

C-7405 to C-7406 Transcriptions

Kula, Irwin. "Fantasy and Realism in Jewish Politics: Bar Kokhba and the Decision to Revolt." Members of the Wexner Heritage Foundation Winter Retreat. [Houston, Tex.].

23 October 1988.

Irwin Kula:

...Jews believe, or...What's it called? I don't even know what it's called.

Attendee:

The beliefs of Judaism.

Irwin Kula:

The beliefs of Judaism. It's a, it's a very strange...it's a very strange kind of topic. 'Cause if I asked you, uh, do Jews have to believe anything...to be Jewish? How many people would raise their hand and say yes? If I said - small number, it's a small number. If I said, Judaism is a religion of deeds, Judaism is not a religion of faith or beliefs, how many people would agree? Uh, that's the most common definition of Judaism that we have. Judaism's deeds...And here we're gonna do a session with

people who have committed themselves to studying, very seriously [01:00], Jewish beliefs. And not- if there's one dogma in the Jewish community, it seems to me it's the dogma that Judaism has no dogma, what we'll call the Dogma of Dogmalessness. It's a rather strange thing. If you think about it even more, most Jews that you meet...here's the irony. Most Jews that you meet, who will define, will agree with this definition that Judaism really is a religion of deeds, and it's Christianity that's the religion of faith, most of those Jews don't do the deeds that are defined as being Jewish. Instead, what do they say when you ask them if they're Jewish? What do they say?

Attendee:

I feel Jewish.

Irwin Kula:

"I feel Jewish." Okay, that may be the least sophisticated answer. What else do they say, if they're a little bit more sophisticated? [02:00] "There's something special about being Jewish. "I have Jewish identity." All of those things indicate that Jews have beliefs. When someone says, "I have Jewish identity," but is not acting in any different way from their

Christian neighbors, what they're really saying is, "what distinguishes me...", excuse me, I have a little bit of a cold [coughs]...What they're really saying, is that there are some central beliefs that distinguish me from my Christian neighbor, even though I wear the same clothes, even though I do basically the same things, even though I work in the same workplace...I have some basic beliefs that distinguish me. So it's really ironic. The vast majority of Jews say, to be Jewish you don't have to believe anything special, it's a matter of deeds. And those same vast majority of Jews say [03:00] that what distinguishes them as Jews is Jewish identity, is their beliefs. Do you see the paradox? Everybody see that? It's a very, seems to me a very strange thing.

Alright, so the first thing we have to ask ourselves is, where did this whole idea that Judaism has no beliefs, or to be Jewish doesn't necessitate any particular Jewish beliefs come from? 'Cause I'm gonna question the whole hypothesis, and by the end of today, by the end of these two or three hours, what we're going see is that there are some real central beliefs that underlie everything we do as Jews. And to the extent that we don't determine what those are, and articulate them, we're gonna be in a lot of trouble.

Okay, so where did it all come from? Any suggestions on where this notion that Judaism is a religion of deeds and Christianity is the religion of faith, any ideas where that came from? [04:00] And we've all said it. I mean, I was a pulpit rabbi for six years and there were a lot of times, I am a philosopher and a closet theologian, lot of times got up and said, "relig- Judaism really emphasizes deeds." Knowing that that wasn't really true. Some where does it come from? [name]?

Attendee:

Maybe it starts, uh, from the origin of Christianity, that ultimate salvation comes from believing the right things, and that if you think right, believe right, even at the very last minute, even if they were a rotten person their entire life, if you believe and repent at the very end you get the ultimate reward. I don't think that...so that's how Christianity, in some ways, defines itself.

Irwin Kula:

And so?

Attendee:

And Judaism does not work that way.

Irwin Kula:

Okay. I think that you've hit something very important, and that is one of the reasons that this has been such a prevalent way of defining Jews, especially for us, is that it was [05:00] one of the ways that distinguish us from Christianity. In some sense, we had the understanding that Christianity was a religion of faith, because they did away with a lot of the laws, and so, and as a way to distinguish ourselves, we were a religion of deeds. We acted. Okay. Although you should know that my, that it's codified by Maimonides already that you can be the worst sonofabitch in your whole life, and if you repent a moment before you're dead, [claps hands] everything's fine. Now, what does that sound like? Sounds like Christianity. Just goes to show that, see the sources that are somewhat like Christianity we hide from you, and sources that point out the differences, those are the ones we all know.

So yes, Shel, you're right, hundred percent. One of the reasons is this need to distinguish ourselves from Christianity. Good. Joe?

Attendee:

Well, the Biblical references, you know of uh, of uh,
[06:00] taking care of the needy, leading the foreign appeal,
and uh...[unclear] There's all kind of uh, you the
basis...[unclear]

Irwin Kula:

Okay, there seem to be so many, I think if I can rephrase,
there seem to be so many laws within the Bible that it was
natural for us to begin to think that we were a religion of laws
and deeds rather than a religion of beliefs. Does that sound...?

Attendee:

I'm not sure that I'd agree "rather than," but...

Irwin Kula:

More primary than, right? Primary.

Attendee:

I'm not sure...I haven't thought about it in the sense
that...there's plenty of references to the need to do good deeds
in the Bible. And I don't know...

Irwin Kula:

Okay. Any references to beliefs in the Bible?

Attendee:

Why isn't that a belief?

Irwin Kula:

Good! That the whole need to do deeds is already underlined by a belief. Okay, how many people agree with that? Yeah, that's really...[07:00] if we can get, if there's one thing that we can get across today, if there's one thing I can get across today, it's that all systems have as its base certain beliefs out of which the system emerges and which power the system, even if it's a system that's predominately an active system, of deeds, rather than a faith-oriented internal system. So you're a hundred percent right. And after all everything I've said in the last day, about prayer and all that kind of stuff, I said we see what we...is that what I said? We see what we believe. Right? We come to the world with a whole set of beliefs, and then we see things and integrate them into that belief pattern. Right? The people saw the Exodus, the people experienced an event, but what

they saw was very conditioned by what they believed. They believed God could act in history, [08:00] therefore at the Exodus what they saw was God acting in history. If you had someone else standing at the Exodus, who did not already believe that God could act in history, which by the way was most of the pagan cults, that God didn't act in history, you wouldn't have seen God taking you across the Red Sea. So what you believe conditions, is, really determines what you see.

We studied Kaufman yesterday, Kauf- we only read one chapter of Kaufman, but the whole two books of Kaufman make one argument...funny when Herb says he "hammers it in"...should read too volumes in Hebrew where he hammers one idea in something like eight hundred pages, and there's only one idea in the whole book. I mean, you know, there're always others, but there's only really major proposition, and that is, what is unique about Judaism, created by Moses, is this notion, this crazy [09:00] notion of monotheism, or ethical monotheism. Is that a belief or an action? So the entire Kaufman book is dedicated to proving that what is unique about Jews is one belief. Pretty wild.

Okay. So, we have, one of the reasons we have this notion of religion-of-deeds, religion-of-belief, is distinguish us from Christianity; one of the reasons is that there, there has been,

there seems to be when we read the Bible, we concentrate on the time of deeds. We're now seeing the beliefs that are under even that understanding of deeds, what I'll call a theology of deeds, okay, or a belief system that's, undergird, or [unclear], or foundational to deeds. Any other possibilities?

Attendee:

Well we do use the word [unclear], and I, I think the reason [unclear]...but I'm not actually sure that [10:00] it's not [unclear]...when we, when we study, whatever it is we study, at whatever level we study...and then there [unclear; speaker distant, becomes difficult to hear]...so that when we learn, as we grow in understanding...how to be Jewish...I think that...from lighting candles

Irwin Kula:

Okay, so what you're saying really w- a pedagogic. The Jews developed a pedagogic technique, that rather than concentrating on beliefs first, we would concentrate on actions [11:00] and hopefully from act- even though all those actions, as you say, have as a foundation a very serious belief system, by concentrating on action we come to understand what we're

supposed to believe, rather than concentrating on belief. I think that that is a very important distinction between Judaism and Christianity. Okay? A pedagogical approach, in a sense, to life. Right? Rather than start with beliefs, start with actions, but get to beliefs [unclear]...and rather than, as opposed to Christianity, which says start with a creed, a dogma, a set of beliefs that you can at least, even if you know only by rote, their reasoning is that it will affect your actions. By the way, we have a misunderstanding of Christianity. In Christianity, doesn't have works. Faith and works are equally important in Christianity. And if you hear a good Christian preacher, they will, as much as they'll talk about faith, they'll talk about the implications that faith has towards actions. [12:00] We do it, we take the opposite pedagogical approach, and we say if you do the right act, it's amazing what you'll come to believe. Okay, so I think that's good, that pedagogical approach is maybe the difference in emphasis. Good.

Attendee:

I think one of the things, uh, to use the example of Shabbat, because of the last, one of the last readings [unclear; distant and obscured by background movement]...how so much of

your life is Shabbat. [unclear] You can talk all you want about Shabbat, but if you don't do it, it's irrelevant. But if you talk about Shabbat and talk about the laws of Shabbat and spend the day at the mall, or working, it's irrelevant. You don't have the, that period of Shabbat. If so, the issue of...of...the concept of Shabbat is making it a habit of it, [13:00] and by making habit of it then you can understand what it's about.

Irwin Kula:

Okay, that's, that's a similar point. Okay. That you can't get to the understanding, you can't get to the beliefs, without the acting. But the acting is a concretization of the beliefs, not the other way around. Right? When you read, when you read about the Shabbat in the Torah, what you read about is the belief system that undergirds the Shabbat, and if there wasn't a belief system underneath girding the Shabbat, what would have? Would anybody observe Shabbat? In fact, it may well be that one of the reasons in the American Jewish community there's such little observance of Shabbat, is because since we haven't plugged into the beliefs and understandings of Shabbat at all, or that most of those beliefs are out, we no longer feel comfortable with...there's no observance of Shabbat. So we may

have been in a position now where it's counterproductive to be teaching deeds over faith. Fred? [14:00]

Attendee:

Well, maybe we're getting into semantics, and maybe this goes back to the original premise of dogma versus, uh, belief, but I would, I would violently disagree with, uh, with with Ron's, what Ron has said [unclear]... [audience laughter]

Irwin Kula:

He has a possible understanding of violence.

Attendee:

Uh, well, b- because I mean, if, if Shabbat is dogma, then the was that uh, uh, Joe Williams practices Shabbat or the way that I practice Shabbat or, uh, uh, according to what Ron just said is the total non-belief in Shabbat, and I don't believe that. I mean, I think Shabbat is important to me the way that I practice it as it is to Ron the way he does or anybody else [unclear]. I think that [unclear] dogma, then, then way we...[unclear] [15:00]...I believe Shabbat's very important...[unclear]

Irwin Kula:

Okay. Let's clarify terms. It looks like that we need to clarify terms. Language, we always have to be very precise about language. This is what, from the Oxford English Dictionary, it's, you know, that's a pretty good source, on what dogma means. There's two definitions of dogma, primarily. One is "a body of opinion formulated and authoritatively," and that's the key word there, authoritatively, "authoritatively stated." Okay. Another definition of dogma is a belief, a tenet. Now, this type of dogma we Jews don't have. Why?

[indistinct voice from audience]

Irwin Kula:

[laughs] We don't have a single authority. That's the only reason. [16:00] In fact, we have a body of opinion formulated and stated, from the Biblical times till last year, at least in the Conservative Movement. They published a book called what? Anybody know? *Emet V'Emunah*. What's *emet*? Truth, right. Truth is an action, truth is a belief word. Truth and *emunah*? Faith. Truth and Belief, really that's what they call it. Truth and

Belief! Here in an age where we talk about Jews as Jews, religion of deeds not religion of faith, the Conservative movement publishes a book [woman whispering near microphone], ah book, it's a pamphlet, called...Belief, Truth and Belief. Okay, so we have plenty of body of opinion, formulated statement; we have beliefs and tenets. The only problem is, we don't have any authorities. By the way, you can bet your life that if we ever had a society in [17:00] which we did have one authority, we would have as much dogma in this sense as the Catholic Church. Just look at the State of Israel when it has a chief rabbi, right?

Why is a Conservative conversion, or a Reform conversion, done exactly according to Orthodox law, considering [unclear]? [voice from audience]. Why? Why? The fact that conversion [unclear; noise from moving microphone]...a rabbi. [unclear] says, you don't need a rabbi for conversion. [voice from audience]. No, do you know what? If you talk to Orthodox rabbis, do you know what the answer they will give you? It's because if you, if I do a conversion, I live traditionally [18:00], *halakhically*, and if you taught a Reform rabbi who lives the same, according to an Orthodox *halakhah*, and who converts according to *halakhah* with, making sure that the person's

kosher, making sure let's say, even, the person doesn't drive to *shul* the person is in *shul* every Shabbos, and all the things that would be...let's say it was an Orthodox kind of everything, the reason it's not is because of the belief of Torah from Sinai. If you don't believe Torah is from Sinai, you can't be a witness within the Orthodox community today. That's a what, belief or an action? That's, that's belief.

And I told you about Conservative Judaism and *Emet V'Emunah*, so they clearly are uh, very concerned about beliefs. The whole book is about beliefs. And Reform Judaism, and when you look at the beginnings of Reform Judaism, Reform Judaism almost adopted a church-like kind of formulation [19:00] of what Judaism was and all of its platforms. They put out creedal statements...

So here we are talking about Judaism as a religion of deeds, and all around us, since Biblical times, what's really, what we really argued about, and what really has distinguished us, is what we believe... Ask Elijah, when he killed two hundred fallen prophets, what was important, beliefs or actions.

[Pauses] What about the tension between monarchy and prophets? That was about beliefs. Or 1st Century Judaism, Sadducees and Pharisees, they killed each other, over what? They were living

basically the same way, [20:00] but one group believed in freedom of will, the other one believed in fate. One group believed in resurrection, the other group believed no resurrection. One group believed in a hereafter, the other group didn't believe in a hereafter. So they killed each other...

What about Kabbalists, who talk about God in the most passionately sexual terms...and anti-Kabbalists, who lived exactly the same way? What about Hasidim [unclear]...who actually jailed each other, using the secular authorities, because of belief differences...which obviously did have action implications. And of course [unclear] concern of Orthodoxy, but what about Maimonides himself, who we're gonna study in a little bit? [21:00] D'you know, we don't recognize that Maimonides books were burned in his time. The book of ideas, the *Moreh Nevukhim*, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, by the way that was, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, a perplexed is somebody who is confused, *nevukhim* literally means 'confused'. What are you confused about? You're confused in your mind about what to believe. So he writes this whole book about what you're supposed to believe, and in fact - he says, he writes another book for what you're supposed to do, called the *Mishneh Torah*. Okay, so he writes two books: one an action book, and one a...philosophy,

belief book, although, you should know, even that dichotomy is not fair, because in the introduction to his action book, the whole first part, is on beliefs, and he says, a person who is the worst person in the world, who believes the right things, is still within the commandment... [22:00] he's just called a sinner in Israel. A person who does the right things, in other words does the *mitzvot*, but doesn't have the beliefs...can be an idolater. Sound Jewish to you?

What about Philo, who lived in 20 CE? Writes a whole book about beliefs. What about Mordecai Kaplan, you know what they did to his books? Take a guess, we always do it to books we [unclear]. Burned Mordechai Kaplan's books. Until Mordecai Kaplan was [unclear]. Now he was the founder of Young Israel, you know that? That Mordecai Kaplan was the founder of the Young Israel Movement in this country? We don't, we don't talk about it that too much, because it's not nice to think of a heretic as the founder of Orthodoxy, modern Orthodoxy, [23:00] the modern Orthodoxy, congregational movement. Now he did leave that after a while, because his beliefs...because his beliefs, not his actions. I had the opportunity of visiting Mordecai Kaplan when he was 99 years old, got in with somebody who was one of my teachers. Mordecai Kaplan's home was an Orthodox home. Mordecai

Kaplan's brain was not an Orthodox brain. [Indistinct female voice from audience] His grandson was [unclear]. So ask me...[woman continues] ask! Books burned.

So I got a feeling that beliefs have been very important to Jews. We killed each other over beliefs.

Attendee:

But perhaps the only time that we really got into trying to look for the beliefs at the underpinning of our religion is [speaker distant from microphone; unclear]...

Irwin Kula:

[24:00] Beautiful. Okay. Now we have to ask the question. If I just sho- by the way, we forgot a very important character, Spinoza. Right, I think that if we had Spinoza back here, and maybe put him in the middle, since he's used to being under attack, if we put Spinoza in the middle and said, "are beliefs in important?" Chances are Spinoza who excommunic- from his commun- ex...excommunicated from the community w- would say, "oy, are beliefs important to these people!" I think your point's very well taken. Gotta ask a question: When has the agitation about beliefs been most at the forefront? Twenty years

ago, right, none of you would be in a room agitating about beliefs, and I don't mean you, but your parents, who were active in the Jewish community, and let's say and who were even, and who worked for the Jewish community, would not be agitated about beliefs to the same extent we are now. Let's ask: when are we most agitated [25:00] about our beliefs? Now, one answer, and it's a hundred percent correct, when we are involved in a society around us, when the society is very open to us, and when we're challenged both intellectually and religiously from cultures around us, we have a tendency to develop and articulate our beliefs, i.e. what distinguishes us.

And all of those characters that I mentioned lived in periods like that. Philo lived in the midst of an unbelievable Hellenistic environment. Hellenist, Hellenism, think of Hellenism in that period as Americanism now. It's the Western Civilization of its day. It was cosmopolitan and it was wonderful and it was art- and, and the best architecture, and the best philosophy, and the best music, and the best science, it was everything. So Philo was confronted by the intellectual and spiritual challenges and so articulated a set of beliefs. He, by the way, he narrowed down Judaism to five beliefs that [26:00] all Jews have to have.

Okay, so I think that's one answer. And Maimonides, the same thing. Maimonides would never have written that book if it wasn't that he was challenged by the *kalaam*, k-a-l-a-a-m, the *kalaam* was Moslem philosophy. That's a, that's not fair exactly, but that's a simple way to look at it, Moslem religious philosophy, which was very creative, which was very challenging, and he lived in a society in which, at least, when he got to Egypt it was pretty open. I mean, the guy became the doctor to the Sultan, you know, that's better than Kissinger. You know, he got to see the king naked, he probed him [audience laughter], he was pretty vulnerable...Only Lyndon LaRouche thinks that Kissinger got to do that [laughs; audience laughter]. [27:00]

All of these characters, Mordecai Kaplan too. Mordecai Kaplan lived in an age in which...Mordecai Kaplan [noise in microphone] always worried when that happens...but Kaplan lived in an age in which society was becoming incredibly open in America. The challenge is, our philosophy...It's stimulating to think about what Judaism really should be. So yes, that's a very, very important point. At all times of interaction there is this worrying about what beliefs we have, okay? Any other possibilities?

Attendee:

It really seems to me that, notwithstanding the examples that are cited and the dogma here, and the modern day ones that you cited, the centralized opinion of Jewish life up until modern times has been the Talmud and applying the [28:00] Talmud to everyday life. The central [unclear] has not been the recitation of the Canon [unclear] that we must subscribe to [**Irwin Kula:** Right.]. And the Talmud spends the majority of its time dealing with how to practice. Yes some of it in matters of rituals, but a good deal of it in matters of everyday life, commerce, how to interact with other people. And very little time is spent in it talking about the belief in God as the central, even the [unclear] beliefs [unclear]. What usually defines, you know, what we need to do, who was righteous in terms of being [unclear] more than anything else.

Irwin Kula:

Okay. Jacob Neusner, who was one of the founding, he'll go down in history as one of the greatest scholars of the latter half of the 20th century, 'cause he's setting the agenda of what questions to ask about Jewish texts, will say to you, that's because you have studied the Talmud with people who have

absolutely no understanding of the Talmud. That the Talmud really is one of the most sophisticated [29:00] belief systems articulated in the history of religion. And he makes such a persuasive case that Christian universities, like St. John's, are now studying Talmud, because the only way to understand the Jewish belief system is to understand how the Talmudic rabbis put these what he calls 'paracos' which are short paragraphs, together that were all seemingly on the outside dealing with actions, but had as foundation in the way they were put together, unbelievable statements of belief. Now that's even being challenged.

Attendee:

...that's the guy from [unclear]

Irwin Kula:

Yeah, of course.

Attendee:

Most of the things in Talmud, when they try- I mean it accepts the, the divine giving of the Torah...I think is an underpinning of the Talmud, but they still try and use logical

principles to arrive at their conclusions, using the text...putting text against text, [30:00] and it is rare in the Talmud, but occasionally that the fathers said the only reason for this is [unclear]...most things in the Talmud are identified as a matter of reasoning...

Irwin Kula:

Most beliefs are arrived at by a manner of reasoned [unclear]. Most beliefs have premise one, premise two, premise three. If you accept the premises, you accept the conclusion. Same as legal tradition. Legal tradition has step one, step two, step three, if you accept that then you get the derivation of the law.

Attendee:

The potential underpinning of the Jewish belief and how it was translated...Kaufman said it in his article, was that the last five commandments, probably other people have described those beliefs as well, but what was important was that it was now given not just a general morality but that this is God in a monotheistic approach...

Irwin Kula:

So you just said exactly what I've been saying for the last thirty minutes. The real essential thing was a belief, [31:00] that there was God and that there was a monotheistic, a monotheistic approach. You just proved what I just said. [unclear] the Ten Commandments are a wonderful thing. The Ten Commandments, we think of Commandments as things you have to do, but what's the first commandment? It's a belief, right? Maimonides says without that belief there are no commandments. These are real, these are the real tensions within the tradition. You're right that there's no Catechism, that's true. But that's because we don't have, that's why I started with this, we don't have an authority figure, and there's no list of beliefs that we have to recite every day. Although, that's not true a hundred percent. How many people like the song [sings 'Adon Olam' in Hebrew]? You like that song? All that is is Maimonides thirteen principles of faith, rearticulated in poetry that we have used in song form, that is sung in Reform congregations...right, [32:00] and if Reform Jews knew what they were singing [unclear] oh God, I'm sure they would strike it out [audience laughter]. Right? One of the things we're going to study this- one of the things that they're saying is that they

Torah was dictated from God word for word to Moses, who wrote it down and that's the same Torah we got in our book now. I don't think there are very many Reform Jews who believe that. Or the twelfth principle that says resurrection of the dead, I don't think there are very many Reform Jews that believe that. And yet we all sing *Adon Olam* . And Maimonides himself says, if you don't believe these thirteen things, you're *akofer*, you're a heretic, you're an idolater, you're outside the community.

Now, I wanna, I'm making a very strong case, I know, and so that's why you're objecting a little bit. And what I wanna say, what I think some of the objection comes from is that there is this heavy biological understanding of Judaism, that you're automatically a Jew if...[33:00] if you're born a Jew. Okay? So that, that heavy biological connection makes everything unimportant in relation to your really being a Jew, but by the way, that makes belief as unimportant as it makes actions, and we never, we don't understand that. Right? You can do everything wrong as a Jew, you can transgress every ethical and ritual, quotation marks, "commandment," and every belief that's ever been brought down and we still have this crazy understanding of what does it mean to be Jewish. That's our biological aspect of Judaism. How many people are comfortable with that?

Attendee:

That you can still be Jewish or that you can still be a Jew?

Irwin Kula:

That you're still a Jew, I'm sorry, that you're still a Jew. So, in, in that sense, there's nothing you have to believe to be a Jew. But there's nothing, and that says there's nothing you have to do to be a Jew, either [34:00]! So, well, how many people are comfortable with that heavy biological...? Everybody's really happy about that? You can have the worst human being in the world...

Attendee:

You first said comfortable, now you're saying uncomfortable, I don't know if people...

Irwin Kula:

Who's uncomfortable with this notion, that no matter who you are, no matter how bad a human being you are, no matter what you're beliefs are, your mother's a Jew, you're a Jew. How many

people, like- really uncomfortable with that that? How many people- I'm sorry, how many people are really uncomfortable with that? Sure, we're all...You're not, you're not uncomfortable with that at all?

Attendee:

I mean you can be a really bad black person, you're still black, and you can be a really bad Chinese, you're still Chinese.

Irwin Kula:

Oh, good. So for you, Judaism really is a race?

Attendee:

No I'm not saying it's a race, I'm saying if you're a person you're still a person. You can be a rotten person, you're still a person.

Irwin Kula:

Oh well, no one's saying they're not a person. God forbid! A person's a person. I'm saying is the person a Jew?

Attendee:

You can have a terrible mother but they're still your mother.

Attendee:

It's not [35:00] exclusionary; it's not the only way...

Irwin Kula:

Your mother's your mother, well how?

Attendee:

Because of biology...

Attendee:

Biological!

Irwin Kula:

Biological. Because of genetics, right? [**Various attendees:** Right]. A black is a black because of what?

Attendee:

Okay, well...

Irwin Kula:

Genetics. A Chinese...

Attendee:

Your mother's a Jew, you're a Jew.

Irwin Kula:

But because of what?

[several voices speaking at once]

Attendee:

He's a Jew!

Irwin Kula:

But I...I'm, I'm saying he's a Jew! The system says he's a Jew. I'm asking if you're comfortable with Father Daniel being a Jew.

Attendee:

It's not ideal...

Irwin Kula:

Well it's not ideal, but...yeah...Oh we're so scared to disagree with the tradition. God!

[several voices; indistinct]

Irwin Kula:

One person, one person.

Attendee:

...be much more discomfiture if that was the only way to be Jew. Since it's not the only way, it's not that uncomfortable a proposition. I mean after all, there's always the possibility that someone is born a Jew and that's their only entitlement [unclear] could one day [36:00] become a better act- uh, act out [unclear]. It's not the only way to become a Jew.

Irwin Kula:

That's true. We have conversion. And it's funny, you know what we do to converts? I mean, we do a lot of bad things to

converts, but you know what we do to converts? Across the board, from right wing Orthodoxy to left wing Reform, you know what we make them take?

Attendee:

Classes

Irwin Kula:

[unclear] well classes [audience laughter]...In a lot of cases, that's a form of punishment, I do know. You know what we make them take, after they get out of the *mikvah*? An affirmation of faith. Ask any convert from right wing Orthodoxy to left wing Reform is they have to recite the Shema at their entrance ceremony.

[unclear voice from audience] No one's saying that, no one's saying that. But that's committing themselves to belief, too. So [37:00] it's funny that a convert...we have to commit them, we make a very significant point to commit them to a belief system. But a Jew, genetically, is always a Jew. So I think that that tension, that a genetic Jew is always a Jew, which taking the logic to extreme does become racist, by the way.

Attendee:

Why does it become racist?

Irwin Kula:

Because if the only reason you're Jew is genetic...

Attendee:

Well, I...[unclear]

Attendee:

It's not the only reason all Jews...but some Jews

Irwin Kula:

Yeah, well, bottom line, it's the reason all Jews who have Jewish parents are Jewish.

Attendee:

Right, but it's not a reason that all Jews are Jewish. Not all Jews have Jewish mothers.

Irwin Kula:

That's correct. Those people, we make sure that they have the right beliefs and the right actions.

Attendee:

That's an important distinction...

Irwin Kula:

But I think...don't you see a little bit, don't you see a little bit of irony in that? That you can have this, that you can have this...[38:00] Brother Daniel is a good example of this, really. You can have this guy, who says he is Jewish, because his mother was Jewish, he lives like a [unclear]...I mean he lives like a Christian. What if the Israel government decides...the *Halakha* decided [unclear] on that person.

Attendee:

They did...the chief rabbi never had to make a decision...decision is made by the Supreme Court...

Irwin Kula:

Right but I'm saying what if, what would the chief rabbinate say about that?

Attendee:

They didn't, but I think they would have had to have said he was Jew.

Irwin Kula:

Yeah, of course, the *Halakha* says he's Jewish. What if, what did the Supreme Court say? Not Jewish. The Supreme Court's decision was based on what? On fact? It was based on belief. Not biology, right. Belief, not biology. What belief/action would your people...[unclear]. The non-biological...[39:00]

Attendee:

A lot of the... [distant, unclear] the allocation of resources...As, as a community, we don't allocate [unclear]...We allocate a lot of time and effort to try and...if you look at our body of literature, or if you look at our actual activities, spend a lot more time in volunteering for the tribe, [unclear] um, ...that's the only action, of sorts, we have *bris*, we have *shiva*...so we say we're action oriented, because that's where we spend our time, our total resources... [unclear]

Irwin Kula:

Okay, but, my point is that every single one of those actions has as a foundation very serious beliefs. [40:00] And if it, when it doesn't, what happens to those actions? They ordinarily stop being done. And in ages of great openness to the community, where there's tremendous intellectual challenge, that's exactly what happens...when we don't articulate our beliefs.

There's one other, let's just move one so we can have one more [unclear]...There's one other time when this tremendous agitation about beliefs...we've said where there's openness. Does any have a...one other time, that I can, in my sense of Jewish history...[voices from audience].

Okay. Where there's persecution, which means when there's some kind of catastrophe that happens within the Jewish people, and there's a tremendous agitation about beliefs. That's correct. We have a few great examples. The destruction of the First Temple, right? Isaiah, two, okay, [41:00] and Ezekiel, who lived post-destruction of the Temple, in a sense redefined everything we talk about God, and the relationship between God and human beings, and I'm sure during your seminars in the next two years one of the things you will do is study the prophetic

period, so I don't want to go into it now, but there are very fundamental distinctions about what it is to believe as Jew. Same with the first century destruction, right, by the Romans. That the Judaism of 200 CE would be unrecognizable to the Judaism of 200 BCE...The beliefs were so different! And because the beliefs were so different, obviously, what else was different? The practice is so different.

Now, if this is the right theory, and I think it is, okay, it also means that in an age like ours, when we have both openness and key events [42:00]... I think the key events are the Holocaust, obviously, and the establishment of the State of Israel. When we have two key events like that, it's gonna force the system to rethink its basic premises, to rethink its basic beliefs. Which means we're in an age, and this is why what we're doing is so critical, we're in an age that's beginning to redefine what it means to be Jewish. We've gotten away, in the last 35 years, 40 years, without doing it. You know why? 'Cause we've been so busy just surviving, post-Holocaust. Right? How do think we raise money based on Jewish survival [unclear]? All that means when I say that, that's just a fancy way, that's just a simple way of saying you bring in Holocaust, you bring in persecution, you bring in that everybody's against us, you bring

in [43:00] those kinds of issues. [voice from audience]. Every little bit helps, and that helps lot! Right? Jewish survival. What are we learning in fundraising now? Anybody who's active in fundraising in, in, we were just talking, Joe and I were talking yesterday about what's going on in training, in UJA training seminars. All of a sudden you've got a half hour of what, Joe? [**Joe:** Judaica] And you specifically said one thing about Judaica, they talk about what? Covenant. A covenant's not an action word. Covenant's a belief word. Meaning belief is a relationship, it somehow exists between God and Man and that's powered this whole civilization...That is a pretty weird thing to be talking about from a solicitation. Herb, I don't know but, in the solicitations of twenty-five years ago...

Herb:

No.

Irwin Kula:

Okay, and I'm not an expert on that, but he's the expert, probably in the world, on that...Chances are, if you talked about covenant, your wealthy person...I don't know what he would

do. But, you didn't talk about covenant. [44:00] You didn't talk about...Why all of a sudden the talk about beliefs?

Attendee:

Trying to give the solicitor a sense of purpose.

Irwin Kula:

Once you got survival guaranteed, then you don't question that answer? Once survival is guaranteed...and survival, Jewish people's survival is guaranteed. I mean, Herb made a case yesterday. Israel's survival is not at stake. Individual people in [place name] and [place name], and, and when you have a terrorist, they, they are at stake, but the survival of the Jewish people is not at stake right now! So once you get the survival down, what do you got to answer, what questions? Why! Why survive. Is that an action question or belief question? It's a belief question. 'Cause once you answer the question why, then what will you be [unclear]. Then you have to act. Once you answer the question why, then you got a chance of getting some money, to take care of the why... [45:00]

Now [unclear] happens to be, for whatever reason, this is God's little game with us, we're the generation that is

responsible to answer the why. Much like that first century [name]. When [he] left the temple and knew the temple was going to be destroyed, and all those Zealots were going to be destroyed, and [unclear] would be killed at Masada, and he knew it was all over for that whole expression of Jewish life, and he went up to [unsure], he went to Tiberius. [He] knew, unfortunately he probably wasn't so happy about it, okay that he was going to have to redefine Judaism. You know how long it took? Well the Talmud, remember [unclear]...when was the Jerusalem [unclear] the Babylonian Talmud was finished when? 500, 550. That, in a sense, was the encyclopedia of Judaism, belief, action, everything. It's not systematic, so we get more action stuff we think than belief, but that's only because it's not systematic. But, at 550, you've got the Judaism debate that basically lasted until 1750, 1720. [46:00] [unclear]. Took four hundred years. Now, one...one of the things I learned from Herb is that history moves, moves faster once we hit tech- modernity, with technology and communications, and all the kinds of things we have that make this modern. History itself moves faster. So, four hundred years of movement between 200 and 550 or 200 and 600, may be equal to fifty years of movement in this age. Is that...that's one of the things I learned, and it makes a lot of

sense. You know, it took the Babylonian Talmud [unclear] to get to Palestine, a hell of a lot more of than it takes to get a message that's figured out in a university in New York to Houston. And I learned that this week as I left a very important part of my work in New York. I got here in Houston at twelve o'clock, and I had it by fax machine about twenty five minutes later. It's an amazing thing. So I learned, yeah, history is compressed [47:00]. So instead of a...[recording goes silent] ...generation together, and every city in this country, and we hope it grows past the cities we're in now. I better get these young people together, and better get them thinking about the why, or we're gonna be in a heap of trouble...That's the stakes of what we're now going to do for the rest of this session. We're gonna begin the 'Why.' And if we don't come up with a good Why, okay, or at least the beginnings of a Why, or at least the discomfort of not having a Why yet, we are in very big trouble. It's not only going to happen here, but we're talking about [unclear], and the truth is this is a wonderful exercise for all of the Jewish people to be doing here, and it's probably the exercise [48:00] that happened around Jochannan's academy...and it's probably the exercise that happened in Maimonides's

discussion rooms with his students. It happened at all those [37:00] important moments in history, and that's one of the moments we're living in now.

So now let's go to the 'Why.' Now how do you start, in Judaism, with answering a question like *Why*? How do you start? [voice from audience] Yeah, you ask another question. Well, let's say that we got to the bottom line question, how do we do it? Well there, it seems to me there are two approaches to answering a question like why. We can open up the law, right, or we can say, "What do you think?" And we can make a big list and argue about it. Right? What's the problem with that approach? [voice from audience] Ha, too much like [unclear]. What's the problem with that approach? [voice from audience]. I dunno, maybe we can come up with a very nice list. I bet you we can come up, maybe even with the...[49:00] well, we'll see about the other approach. We can come up with a list and I bet you most of the people here would agree on, and which would be very powerful and which would, we can send around and get people to talk about it, it would really be very effective. What's the problem with doing that? [voices from audience] It's...authority. Okay...[voices from audience] Maybe instead of authority, let me use the word legitimacy. In some sense, from what we understand

about Judaism, it would be somewhat illegitimate, because it starts here as opposed to starting where?

Attendee:

Well, [unclear], with the ideas that you would come up with would be, what, what, what was in the Bible...

Irwin Kula:

Oh, okay.

Attendee:

The the *why* was answered thirty-five hundred years ago, we just...

Irwin Kula:

Similar Whys, right? We have to rework the Whys. Good. So what really you're saying is, what we have to do [50:00] is begin at the beginning in some sense, look at all the answers to the Whys up to now, reinterpret some of those Whys, strike out some of those Whys, recast some of those Whys, rework some of those Whys, until we have the answers to the Whys that fit our generation. Okay? So those- to make it continuous somehow with

Moses at Sinai, we have to at least start by looking at the answers that were given there. That's why, what do we do most in these sessions? We study texts. We don't just bullshit around. We- that's what they do in synagogues, by the way, for the most part, and some classes. They bullshit around. What do you believe? [indistinct voice from crowd].

No. Jews decide what they believe based on an interaction between themselves and their texts, whatever those texts are. That text can be a Kaufman, that text can be Exodus, that text can be [51:00] Kaplan, that text can be Maimonides. Doesn't make a difference what the text is, but an interaction with the texts. So we're gonna start with what is the classic formulation of articles of faith, or principles, and that is Maimonides, if you open your...your dogma article, there's one thing that's great about this article- it's a terrible article [audience laughter], but there's one thing that's great about the article...is that, it's short, that's a great thing, right, especially post-Kaufman! I think, when I saw what Herb gave you, okay, I had no chance of me getting you to read anything that was like that. So I figured, I, I take it easy on 'em. But here's the funny thing about that article, the first page and a half deals with proving one issue, what is that? That Judaism

has? No dogma. The rest of the article deals with what? Dogmas of Judaism. The guy, Menachem Kellner, I know Menachem Kellner...he just couldn't accept the fact that Judaism has dogma, so he writes this whole article about dogma, prefacing it [52:00] by saying Jews have no dogma. The article should have been over after the first page. And he didn't unpack Kreskas, and he didn't unpack Albo, and he didn't unpack [unclear], that he didn't unpack, he didn't unpack anybody, who all have dogmas, in the notion of beliefs, intents, they are the basis to the system.

Okay, let's look at...in just a one sentence review, what we said is Judaism does have dogma, that it's the foundation of any system of life. Any system of life has to say things about God, has to say things about the world, has to say fundamental things about man that you believe out of which emerges actions. We said that struggle to articulate beliefs, basically happens most when you can interact with society and the challenges of society, and when there are fundamental, catastrophic [53:00] events externally that happen to the Jewish people, forces us to reevaluate, and finally we said, we're in that age. And we're in that age in a very serious sense, 'cause we maybe only have fifty years...to being to rearticulate. By the way, if you ever

read [unclear] book called *Sacred Survival*, I think it's on the [unclear] reading list, *Sacred Survival* by Jonathan Woocher...in which he talks about civil Judaism. And he says in that, that civil Judaism is the kind of Judaism that's emerging in Europe, and he says when a civil Judaism be able to be transmitted to the next generation, will be dependent on whether it can develop a, a system of beliefs that they could articulate that underlies civil Judaism. The whole last chapter, you must read the last chapter in that book...the first, be sure, you have to read the first chapter and the last chapter. Everything else in between you know, intuitively. Okay, it's a very important book to read.

[54:00]

Attendee:

...question on your comment that we're at that age. Why are, why are we in that age?

Irwin Kula:

Okay. We're at, these are some of the reasons we're in that age. One, is that we have never lived in a society that is more open than America, in the history of Jewish people. Would you agree with that? Never in the history of the Jews have we lived

in such an open society. So automatically, the challenge is to articulate beliefs that distinguishes us from a non-Jew become critical. Okay? So that's one reason. The second is, we had experienced in, the generation before us, not really our generation, the two most significant events in Jewish history since the destruction of the Second Temple, and that is the Holocaust, which was as great a catastrophe, if not greater, than the destruction of the Temple; and second, the establishment of the State of Israel, which changes the categories of Judaism. When was the last time we had a state? Sev- sixty-odd, six, seventy, and even, listen, truth is even in that...beginning of the 1st Century, [55:00] it's not like we had a great state. Okay? I mean, Rome was really running it. So we haven't had a state, and we haven't had all the things that power means and sovereignty means and... it's changed the categories of the way we think about Judaism. And if you don't believe that, why do we have Jews who don't observe the Shabbat, who don't observe kashrut, who don't observe any of the things that have... and who don't believe any of the things that Jews have believed for the last 2000 years, but somehow, because they work night after night for the State of Israel, we recognize as good Jews and we recognize as people who have a Jewish, a strong

Jewish identity. It's a very interesting phenomenon. It indicates that there's something happening in our era, there's a redefinition going on. The same kind of redefinition that happened in the 1st Century.

So the stakes, I believe, are very high. Also, I mean, here's an example: why does it, what does a thing like the Wexner Heritage Foundation happen? It only happens 'cause we... people who are making decisions to have this thing [56:00] believe we're in a very serious...we got some serious issues to address, and the stakes are pretty high. So high, that we have to do it in every city, we have to call and spend time and incredible amounts of money...that's how high the stakes. Not to get you to raise money. We don't ask you for one penny. Probably the only foundation in the United States of America that doesn't ask its participants for money, Jewish foundation I mean. All we want you to do is think about what? Ideas. We don't even really ask you to do anything. We didn't demand that you pray yesterday. We gave an opportunity for you to experience prayer. Chose not to pray, we wouldn't have thrown you out of the program. We don't demand that you keep kosher. We don't demand that you wear a yarmulke. We can't dis- if you came to last- yesterday without a yarmulke to prayer, no one would have said,

I wouldn't have said anything to you. Come without a *tallis*... 'cause what are we about? We're about ideas... [57:00] right? So that all these are indications, and I go up, I can give you a list of thousands... all these are indications that we're living in some kind of different time.

Okay, so now, look at the dogma, look at the article on dogma, on page... 143. It's good to, like I say, let's, we're just gonna start with Maimonides. What time is it?

Attendee:

It's twenty after ten.

Irwin Kula:

Okay, great... Okay. These are Maimonides thirteen principles, okay, we're starting with them, and... let's go through them, see what Maimonides meant by them, and I'll have to help you with that, and then see if we can put it on the board as something that ought to be entertained in the list that, by twelve o'clock, we will have created. Okay?

What's the first one? [audience response] God exists. Okay. [58:00] Always start with one of the most difficult ones, that

God exists. What does Maimonides mean? [voice from audience] It doesn't say that.

Attendee:

...implicit in the word God is the...concept of an omnipotent creator, who created time and the world and the universe, and created us, and, uh...[unclear]

Irwin Kula:

Okay, how many people are comfortable with that? How many people are comfortable with the notion that God exists? How many people are ready to say, "I believe in God"? By the way, it, Maimonides [unclear] [speaking Hebrew], 'I believe in perfect faith,' although that wasn't his language, that was later language. I always say, but it says, "I believe in perfect faith that...", for me already the, after, anything after 'that' is problematic, because to me the 'perfect' is the problem. Right? [59:00] 'I have perfect faith.' Anyone here have perfect faith, in anything? No, that's one of the casualties of modernity, we don't have any perfect faith in anything. So we just, we can write it, 'I tentatively believe in...' [audience laughs], and

I'm willing to, you know, stake some of my actions and some of my life on.

So what do we say about 'God exists'? Should we put it on the board, and come back to it? Or do we want to strike it right away? How many people comfortable with striking 'God exists' right away? Alright, we're not ready to do that! [laughs]

Attendee:

This is basic, is it not? Or am I crazy, or what? This is basic.

Irwin Kula:

Any responses?

Attendee:

[unclear]

Irwin Kula:

[unclear]

Attendee:

What is there if we don't have God? Really? There's got to be something...

Attendee:

[unclear] higher moral authority...

Irwin Kula:

One person, one person!

Attendee:

You said [unclear] definition [1:00:00] of dogma there's no authoritatively...there's no authority...well, if you don't have God as the ultimate authority, if you don't believe God exists, why believe anything about what happened at Sinai...

Irwin Kula:

Okay, so you're making a case to believe that God exists?

Attendee:

Absolutely.

Irwin Kula:

Okay, so I- David's making the case that God does exist.
Gary? [speaker distant from microphone] Okay, so for you then,
God as a moral authority, distinguishes a moral set of beliefs
from an immoral set of beliefs?

Attendee:

Without a God there's no...

Irwin Kula:

There's no what? Are atheists all immoral?

Attendee:

Some are and some aren't.

Irwin Kula:

Some are and some aren't. And some believers in God are and
aren't either. Is there a necessary connection between God and
morality? [1:01:00]

Attendee:

Yes! Yes.

Irwin Kula:

Is there?

Attendee:

It makes it not relative...I mean, our friend in California, uh, who's the expert on non-relative morality...he said it's relative to an age if you don't go back to a belief in God.

Irwin Kula:

Okay. Dennis Prager, who I think Joe is referring to, Dennis Prager, makes an unbelievably articulate, and I could never match him in this area, but an unbelievably articulate argument that God as a moral base, without God as a moral base you have [Hebrew], 'everybody can do what they feel is right.' What do we call that? Anarchy.

Attendee:

Didn't I say that once before...[woman laughs]

Irwin Kula:

That's because really deep down I am an anarchist. I repress it all. But, so, a lot of us are uncomfortable without

God...because God exists means God as moral [1:02:00] arbiter. And that doesn't mean that God says, "Do this!" or "Do that!" But, in our understanding of God, we use that as an authority. Okay? By the way, that was a really radical idea, right? In Biblical times, God and morality was detached for most peoples. Right? Think of the Noah story. The Noah story was, the Noah story has its parallels in other cultures. One of the most famous is called the Epic of Gilgamesh, which we're gonna study about these things during the, during the next few seminars. But, the Epic of Gilgamesh says, you know why the world was destroyed? Because people were making too much noise and disturbing the gods. In Noah's story, why are the people destroyed? People are immoral. So the Jewish authors of the Bible, or for those people who are not comfortable with that, the Jewish Author, with a capital A, of the Bible - makes no difference to me...[1:03:00] posited that this connection between God and morality. It's a very radical thing.

Okay, so we gonna put up 'God exists.' I guess I need...unless, I would love to hear, does somebody have a strong objection?

Attendee:

Well, I, not a strong objection...

Irwin Kula:

Oh, I'm not gonna tell you how to use both sides [audience laughter]

Attendee:

...on the one hand. On the hand, about this morality issue, every time when I talk about God existing, the morality issue comes up that troubles me, because what is involved in the morality issue, I'm never sure we're referring to the dogma of our beliefs or the way we should behave, or is a no-no to everybody who's not Jewish that that's why they should behave a certain way?

Irwin Kula:

Okay, so what you're saying is there, in, even in all beliefs, there are dangers when the beliefs are misunderstood. The notion that God is the arbiter or ultimate ground for morality can, if used improperly, wind up being very judgmental [1:04:00] on other peoples who have different systems of morality. Okay. And I, that, that's a fair criticism, which

means there are gonna have to be checks and balances within our belief system.

Attendee:

I think [name?] question may be more specific...

Attendee:

I...you're exactly right. Also, kind of the flip side of survival religion versus the why be Jewish...

Irwin Kula:

Good, right, and these are, again, all...every time, it seems like every time I'm talking to you, we always find the what, what we call again the dialectic. We got one side but it's left to the extreme, you need a corrective. So I think that that's a very good point, a very good point. What we can say is that all cultures do have senses of morality. In all cultures murder is wrong, it's just how you define murder. In all cultures theft is wrong, it's just how you define theft. So there is some kind of ground of morality that transcends the human mind, Prager would say. And that...fundamentally is that God exists.

Okay, so, any, any arguments? [1:05:00] I mean, I don't wanna, I don't wanna put anything on the board that this group doesn't come to consensus about. Alright.

Attendee:

I can't really [distant from microphone...] It seems to me that even if you take a complete atheist viewpoint, if you still accept the moral system, if you still understand the wisdom, the behavioral patterns that are dictated by reading and interpreting what the Torah is saying to you...

Irwin Kula:

Uh huh.

Attendee:

...you can still be a wonderful Jew. I mean...I'm not saying that God does or doesn't exist, I'm just saying that it's not necessarily the ultimate decision making factor.

Irwin Kula:

Okay, so you're saying, let's have two lists. Let's have a list of things that are necessary, right, you know necessary and

sufficient. There are two different kinds of things. But let's have a list, let's have a list of things that are absolutely necessary, and let's have another list of things that [1:06:00] we strongly recommend. Okay? You can have a person who buys into the whole system, who says, "well, this is a morality that rules me, individually. It makes sense to me, individually. It seems like what goodness is, to me, individually. And therefore, I am going to adopt it." And that person surely is a good Jew.

Attendee:

How can you be a good Jew if you don't believe in the Ten Commandments?

Irwin Kula:

No, he said, he's saying just the opposite. He's saying, believe in the Ten Commandments, okay. It doesn't say in the Ten Commandment that God gave him, that that's one of the things you have to believe. Says, believe in all the actions, here, here's what he's saying....I think this is what you're saying, that you have a human being who...is born Jewish, let's say that way, okay, who observes most of the rituals and, and ethical practices of Judaism, and believes that they're, that they're

really valuable, and they move him individually, and he adopts them because individually they sound right, they [1:07:00] may even give him pleasure...But the person says, "listen, God...uh, creation of man, we happen to be, we were a kind of people that really worked hard, working out a system that would be for the betterment of man, it came out of our own minds...And it's a good system...God? Don't need God." And that person would be, what you're saying, that person I think we would say is...Jewish, and a good Jew. Maybe even a great Jew, maybe we need more Jews like that. Is that, did I, fairly, did I do it?

Attendee:

Yeah...you keep running it through, you get to some real intellectual abstract concepts, maybe that's how you [unclear] God exists, but...um...

Irwin Kula:

By the way, that's not...so radical. Right? Mordecai Kaplan said, "supernatural God? What are you talking about?! Come on, guys, it's time to grow up..." Okay, by the way, he was very hard on people who studied at temple [1:08:00]. Most of the peop-, he taught at the seminary forty years, most of the peop-

the, which is a conservative movement, and most of the people who were in the seminary in the forty years that he taught came out of Yeshiva. And I from what I hear, and I obviously never studied with Mordecai Kaplan, what he would do in the first three or four weeks of the class, would abuse anyone who believed that God dictated the Torah. Abuse people! He would call them, "you're stupid!" And then he would reconstru- and in the last half of this year he would reconstruct, reconstruction there, he would reconstruct Jewish beliefs, based on the understanding that all peoples have beliefs, that the beliefs come from the internal dynamics of a people, or what he called the civilization, that's how civilization is created. They come from the inside, there's a people's ethos, a people's...they're the things that make us up as people. And that God is the power within, that pushes towards goodness, that pushes towards [1:09:00] perfection, that pushes towards development of civilization. That is not, by the way, probably most Jews believe a God kind of like that, shows the influence Kaplan's beliefs had. So...complete rejection of...that's why they burned his books, by the way. Lot of people didn't like that idea!

Attendee:

I, I have a problem. I know God, I mean I believe, I think, that God exists. But he's not always there. I mean, I don't understand the concept of the Holocaust where, you know, God said, it's a war, it's what man did to man. You know? I think he should have been there. I mean, I guess, I was disappointed in God that he didn't do something. I know half the people came out saying their faith made them survive. I think I would have been one of the ones coming out saying, you know, where was God when we needed him?

Irwin Kula:

Good, very honest.

Attendee:

So, I have a problem with [1:10:00] his always being there.

Irwin Kula:

Okay, so you're, you're saying, if I can rephrase, that, you're not going to take, it's not that you don't say God exists, is that you're very troubled by God's hiding, okay, what Buber called - by the way, I'm using all these names, not to show off at all, I'm using all these names because these are the

people who struggled with beliefs, and it's those struggles that determine the kind of Jewish people we are. That's what I'm trying to get across; that's only reason I'm using these names. Martin Buber called that the eclipse of God. What's an eclipse? Hidden, right? Richard Rubenstein called it the death of God. Mordecai Kaplan, who really could never deal with the issue of, of the Holocaust, in a sense what he would say was, "hey listen, guys, you know, there comes a point where God hides himself so much...if God hides himself [1:11:00] 99.99999999 percent of the time, you know that's not such a big difference between that and a hundred percent." If he hides himself a hundred percent of the time...for all practical purposes what? For all practical purposes what? Don't worry I [unclear]...Doesn't exist. So, the problem of evil has really been a serious problem. In the Bible they have the problem of evil, too. What's the book that deals with the problem of evil? [audience response] Good, Job. Right? So, this is not a new problem, the problem of evil, and it's really, it's really agitated the Jewish people. So we're saying is...so, you're saying a hiding a God, you're saying a God that's a very different kind of God, a kind that maybe emerges within you as opposed to a supernatural God. Then we have those who say a supernatural God...

Attendee:

What's the different in what Ellen's talking about and what we [1:12:00] read in Genesis? Where God gives and takes away...I mean that's been going on...

Irwin Kula:

The hiding, and the presence, and the hiding, and the presence? Okay...

Attendee:

I mean yesterday we talked about...

Irwin Kula:

Right, I think that that's a fair reading of the text. Yitz Greenburg, modern Jewish philosopher, completely agitated about Jewish beliefs, what does he say? He says that God hides, not God hides, God steps back, [Hebrew] is to, uh, contract. God can keep stepping back, and as he steps back, we have more power, right? Just like a parent continually steps back from his child so his child can do what? Grow up. And a parent who does not step back on a child, what do they do to that child? What?

Smother that child; that child becomes pathological. So
[01:13:00] [distortion, recording skips]...God continuously
steps back.

Now why is Yitz criticized so vehemently by so many people?
Because take that to its logical conclusion. If I keep stepping
back, where am I gonna wind up? Out. That's, that's why he's
considered by some people a heretic. 'Cause the logical
conclusion of the statement is that God, first of all like all
parents, what happens to all parents, no matter what? They die.
So the logical conclusion of Yitz's statement, and he fights
this, but his logical conclusion, he just has to live with it,
is that God dies. And ultimately we become mature, fully
responsible, powerful human beings, with infinite dignity and
infinite...value, and recognize that about each other.

Attendee:

The problem I have in terms of the issue of a God
intervening in history is that I'm, personally [1:14:00] feel
very bad and angry about the Holocaust, but I don't feel angry
about my sense, about God. I'm angry at my parents' generation
that they didn't do everything they could have to have prevented

it, or mitigated it, from happening. I don't, in terms of my worldview, I didn't expect...

Irwin Kula:

...God to...

Attendee:

...that God would have blown up the railroad tracks to Auschwitz. In my opinion, men were capable of blowing up the tracks to Auschwitz, and unfortunately, they didn't!

Irwin Kula:

Okay, great. So in other words, God...the Holocaust is not a theological problem for you at all. [**Attendee responds:** No!] It's a man problem.

Attendee:

Yeah, it's a hundred percent a man problem.

Irwin Kula:

Good. By the way, that's a, that's a very powerful response. Right? I mean that's what [1:15:00] Eliezer Berkowitz

says, and a lot of theologians say, "listen, an earthquake is a far more problematic issue for God than the Holocaust."

Attendee:

But if God was there at other times. You know, I mean, he was there in Sodom, and Noah...You know, why did he choose this time not to be there? I mean, when we've needed him the most?

Irwin Kula:

And that's the theological problem. You're seeing all these debates about God, it's great.

Attendee:

But he wasn't there at the time of the Inquisition! I mean, let's look at some history!

Irwin Kula:

Good. So you're saying that that kind of, that kind of God response within history directly, for you ended when? Look at history, history is very important. Ended when? [audience murmurs] Good. Think about, you wrote a track record...it stopped when? Well you already said Inquisition, so, so it

didn't go past that. Before that? Okay...okay! The tradition says, and I think that it's a fair thing, with the end of prophecy, God's [1:16:00] active role in history or that kind of changing history, the hand coming into the middle [Hebrew]. The right hand, the outstretched arm, okay, coming into history and splitting seas. That kind of...stopped.

Attendee:

Why?

Attendee:

Tied historically to prophecy and the destruction of the First Temple...

Irwin Kula:

Prophecy, the destruction of the First Temple, literary prophecy, talk about, you know the list, Amos, Isaiah, all those prophets, the eighth, seventh, and sixth centuries, okay, both post- and pre-. Both post, pre-destruction of the First Temple, and post destruction of the Temple. Although they perceived God destroying the Temple. In other words, they developed a theology in which the enemy was the rod of God.

Attendee:

So what caused him to change?

Irwin Kula:

You ask, you ask him, I mean I don't know from God's perspective. But, what do you think?

Attendee:

I don't know...[indistinct] [1:17:00]

Attendee:

He gave us the tools and said, "go for it."

Irwin Kula:

He's like a parent. Gives us the tools and said "go."

Attendee:

You have different generations growing up, at some point he needs to come back and reteach...

Irwin Kula:

Well, your child becomes 30, right, and screws up...it's very hard to come back and reteach, right?

Attendee:

It's hard to let go.

Irwin Kula:

Yeah, I always wondered about that. If he's a... By the way, what we're doing right now is debating the issue of God, much like it's been debated for 2000 years. We have some new ideas, I mean Kaplan's is a new idea, Yitz's is a little bit of a new idea.

Attendee:

Since we started this particular discussion, we've tried to look at Maimonides's thirteen principles, which one were we gonna put on the board...I think the issue of the Holocaust attacks most on number eleven, that God is, that God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked. So probably, for the sake of moving it along [1:18:00], I'd like to propose that we set the first four that are listed there [laughter].

Irwin Kula:

...so you're ready to accept God exists, God is one, God is incorporeal...I think everybody agrees, agrees, if we believe God exists, God is incorporeal, that means that God doesn't have a body; that there's not an old man sitting with a beard, with a yarmulke and a *tallis* hanging out up there. And if God is ontologically prior to the world, that all, all that...

Attendee:

What does ontologically mean?

Irwin Kula:

Ontologically means, from a *being* perspective. All that means is that, is that God is before time. Okay, that nothing created God, is what it means.

Attendee:

That God is first and then he created...

Irwin Kula:

Right, right. It's just a fancy way of saying God preceded every single thing, including time itself.

Attendee:

It doesn't say...

Irwin Kula:

That's the creation.

Attendee:

But it doesn't say that you have to take creation literally, I mean is...

Irwin Kula:

Creation literally? What does that mean?

Attendee:

Meaning, we haven't got to the point that whether or not you accept that the Earth was created in six days...

Irwin Kula:

Oh no no no, Maimonides would say if you believe that you're a fool. So, even that was already in the twelve hundreds [1:19:00]. No, all he said is, you have to believe is that God

precedes everything and God cause- and God somehow causes, what ever 'causes' means. Okay, that's very open. Let's, so we just wanna put one to four?

Attendee:

I'd like to give a reason why. I mean, the, the people...if you look at existence today, and science today looks at existence today and also how we got to here, the current non-religious theory goes back to the Big Bang but nobody's been able to say what puts the Big Bang in force, so there are, the scientists that reach the roots of belief in God by saying that the Big Bang is a concept, something had to put that in force. So, that's why, before we get into the qualities of God, is he merciful or not merciful...

Irwin Kula:

Oh, we're not going to do that today.

Attendee:

Okay. Not even on number eleven?

Irwin Kula:

Yeah, I guess we'll have to hear a little bit...

Attendee:

That's why I think that the first four, the Holocaust doesn't challenge the first four.

Irwin Kula:

The same way it challenges number eleven? That's fair. So, should just put, what, could...[laughter] Do I hear a second?

[1:20:00]

Attendee:

A discussion.

Irwin Kula:

Okay, we're gonna discuss that motion.

Attendee:

I want to go back to [unsure], which is whether or not...I mean, if God exists, sure two, three, and four follow, but even if you can't accept number one, you can still accept the rest of Jewish life, practice, and be part of the Jewish faith, without

any particular, I mean you may have a problem, but you can do it, and there's no...

Irwin Kula:

What kind of problem?

Attendee:

Personally, when I say you have a problem with it, obviously it'd cause you some anxiety, because it doesn't seem to fit in with a lot of the things you do or things you say, it's hard to say *Baruch atah Adonai* if you don't know Adonai is there. But ...So, that is the problem, but I think that you can still say *Baruch atah Adonai*, not everybody is sure Adonai is there.

Irwin Kula:

Okay. Not being sure and believing that he's not there are two different things. One is doubt [1:21:00] and one is already no doubt about not being there. So that's imp-, that's, right? That's a distinction.

Attendee:

Okay, I mean, you, sure. And, and, but I don't think either way, even if you're sure he's not there, you can still say it for other reasons because, because you do it, because [unclear], whatever it is, and you're still part of it, you're still part of it, and it's the part that [indistinct, noise in the microphone]...

Irwin Kula:

Alright, let's put one to four, we'll call them the God Principles; by the way, Albo did do exactly that, by the way. He said that God, all of, Maimonides, he narrowed down Maimonides' three, one two four were all one.

Attendee:

Wait, Irwin?

Irwin Kula:

Yeah.

Attendee:

For the same reason I raised the issue on number one, number four becomes problematic.

Irwin Kula:

Number four is that...okay.

Attendee:

Because if, if, what we're saying...

Irwin Kula:

Then we created God, is what you're...

Attendee:

Well, yeah.

Irwin Kula:

Okay. So, one to four either...what did you say, there was a good, there was good, what was the language you used? It was [1:22:00] recommended, is that what you said, highly recommended! Okay, it's funny to put God in the highly recommended. [laughter]. Okay, we'll put God as highly recommended. By the way, what we do have to recognize is that if God falls into the highly recommended category as opposed to the necessary category...it does necessitate heavy reinterpretation

of the tradition. Right? Because, it's very nice to say that because your Bubbe said *Baruch atah Adonai* you can say *Baruch atah Adonai*, and that may work two generations, but I'm not sure that will work eight generations. Okay? So there will come a time where "highly recommended" necessitates very serious revision in the system. That's perfectly legitimate! I have no problem with that. You know, we did sacrifices for a thousand years, and then we woke up one day, the temple wasn't there, we had to say, "uh-oh!" and we [unclear] prayer, which is a pretty radical substitute for sacrifice. So I have no problem with very serious revision, but what we have to understand is that the stakes are very high...[1:23:00]

Attendee:

Let me throw in a, a...

Irwin Kula:

Alright, so we'll put a necessary one to four, too. We'll have two lists. Uh, one person.

Attendee:

A whole different concept of faith [unclear]...a personalized kind of deal. Y'all mentioned a, the lack of evidence [distant, hard to hear, Kula laughs]...uh, the superstition, plague if you will, in our acceptance of one through four...

Irwin Kula:

I don't know, you have to answer that, I don't know.

Attendee:

[unclear]

Irwin Kula:

No, I'm talking about...Rambam, there's no superstition. But he didn't ask about Rambam, he asked about us. Okay? Rambam, well, when you say logic, it's not logical for Rambam. What Rambam says is there are two kinds of truths. There are truths that can be demonstrated logically, from premise to premise to premise; and there are truths that one accepts from tradition. Whenever there are truths that can be demonstrated logically step by step, and they come in conflict with the tradition [1:24:00], the tradition must be reinterpreted, because there's

no way that the tradition can be illogical from a step by step perspective. There are, however, a whole set of things about life that cannot be proved logically, or what we'll call demonstratively, step by step by step.

Once one doesn't have those kind of proofs, there are other ways in which one accepts truth. One, Rambam calls, is authority or tradition. God as creator, Maimonides, there are two, there were two basic approaches to God in Maimonides' time. One was that God created, and one was that God had nothing to do with creation. God was just eternal, and there was no- the world was eternal and there was no creation. That was the Aristotelian view. What Maimonides showed was that it was impossible to prove demonstrably, step by step, that the world was either eternal or that the world was created. And so when he said since there's no philosophical proof, let us, for the sake of *our* tradition [1:25:00] and for *our* system's development, accept God's creation, as creator, because of all of the things that it says. Right? God as creator says that there's purpose, that we're not an accident. Those are very fundamental values. Right? I mean, how many people like to think that they're an accident, as opposed to purposeful? I happen to have been an accident [audience laughs], so, I, I have worked out a whole theology on

accidents. I feel it's really great...it is really great to have been conceived in a moment of passion, rather than preplanned package, but...I guess for the world, that's not such a great theology. For me, it kind of makes me smile. But my daughter was planned, so she's not going to be able to say that. But...what's more comfortable? That the world is just, it's been here, and that's the way it is; or that there's a purpose behind the whole thing? What do you think's been the driving force in Jewish...[unclear] Purpose, right?

What, I mean...Everything's been purpose. [1:26:00] The most assimilated Jew who says, "But I'm Jewish," is saying, "But there...there's some purpose!" That's really what, I think, Maimonides was saying. You know what's very interesting about Maimonides is what he says, if you can't prove it, you're allowed to have other truths that you accept for different reasons, but if you can prove it according to the canons, the philosophical rules of the time, it *must* be parallel to what the tradition says, and you're forced to reinterpret the tradition, which is why the whole first part of the *Guide for the Perplexed*, he deals with language. All the language in the Bible is problematic. Give me one sentence in the Bible that's problematic to you understood literally, according to the canons

of the logic of our time, let alone Maimonides's. You gave one: God created the world in...? Six days. Right. A lot of people believe that, and Maimonides, a lot more people believed it around his- said you're stupid if you believe that. By the way, he was [unclear] abusive teachers; [1:27:00] probably one of the great abusive teachers in the history of Judaism. I mean regularly, on every page of the Guide, he calls people ignorant, and he had the most wrath for those who are religious, quotation marks. He hated the religious of his time, because they accepted a lot of things based on traditions as opposed to based on philosophical proofs, and a structured, ordered, way of believing. And he couldn't stand them. He called them the people who are outside the castle walking backwards, and inside the castle was God. Can you imagine walking backward- by the way, you know who he said that, those were the people who only studied Talmud. I think he would die if he lived in Jerusalem today.

Okay, so, for Maimonides, and this gets back to, this really gets back to your point, not superstition at all. Superstition is, that's, that's for the ignorant fools. We're leadership [1:28:00], we're not ignorant fools. So, I don't know how much is superstition. What I do know is that...Maimonides

posited God because there had to be purpose in the world, there had to be direction in the world.

Attendee:

So why is it necessary...[unclear]

Irwin Kula:

Why is it what?

Attendee:

Why is it not necessary to believe in God?

Kula

Well, I, I don't know, she, she wasn't comfortable with putting it down as necessary. And because plenty of people in the world...

Attendee:

...people in the world who do not come forward and say, "I believe in God," and yet fully participate in this century's activity of Jewish participation...

Irwin Kula:

Fully participate, is that what you said?

Attendee:

Fully participate. I'm not, I'm not even talking about the...

Irwin Kula:

She's making a sociological observation of the Jewish people. And we're trying to create a list that the Jewish peoples, that we can go out, this group in Houston can go out and say, "listen, there are some fundamental beliefs that we have to believe, that underpin the whole system! And if we don't start teaching them, and arguing about them, and [1:29:00] looking at texts about them, the system's gonna fall apart!" So, she's not ready to put that in the necessary...although maybe, maybe, in that sense, we're gonna have to talk about it in very serious ways that should be under the necessary.

Attendee:

But I think...My guess is that no matter where you come out on it...you can still participate. I mean, when the dialectic is

all done, you're still gonna be able to participate without making that leap of faith to "God is this," in whatever form, be it active in history, be it passive in history, be it through humans, be it humans determining what direction we're going by ourselves without God telling us. I mean, you may come back and redefine it in places, it may end up as commandments when it's all done. But, to start with that as the premise, you turn off, I don't know if it's 20% or 80%, but it turns away a whole lot of people who can be actively involved in this thing called being Jewish.

Irwin Kula:

Okay, I think that, what I'd like to do is this [1:30:00]. I'm gonna try to get, I always like to create the consensus. I think what we can do is this. It is...I'm gonna cross out highly recommended, that's too complicated anyhow. What I'm gonna do, is I'm gonna put one to four necessary, but...but what I'm gonna put is "redefinition," "reinterpretation," "...of God." If on the agenda for leadership of the American Jewish community, and leadership of Jews, what's necessary is some redefinition, reinterpretation, reevaluation, of God's role in the whole

scheme of things. That, I think, is what UJA is doing by giving you a half hour of covenant. Gary, you...?

Attendee:

I just want to say, one to four are the anchors to everything, but without...

Irwin Kula:

But that's, I'll just, so you know...[1:31:00]

Attendee:

Now it's not that [unclear] It's all...I agree with Prager, what's good for you is good for you, what's good for me is good for me, there's no reason for future generations to go along and follow the Commandments, because there's nothing to tie them. [unclear; distant from microphone]...but, you know, the majority of cultures...[unclear] Christian do the same thing, and is still a good person. Absolutely true. There's got to be an anchor to everything and that's what that is and that's why if it's necessary to let that go, then we're gonna let everything else go with it.

Irwin Kula:

Okay. We have two [unclear]...We're gonna move on. We have two different opinions. They really, what makes them similar is that, what you wanna do is say God may well be the anchor but if we talk about that right now without really understanding people's values and grappling with redefinitions and all that, we are gonna turn off a lot of people, and recognizing that we'll end up excluding a lot of people who aren't good Jews. Okay, so what I'm calling for [1:32:00] is a serious commitment to begin to talk about this belief. 'Cause there's a lot to talk about. Last comment on this then we'll move on.

Attendee:

I don't necessarily [unclear]. I mean I am more comfortable with saying, teach 'em um, what exists already, not each generation reinterprets, um, you know, you say...[unclear]

Irwin Kula:

No, no, I didn't say that...But Maimonides's God was different from Rabbi Akiva's God, wasn't it?

Attendee:

I don't know.

Irwin Kula:

Take a guess.

Attendee:

What did you say?

Irwin Kula:

Maimonides's God was very different. Surely Maimonides's God was very different than Moses's God.

Attendee:

Different in what respects? [unclear]

Irwin Kula:

No, that, creator...Omnipotence, omnipotence is not a given in the Jewish tradition [1:33:00]. Kreska said God wasn't omnipotent, that God gave [unclear]...says that God's not omnipotent, God gave up one of his powers when he created man, gave him freedom of will. So, see we gave one understanding of God that's kind of the supernatural, all powerful, all

knowledgeable God, but there are a lot of different definitions of God. That's what...and I don't mean to say that redefinition means that it's a brand new God! All I'm saying is that the possibilities of understanding God are so unbelievably wide that we've just begun to understand God. That's all. I don't mean to say that it's going to be a radically different God, or it's not the same God. It's just...

Attendee:

You know what might be a better way of looking at it now, it helps me with it...

Irwin Kula:

Okay.

Attendee:

God is God, and God is, is beyond our comprehension of pre-destiny and what it's all about. We may approach him in different ways and maybe [unclear] between generations, but the entity God has got to be transcendent [1:34:00]...

END OF AUDIO FILE [01:34:05]



Herbert A. Friedman Collection, C-7405 to C-7406. American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.