

Food, Religion, and Politics: A Conversation on Contemporary Issues in the U.S.

A Panel Discussion Moderated by Rachel Gross including:

Karen Adelman
Dr. Jennifer R. Ayres
Jason Fowler
Rabbi Dr. Shmuly Yanklowitz
Dr. Benjamin E. Zeller

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Marie Griffith

Food, Religion, and Politics: A Conversation on Contemporary Issues in the U.S. For those of you who are new to the Danforth Center, we're a pretty unique enterprise – the only group of faculty, fellows, and students, who are devoted to both foster rigorous scholarship and to educate both the University campus community, and the broader public about the complicated intersections of religion and politics in U.S. history. And I think most of you do know us, but if you don't, please ask us what we do. There's information on the table just outside this main auditorium for you, and we encourage you to take that. Before I turn things over to the organizer of today's event, Rachel Gross, I do want to announce the Danforth Center's final event of this academic year will take place on May 9. That is a graduate student conference on religion and sexual revolutions, featuring a public keynote address by University of Delaware historian Rebecca Davis. That keynote lecture is at 5:30 p.m. in Umrath Lounge. For those who are interested in attending the graduate student panels during the day, it will be sort of a pretty small, focused gathering, but is open, and I've been advised by the organizer, our dissertation fellow, Emily Johnson, that registration is required by April 15, which is a week from today. So, do register if you would like to come to those panels. If you only want to come to the 5:30 keynote lecture, you can just show up. We always appreciate RSVPs because it helps us plan, but you can always come.

So now, I just want to offer my warmest appreciation to the organizer and moderator of today's event, Rachel Gross, who shares with Emily the title of dissertation fellow at the Danforth Center this academic year. As part of this fellowship program, we offer our dissertation fellows a chance to put on an event that will be of interest to the University and the broader community, and here for us today, we're very pleased that Rachel chose to take on such a timely and contentious subject as food, religion, and politics. And she's assembled a wonderful panel as you see here. And she'll introduce the panelists in a moment. Rachel is completing her Ph.D. in religion at Princeton University, where she has always distinguished herself with a number of grants and fellowships. She has also taken numerous opportunities for professional presentations, conference presentations, and other activities, as well as some publications, such as her article "Who Counts as a Jew?" which appeared in our own *Religion & Politics* journal last October. This summer she will defend her dissertation, which is entitled "Objects of Affection: The Material

Religion of American Jewish Nostalgia.” And I’m also delighted to announce that she recently accepted a teaching position at Virginia Tech, where she will start in August. It’s been a tremendous pleasure having both Rachel and Emily with us this year, and we’re going to miss them greatly upon their impending departure. As she comes now to take over the proceedings, please join me in thanking Rachel for bringing us together today for what promises to be an excellent panel. Thank you.

Rachel Gross

Thank you to Dr. Marie Griffith for that wonderful introduction, and for her masterful guidance of the Center. Some more thanks are in order, especially as ritualized gratitude is appropriate at an event about religion and food. An enormous thank you to the impressive staff at the Center who did so much to make this event happen: Dr. Rachel Lindsey, the superb associate director of the Center; Debra Kennard, the Center’s incredible communications specialist; and Sheri Peña, the administrative assistant extraordinaire. Thank you also to all of the faculty and postdocs at the Center who have made it such an enjoyable and productive place to work and to teach this year. Thank you to our director Marie Griffith, Darren Dochuk, Mark Jordan, Laurie Maffly-Kipp, Leigh Schmidt, Lerone Martin, and Anne Blankenship. A special thank you to my fellow dissertation fellow, Emily Johnson, who probably deserves credit as an unofficial co-organizer, or co-author on everything I’ve organized or produced this year. Thank you to all the students in my course on American Jewish food, religion, and politics, who have helped me think through these issues, and think through the questions that I will be asking our panelists tonight, and who, not coincidentally, are required to be here, but still thank you for your presence. I’m learning so much from all of you. Last, but not least, thank you to all of the panelists for traveling from near and far to be here and participate in tonight’s conversation. And thank you to everybody for being here tonight. The panelists and I look forward to your questions at the end of the panel.

A brief word about the structure of tonight’s proceedings. I will say a few words introducing this event, and then we will hear short presentations from each of the panelists about his or her work. We will then have about 30 minutes of moderated roundtable conversation, moderated by me, and then will have about 30 minutes to hear from all of you, the questions from all of you are an important part of tonight’s proceedings.

As historian Felipe Fernández-Armeseto writes, “Food may claim to be considered the world’s most important topic. It’s what matters to most people most of the time, and it’s probably what most of us are thinking about at any given moment.” And food is trending right now. Food justice, issues of food insecurity, and reevaluations of industrial food system are gaining more and more attention from devoted activists and gaining attention of the popular press. Americans and others around the world are evaluating the politics of food, the sources of power that underwrite the production, regulation, distribution, and consumption of food. At the same time, every religious tradition that I’m aware of has traditions relating to food, relating food to the concepts of the sacred, through regulating consumption and rituals involving special activities and special foods. Today, we will have a conversation bringing together these two strands: contemporary food issues, and

religious traditions. At this moment, religious food activists and entrepreneurs are gaining traction, and scholars of religion have begun belatedly to turn serious attention to food ways, the study of how people eat and how they think about and use food. This roundtable brings together individuals doing important work on food, religion, and politics in distinct fields, who otherwise might not have the chance to come together in conversation. While Christians, Jews, and scholars of religious studies are engaged in their own conversations about these issues, they are rarely brought together to share their parallel work. We will discuss how they and the people they study are bringing religious approaches and traditions to bear on the pressing issues of our day – such as sustainability and labor concerns. This panel is of course not representative of all American religious traditions, nor will we cover all issues related to food and politics in our conversation. Rather, the goal is to begin a productive, interfaith, and interdisciplinary conversation that will continue in many different venues beyond our time together tonight.

And now, a brief introduction to all our panelists at once, in the interest of time, in order in which they will present their own work:

Karen Adelman is a co-owner of Saul's Deli in Berkeley California, with her partner, Peter Levitt. Adelman and Levitt work to make Saul's, in their words, "an authentic, vibrant, and relevant Jewish delicatessen." They serve dishes drawn from throughout Jewish history, and work to minimize the impact of the industrial food system. Adelman and Levitt serve local and organic produce, artisanal products, and humane and sustainable meat and fish. Karen began working tables at Saul's after her publishing office was crushed in the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake. Eventually Karen came to manage Saul's, and called Peter out of teaching to help her purchase and run Saul's Restaurant and Delicatessen. They have organized and participated in a number of events with their Jewish deli colleagues, including the referendum on the Jewish deli venue, with their regular patron, Michael Pollan, in 2010, and Deli Summit, the Renaissance, in 2011.

Jason Fowler is the co-founder along with his wife Pamela, of the Sustainable Traditions Project, and their local food initiative, Land and Table in Litchford, Virginia. Sustainable Traditions is a beautiful online magazine providing a conversation on whole-life Christian faith, intentional communal living, and sustaining the environment, among other topics. Through Land and Table, their grassroots community development initiative, the Fowlers are cultivating a network of farmers, food producers, food artisans, eaters, gardeners, and homesteaders, in the Litchford regional area, working to change the way the region eats. They live on a scenic farm near the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, along with their seven children, one born very recently, congratulations, working towards missional Christian community, new agrarian living, and holistic embodiment of the teachings of Jesus.

Rabbi Dr. Shmuly Yanklowitz is the founder and president of Uri L'Tzedek, Awaken To Justice, an Orthodox social justice organization guided by the Torah values, and dedicated to combatting suffering and oppression, including working towards ethical Kashrut, the practice of keeping kosher. In 2009, Uri L'Tzedek launched the Tav haYosher, an ethical seal certifying that kosher restaurants meet the standards of fair pay, fair work time, and a safe work environment for their

employees. Rabbi Shmuly is also the founder and CEO of The Shamayin V' Aretz, Heaven and Earth, Institute, a spiritual community of Jewish vegans working to promote veganism within the Jewish community and to address issues of animal welfare, environmental, and health veganism. Rabbi Shmuly is the author of *Jewish Ethics and Social Justice: A Guide for the 21st Century*, an epistemic development in Talmud Study, and the forthcoming, *The Soul of Jewish Social Justice*. He completed his doctorate at Columbia University in moral development and epistemology. Yanklowitz was ordained as a Rabbi, by Yeshivat Choavaevei Torah, the YC Torah Rabbinical School. In 2012 and 2013, Newsweek ranked Rabbi SHmuly one of the top 50 Rabbis in America.

Dr. Jennifer Ayres is an assistant professor of religious education and the Director of Religious Education programming at the Candler School of Theology at Emory University. Ayres is the author of *Waiting for a Glacier to Move: Practicing Social Witness* and *Good Food: Grounded Practical Theology* based on her ethnographic study of the food practices of diverse religious communities, and her examinations of issues of faith formation through religious practices of food justice. Ayres also researches faith formation in the context of popular culture, pedagogical theory and practice, feminist practical theology, social activism and religious moral formation, and ecotheology and the global food system. She has also written for *Feasting on the Word* commentary series and the *Being Reformed* adult study series. She received her Ph.D. from Emory University Graduate Division of Religion in Person, Community, and Religious Life.

Finally, last but not least, Dr. Benjamin Zeller is an assistant professor of religion at Wake Forest College in the Chicago metro area. He researches new and alternative religious currents including new religious engagement in science, and the quasi-religious relationship people have with food, focusing particularly on vegetarians and local growers. He is the author of *Prophets and Protons: New Religious Movements and Science in Late Twentieth Century America*. He is the co-editor of *Religion, Food, and Eating in North America* for which I had the distinct pleasure of working with Ben as a contributor to the volume, and he also co-edited *The Bloomsbury Companion to New Religious Movements*. He is co-general editor of *Nova Religio*, the journal of alternative and emergent religions. Zeller received his Ph.D. of religious studies at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. He is a fan of fermented foods, and always has sauerkraut growing near his house. He is also a home cheesemaker, and he would like us to know that he is rather fond of gouda.

And now, I'll turn it over to Karen Adelman. Thank you.

Karen Adelman

Hello, my name is Karen Adelman and I'm from Saul's Restaurant in Berkeley California. Rachel asked me to come and talk about my experience with the restaurant and how running a Jewish deli intersects with some of the big political, ecological, and moral questions of the day. And it's true, it does. The iconic deli is a deeply nostalgic venture, serving comfort foods of the Jews reflecting first, the dishes of the American Jews of Eastern European descent, and then secondly, it's filtering these great delis of New York City specifically. It started as Kosher, as home-away-from-home, and different foods were separate. Over time, as American

Jews assimilated, they came to be morphed into one, at that point, secular warehousing for these foods. And it also lended itself to American cuisine in general.

Behind me, these are pictures of mostly delis. Anyway, at these delis, there were very big menus, because it was sort of like all the traditions came together under one roof. Giant menus serving the same thing every day of the year. Giant sandwiches, too. The New York experience was a very specific struggle moment, and after the World Wars, all the Eastern European Jews came. When they got to New York, their prosperity increased and also, their reliance on mass production in the food system. At one point, there were 1500 or more delis in New York City. Now, that's not the case. I'm not sure if you guys have heard about David Sax, wrote a book called *Save the Deli*, and while it was a hyperbole, there really aren't that many delis left, and it's partly because of the way we eat now, which is different, and it's also partly that it didn't pass forward to the next generation.

At Saul's, we are not a kosher deli. I'm the representative of the secular tradition, and the deli is in what's by some people called the gourmet ghetto, which I wince at that, because it's really one of many places that have an important history. And it's a tourist destination. But important things actually did happen there, and one of them is that that Alex Waters had the restaurant shaped [*inaudible*], but very important, she promoted local and organic foods, long before those were terms most people thought about or used, and she supported these while the rest of the country joined the conversation. And by the time they did, she had been doing it ten, fifteen, twenty years already. Also, there was an early wave of artisanal small producers, creating a kind of alternative to the industrial food system. At Saul's, our journey, we're kind of loosely using the term 'sustainable' here, and certainly for us, it's been a moving target. I'm not sure what the official definition is, but the idea is something with long-term, something healthier. For us, it started with organic, which led to local, which led to clean (sort of the best choice possible), and we're calling that sustainable. And you've never arrived, and there have been regressions, but once you start down that path, you can't really leave it as far as I'm concerned.

So, one of the first things we did was look at menu size. Deli was always a giant menu, and we all of it, and we realized that a large menu doesn't usually produce very good outcomes, and economically, it's not very easy to organize, it's not good. It was a Jewish deli, and there were these dishes, and they have to go everywhere, and it doesn't matter what season it is, even though it might have been in a Polish winter, it doesn't really make that much sense in a New York summer. And it certainly doesn't make any sense in the California spring. And, so it's not that we didn't serve that, we would just serve it in its time. But that was sort of a new thing that a deli menu would be a seasonal menu. So, we started going through the menu one item at a time and trying to address those issues.

Early on, we also had to address the New York question. It used to be believed that a Jewish deli was a New York deli, even if you weren't in New York, which literally meant you would take your ingredients, shrink-wrap them or freeze them, and ship them, truck them, fly them, to California, and that was how you were an authentic New York deli. And we started that way as well, but I think there was a little tag on our restaurant: "A New York Deli in Berkeley," and then that changed

into “A Deli on the Upper North Side,” and we had pictures all over the restaurant of New York delis, and one by one, as we moved along through the years, we started dismantling this idea. Because really, just on the face of it, it doesn’t make any sense at all. And, it has a terrible carbon footprint. You’re flying all your food, that’s not even good by the time it gets there. People would brag, “Oh, bagels from New York!” That’s ludicrous, bagels are only good for a certain number of time, but that was how it went for all the delis. And it begs the question of what deli food is: is it New York food? Is it [*unintelligible*] food? Is it Jewish food? We sort of have generally thought the beloved foods are the Eastern European dishes, and we have also added some dishes from other places, because it matches more how people want to eat now. One of the first things we did was get a good rye bread that’s organic, but rye bread here is meant to be corn rye – it’s very light, it’s mostly wheat, just a little bit of rye – but the actual, original rye culture is in Eastern Europe and it had a lot of rye and no wheat, or very little wheat, and it was dark and chewy. We designed a bread with Acme Bakery, which is a local baker with organic flour, and it had a crust that’s a little darker than the traditional at that point, the lay rye. And people rejected! So we were going back to not just New York, but where it came from before then, and that was a radical idea.

We also did organic meat, organic ketchup, organic honey, organic milk (organic milk is really expensive), and then that moved into this idea of local. So we were trying most things local. Oh, the other really radical thing we did was we took Dr. Brown’s Cream Soda off the menu, and we started making our own sodas, and our own cream soda, because these were bottles that we trucked in from New York, and the label had tons of additives, and they were barely made out of anything you could recognize anymore, and we thought surely, nostalgia is not going to keep us from good sense. And we had a special machine made for us, because Coke and Pepsi own all the equipment for soda making, and you have to get their syrups, and then you get soda water, and so we had these old machinists, these beer makers, kind of like a SWAT team get together and make us a soda machine. And this was a long time ago. Now you hear a lot about people have seltzer in their restaurants, but we were trailblazing. And people still freak out about the Dr. Brown’s, because that’s how you know you’re in a deli.

Okay so, we did what we could, and then we came up with this idea that we would make choices that were clean, which means the best possible choice. Sometimes, you can really push it, and sometimes it’s not feasible, and there aren’t options, so we would always go for the clean. We would variously be asked what you call them, well you call them eco-kosher, which wasn’t something then, but now it is, which I’m really really happy about. So we got rid of all of our cans and bottles, and then we had to bring some back, because when people are going home, they can’t really use our stainless-steel container, they just want a bottle.

Oh my god, it’s ten minutes. Okay, I have a lot more to say, let me just jump ahead to the ending [laughs]. I can really rattle on sometimes. Okay, we went on a lot of different things. Most of our customers just want a bagel or a pastrami sandwich, and they’re surprised to find themselves engaged in thorny issues about the food system, and we’re pushing up against, Are people really comparing the real costs of food? And, in some cases, I’m not sure that they are. What does a deli look

like post-the Food-pocalypse? What are the sustainable dishes? Most of our clientele has gone along with some greening without complaint, but people still need to gather together. Food is a comfort, and a powerful way of passing culture. The future of the deli might look a lot more like the past. There will always be a place for Jewish cultural food eatery, but I don't know that it will look like New York City in that time period, or that it should.

Rachel Gross

And next we'll hear from Jason Fowler.

Jason Fowler

Greetings from the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. So, my wife and I started Sustainable Traditions, it was born out of a personal crisis, a crisis of vocation. We moved from the northern Virginia area down towards the more rural part of Virginia, and began asking questions about job stuff. I was job searching, so we were asking questions about – What should I do with my life? Should I just be earning a paycheck? We were looking for a church, so we started asking questions – what should the church look like? How does my work integrate with my work life, church life, family life. For most of us, those things kind of float in spheres that don't always connect. Living in the hectic environment of northern Virginia, we were just wondering and feeling that God was calling us to integrate all the pieces of our life. Sustainable Traditions really is a conversation on: what does it mean to holistically follow Jesus and embody his kingdom in the world? Instead of having to compartmentalize faith, or a dualistic faith, where you say these things are sacred and these things are secular. What does it look like to make the Lord the Lord of every aspect of our life?

One of my favorite writers is Wendell Berry, maybe you've heard of him, he's a little famous agrarian writer who's said a few things. He said this, instead of relaying to you my whole journey, I think it's one that really sums it up: he says, "The dominant religious view for a long time has been that the body is a kind of script issued by the great company store in the sky, which can be cashed in to redeem the soul, but is otherwise worthless. And the predictable result has been a human creature able to appreciate or tolerate only the spiritual or mental part of creation, and full of semi-conscious hatred of the physical or natural part, which is ready and willing to destroy for salvation, for profit, for victory, or for fun. This madness constitutes the norm of modern humanity and of modern Christianity. But to despise the body, or mistreat it for the sake of the soul, is not just to burn one's house for the insurance, nor is it just self-hatred of the most deep and dangerous sort, it is yet another blasphemy. It is to make nothing, and worse than nothing, of the great something in which we live and move and have our being." I've sort of gone through a series – you know, Jesus talks about, you have to be converted, and become like a child, and I feel like Scripture talks about being sanctified, and we're going through, for me, it's almost like a series of conversions. For me, reading Wendell Berry was one of those conversion points. Moving onto a farm, and learning how to milk a cow, were all things that were really radical for me, and came to have meaning as my theology shifted, in understanding that the end of the gospel

is not going to a disembodied heaven, but heaven coming to Earth. And the idea of resurrection and new creation. So we all live backwards from the future, so what your view of the future is is going to affect how you live out your faith or your beliefs, and so ideas have consequences.

One of the consequences of my theology shifting and an understanding that the end is new creation (Scripture talks about new creation) and the restoration of all things, all of the sudden my body matters. All of the sudden creation matters. All of the sudden food matters. Agriculture matters. And also, within the community that I live, we have friends who are farmers, who are sustainable farmers, and we began meeting on a monthly basis and talking about what we could do to grow the local food movement, and what we wanted local leaders to do to help to grow the local food movement. So, what can we do, and what do we want the leaders to do for us? We've been meeting for two to three years, and have really sought to cultivate relationships. When it boils down to it, everything is about relationships, even if you're talking about the economy, the local economy, reviving your community. You know, rural communities are kind of torn apart in many ways by how the economy has gone, how industry has gone, and as a follower of Jesus, my wife and I have felt compelled to – well, what scripture says, "Seeking the Shalom of the community that we're in, seeking the wholeness". So, where you see brokenness, identify the brokenness, and say: What is God calling me to do to heal this brokenness? And for us, it was the local food movement, helping to cultivate that. It's a little difficult because we're in a conventional farming community, and so on one side, you have local leaders who are asking: How can we lift regulations so that we can have more confined animal feeding operations in the County? And then you have us on the other side, saying, "So, how can we have a future and not destroy ourselves? How can we, my farming friends (we live on a farm, but it's more of a homestead farm), how can my friends who are farmers who are making a living full time, how can they stay in business?" So, we're asking a lot of questions about, you know, how can we reconcile with the traditional farmers, and fight with them in a healthy way, I guess, oppose in a healthy way? But also, to grow something that's so fragile for us, the local food movement is really in a seminal state, and even among us, we're asking questions like what is sustainable agriculture, like you're asking. The triple-bottom-line: ecologically, economically, and socially – how can we be viable, how can we proliferate, how can we renew ourselves continually, instead of destroying ourselves for the money, or for what we feel is a necessity.

So, I'm doing this as a Christian because I feel motivated to love my community, but our project is called Land and Table, and it's not faith based, but it's us engaging the community and building relationships, and we feel like you know, I can't just preach the gospel, I have to embody it, and Jesus said, "Love God and love your neighbor." So, we're trying to do that in a small way. I hope in ten years maybe I can come back and say, you know, it's been a success, but I think it's always a struggle to build relationships and to seek the health of the community.

Rachel Gross

Thank you, Jason. We'll hear from Rabbi Dr. Shmuly Yanklowitz next.

Rabbi Dr. Shmuly Yanklowitz

Thank you, it's really a great honor to be here. Thank you, Rachel for the invitation to learn from these great panelists, and to learn from all of you. I also notice there's two amazing Jewish clergy people in the room. It's significant that they're here – this is the most crazy week on the Jewish calendar, leading into Passover, with no free time. People clean their houses like crazy to get ready for Spring. The second best thing to marrying my wife, aside from her, is our in-laws – we go to their house for Passover and don't have to clean our house. Really an important thing. So, it's a big sacrifice that they're here this week. And it's great to be here with you all for this very rich topic, which I spend a lot of my waking and sleeping hours thinking about, around food and politics and religion.

So, as Rachel mentioned, we founded an orthodox social justice organization in 2007. Now, there's many Jewish social justice organizations, in fact a Jewish social justice roundtable has thirty of those organizations, but this is the first and only orthodox one – the most traditional segment of the Jewish community, which is engaged in this work. And it seemed clear to us on a biblical level that the dozen of times that the Torah reminds us to care for the stranger, to care for the vulnerable, that the work of being religious is going out to the vulnerable, to the oppressed, and to the alienated, and to be in solidarity with them. And so, we started to build this movement in 2007. Actually, since we're leading into Passover – you know, so the Israelites were coming out of Egypt – you know, the whole story of Passover is where this message is learned: you were slaves in Egypt, and so you should protect the vulnerable in your time. But what happens, is the Israelites come out of Egypt, and they come out of the sea, the split sea, and they see the Egyptians drowning, and they finally realize they're free. They finally realize they're going to be liberated. And what do they want to do? They want to sing. But the Rabbis say, they don't know how to sing, they've been slaves for centuries, they don't know how to sing. So they look up in the sky, and they see birds chirping. And from those birds chirping, they once again learn how to sing. And I'm thinking about this, what I'm teaching this week, because it's about how do those who are oppressed regain their voices. How do we find the invisible people in society, who are not seen, are not heard and give a voice to them, give them sight to their story? And how do we teach them once again, to sing, and then learn from their song as well?

And so we started to build this organization, and only a year later was the largest immigration raid in U.S. history. In Postville Iowa, a community called Rubashkins, or AgriProcessors, was raided, and about 400 workers, 396, were arrested by the ICD Department of Homeland Security, and at the time, it was the largest, I believe it is now the second largest immigration raid since then. What emerged from that story was significant abuses that were happening in this plant: around denial of wages, paying below minimum wage, denial of breaks, overtime, this and that. My colleague and I went to Postville, Iowa, and met with these individuals who were wearing anklets that the government had put on them, like they were animals. And we launched an international boycott against this company, and within about a week or so, 2,000 Rabbis and Jewish leaders signed on to support. And this was kind of unheard of, a group of orthodox Rabbis and leaders saying, "Hey, we care enough about Kosher food, and Kosher values, and Torah

values, that we're actually going to take a public stand against a Kosher facility." Now, this is not just any facility! They're the ones producing 60% of the Kosher beef in the country, 40% of the Kosher chicken. This was the Kosher industry of America. And we said, "We believe in the values of Kashrut."

I'll tell you a story. I was on a panel at Yeshiva University some years ago, and one of the panelists who spoke after me said, "This is all nice, but let me give you an analogy. Nobody cares if the poet stinks. When they read poetry, what they want is quality poetry. Nobody cares about the hygiene of the poet. And it's true here. The Kosher consumers, they don't care about the ethics, they just want to keep a good tasting meat." And my work, and our work since then, has been to try to prove this individual wrong – to say that actually, those that are part of the Kosher industry care deeply about the values of the worker, of the animal, of the environment, of the trade agreements, and the like. And I've been leading on the spot since then.

Now, just going back to that case for a moment, the boycott became so strong that the family had to meet with us, which we did, and we basically said, "Listen, if you make your plan transparent in terms of meeting basic law, we'll call off the boycott." And they did, and we called off the boycott. So you know, of course, the so-called right wing critiqued us for doing the boycott, the so-called left wing critiqued us for ending the boycott. You can't win when you do activism, often times. But that was what happened. We said, "Listen, this is not a sustainable response. We can't just launch a boycott and [*unintelligible*] this problem in the news. It's very difficult to verify what's happening, getting inside, and understanding." And so we said we have to create something more sustainable. And so we launched something called the Tav haYosher, which is an ethical seal for Kosher establishments, certifying that they're not only Kosher, but Yosher. Yosher, in Hebrew, it sort of means just. We say we care just as much for us as religious Jews about the ritual standards as the ethical standards. We want to know the workers are treated properly. How do we establish the ethical transparency? Now we started to succeed, so the Department of Labor called us, and they said, "How can we learn from you? How can we build a model like this?" This was the Department of Labor, and you want to learn from our little dinky, \$300,000 budget organization? And they said, "Listen, we don't know how to do this. We don't have the funding to regulate restaurants." They didn't have the funding to go out. So, of course, they can do immigration raids when they want, but actually regulating labor, what people are really making... It's really nice when minimum wage goes up, for people who want that, it's really nice for them. I happen to be someone who wants that. But when it goes up, a lot of times it's not even regulated, especially for undocumented workers who are living in tremendous fear. So, we launched this ethical seal, it's now in about 90 to 100 establishments across the country, and we did that because we have a power base, we believe in Kashrut, meaning the Kosher establishment is a vehicle for social justice. It is a vehicle for creating change. And so, we have a very strong power base of Kosher consumers who will only want to support establishments who make these types of commitments. And so that was 2008 with the raid – May 12, 2008. May 12, 2009, we launched this Tav haYosher. It was modeled off a similar project called the Tav Chevrati in Israel, which has 400 certifications on Kosher

restaurants in Israel. Primarily, we're dealing with Latino-American workers in the States, primarily within the [*unintelligible*] Corps in Israel, those who are in the back rooms cleaning and the like, who oftentimes don't receive their basic rights.

Now, part of what this was motivated by was that the very first – you know, I don't use the word sin. I happen to view it as a Christian word, and I love a lot of Christian words, but I like to use Jewish words as a Rabbi, and so I don't really use the word sin – but the first wrong in the Torah, what is it? I mean, everyone knows it. It's the eating of a fruit, right? Now, what happens when they eat this fruit is they eat it from the knowledge of good and evil. So with the first act of food consumption comes the birth of morality. This is pretty radical if you think about it – that morality in the Biblical tradition is born out of food consumption. It is in that first food choice that they become aware of good and evil. That's really powerful to me. And so that inspires the saying that what's happening in the world today, I think is all these values are intersecting how the food industry is run, and so when I make a blessing on food, which I make before I eat or drink anything, I ask myself a question (on a good day, on a good moment). I ask myself, not only, "What is this food? What blessing do I make?" That's a whole complicated thing, but, "How are the workers treated in producing this food? How were the animals treated? What was the environmental impact? How was fair trade a factor?" There's all these different questions I begin to think about. "What about the health factor? What's going into my body?" And so all these questions start to emerge, and that becomes a part of my spiritual practice. Now this is not just political for me. Rabbi Joshua Heschel once said, "We affirm the separation of church and state, of religion and state, but we reject the separation of religion from the human condition," which is saying that I believe deeply that these issues which many call politics of the human condition, that religion is about that tribute, it's not ghettoized into that sanctuary, but it's about how we live, how we live ethically and spiritually.

Just one last idea on that is Rabbi Yisroel Salanter is the founder of something called the Musar movement, which is the Jewish ethical and spiritual movement. And one of his most famous quotes is that, "The physical needs of another are my spiritual needs." And so I believe that the spiritual practice of Kashrut is ultimately about addressing certain ethics in society, and I have very deep faith in that institution, that it can be a light, and I'm going to forfeit my time on Earth.

Rachel Gross

Thank you Rabbi Shmuly. And now Dr. Jennifer Ayres.

Dr. Jennifer Ayres

Thank you, Rachel, so much. What a pleasure, I'm just really enjoying myself. Food matters. It matters in fact, so much, that it's often a memorable character in some of our favorite films. Films like *Soul Food*, or *Babbette's Feast*, or *Julie and Julia*. Food nourishes, bonds, soothes, inspires, celebrates, heals, and connects. If a film were to be made of your life, what is one food or recipe that would be featured prominently in that film? For me, it's a tomato sandwich. In the summers of a Southern childhood, whole meals are made of fresh vegetables from plants in the backyard or in the roadside produce stand. Suppers taken out on the back porch

might boast a steaming cob of silver queen corn, some cucumbers sprinkled with vinegar, a slice of Vidalia onion, and the ubiquitous, tomato sandwich: big slices of misshapen, ruby-hued tomatoes rest upon white bread, dressed only with Duke's mayonnaise (I don't know what's in that), and gracious amounts of black pepper. Mawming up the tomato juice dribbling down their chins, family members share laughter and tall tales, reveling into the late evening.

Such meals fortify the affected bonds between sisters and brothers, between parents and children. They were a ritual of sorts, and remind me that food that shows us not only something about our social relationships, but also our relationship to a good God, who provides these gifts for us. In many ways, then, the table is a site for divine encounter. And yet, before we wax too theological, we are caught, because the tomato sandwich is not a simple and accessible meal for so many in the United States. Indeed, the main ingredient, the simple tomato, presents a moral dilemma in our food system. Struggling farmers have difficulty making a living growing produce and migrant workers are paid very little and suffer difficult and sometimes abusive working conditions in the fields. In many neighborhoods in the U.S., even sorry excuses for tomatoes may not even be available, or are priced so high, that it costs more to buy that single tomato, then to buy a fast food hamburger. And I haven't even touched on the other crises in our food system of abused animals, stripped soil, abandoned communities too. These all challenge simple, theological affirmations of divine encounter in the food system. So when we talk about food, we encounter both the God who creates and provides, as well as a brokenness, an alienation in our system. For many of our religious traditions, the site of this confrontation is a table around which we orient ourselves on a regular basis. The fact that, for example, the earliest Christian communities experienced conflict around the communion meal, suggests that for them, as for us, the table is the core of theological and moral knowing.

Embedded in this expanded table theology are at least three core affirmations that orient the Christian faith. First, when Christians refer to this communion meal as the Eucharist, we acknowledge its literal meaning, that is, "Thanksgiving." We express our thanksgiving for God's gifts, and we also promise to distribute them justly. The principle of just distribution means that we cannot ignore serious issues of food insecurity and poor urban and rural communities, nor can we ignore unjust wages and working conditions for agricultural laborers. Second, Christians are reminded at the Eucharistic table that the meals that Jesus shared with his friends also served to proclaim and enact the nearness of the kingdom of God. In other words, signifying an alternative future in which God restores relationships among persons, communities, and the Earth, in which death does not have the last word. In light of the challenges we face, this is a significant challenge. What prevents any of us from giving up, throwing up our hands in despair? But today I want to think more intentionally about this third theological affirmation: that the Eucharist is, at its core, about belonging and membership. Christians approaching the Eucharist table might, in other meals, experience a great distance between their eating and the lives of farmers and laborers, agriculture, and even other people eating. Eating is something we often do alone, maybe out of a take out container, and one could hardly identify the origins of that meal, or the

conditions under which it was prepared. But Paul reminded the Corinthians, for example, that in this Eucharist meal, we are bound to one another. His admonition to discern the body immediately follows his descriptions of the church as the body of Christ. But when we think about food as a commodity, something that we buy, then our responsibility really goes no further than paying a price for that commodity. Christians around the communion table, however, are not mere consumers. Indeed, we are together members of a community. Paul says, members of Christ's body. We're members of a global Communion, and indeed, members of creation. In an alienating world, the dismembers, all participants in the food system, we are remembered at the Eucharist table. So, this is the theological imagination I argue in my book is cultivated at the Eucharistic table. We learn these three things: that God is the giver of all good gifts; that our responsibility in the face of this giving is to express our gratitude and to commit ourselves to the equitable distribution of these gifts; and that in this meal we are offered a glimpse of the Kingdom of God and God's alternative future of abundance and vitality, and that we belong, we are members of Christ's body, the Church, and God's body, the Earth.

So where does this theological imagination lead us? This table theology gives us rise to four moral commitments, and I'll just address these as I close. First, we're convicted of the priority of the hungry. An abundance feast convicts religious communities wherever whole communities around them are described as food deserts, with little or no access to fresh, healthy, affordable food. And rural families living in the U.S. agricultural heartland are food insecure. Second, we must seek justice for those who work the land. When we receive the bread and the cup, we receive in our bodies the fruits of the laborers, the farmers and agricultural workers in the U.S. and around the world. Farmers and agricultural laborers are, however, poorer and more likely to face food insecurity than persons in other vocations. Third, we receive a charge to tend the Earth. We consume in the sacred meals the simple fruits of the Earth, wheat and grapes, and insofar as the Earth yields these fruits that we bless, break, and share, it demands gratitude and reverence. And yet we live in a time in which our agricultural practices are anything but restrained, depleting the soil and exploiting animals.

Finally, all three of these moral commitments depend on one deeper, or fundamental orientation. It requires the cultivation of a keen sense of the interrelatedness of humanity, and indeed, all creation. If one receives no other moral challenge from the Eucharistic table, it is this one: having received the radical gift of membership in the body of Christ, the human's sacred obligation then is to continually seek, tend, and nurture the bonds of connectedness, and God's whole creation. This is hard in our alienated world, but in the book, I try to tell stories of people who are doing just this, who are cultivating this keen sense of connectedness, like farming in a church yard in the midst of what others have called a desert, or traveling to Mexico to witness the struggles and innovations of traditional farmers, hosting a farmers' market in the church basement, supporting the human rights of workers, touching and cultivating the Earth, tending a sow that they know by name. In these practices, hope is born. At their heart, at least instances of fragile goodness and interdependence stand as a witness to the sin (I'm okay with using that word) and brokenness that characterizes the food system. They make truly good food a

near impossibility, but they also serve as windows of grace, demonstrating care for the poor, dignity for the laborer, reverence for all forms of life, and a way of life deeply related to others, the Earth, and to God. These stories, then, are a testimony to people who have become truly alive. Thank you.

Rachel Gross

Thank you, Jennifer. Finally, Dr. Benjamin Zeller.

Dr. Benjamin Zeller

Thank you. So, I've been asked to give a couple of comments on the relationship between food, religion, and politics from the perspective of the scholarship on those topics. I'm not an activist, I'm basically a historian. The comments that I'll give you are from two perspectives: one is from the research I've done, I'll talk a bit more about that, but the other perspective is as the founding Chair of the Religion, Food, and Eating seminar of the American Academy of Religion, which was the first semi-permanent program in our national guild to study religion which focused exclusively on the study of food. I say "semi-permanent" because the seminar has ended, but another group rose from its ashes. I'm going to talk a bit about the broad study of religion, and politics, and food, and also, what I found in my own studies.

In terms of the food seminar – and I promise to pull a [*unintelligible*] in which I talk about the book too. We produced a book with the seminar, to which Rachel contributed, as she mentioned earlier – the vast majority of proposals we got to submit chapters to the book, or papers to the seminar, really had to do with these three issues, at least as defined broadly. Food is a lot more than just food. It's the stuff, obviously, but it's the process as well. So, if we take food to be not just the stuff you're eating, but the act of eating, the act of drinking, because food can be a liquid as well, the act of growing, of cooking, of sharing, of producing, of distributing, then food means quite a bit. And intermixes quite a bit with those other two, religion and politics. Also, if we take religion very broadly, we see a lot of ways in which it connects to food. Religion can be institutional, in which case we can imagine how religious organizations or denominations publish official statements or take stances on food and politics. Religion can also be individual, it can be spiritual. Religion can be embedded within the person separate from the institution in some ways. And finally, we can look at what I like to call quasi-religions: things which aren't religions per se, but seem to look very religious. So some of the research I did is I interviewed people who are either vegetarians, or locavores (if you don't know what a locavore is, it's someone who is dedicated to eating locally-produced food, however locally is defined). And I found that a lot of those people, though not parts of official religions, were treating their association with food, and their food ways, in a very religious way. I call that "quasi-religious" because it's not necessarily a religion, but it looks like a religion. If we look at them – religion, food, and politics – very broadly, the vast majority of the proposals we had for chapters to be part of our book or papers to be given at our seminar, had to do with those topics as they were related to each other. Particularly they had to do with how individuals connect it to communities and how people try to embody the practice of eating.

Eating is very very bodily, it's certainly not unique in that way, but in that it's something that we all do, in that it's something that every religion that I'm aware of has rituals involving, or ceremonies and practices or beliefs, it's something that is directly relevant to all people, religious people in particular.

One of the ways which I found helpful to look at the study of religion and food was to borrow a concept from the study of culture. In cultural studies they have an idea called the circuit of culture. The circuit of culture begins with representation, production, consumption, identity, and regulation. This actually came out of folks who were studying the Sony Walkman, if you remember that, so now of course, people have ipods actually and ipods within their phones. But the idea is that any object of culture can be studied through different angles. I condense that a bit when I think about religion and food. I condense that from five down to four: production, preparation, consumption, and conceptualization, as all loci around which people need to wrestle with what are they eating, how are they eating, with whom are they eating, and what does that say, what is the meaning of that.

I'll talk a little bit about my own research because that allows us to really focus in. In the individuals whom I spoke with, all of whom were, as I said, either locavores or vegetarians, I helped them produce oral histories. So basically I sat for between one to three hours, or more than that in some cases, with folks, and asked to talk about what they ate, why they ate it, and how it related to other aspects of their life. And I would sort of ask them questions now and then, mostly I would just let them talk. What I found were, of these people that I talked to, there were twenty of them, that all of them were deeply uncomfortable with what many of them called the standard American diet (or SAD, it's a great acronym) of mass-produced industrial food, which is faceless, nameless, and which often is the product, quite literally, of exploitative labor, destruction of the land, and it is quite alienating from, not only the means of production, to use a nice Marxist phrase, but the actual food itself. If you turn over your bar of candy and read the ingredients, you can't produce half of them. I'm not the first person to make this remark. But, one becomes alienated from even the food that you're eating if you don't even know what it is. And all the folks that I talked to were deeply uncomfortable with this reality. They wanted something which was authentic, which was true, and something that they could inscribe meaning into, and not just have it be something which they had to eat. The particular ways they went about this either were vegetarianism – choosing to eat only plants, or mushroom-based products, or for some of them, if they weren't vegan, dairy as well – or locavores – choosing to just eat foods which were locally produced.

I can't generalize all twenty of these oral histories that were produced in the four minutes I have left, but I'll just give you a couple of generalizations. One of the joys of having a last name that starts with "Z" is that I get to go last – I got to hear what everyone else was saying and actually a lot of the themes they were bringing up were exactly what came up in these oral histories. And something that Jason talked about, he talked about his crisis of vocation, and his conversion. What I actually got were conversioners. Of the twenty people I talked to every one of them gave me a conversion narrative – about having a crisis where they discovered that

this standard American diet was not working, that it made them uncomfortable, that it left them feeling meaningless, that they needed to make a change in their life in order to feel like they were having real, authentic food. And there's that issue – authenticity. I think most the panelists talked about that, wanting authentic food. Now the particular paths they chose varied, but that was a commonality. And in fact, about half way through these oral histories, one of my sort of protocol questions is after they've told me this is, well have you ever thought about this as conversion? And a few of them had. But a lot of them said no. But when I explained to them the ways of setting conversion, for all but one of them, they said, "Oh yeah, that absolutely makes sense." And the one who didn't like it, actually didn't like religion at all, so she didn't like anything that reminded her of religion. But for all the rest, they said that yes, it really was a conversion, which gets to the heart of the real meaning and value that we find in food. If by changing one's food ways, those who are doing it actually think about it as conversionary, that's actually quite radical, that's actually quite powerful.

The other commonality that emerged out of this was that for every one of these people, they were wrestling with their individual practices of consuming and how it related to communities of people and the Earth. Eating is, on the one hand, a supremely individual act. You don't need anyone else to help you eat unless you're a baby or have some sort of medical condition. That being said, for every one of the people I talked to, they wanted to make eating not just about the individual shoving something in their mouth. They wanted to integrate eating and food either to communities, or to systems of meaning having to do with the Earth, having to do with plants and animals, having to do with God. And that was a commonality that – I mean, a few went about it different ways, but every one of them had to deal with this. What I thought most ironic, quite honestly, is that the way in which people were trying to make sense of their identity and their community was actually through consumption, and that is very very American. That we consume our identities, whether it's what you wear or what you eat. And while most of the folks I talked to had not thought too much about it, when I brought that up, they said, "Well, how? How else would I do it? It's through consuming that I define who I am." And that speaks quite a bit, not just to the twenty individuals who I spoke to, but I think to our broader culture. I see I'm out of time, so thank you.

Rachel Gross

Thank you Ben, and thank you to all of the panelists for sharing about their own work. I want to begin the conversation part of this event by simply asking the panelists to reflect on each other's presentations, and perhaps how they intersect with your own works. Any of you feel free to jump in.

Jason Fowler

Just, it's interesting that like you're saying [*motioning towards Dr. Benjamin Zeller*], the idea of conversion, and a couple connecting things. What you're saying about the first act of brokenness, or sin, or whatever we want to call it, is an act of consumption. And then, many people inherently finding brokenness within how they're consuming food. And then, having that conversion in the realm of eating, is

fascinating to me, and interesting – what does that mean? I feel like that has a deeper meaning, and I guess that food, like you're saying, means a lot more than what we.... I mean, even this glass of water has more meaning than just what it is. And I think that's why food is so interesting to talk about, because there's an intersection of all the issues that we encounter as humans – whether it's agriculture or economy or morality or community. You know what I mean, that food, it all goes down to that, and interesting, like you said, the original story starts with the wrong food choices.

Rabbi Dr. Shmuly Yanklowitz

I have a question for the rest of you all, is the politics of shame, and how shame is experienced in regards to food consumption. I think that, actually going back to the Garden of Eden for just a moment, what happens after they have the birth of morality? They realize they're naked. Right, they feel shamed that at their own nudity. They start to realize it for themselves. And I find in my own communities that there is a lot of shame and judgmental division that happens around food. For example, who keeps kosher and who doesn't, different levels of commitment within Kashrut foods, even there's different symbols, so when you go to the food store and you buy something, there's little symbols of whether it's kosher or not, but there's like a million different types of symbols – some eat that one, they don't eat that one. So there's all these politics going on. Then, as we happen to be, my wife and I became vegan on our wedding day, and we noticed that in the vegan communities there is incredible animosity, and some of it towards the non-vegan world. And certainly, people who eat meat feel very threatened often by vegans, and that kind of conversation. There's all kind of shame and judgmental stuff going on around meat, Kashrut foods, and I wonder in your own communities how shame plays out, judgmental – and sort of, as you're saying, that people are looking to come together. I think that unity has become more complicated as the choices expand, and the details of consumer expand.

Dr. Jennifer Ayres

I think that's a great question. Thank you for it. And I think that the food system is so complex that we really need some sort of nuanced reading. So on the one hand, we have the systemic structural injustices that require a very strong critique, and frankly, I'm not necessarily afraid of shaming these kinds of structures that oppress. But, then when I think about a person working a minimum-wage job who maybe doesn't have time to look for the best-priced items, maybe there's no access in their neighborhood, and so they really are eating the kinds of foods that we've sort of been talking about here as you know, not authentic foods, I don't think shame is the appropriate response to that situation. Clearly, because there's already a systemic oppression that's going on that's making it so that that is the most reasonable option for them. So, to me, it requires for people's conscience, both a systemic structural analysis, but also an individual micro-analysis, or analysis probably isn't even the right word, but to build a structure of support for people who are struggling, who are getting crushed, really, by the system.

Dr. Benjamin Zeller

Shame is a powerful tool of self identity. It allows one to talk about their body, what's good, what's bad. I'm sure all the individuals I spoke with evoke concepts of shame in talking about their diets, or what their food ways were like before their conversions. Of course, I was talking to converts, and as we know from the study of conversion, one of the things I discovered in my study, is once we talk about food choices as conversionary, we can use all the tools from the study of conversion. And one of the things we know is that converts are at the extreme. And so, certainly it's understandable, but the folks I was talking with, they were also quite willing to shame others. And, you know, there's different variants within both vegetarianism and locavores, but I'm glad you brought up veganism. The institutionalization of veganism within PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) – PETA is quite willing to shame those who are not vegan. And they're doing it quite intentionally, as a way to try to in their minds, better the word, but it's evangelism. I mean, this is what we see in many religions, is that the idea that "Me" or "I discovered what's right, and I think it's right for me, and I think it's right for you, and let me tell you about it." And sometimes shame is one of those tools.

Dr. Jennifer Ayres

I'll just add one quick thing about that. There's also a discourse about the use of shame in human rights discourse too. You might have a state sign on to a treaty, even though they aren't really fulfilling all the aims of the treaty, and the responsibility of the international community is to sort of shame them into fulfilling all their obligations. And so I think it's interesting.

Rachel Gross

I guess I want to ask a question that Jennifer and some of the other panelists have mentioned, but I want to ask you about the goals of your work, or the work of people you study. What are you trying to affect? Are you trying to affect the large system? Are you trying to change the communities you live in (or they live in) and work in? Or are you working towards personal change, whether it's your own person or the people around you?

Karen Adelman

Well, I think for me, I'm looking to wake people up. There's a certain sometimes shamelessness in my community, and I think in a climate of abundance, it's important to know and to remember and to act on the fact that that is not the whole picture. So, without being too prescriptive, I would want to educate. And also nourish. So, it's a kind of complex thing over here.

Jason Fowler

I think if we can model a different way of doing things, it becomes possible for other people. If we can inspire people to change what they believe about the food system or, for me, it's deeply theological – helping the Christian community to see that food matters theologically. I'd like for one [*unintelligible*] theology of creation to be developed so for me, it's kind of like a large-scale. It's like

a world-wide reformation. You know, but it's born of like, it's a drop in the water, and it's ripples that keep going. I think you can only change what you can touch, and what's in front of you, and then letting those ripples go out. And certainly in our community, the struggle is conventional, industrial farming, and the sustainable farming community – we would love to like, I don't know, overcome their thinking with, you know, sit down at the table and say, "Please, we don't want to shame you, but snap out of it. Wake up!" You know, we want there to be radical change – radical in the sense that... it's hard because you want people to see things your way because you feel like it's right, and at the same time, being able to listen to them, and understand them in a way that you don't shame them. You know, "We don't eat the same way, but we can have a conversation that maybe would be productive for both of us." So I'm all about changing the world, but starting with one drop.

Rabbi Dr. Shmuly Yanklowitz

So, there's this phrase I love, called 'sustainable hypocrisy' [laughter] which means that if somebody thinks you're a 10/10, and you know you're kind of a 7/10. Don't tell them you're a 7, just pretend you're a 10, and then meet that bar, you know, use that to meet the bar. And so, one of the things I love to be able to sit up here and pretend like I've got all of this worked out, and it's like I'm preaching to myself, I'm inspiring myself to go to the next level out of here, and so I say this just to say that I'm talking more to myself than anyone else here. There's the story of Gandhi, you know, this mother comes to Gandhi and says, "Tell my son to stop eating sugar. It's not good for him." He says, "Come back to me in a week." She goes back in a week, "Tell my son to stop eating sugar," "Come back in a week," "Tell my son to stop eating sugar," he says, "Don't eat sugar!" And the mother says, "That's great! Why did you wait all those weeks?" And he said, "Because all those weeks I was still eating sugar." And so, he needed to get to a place where he wasn't eating anymore to go to that place. So, I see my work as doing some sort of modeling. To start off is to kind of work on myself and to prove my own personal practices. It's great to pick the one or two things I care about and go around about them, but how am I making myself a model for, you know, within my family and beyond, my community? But the things I do educate about; One, I educate that the ethical sides of Kashrut, to those who keep Kosher, I emphasize the value of Kashrut in the Jewish community for those who aren't interested in Kosher, so kind of go with that there. I'm interested in incremental change, so going back to the PETA conversation, around veganism. You know, veganism and vegetarianism has remained somewhat at the same level of the last couple of years. Since 2008, there's been increases in both, but it's relatively stable. But there's been a huge increase in meat reductionists – those who are taking Meatless Monday, or buying less, or buying alternatives to milk, or alternatives to eggs, or organic products, or whatever the case it is. So, as someone who thinks that, as I believe, it's bad for our health, bad for animals, and bad for the environment, to be eating animal products, I don't go run around yelling that, because that's not going to do very much. What I try is to think with people about how we can live more healthy and in more sustainable ways. And so, I kind of try to balance my radical approaches with more measured perspective.

Dr. Jennifer Ayres

So, as a practical theologian, I'm really interested in telling the stories, and hearing the stories, of people who are really engaged in this work. So I feel like I talked to a lot of people like you guys when I was working on the book, which is just such a, I mean, how can that be my job? That's just such a great job, to be able to hear these stories. But I really liked what you said, Karen, about being awake, waking people up, this wakefulness. And for me, as a practical theologian, that sort of takes two forms. One is a wakefulness to the way things are, this sort of analyzing the food system, being fully aware of what's going on, and helping invite people into the conversation that can feel really over all of our heads. I mean, the Farm Bill is 1800 pages, for example, and I read somewhere that you have to have 13 different kinds of policy expertise to be able to even read and interpret it. And so, I'm trying to make some of it – I mean, I obviously don't understand all of it – but trying to make it accessible to people. But then also, the other kind of wakefulness is kind of unearthing the beauty of everyday people trying to do something, trying to be a different way, to live a different way. And I hope that the book will be helpful to them, it's just Keep On Keeping On, right? I don't think many of them, they say they want to change the whole system, but I don't think any of them are surprised when the system doesn't change that much, right? But they still have this joy in their work. And I think it has to do with their vocation. And so for them, I think, the goal is to live a life of integrity, according to their own moral framework, and making change that they can. And that's a real pleasure to hear those stories.

Dr. Benjamin Zeller

My own study of religion and food [*unintelligible*] I've taught a course. And what really drove and drives me, is just wanting students in my course to be able to think about religion as not just doctrinal, as not just what happens in a church or synagogue or mosque or temple or wherever you pick, but that religion is something that happens all over and throughout one's life. And that's what drove me to want to teach about religion and food, and want to study why religion and food, among scholars, certainly that are not a part of that broad movement, and people sitting in this room have worked on various other topics. Marie Griffith's book *Born Again Bodies* looked at very similar ideas of the practices of eating and other body practices as ways of understanding one's identity and working through one's religious self. Leigh Schmidt's work in *Practicing Protestants* was looking at the way Protestants don't just think things, they do things. So, among scholars, this certainly is very very mainstream. But in the classroom, I found, that when students walk in on day one, they still often think about religion as "I believe in A, B, C, and I go to building D." And I want them to think about it a lot more than that, I want them to realize that religion is embodied and religion is everyday, and religion happens at the dinner table, and whatever restaurant you choose to go to, and what sort of coffee you're drinking, and doesn't just happen in the head or the pews.

Rachel Gross

As you all talk about what kind of changes you want to affect, and you are affecting, would anybody like to talk about the kind of obstacles, or pushback you've encountered in this work?

[Groans, laughter, "Oh man"]

Jason Fowler

'It's elitist' is biggest thing, it's like 'it's not accessible, it's only for...' And honestly, like you're saying about your own practices, there are times that, you know, that we struggle with just buying food. And so, when I stand in the grocery aisle, and I'm like, "This organic item, or I can buy more of this." You know, I mean, there's an obstacle just within the sphere of my own practices. I've been wrestling with, is this accessible, at times. But then others are addressing the local food movement, or these other ways of reforming the food system, and saying "You can't do that. You can't change agriculture that drastically. You can't change the way people eat." I'm a part of a food council locally where I live, and we want to help people eat better. They don't want to eat better [laughter]. You can't, you go to anyone in this room, you turn to your friend and say, "You know, you really shouldn't be eating that." You know, all of us will bristle and be like, "You're not telling me what to do!" Because it's culturally engrained. What you eat is culturally engrained, first of all, and even deeper than that, it's familial. You know, how your family taught you to eat – long grain and wild rice, but not something else. There's a world of obstacles, and the biggest thing that I want to encourage people is, changing the way that you eat, and changing the way that we eat in America is not elitist. And, we have to do it.

Rachel Gross

You all have very thoughtful faces... would anybody else like to speak to those obstacles, or should we move on?

Rabbi Dr. Shmuly Yanklowitz

I'll say something very briefly, although I think it's relatively obvious, which is that, David Hume once said that individuals care more about the stomach of their own town than death on the other side of the world. And I think that to some extent that's quite true. We're very selfish in our own comfort and that's just part of the human condition. And I think to actually curb desire for a higher value is something that many have not chosen to cultivate in their lives – they simply have a desire and fulfill that desire. Victor Frankel said that the moral moment exists in between stimulus and response, and that moment of being hungry, what does that now mean? It's something that we haven't replicated in the school system – to take that moment and actually think about it. And I myself fail all the time. My fourteen-month old cries for something, and she doesn't want the first 19 things I offer her, and so the twentieth thing, I know is probably the worst for her in a lot of ways, but it's going to get her to stop crying, and so I, you know, we fulfill that desire.

Dr. Jennifer Ayres

I'll just say briefly – I think that Sharon Welch described one of the challenges facing anybody who wants to do something in terms of addressing systems of injustice as often-being vulnerable to culture despair, meaning that, you know, every time you make a little bit of progress, the response says, “Well it really doesn't even touch this other issue, or all these levels of issues.” And I think that's a huge risk in this work. That once you address one little corner, you're just reminded of all the corners that you didn't even know existed yet, and I think that's a pretty big obstacle.

Dr. Benjamin Zeller

I try when I'm teaching in my scholarship to find out the way in which food isn't just food, but sometimes people remind me, sometimes food is just food. And it reminded me of what several of the panelists just said. Karen, you said something about how the customers just want a sandwich sometimes, or [gesturing to Rabbi Dr. Shmuly Yanklowitz] the stinky poet analogy – who cares what the poet smells like if the poetry's good? I mean that's the issue that I think anyone studying or an activist involved in food and food ways has to deal with. It's that food has layers and layers of meaning and layers and layers of production and value and ethics. But food is also just something you put in your mouth. It has particular tastes, and it costs a certain amount of money. And those are the two that are bumping up into each other – food as a physical substance, which tastes like something, it costs something, it has to take time and money to produce, and food as systems of meaning. I don't have an answer to that [laughter].

Karen Adelman

I would just add that I think these times call for more true thoughtfulness, and possibly sacrifice. And I think that's really difficult, so I think there's pushback from how hard it is to affect the kinds of change.

Rachel Gross

Maybe, on that note, looking forward, what do you see as the future, either... I want to ask two questions at once. So, what do you see as the future of the industrial food system, the food system at large? And also, if you want to answer this question, what you see as the future interactions between religion and food and politics? So what comes next?

Jason Fowler

What comes next is the collapse of the food system. There's a little hopeful. I mean, the food system is collapsing, it's slowly collapsing. You may not wake up tomorrow and not be able to buy twinkies, but it almost happened with twinkies [laughter]! But they came back, so the way we are producing food, we're close to creating another dust bowl out West. That is incomprehensible to me that we didn't learn from the dust bowl or any number of issues like the spraying of sludge. A lot of people don't know what biosolids are, but the wastewater treatment industry magically turns their stuff that they make into this magic fertilizer that's suddenly good for the soil. All these practices build up in the soil and in our bodies

and how many people do you know that are dealing with food allergies or food-associated, diet-associated illnesses? It's skyrocketing. So that's what I mean by... it's a feast of consequence. We're coming up against the wall quicker and quicker and that's not very hopeful, and that's why I think there will be, and there is increasing amounts of Christians and Jews and a whole host of different faith-based responses to seeing the need to heal our communities and to heal society. There will be increasing response because there's an increasing amount of brokenness.

Karen Adelman

[Asks unintelligible question to Jason Fowler]

Jason Fowler

No, I don't think I made that up. I can't remember where I heard that, but eventually we sit down to a feast of consequences, and the foolishness we've reaped, you sow the seeds you reap the whirlwind, and I think we are seeing that in the healthcare crisis. To me, that's the real healthcare crisis, that our food is killing us, and that we're killing the Earth in how we're producing food.

Dr. Jennifer Ayres

I think... yeah, that was a tough place to start, Jason [laughter].

Jason Fowler

Sorry, I just blew the bomb up right off the bat!

Dr. Jennifer Ayres

I mean we all read the IPCC report last week, right, that the climate crisis is really seriously threatening the collapse of the food system. So it's not, I mean, it's something that we really do have to reckon with I think. I'll answer the second part of the question, and I think that one of the things that I studied in the book were religious communities who started growing their own food in places that are referred to as food deserts – it's a contested term because it's kind of defined from the outside as far as what a community lacks, rather than by the resources and access within the community. And so I always have to put quotes around it, but these religious communities are trying to grow their own food, they're not going to wait for a supermarket to come, they're not going to place their future in the hands of the consumer-capitalist model, they're learning how to grow their own food, they're remembering how to grow their own food. And some of them are reclaiming some of these practices from the oldest members of their communities before this oral history and knowledge dies with them. And so to me that is one way forward for religious communities to respond to this system, so they can grow their own.

Rabbi Dr. Shmuly Yanklowitz

So, I guess this isn't very Rabbinic of me to say, but on the one hand I really think that religion is one of the greatest barriers to progress on a lot of these issues, at the level of xenophobia and [*unintelligible*] and sexism and just hate that comes out of these circles is enormous, and how dark and gray and unhealthy and

destructive practices. On the other hand, I think religion offers one of the greatest promises to address these issues, in that I would argue there are very few movements alive today in America. I mean, if you look at how you define a movement and what a movement requires, maybe there's something of a labor movement, there's something of a gay rights movement, but a lot of those things, even though we hear little bits and pieces everywhere, they don't operate like movements. But religious movements are incredibly powerful and organized in a lot of ways. And I think that to address this stuff we need religion on board. There's specific tactics that have to be approached in each religious discourse and ethos and pathos and logos, let's throw that in there too, that have to be employed to address this stuff. And I just want to name one other issue that I think about. So I've been involved with the American Jewish World Service, it's kind of like the Jewish Peace Corps in developing countries, and one of the things is how American trademarks have wiped-out industries in other countries. The most obvious one, you've probably heard of, is how we wiped out the corn industry in Mexico by giving subsidies and then dumping all those products at below-cost to Mexico. But 40-60% of the food that we give in aid to countries goes into transportation. A lot of [unintelligible] on the boats are always transported. It wipes out the local industry and forces on them certain things that aren't necessarily what they want, and we call this 'Aid' while it furthers businesses here. And those businesses are incredibly powerful, and the only thing that can beat those businesses is organized religion.

Dr. Benjamin Zeller

I see a growth in what I call identity food ways: people who are really looking to what they eat as a way to define themselves. Locavores and vegetarianism are the two that I study, but I'm starting to look at the Paleo diet, sort of Paleo-eaters as an identity food way. Raw food, foodies (people who where they stay, where they vacation, with whom they dine, is defined by seeking out certain types of cuisine), gluten free (certainly there's people for whom that's a serious, medical issue, but there's others for whom it's much more of a lifestyle choice), low-carb, I scribbled down a couple others: eco-Kosher, and there's all sorts of different identities that one can try on, one can use, yet as I think about it, it's very class-based, right? This is a very middle- to upper-middle-class sort of way of functioning. If you live in a food desert, or if you're just trying to make ends meet, this is not the way you think about your food. So, I was about to say I hate to be a pessimist, but we're all a bunch of pessimists! It sure looks pretty stratified to me – like you have those at the bottom getting sick and dying, and those at the top trying out different ways of identifying themselves with different foods that they're eating.

Rabbi Dr. Shmuly Yanklowitz

If I can just say one other quick thing about that, if you ask me, this isn't pessimistic. What the strongest food movement is that is within the food movement would be hedonism. I think there's this return to almost like a paganism, this sense of "I want to eat good food, the best tasting food. I want to get to know it and make it and feel it and touch it. I want to be consumed by food." And this is emerging, even, I mean I see parts of it in all communities, I see it within my own Jewish

community – people who want to kill animals, they want to shack them themselves, because they want to feel the experience of being close to them, the killings, they feel they owe them, and get something out of that. So I think there's this sort of pagan/hedonism that's emerging that is one of the biggest threats coming from within this conversation.

Dr. Benjamin Zeller

I would say that comes out of, constructive speaking, the last 10-15 years, the slow food movement, which started out with really noble intentions, but that can devolve into either hedonism ... or epicureanism is maybe a less judgmental way of phrasing it. It's a response to the rejection of industrial food production and consumption, right? But you're right, it can also lead to, I guess hedonism is the right word, but there's a nobler side to it too. If you've read the slow food manifesto, it's quite religious... quasi-religious, it doesn't talk about the divine, but it's talking about healing the Earth and healing communities. I haven't read it recently, so I'm paraphrasing here. It's quite religious in my views. And if you look at the context of it, those are people who's life and maybe cultures they saw being destroyed by globalization and industrial food.

Jason Fowler

I think people are looking for embodied experience, and I think maybe that's why hedonism and epicureanism... people... it's like coming out of modernism and post-modernism. Even the industrial world around us is some body; people are looking for visceral experience. I mean, for me, the first time I killed chickens, it was powerful. For me, because I realized that when I ate chicken, it meant that that chicken died, and that was a profound experience, that I was taking its life so that I could live and feed my family. I had never experienced that before when you have chicken nuggets in front of you, and you don't think about that, although chicken nuggets aren't chicken, so [laughter]. But, people are looking for and finding experiences, and I think that's why food has become religion for many people. They're not finding an embodied faith in our institutions, so they're making their own. They're returning to the Earth instead of being ghosts just floating between...

Rachel Gross

I want to make sure to open up the conversation now. We have about 15 minutes if people would like to contribute their voices to this conversation and ask questions of our panelists.

[Q&A]