profoundly. Those sermons now are circulated widely and I think they're changing people's position. They're having an impact. So I do think rabbis should speak out. As your own rabbi [01:04:30] and other

rabbis said and this goes to politics, there's a difference between addressing an issues, addressing that is to say a moral concern on one hand and actually taking aim verbally and directly and obviously at a political party or at a political person.

Now clearly, if I favor a particular policy or if I say anything about my position, someone is going to say, "Oh, but you're opposed to that particular person." That may be. That's only because however, that particular person [01:05:00] takes a different position than I do on the issue. These are issues moreover of action and they're what I said before. I'm with Riv-Ellen in that. When it comes to action, we have to do what our conscience tells us and the role of rabbis is to help us do that.

Valerie: Do you agree with the premise of the first question that the rabbinate was quiet while the Christian clergy was vocal during the election? I mean, that's the premise of the question.

Larry : I think there's a mistake in the premise. It depends on which [01:05:30] Christian clergy we're talking about and which rabbis we're talking about. There are I don't know how many thousands upon thousands upon thousands of Christian clergy. Those who spoke out on the right have received a lot of publicity. Those who didn't may not have received any publicity at all. There were lots of rabbis who did in fact speak out. You know better than I. I mean, you're the one who is on newspaper's work.

The real question is who gets the publicity and what actually [01:06:00] is our understanding of what people did. I think it became complicated, however, I will say for liberal rabbis. That is because liberal rabbis started with the assumption to some extent that there should not be a religious voice in the public square. That is because since the 1970s, the religious voice in the public square has been the conservative voice.

So our native assumption that there's something wrong with the religious voice actually means we liberals think there's something wrong with the conservative [01:06:30] religious voice because they're winning and we're not. So what we've tried to do is fight a rearguard action and say, "No voices in the public square. Religions, stay out." What I began by saying is that they would have a voice. That's a lost cause. It's bad policy. It's bad politics and I think in fact, not just on tactical grounds, but on grounds of belief. I think religion belongs in the public square.

So I began, I took that whole paragraph on this because I had only eight minutes, I began [01:07:00] by actually assuming there should be a voice in the public square. What I want to do is make the various voices possible. How do we therefore speak with different voices in the public square legitimately? I want to allow liberal clergy, especially, to see themselves with the role in the public square without feeling that somehow they're buying, encouraging just the right. I think the public square has barely been touched by liberals. To that extent, I think the questioner is right. I think we have a long way to go.

Valerie: Okay. [01:07:30] We have a guest.

Rabbi Zemel: This is all choreographed. Okay. I have a question for each one of you. Larry, the question I think is a continuation. What do we do, what do we need to learn to do in order to tell our stories, our religious story in a compelling way in the public square so that it will be heard? I feel like there's something that [01:08:00] we're not doing well in the liberal religious community. What are the forms? what does it look like? What does it feel like when the story is told in a compelling way? Where is it heard? Where does it take place? How does it happen?

Rich, my question for you is we've talked about this a lot. I think we agreed that social change, that's what I'll use, social change drives political change in terms of the way we're using the word politics. I worry that [01:08:30] we don't have that kind of time. How long does it take?

For Riv-Ellen, I agree, voter suppression is everything. I've been trying to get my religious movement to understand that. I've been trying to get through those accents where my daughter works to understand that voter suppression is everything, that we need a nationally organized religious movement that says, "We, the people, [01:09:00] that the way we express human dignity in this country as American citizens is everybody has a right to vote and the platform is such that everybody cares." What would you suggest that we do to create that environment or action is actually taken that's productive, both locally and nationally because I think it is critical, it underscores so much?

Valerie: Thank you for all that. I would add one other thing. I would actually ask you a question. [01:09:30] When you asked Larry, you said to tell our story. What's our story?

Rabbi Zemel: I said stories.

Valerie: Okay. That's different. Okay. Do you remember the question he asked you?

Larry : I remember it. I do remember it. We were joking before about getting to a certain age where you forget things, but I remember that. First of all, I want to not amend, [01:10:00] but emphasize one part of the answer to the last question as I think about what I said. I was working my way to an answer. I think the questioner is more right than wrong. That is because that they got towards the end. Liberals are afraid to speak and I want to encourage, empower liberals to speak.

The way to speak is first of all, by having these one-on-one meetings and these conversation with other people. Now, the question of how we tell our stories, our stories, [01:10:30] right? I will give you an example. When I was at the University of Notre Dame, I found myself sitting around a table with a bunch of theologians, some of them very famous, who are talking about their interpretation of the New Testament and of the church fathers and of Christian experience. I almost didn't understand what they were talking about most of the time and we had that conversation.

At some point, I realized that I've been there for several months and I actually began to clue [01:11:00] in a little bit into what they were saying. It's the conversation in many, many years I never would have thought that I'd be part of. At one point, I said to the theologian on my right, "Aha!" I said, "That is your life in Christ." He said, "Yes." I said to him, "I don't know what I just said."

In other words, I knew how to speak Catholic. I knew what the right response was. What [01:11:30] I had got from him that we're spending a lot of time was I knew he had an image of a life in Christ. Rather than pulling it or deciding that, "Oh, that's silly," or "I don't believe it," or "I don't know. I don't believe in Christ," I can think a lot of answers, I decided he was onto something from his experience. I wanted to know what it was.

I probed him and I asked him. Then the result was he asked me what would be the equivalent in my Jewish experience. I didn't have an answer. No one has asked me before, but because I was in this dialog, [01:12:00] I got a different question I would have had and I began talking about the life of Torah. Then he began saying, "Oh, that's what Torah is, huh?"

Now, out of that, there emerged, first of all, an ability to talk with one another because we had two different images, but the same kind of thing it turned out. Secondly, I was getting my stories right. One of the way you get your story straight is to have conversations with people who don't know it and will ask you what it is. Then you realize most of what you want to say you didn't know [01:12:30] before because no one ever asked you.

When they ask you, then you say, "Gee! I don't know. I got to think about it." Now, I can imagine the scenario where each of us make this up. We are at Temple Micah. I can imagine this scenario or each one, each person here says, "I want to find somebody on different religious community. I want to have a conversation of what do you believe most and think about best." Then I'm going to make a note of the questions they ask me. Then I'm going to get together with another 10 people [01:13:00] and say, "Here are the questions I didn't know the answer to."

I can imagine now a dialog among the 10 people in each of these groups saying, "Oh, that's my story." We don't get our story straight because we don't have a conversation. We don't have conversations because we don't have a conversations anymore and we don't know how to have conversations anymore because we don't know how to speak differently and we're afraid of being embarrassed. We're too much of the adults are saying, "I don't want to talk about things I don't know anything about. I don't know. Don't ask me."

I think we need to have more conversations [01:13:30] on a congressional level with other people from other congregations probing the things that we never get to talk about and then trying to think through, what are the Jewish ways of speaking about

this? The result is an enormous depth through each of us and our ability now to enter the public square in ways we never could.

Valerie: That was great. You just answered a question I was going to ask, somebody had asked. Brilliant. The question was, "How [01:14:00] can we as American Jews reach out to those who reject us as a leader, our positions on immigration and race without abandoning our responsibility to stand up for the oppressed?" You spoke about how to go about having this conversation. Riv-Ellen, you want to answer Danny's question?

Riv-Ellen: So I didn't come here to talk about voter suppression and just off the top of my head in this Washington, D.C. congregation, I bet there are five people who [01:14:30] would have a better answer to question than I would. Frankly, it's a political answer about what organizations you support, where you put yourself at polling places, how you go about doing that. I think that's a more organizational question.

Similarly, I'm not in the leadership of any religious movement, where I think there are ways to have this conversation, but time is brief and [01:15:00] this is not what I ... As I said, I'd love to talk to anybody afterwards in your community who might have something to say. So I'm going to pass on to Rich's question, which is a profound question that he has to answer.

Rich: You're welcome to answer.

Riv-Ellen: Well, it's a very powerful question about time.

Rich: Yeah. So a couple of things.

Valerie: Your mic is off.

Rich: That's the mic in everyone's benefit.

Valerie: No.

Rich: [01:15:30] Can you hear me now? Great. I'd rather not stand, but, yeah. Great. Thanks. I think there are a couple of different ways to think about this. One is the way I think about where we are right now as a nation, we are at an impasse. We're loggerheads. The question is how do you move through an impasse, right? So I think one of the ways in which you move through an impasse at a national level [01:16:00] is that we commit ourselves to supporting people who are speaking sense, that we believe are speaking sense, that we believe have some public spirit in what they're saying.

In many cases, we may not agree with ideologically or even from their positions, but we believe that they have integrity and that they're trying to make the public square work. I think more than anything right now, we need to invest in making the public square work. On a national level, what I would say is how do we support [01:16:30] those individual leaders, those organizations, those groups that are seeking to make public

square work. At the same time to Riv-Ellen's points, which I agree with, there are times when you have to go into action and mobilize and argue your point.

To me, that's necessary, but not sufficient. The sufficient part is that we need to mobilize around people we believe are of goodwill and good intention. That's number one. Number two in a larger scheme, if you look at the scope of history and how communities and societies change. [01:17:00] The ways in which we move out of impasse is we create alternative forces for the public good. So I want to connect this to Larry's point.

In those places where I've seen this work like in Alabama where I was, where everyone was locked into their position on education, you had conservatives for charter schools, you had liberals, you had all sorts of groups. When I was able to change the conversation to what kind of community you're really trying to create and what do you believe children deserve in your communities, they could move up those positions and begin to [01:17:30] articulate a different sense of how to move forward as a community or a state.

Now, that's not a singular public voice, but it is a public voice that becomes an alternate force to politics as usual to go back to Valerie's point, to politics as usual because we need forces against that, but that's not enough. I think in addition to that because you're asking how do we accelerate social change, one of the things that I think we need to pay more attention to and this also goes to stories is [01:18:00] that there are a lot of actions happening in local communities that are invisible to us. They're only visible to those who are working on them. I can go take you to Mississippi, to small towns in Mississippi where people are coming together who are strange bedfellows across political spectrums, who are ensuring that kids zero to five get off to a healthy start, right?

None of us would ever imagine that, but it's happening, but we never talk about it. We don't make it visible. So I think one of the things that we need to do in our society [01:18:30] is we need to make more visible those things that are invisible to us that hold value to us and when we make them visible, we then need to begin to understand how to talk about them in a form that creates an alternate narrative that runs counter to the dominant narrative that tells us we ought not to believe in ourselves. We ought not to come together to try to find common ground. We ought not to take shared responsibility for our communities. We ought not to have a can-do spirit in our country because I believe when we start to make these things visible [01:19:00] and talk about them in a more intentional way, we can begin to take a different path and accelerate the social changes that you're talking about.

Valerie: Thank you. I'm going to crunch a couple of these. This place that you talked about that we're in, where people feel they have no dignity, they feel they've been left aside, it doesn't just happen starting in November. It's been going on. You've been walking for 30 years, you said, right? I think there's [01:19:30] actually a great book written by a New

York Times columnist. I think it's called The Unwinding of America. It's talked about the last 30, 40 years, this unwinding.

Yet, you talk about these people coming together in Mississippi, but we don't talk about them. Yet, people are coming together in these places yet. So here, somebody is asking, "What have these folks been able to agree on to solve the opioid crisis?" You were talking about folks coming together in Eastern Kentucky.

Rich: That is just starting. I think what they're-

Valerie: Okay, but-

Rich: [01:20:00] What I can tell you is in Mobile, Alabama, where they didn't pass a school levy for 40 years, where the chamber of commerce started a million dollar public relations campaign tried to convince people to support the schools, which they wouldn't, where everyone said that blacks and whites in that county would never agree with one another and that rich and poor would never agree with one another and that urban, rural and suburban would always disagree about education that when they came together and had a different conversation, not [01:20:30] about their entrenched positions, not about their religious positions, not about some self-righteous point of view about who's right and who's wrong, but about what they wanted to create. What happened there?

They went from the lowest performing schools to the top performing schools in Alabama, right? They started STEM education. They got teachers who would not go to rural areas in Mobile county and incentivize them differently and now, they've got a much better distribution of teachers across that county.

So [01:21:00] it can be done. The Unwinding of America, it's no question that it has happened. It has gotten worse over the last 30, 40 years. My point is that it has moved from a purely political topic to a more profound cultural issue about our human condition. That's troubling. It also provides us an enormous opportunity because the human condition is easier to talk about and work on than politics as usual [01:21:30] when we entrench ourselves and dig into our positions.

Valerie: So in the last 30, 40 years, have we heard a Jewish voice in the public square? Has there been one?

Rich: A what?

Valerie: A Jewish voice? Larry?

Larry : Yeah, I think there've been a lot of Jewish voices. I mean, the most obvious one is the Religious Action Center, the RAC, where they do nothing but try to develop a Jewish voice. Remember I said there are different publics and that's really important. [01:22:00] Look, I could have simply addressed the obvious things about all the great things

Judaism has to say and then you'd all go home and you'd say, "Yeah, we sure need you to start talking in the public square because Judaism got things to say." I could have done that, for sure, but I'm trying to do something a little more profound, a little deeper.

I'm trying to say, first of all, there are many different publics. The voice you offer differs depending upon the public. So on the one hand, you ask me, "Are there rabbis [01:22:30] whose diverse question," which is an excellent one and now we come back to it. Are there rabbis, are there Jewish voices in the public square? Sure. The RAC, for example, is in public square. It's all they do constantly. I mean, I know some of the things that Danny's been doing and other rabbis here and other cities, I could point to that.

What I'm saying is that we don't have a profound enough understanding of the public square to recognize. Guess what? We're all in it. We're all in the public square. I mean, they may not know your voice and put it in the newspaper and it's not as if you've got your own community that you can call [01:23:00] together and so on. You don't have that position, but every day of the week, you know somebody you can talk to.

It happens locally as Rich says. So each of us has a voice. We also may think that we don't have a voice that knows anything about Judaism. Who am I to talk about it? I grant you. A lot of us don't know enough. You know what? You can simply tell your story. You can find out the way I said before, what are people saying, what do they think most profoundly about. The key is not to feel on the defensive.

[01:23:30] So I meet somebody who says to me, Well, quite frankly, I think you're not saved unless you believe in Jesus Christ." So I could say that's the end of the conversation or I could say, "That's really interesting. What do you mean by that? What do you mean by saved and tell me why you believe in Christ. That's fascinating to me."

The other person is now interested and I'm interested. The thing next you know there's a conversation and it turns out we differ on the picture we used. Guess what? We all want to be saved. Maybe we don't use that word. We all want to [01:24:00] have a better life. We all hope there's something in the beyond. We all want to matter more than we ever thought we could. I mean, think of different ways of putting it. Those are different ways of speaking.

So I'm trying to say each of us can have a voice as who we are. I don't want to just talk about the particular people out there because it's not about out there. It's really about in here.

Riv-Ellen: Could I add something to what Larry said why I think this is especially important? There are a remarkable number of people who would like to speak for Jews and [01:24:30] who would like to tell us what an appropriate Jewish response is to a variety of issues, largely international ones. They rarely actually represent the attitudes of most Jews.

They rarely speak for anyone but a kind of institutional group or something like that. I think that's also something really to keep in mind.

This is true even among evangelicals. For example, there's a profound environmental [01:25:00] evangelical movement that is largely of younger evangelicals. So we just need to know that whenever someone claims or a group claims to speak for everyone, I mean, that is driven by all sorts of things. I think where I began is exactly what Larry just said, which is you need to find your own Jewish voice. You need to speak from it. Obviously, there are institutional [01:25:30] Jewish voices. The RAC is very interesting, but again, don't forget the first amendment. The RAC can't endorse and shouldn't endorse because we need really to keep religion out of the public square in so far as religion means the endorsement of particular political candidates.

I think voter suppression is a really important issue. Guess what other issue I think is really, [01:26:00] really important. That is what is being done in the Trump administration to, for example, forbid abortion protected by the constitution of immigrants in detention today. Don't lose sight of really what a dangerous moment we're living in in that way too.

Danny invited me here as the optimist. So I just really want to take my place at the table. Sorry.

Valerie: [01:26:30] I'm looking to all these questions and I think a number of people don't know how to start the conversations with other people you're talking about. So maybe it's up to the synagogues to create these conversations within them. How do you speak to them? How do you reach out to other? Maybe that's the way to do it because a lot of people are saying, "How do we talk? How do we actually ... What do we say? Where do you begin?" You all are very privileged people. You get around. You get to talk to whoever you want, but other people can't just say, [01:27:00] "Oh, I want to talk to an evangelical tomorrow." Where are you going to find one? Oh, Danny can, but you guys can.

So Riv-Ellen, here's a question. How should we think about the Jewish voice in the time of rising anti-Semitism? Is the Jewish voice any different in this time? Is it more defensive? Is it explanatory? What is ...?

Riv-Ellen: So I actually think that's a really profound question. [01:27:30] I told you this wonderful examples in my own community of the twin cities of Minnesota, where Muslim leaders and Jews, Jewish leaders and Muslim lay people and Jewish lay people have found things to talk about in terms of the anti-Semitism and Islamophobia of the moment that we're in. What I do think is that we have every reason [01:28:00] to be very much on guard against anti-Semitism to understand that many people claim not to be anti-Semitic who are, particularly on the outright in other dimensions.

It's a complicated issue because of the conjunction of international politics and local politics, but anyone who speaks in the language of Nazism, [01:28:30] Neo-Nazism is it's

called or the language of the outright or frankly, the language of racism. Those are things that I think we need to be engaged in, vigilant in and to not be afraid. So that's a short answer to a really large issue.

Valerie: Either of you want to jump on that?

Larry : Well, I do want to say something and that is that in matters like anti-Semitism, you just need allies. [01:29:00] We could, but we'd be foolish to fight it alone as if, "Oh, my God! The whole world is against us." The whole world isn't against us. In fact, most of Americans aren't anti-Semitic. In fact, most Americans hate anti-Semitism, but if we are not able to tell our stories and share stories with others, then we're not going to build allies and all the canards about Jews then will go unanswered.

The way to answer them, by the way, is not necessarily only public [01:29:30] although I think we have to do that too, but I think we need to be working at the local level and the local public square. Tell our stories and build allies so that people who differ us on all sorts of things understand what we talk about when we mean anti-Semitism and say, "You're right about that. That now is not just your problem. That becomes my problem."

You know what? I got problems in my schools or my opioid crisis or whatever and we say, "You know what? I didn't understand the depth of that. That's not my problem too. Let's share each other's problem because both of us [01:30:00] have common enemies. There are people who actually don't belong in the public square because there are people who want to destroy the public square. There are people who just hate mongers and that's what America stands for and that's not how you have any conversation at all, but they are actually the common enemy of nine-tenths or 99/100ths of Americans. We need to have those conversation if only to get the boundary straight and to build coalitions on the local level as well.

Valerie: Do you find anti-semitism when you're going to Mississippi and Tennessee? If you'll say it.

Rich: [01:30:30] Do I find anti-semitism when I go to Mississippi and Tennessee?

Valerie: Does it impede your work?

Rich: Look, I don't find. I find racism, antisemitism, all sorts of challenges across our country. I think what I would say is that I wouldn't ascribe it to a certain region of our country and believe that it only exists there. It exists among us [01:31:00] wherever there are people. I think to the two points that were made, look, this is one of the things I was saying in terms of there are many, many groups in our society who are aggrieved, who believe that they have sold a raw deal, who believe they have been sold a narrative that the economy has improved while their lives have gotten worse, who believe that they fear, if you're a Muslim, that you fear because of terrorism [01:31:30] internationally that someone's going to harm you locally, right?

To Larry's point, Riv-Ellen's point, these aggrieved groups actually share more in common. There are things that divide them. There is no question about it. We can't be naïve about this or Pollyannaish about it. There are things that bring us together across these groups that if we're willing to change the conversation, if we're willing to listen differently, if we are willing most fundamentally to ask a different [01:32:00] question, then I think we would find common cause with more people in our country and not feel so pushed into a corner without any options for creating a sense of possibility for ourselves and others. I think that's the real work that America needs to do right now.

Valerie: Thank you. We are at the point in our program where we're going to start to wrap up. So we're going to have each of them two minutes say whatever it is you wish you had said before. [01:32:30] Here's your chance. Here's your last chance to say what you want. Riv-Ellen, you want to start? Oh, we're starting the other way. I'm sorry. Larry?

Riv-Ellen: Yes, we're going to start with Larry.

Valerie: Yes.

Larry : Well, I'll start with a story. That's appropriate for everything I said. When I was Alabama, you mentioned Alabama, some years ago, long time ago, I was quite young and quite immature and quite naïve about everything. [01:33:00] I went down to give a talk in Alabama. Lo and behold, it was to a series of mostly Protestant, mostly African-American clergy. We had first a little bit of food, first of all. Then one man, an elderly man it seemed to me, probably younger than I am now, but, oh, well, came up and said to me, so I won't do the draw.

I'm not good at it and I don't want to come off as if I'm making fun or something, but he said to me, he said, "You're from [01:33:30] the East, huh?" I said, "Yes." "From New York, huh?" "Yes," I said. Nodded and he said, "I'll give you some advice." "Yes?" I said. He said, "This is what you got to remember when you talk to us, us." He says, "Here's your lesson. We talk dumb, but we ain't." Bingo. I learnt something [01:34:00] that day.

I realized I was never going to treat anybody else as if they were a moron, they're not worth talking to, they got nothing to teach me or they'll never understand, what do they know. The fact of the matter is I find that most people have ... They may not have book knowledge. I mean, I'm not talking about other preachers. People may not have book knowledge, but they've got knowledge. There are a lot of people who have knowledge. Everybody [01:34:30] does because they have a life. You can't go through life without having knowledge.

I tell my students, all of my students have to write what I call a autobiographical theology. I tell them they think they don't know what they don't know ... They think ... Hey, they know what Martin Buber said. They know Mordecai Kaplan said. They know what Heschel said. They know theology. They know it. They know other people's theology. I say, "The one thing you're an expert in is your own life, [01:35:00] but you

never talk about your own life in a serious way because you're afraid to take yourself seriously. So talk about your own life. What do you know for sure? What for sure do you doubt? What do you think matters most?"

Now, imagine that you are a theologian. Put that into some talk about God. You never talked about God before. I know. Try it. You'll like it. In fact, people stutter and they stumble and eventually, they come up with a different kind of story about their life. You see? It's [01:35:30] all about what register do you want to use, what vocabulary you want to use. Outcomes now the stuff about well, I guess God is or for me, I don't believe in God, but I think about this and you can make up the rest of it.

It's fascinating. So I think everybody's got that story in them and yet, no one encourages them to say it because we're afraid to have deep conversations because we're afraid we'll be wrong, we're afraid we'll be proven stupid. We remember when we were kids, then we had to do [01:36:00] it. The teacher made us. Now, we're adults and we read all the great newspapers and we read and now we know better than to put ourselves in a situation where we might have to say, "Gulp! I really don't know." There's nothing as profound, nothing more profound than taking your life seriously.

I happen to believe that religion is about taking your life seriously. In so doing, taking the life of the universe seriously and the life of everybody else seriously and there's nothing like having a serious conversation about stuff you don't really know about [01:36:30] in that language, but you know about it because it's your own life. That's my first thing.

The second thing is I want to give you a model. The worse model is to assume that religions tell truths and therefore, if I'm right, they're wrong. I don't think Christ is the son of God. Therefore, the people who think he is are idiots. I can't imagine how anybody can leave that. You name it. They think I'm an idiot. What's the matter with me? You choose and accept it, all right? That's [01:37:00] the way of hatred and that's the way of warfare.

If we treat it differently, as artistry of the finest order and we imagine that the great challenge of life is to make a brilliant art piece of who we are and to keep that art piece going and touching it up and you look at it and say, "That's who I am." Now, imagine each community. Here's my model. It's not a model of religious groups that hate each other and think that they've got the guys all wrong, not worth talking to. It's a model of a museum [01:37:30] or an art gallery, better. Each religious group has its own room. They spend their time in the room decorating and redecorating. You've done that in your house.

Now, it turns out they don't all agree in the decoration either. So the orthodox are in that wall and the reform got that wall and they are two, there's differences, but what makes us all Jews is we're all working with Torah and some of the same imagery and so on. So we separate walls, but we got our room. Every once in awhile, [01:38:00] we go into the hall and we meet somebody from the Muslim community or the Christian community or whatever and we say, "I'd love to see your room." We look at their room

and say, "Why did you do that? That's gorgeous. I don't get this. What's that image?" They tell us their story. We walk back out into the hall and we say, "That was lovely. I wonder if I have anything like that," or "Maybe I learned something from them. Maybe I got something similar. [01:38:30] What can I do in my room?"

Look, to be human is to live the human condition, to be part of a congregation of any sort, to get together because you want to learn what that tradition is and make the most of it and go deeply yourself into it someday before you die and you want to leave something for the people you love behind. We're all doing that together. If you can imagine ourselves occupying a Jewish room and realizing how much we have to gain by going into the hall and talking to someone else and [01:39:00] coming back and getting our story straight. We will live much deeper lives. We'll avoid the antagonisms that have gone into the human race for these how many thousands of years and we will be able to build at least stories that can be told together even though we may differ on issues. We will build stories together about the human condition, which we all share and that I think is the function of the public square.

Valerie: That is why Larry Hoffman is [01:39:30] a revolutionary Jewish thinker.

Riv-Ellen: So I want to thank both of my colleagues for very powerful reminders of this centrality of dignity in all that we do and the possibility at local levels around shared struggles that the connections that have seemed impossible in this moment are really possible. I feel very enriched [01:40:00] as an individual by these conversations.

I want to leave with what became so important to me as I thought through much of what I've been reading and reflecting on lately and that is the centrality of justice. I say that because we are living in a moment really developed since the late '70s in which the extraordinary gains of the '60s and early '70s [01:40:30] and late '50s are being dismantled every hour of every day before our eyes.

Donald Trump unleashed the possibility of two crucial things, the possibility of speaking a language of hatred, long suppressed that people now feel able to speak through, which is very powerful and he has unleashed a complete lack of confidence in truth, [01:41:00] in fact and in science that has put all of us at tremendous risk.

So the impact on people of color, the impact on immigrants, the impact on women's right and the rights of many others is really, really to my mind the most important thing that we have to address. As those problematic cosmopolitan overeducated people that we are, we have [01:41:30] every responsibility, every day of our lives to ask the question of justice and to ask the question of a common good that is built on science, empiricism and fact that we cannot decrease from struggling with. That's what I'd like to leave you with.

Valerie: Thank you.

Rich: Going last was a really bad idea.

Valerie: [01:42:00] You're not going last. Danny is going last, so you can relax.

Rich: Well, being the penultimate one is a really bad idea. So I started with one idea, but as I've listened to my two colleagues, here's what I've ended up. I want to pick up on this notion of risk because I think Riv-Allen was really eloquent in talking about the risk that has evolved since the 1970s. As you were saying, Valerie, the unwinding of America. [01:42:30] Look, I think there are two conditions in our country that we get to choose how we're going to deal with.

One is our sense of alienation, our sense of frustration, the sense of a loss of dignity among and between too many of us, a sense that we've lost our voice in the public square, a sense that we've lost the capability to come to any sense of common ground as narrow as it might be at any particular moment. That's condition number one.

I think we get to make a choice [01:43:00] about how we deal with that. We can hunker down, we can retreat, we can hide from it or we can decided to make ourselves visible, step forward and engage with it. I think we need to choose obviously the latter.

The second condition is this, that many of the challenges that we face in our society today require collective responses. We can't do it on our own. Whether it's the education work that you report on daily or the opioid crisis or the discrimination, antisemitism and anti-refugee, [01:43:30] sentiments that are in a lot of communities, all of these challenges require a shared responsibility.

So when you put those two things together, we have actually an opportunity to say we will take a different path for how we'll work together and we will come together to take shared responsibility to address our collective challenges. That's number one.

Number two, I always think it's important to remind ourselves of our history. I believe we're a unique [01:44:00] country. We kicked out a hostile landlord called King George. We decided that we wanted to create, we're in the creation business in America, much like faiths are in the creation business. We're in the creation business in America and we decided to create a different kind of country that was rooted in ideals, not monarchies, not cast systems, not how much wealth you had, but in ideals where people were deemed to be equal. We know darn [01:44:30] well that we have lots of stains, ugly stains on our history.

I think it's always important to remind ourselves in the ark of history that we have consistently dealt with those ugly stains and overcome them, not as fast as we wanted to, not in the ways that we often should have, but we have worked at it and we have kept going. To me, the promise of America is something that we need to keep reminding ourselves of.

So at this time, what some of us might think of is peril, [01:45:00] which I agree with. There are lots of challenges and I think they're coming not simply from the right. I

believe they're often coming from the left as well, I do. At this time of peril, we would do ourselves well to remind ourselves of our history, to remind ourselves of the promise of this country, to remind ourselves that in this unique time, we get to choose whether or not we will succumb to the politics as usual that we disdain or whether or not we'll choose a different path [01:45:30] and we get to choose whether or not we will take a shared responsibility to solving our collective problems or whether or not we will choose to go at it alone on our own. Those are choices we get to make that no one gets to choose for us. I think that's what we need to start concentrating more on.

Valerie: When you talked about our story, actually, I thought you were going to talk about the Jewish story.

Rich: I was. If I could just say one quick amendment to [01:46:00] Riv-Ellen's point. So I agree there is no singular Jewish story. My hope would be that our faith, our leaders of our faith, those of us in our faith, all of us would use our faith not to tell each other what we ought to think, but to call each other forward to say that we are part of what needs to happen. We are co-creators of this world we live in. We get to choose that and Judaism or the [01:46:30] Jewish faith can instruct us to make ourselves visible, to engage with one another, to account for what we say and do and to be part of the solution as supposed to retreating from the public square because when we retreat, we forfeit the opportunity to shape our common destiny.

Valerie: I think it's worth noting that Jewish thought has informed the creation and the ability. That's where I thought you were going to [01:47:00] go there. I would like to have Rabbi Zemel close this out with his thoughts, his wisdom, his jokes.

Rabbi Zemel: Thank you all so much. My wisdom is that we're getting close to 7:00. So first-

Valerie: No one left.

Rabbi Zemel: What's that? You're right.

Valerie: No one left.

Rabbi Zemel: No one has left. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. I am deeply appreciative of ... [01:47:30] I'm left with many, many, many thoughts. I think about the internal Jewish public square and our ability to have our increasingly challenging ability to have constructive conversations amongst ourselves as American Jews. That's an area we did not touch on. Riv-Ellen got close to it in terms of Jewish institutional [01:48:00] and organizational life and sometimes the gap between the Jewish public. It's an area for many of us of increasing concern.

I think we do want to learn to tell our stories and find ways to tell our stories in compelling and deeper ways and relearn what our story is in a way that synthesizes the new American story with the new Jewish story for the 21st century.

As [01:48:30] I think a lot about the stories that our grandchildren's grandchildren will tell about our lives and the way we conduct ourselves as supposed to the stories that we grew up on-- the immigrant experience and how what we're doing now will inform the future of Jewish life and American life.

I'm also left with an enormous question that I think I'll talk about with Riv-Ellen afterwards. How predictive is social science in [01:49:00] terms of the ability to predict? I'm thinking about that a lot in terms of birthrates and orthodox Judaism and the future of American Jewish life, but we should be thinking about and how does social science account for the unpredictable and the unexpected because life happens not always the way, usually not the way we predict.

Mostly, thank you all of you so much for coming and sharing your wisdom with us. I've looked forward to this for so, so, so long. [01:49:30] Two more words or three more words. I want to thank the Temple Micah Innovation Fund, everybody that contributes to the Innovation Fund, for making this possible. The Innovation Fund's next offering will be this coming May as we celebrate 70 years of Israel's independence, where we're offering a Sunday afternoon conversation on the future of Israel and the American Jewish mind.

We have two great people that we've invited. I've got a great moderator lined up, so watch for details. I'm not going to tell you who that is now. [01:50:00] Also, we will be continuing this particular conversation about the public square in December when Rabbi David Saperstein comes here on Sunday morning, December 3rd. His topic is after I've spoken to him, the effective Jewish voice in the public square. Okay. So thank you all for being with us this afternoon.