


Ruth W. Messinger is President and Executive Director of American Jewish World Service, an international development and emergency relief organization. Prior to assuming this role in 1998, Ms. Messinger was Manhattan Borough President for eight years.

law against those who trample them.

And we live in a time when too many speak of these rights and seek to enjoy them as entitlements, but do not sufficiently recognize the responsibility to create and protect them. This is where Jews have a particular role to play.

Observing mitzvot, that is, acting on our obligations and responsibilities, means remembering the Exodus from Egypt, respecting the “other,” and treating the stranger as we expect to be treated — with dignity and rights. It means expanding the fields of justice and peace by actively engaging with the poor and the most vulnerable in our American society and in the world. It means interpreting Jewish tradition in the framework of an interconnected world where famine, war, disease, and

poverty anywhere on the globe affect us all. It means acting out of our Jewish value framework to set an example for others, acting on our responsibilities, and so enhancing the possibility that others will enjoy their rights. And it means urging America and Americans to assume responsibility to work for these rights for more people, rather than assume that they will simply happen eventually.

Jews exercising responsibility to help heal the world understand that the maxim, “It is not your responsibility to finish the work (of perfecting the world), but neither are you free to desist from it” (*Pirket Avot*: 2:16), can make a difference in the world for those many people who are also made in God’s image and who deserve greater justice. 

Jewish Values in the American Public Square

Nathan J. Diament

THIS PAST SUMMER, the Democratic Party announced the appointment of a Christian minister as its first Director of Religious Outreach. This announcement comes as no surprise to those who follow the role of religion in America’s public life.

We are in the midst of a presidential campaign where scores of articles and symposia have discussed the “religion gap” — the fact that polling from the 2000 election indicated that the best predictor of whether a (non-African American) voter would vote Republican or Democrat was the frequency of their attendance at church services. The campaign has also witnessed a number of initiatives by Democrats and their allies to prove to devoutly religious Americans that the more liberal party is not the “secular” party, but one that possesses moral values that inform its policy choices. Yet, while President George W. Bush is clearly at ease speaking of faith and its impact upon his life and policy choices, John Kerry continues to struggle to find a comfortable way of communicating that while he is a man of faith, that is, a Catholic, he supports policy choices at odds with that very faith tradition.

In the 1960s campaign, the first Catholic presidential nominee, also from Massachusetts, had to assert that his faith was a private matter that would not have a direct impact upon his decision-making as president. In 2000, vice-presidential nominee Joseph Lieberman was clearly chosen for this

role and explicitly campaigned as a man of faith whose religiously-inspired values reassured many American voters of many different faiths. (Ironically, it was from liberal precincts of the Jewish community where protests were heard regarding Lieberman’s “faith talk.”) Now, in 2004, the debate America seems to be having is over the very question of whether it is appropriate, desirable, or even possible for a person of faith to compartmentalize that belief system when s/he takes a role of public responsibility.

Despite our status as a minority religion in this nation, American Jews should be the last ones to believe that the privatization of religion and its values is desirable, let alone possible. Judaism teaches us that we have a responsibility to try to shape our society for the better and gives us moral guidance as to what goals we should seek to achieve. Thus the welcome news for American Jews in 2004 is that we live in a society that, for the most part, appreciates the role faith plays in the lives of people and welcomes faith-informed advocacy in the public square.


In recent years, I have been privileged as a professional advocate for the Jewish community in the public square to effectuate or witness the actual impact Jewishly-informed advocacy can have in the American public square, especially with regard to issues that directly implicate Jewish values and/or interests. In just the past few years: a new federal

Nathan J. Diament is Director of the Orthodox Union’s Institute for Public Affairs.

law protecting houses of worship from discriminatory treatment by local zoning boards was enacted; an effort to ban cutting-edge biotech research — even in the private sector — was blocked; a new regulation removing the discriminatory exclusion of religious facilities from federal disaster aid in the wake of natural disasters was implemented; and new legislation to encourage employers to accommodate the religious needs of their employees was advanced in Congress. In each of these policy initiatives, and more, the Jewish community and its advocates played a decisive role.

The Talmud (*Shabbat 54b*) teaches: “Any person who is able to rebuke the members of

his household and fails to, is accountable for [the misdeeds] of the members of his household; [if he is able to rebuke] the citizens of his city, he is accountable for the [misdeeds of the] members of his city; [if he is able to rebuke] the entire world, he is accountable for the [misdeeds of the] entire world.”

In contemporary America, the Jewish community has the blessing and the burden of being empowered and invited to do much more than “rebuke” wrongdoing in our society. Through active citizenship, we can help construct a society that is more just, more compassionate, and more closely aligned with the divine will. 

Jewish Values and Democratic Ideals – an Evening Round Table

Sh'ma and the 92nd Street Y are sponsoring a Round Table Discussion with Brad Hirschfield, Thane Rosenbaum, Pella Schafer, Nathan Diament, and Ruth Messinger.

Moderated by *Sh'ma* Publisher Yosef I. Abramowitz



Monday, November 8, 2004, 8:15 P.M.
92nd Street Y, 1395 Lexington Avenue, New York
For more information call 212-415-5500

Privileged Seating for *Sh'ma* 613 Contributors. Contact Stew Bromberg for information on the *Sh'ma* 613 Celebration Campaign, SBromberg@JFLmedia.com.

Upcoming from *Sh'ma*

New Visions: Creating
New Paradigms for
Jewish Life

New Jewish Rituals
Muslim-Jewish Dialogue

A New Diasporism for an
Age-Old Relationship

An Inside Look at
Conservative Judaism

Art and Culture as a
Gateway to Judaism

The Refugee Question
Jewish Teens

Discussion Guide

Bringing together myriad voices and experiences in a sacred conversation provides Sh'ma readers with an opportunity in a few very full pages to explore a topic of Jewish interest from a variety of perspectives. To facilitate a fuller discussion of the ideas, we offer the following questions:

1. How does a robust democracy and the freedoms of America impact Jewish cultural and religious life today?
2. What constitutes an authentic, religiously-grounded Jewish public philosophy? Is that merited and desirable?
3. How does a communal agenda get built? How is it built on Jewish values?