

A Conversation with RUTH WISSE

Ruth Wisse Ruth Wisse is Research Professor of Yiddish and Comparative Literature at Harvard and a Distinguished Senior Fellow of the Tikvah Fund. In this conversation, Kristol and Wisse discuss the politics of anti-Semitism, why Israel is under attack in our universities, and the study of Yiddish literature. Wisse explains the nature of modern anti-Semitism and why it is best understood as a political phenomenon. She also reflects on a lifetime of teaching Yiddish literature, and discusses why we should read its great authors like Mendele and Sholem Aleichem.

On the Jewish predicament in history, Wisse says: “Jews were creative. They found out what was necessary wherever they were. But they always tried to fit in and became quite good at it...so that they acquired possessions, they acquired wealth in many cases, they even acquired some political power. But they never had the ability to defend what...they acquired or created. And this made them a no-fail target...it was always profitable to go against them.

On how anti-Semitism hurts anti-Semites, Wisse says: “Anti-Semitism may be a very successful politics of grievance and blame in one sense that it in the short run misdirects the problems and scapegoats the Jews. But since these problems are never solved, they keep growing and they keep festering, and you can see what is happening in Arab society...The ultimate casualties of anti-Semitism are always going to be those who misdirect their politics at the Jews.

On the origins of Yiddish literature, Wisse says: “Modern Yiddish literature really is dated precisely in 1864 with the publication of a very slight work by a great literary genius who adopted the pseudonym of Mendele the Book Peddler, Mendele Mocher Seforim. And he became so well-known by this pseudonym that he became known as Mendele.... [Mendele’s stories show] how Jews became modernized. All the texts are there. If you read them, you’d see. Philip Roth, what is Philip Roth compared to Mendele?”

Chapter Links to RUTH WISSE Conversation

[What is anti-Semitism?](#)

[The Politics of anti-Semitism](#)

[Israel on Campus](#)

[The University in Decline](#)

[On Yiddish Literature](#)