

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

Conversations with Bill Kristol

Guest: Ruth Wisse, Tikvah Fund

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I: What is Anti-Semitism? (0:15 – 34:28)

KRISTOL: Hi, I'm Bill Kristol. Welcome back to CONVERSATIONS. I'm very pleased to be joined today by Ruth Wisse, longtime professor of Yiddish comparative literature at Harvard University and master – mistress, maybe, of all things Jewish, Israeli, Yiddish, and American, too, actually. And Canadian, right, that's your actual origin.

WISSE: And Canadian, yes, and not really my origin but, yes, almost my origin.

KRISTOL: Now I'm intrigued. So why is not really your origin? I've read you, growing up in Montreal.

WISSE: Oh, well, I was born – in Montreal, in fact, but I was born in Czernowitz which was then Romania, and it's only when I immigrated to the United States that I discovered that I had been born after all in the Ukraine.

KRISTOL: Is that right?

WISSE: Yes because it's now part of, the city is now part of Ukraine. So, international.

KRISTOL: That's good. I like that. Well, speaking of international. We have so much to talk about and your incredibly important work on Yiddish literature and other topics. But you've been writing a lot recently about anti-Semitism, a topic that I suppose you might have hoped, I might have hoped that we could have left behind a long time ago. Why? What's – are you very concerned and what's happened and what's new?

WISSE: Well, tremendously. I mean you know when I was growing up, I was pretty sure that the worst of history was behind us and it's been a shock to realize that in fact anti-Semitism is something that not only did it not go away, but in my estimation, it is much more virulent today than it ever was. So I once wrote about it being the most successful ideology of the 20th century, but I fear that it may be the most successful ideology of the 21st as well.

And look it seems to me that there's a double problem that one of the difficulties is the phenomenon itself, what Anti-Semitism is, how it spreads, why it is so successful as a political strategy, as a political instrument. But related to that is the fact that nobody seems to want to tackle it. Nobody thinks that it can be stopped, that anything can be done about it. And perhaps unwisely but what occurs to me because it

is A.S., Anti-Semitism, so close to AIDS, AIDS, I can't help making the comparison with that pandemic or that disease, that infection.

And the stunning difference about how people reacted to that, that when AIDS came on the scene, immediately, those who were affected by it needed to find a cure for it. Everyone else understood that this had to be stopped. And so you ask yourself what did they do? They didn't set up a museum to AIDS. They did not write the history of AIDS. They did not even go around the world tracking where is AIDS? No. They went about it scientifically to figure out what are the variables, what causes it, how does it spread, why does it spread. And taking that attitude, something was actually done about it. I mean, you know, one has advanced in one's understanding of the phenomenon.

KRISTOL: And in fighting it, stopping it, saving people from it.

WISSE: Well, absolutely. But you see it's so different in the case of anti-Semitism. I find that when I even try to talk to intelligent people about it, nobody really wants to talk about it and the reason is I think they think it's about the Jews, they think it's about the Jews.

But anti-Semitism has nothing to do with Jews, really. It misdirects attention to the Jews. It points the finger at the Jews and says it's the Jews, the Jews, the Jews. But the carriers of Anti-Semitism are anti-Semites. That – they are the problem. It is problematic for them because they really are infected by this disease but they don't think they're its casualties so they're in no hurry to seek help.

KRISTOL: What's so interesting about your analysis – I want to come back to the failure to fight it effectively or maybe the failure to even recognize that it has to be fought seriously – but I think what's most original about your analysis, perhaps, is this notion that it's a political strategy and tragically a successful one – it has been a successful one and maybe is again.

It's usually taken I think more as a – I don't know – a sickness or a psychological ill or something people go to, you know, out of desperation or historic prejudice or whatever. Some people think it's caused by the Jews. Most people think, no, the Jews are the, I guess, the victims. But I think there's a real insight there that this is – that's a reductionist way to think about it, that it's really – so talk a little bit about it. Where does it come from as a strategy historically and why, and why is it so successful?

WISSE: Yeah, well, let's pick up on what you're saying because I think that one of the first things to do is to try to clarify to people that they should not collapse everything into one great big mess. Anti-Semitism is discrimination and it's – my great teacher, Salo Baron, called it the dislike of the unlike.

You know, well, I don't accept that because, for example, people who say, "Oh, yes, there was anti-Semitism at Harvard and at Yale and all these universities when they had quotas." Well, they didn't let in African Americans, they didn't let in blacks at that time. They weren't crazy about letting in Asians. So it was discrimination of a kind but I don't call that anti-Semitism, that's prejudice.

KRISTOL: Because it wasn't – it was just general prejudice against other groups?

WISSE: General, exactly. Immigrant groups, you thought that you had to protect what Americanism as and so forth. But anti-Semitism began quite precisely in the 1870s and it began in Germany and it began as a self-defined movement.

And I think it's important to look at what the founders of anti-Semitism were about. They were quite clear in their purpose. They distinguished themselves from the Judaeophobia of the Church. They said, we're not involved in that. And, okay, they may have used all the negative associations that had been created through Christian anti-Semitism, or Christian anti-Judaism. But in fact, they defined themselves politically.

And it's extremely important to understand that they said that Jews were taking over Germany from within, that Jews did not have to come with a sword to conquer you. They were conquering the country from within.

The way I see that is that it was a response to liberal democracy, that it was a response to emancipation. There were all kinds of things about the new freedoms that they did not like because they saw it as competition, as pulling down the old regime. And so instead of saying that they were against these new freedoms, very hard to say, look, I'm against freedom for the individual – individual initiative.

Much more work of genius, of political genius, to put a face on it and that was the Jewish face. And since Jews could profit so much from this liberalization, from these new freedoms, from the idea of citizenship, they would say, you see, this is just a plot on the part of the Jews to take over the country from within. So I think –

KRISTOL: So their agenda was less, wasn't simply – did they believe what they were saying? I guess is my question or –

WISSE: Well, that's a good question. I mean I'm sure that some were more cynical about it than others, but politicians began to run on that platform and be elected on that platform because it gave an explanation.

People got nervous – why is everything going wrong? Well, if you say the Jews, and it seems plausible because there they were profiting from all this novelty, right, and innovation. So, yes, you could say it's the Rothschilds, you could say it's the Jewish storekeepers, you could say it's the Jewish musicians, you could say it's the Jewish lawyers who were now taking over.

So I really think it's important to see this as a political tool, as a political phenomenon that organizes politics against the Jews. That's how I would define anti-Semitism. The organization of politics against the Jews.

And then you know the story goes on painfully because there were Jews who realized more or less what was happening and they thought that this was being directed against them because they had no country of their own, because they seemed to be cosmopolitan, because they seemed to be everywhere. Nobody could define them. "Ah!" they thought. "If we normalize our situation and we become a state like all these others" – Italy was now becoming consolidated, Germany consolidating itself, Ireland. You know, the fight for national self-definition and self-liberation was, you know, a phenomenon of the times. Why don't the Jews do this as well?

And it seemed perfectly logical and it seemed really – I mean I think that one would have – I would have accepted it at the time. Ah, yes, if we return to our sovereignty, reclaim our national homeland in the land of Israel and become a nation like all others, there will be no cause for anti-Semitism.

KRISTOL: So, Zionism would be the solution to anti-Semitism?

WISSE: Exactly, and that's not the only reason for Zionism but they saw it as a solution to anti-Semitism. And also by the way, I think in the case of someone like Herzl, they saw it as saving liberalism as well because they saw that something was happening in Europe which shouldn't be happening.

How could we save France? And they thought, well, if you take the Jews out of the equation and let people not worry about them, not point the finger at them, well, then France will be safe, Germany will be saved from itself, from these impulses.

KRISTOL: So they thought the actual presence of the Jews was really – not to blame the Jews – but it was stimulating this prejudice, which if they were – if they left and had a state of their own, the prejudice might go away.

WISSE: Exactly. And then you couldn't blame the Jews for corrupting from within or using, you know, liberal democracy to, you know, actually, as a way of taking over the world because then it became really a question of the Jews, you know, the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" actually inflated and said the Jews are not just trying to take over Germany, they're trying to take over the world. It kept growing.

So I mean to me the most tragic element here is that they were both right and yet totally wrong because they did not understand the variables of anti-Semitism. You could organize the politics against the Jews who were in their own state as easily as you could organize it around you know Jews were spread everywhere.

And I think that that's what the Arabs did in 1945. Even before the state was created, they saw their opportunity in this ideology above all others – not Communism, not fascism, not democracy, but, ah, here was a way of scapegoating, here was a way of creating unity among countries which were totally at odds with one another. I mean, you see what the reality of the Arab world is. These are not people who get along easily among themselves. But the one thing that you could unify them around was common opposition to the rise of the State of Israel and then to the presence of the State of Israel and you never let that go.

KRISTOL: So it was a self-conscious political strategy of parties or rulers or ambitious politicians.

WISSE: Absolutely, and not everybody bought into it because, you know, that the King of Jordan at the time was ready to make a peace agreement with Israel, or so it seems, but could not hold out against everyone else and –

KRISTOL: It is stunning that, I mean, right after World War II and after seeing the price of, to the world, of a regime based on anti-Semitism or at least using anti-Semitism as its path to power and then obviously killing 6 million Jews while in power.

It didn't take long – it's not like anti-Semitism went away for 20 or 30 or 40 years. I think that's sort of the conventional history almost, which is very Western-oriented, is that somehow, well, you know, that's finished.

WISSE: Well, you can see why because they were 25 years of grace between 1948 and 1973, I would say that was a period you thought –

KRISTOL: In the West.

WISSE: In the West, yes, in the West, one thought that it had gone away and I think that there was a reason to think that. I think that in those years, one thought that the Arabs would eventually lay off.

I really think that the Jews of Israel thought that the war would be winnable if they only bought this, if they fought this battle and won it, okay, if they won this war, if they won the next war. And everyone else thought so, too, that the Arabs would become reasonable, that they would accept the State of Israel, that they would make their peace with it.

They did not understand how essential the organization of politics against Israel had become to the Arab world, what a unifier it was, what a key political instrument it was. And unless you realized that, you kept talking about these nonsensical ideas of peace, you give up this, you give up that, what can we do, how can we appease, how can we accommodate? Not understanding that they would have to become politically self-reliant, they would have to change from blaming others to really beginning that process, that really difficult process, of self-accountability, of not looking elsewhere.

And so the most important thing to be done is to refuse ever to allow Israel to be the subject. I mean, when any Arab antagonist begins to talk about Israel, the last thing to do, it seems to me, is to say, "Oh, but how can you say that? The Israelis do this, they're so good, they're so wonderful." It's absurd. It's absurd.

KRISTOL: Because that's not really what it's about.

WISSE: It's not at all what it's about. And technically if you cast yourself in the role of the defendant, you are the defendant. It doesn't matter whether you're found guilty or innocent. You have agreed to play the part of the defendant.

And the problem with Jewish politics, if one gets into that, is that Jews have no incentive to be the prosecutor; they're always looking for acceptance from precisely the people who are against them. So what the Jews would have had to do in 1948 is to demand, you know, from the Arabs what was due to them. "What do you mean you don't accept us? I mean, you are part of the United Nations, it's in the charter of the United Nations. If you want to remain a member of the United Nations or members of the United Nations, you must accept the legitimacy of this country. How can you dare not to accept the legitimacy or to call it into question?"

But you see, it's not in the – it's not in the Jewish political DNA to do any such thing because for thousands of years, Jews have been seeing how can we be useful, how can we fit in, how can we accommodate. And it's made them you know very adaptable but it has not made it possible for them to really play the role of the prosecutor when justice is required on their behalf.

KRISTOL: I'm very intrigued by this notion of anti-Semitism as a sort of self-conscious ideology taken up by politicians or groups to, I guess, get power or keep power or rally citizens to their side or unite countries or whatever as a matter of foreign policy, too, I suppose, because I do think it kind of cuts through all these debates, which I've had the instinct but I haven't really thought it through, don't really work.

You know, how much is Christianity responsible for modern anti-Semitism? Well, of course, there's historic prejudice against Jews in Christianity. But then how come it's so strong in the Islamic world? Well, Islam has had problems with Jews, obviously. But then if it's so – but Nazi Germany had nothing to do presumably with the Islamic faith. I mean I think that – I do think this is a much more elegant but I think maybe simpler but also deeper, I think, view of where it really comes from because it really gives the priority to the politics, not to the kind of psychology or the prehistory or whatever.

WISSE: Well, exactly. But that's why I'm so desperate to have it taken up by people who would study it in this way. And the most difficult thing is that political science, political studies are not interested in the subject, again, I think because they think it's parochial. And how they could think it's parochial is beyond me.

So the only people who really pay attention to this are Jewish organizations and they do pay a great deal of attention to tracking it and seeing it. But Jews are the last people who can actually solve this because Jews have no impulse to be anti-Semitic in that way. They become reactively so, a small percentage of Jews do become anti-Semites in the same way – "if only the Jews did this, if only the Jews did that." But that's reactive. And there are reactive, there's a reactive anti-Semitism. I compare it to second-hand smoke. Okay it's sort of there. But –

KRISTOL: But I guess a lot of the Jewish organizations, I think you had argued then in explaining Jews don't deserve this calumny or Israel doesn't deserve to be criticized on this ground – it's sort of missing the point. I mean, this is not a factual question of proving your innocence.

And in fact, once you, as you say, take the position of a defendant, you're almost – you're – well, you're encouraging in a sense people to make this their political agenda. "Gee, it seems to be working, look, they're on the defense, you know."

WISSE: Exactly. Exactly so and it's one of the reasons that in courses on Jewish literature I have repeatedly gone back to Franz Kafka's text, *The Trial*. It's such an important book for this understanding.

KRISTOL: Okay, well, let's talk about that because I like Kafka but it's been a long time since I've read it and I probably didn't understand it when I did. So talk about that.

WISSE: Well, I'm not sure that this is only way. I mean it's explained and analyzed by so many people in so many ways. But this is really the key to it.

K wakes up – Joseph K wakes up in the morning and he finds himself under arrest. And if he's under arrest in the first page, we don't know whether he's committed any crime. We never find out who's arresting him exactly, what the court is, what constitutes the court. But he becomes the defendant and so he is killed like a dog at the end. And that is the plot.

If you agree in any way to play the defendant in a court which does not define itself, then you're doomed. And this is why when students sometimes come and they say, "What will we do about this anti-Israel rally and what will we do about this?" I say, "Whatever you do, don't defend." Never defend. You have to ask, "Who is asking this question, what right do you have to put Israel on the block here? Who are you? What are your standards?"

First you have to prove who you are. Do you, are you in a position to judge and if you're not in a position to judge, first prove your clean hands, prove what you are. But just never find yourself saying "Oh, you know, Israel it allows homosexuals into the army long before the United States did, and look how liberal it is and look how wonderful it is to women."

And look how – I mean it's – you know, this is as you say, it's irrelevant. And in some way, it's not fair to the other side, it's not fair to the anti-Semites. I think there's a kind of contempt as well in not asking people to rise to your level of ethics and your level of understanding.

KRISTOL: And taking their – taking them seriously in a certain way as having a political agenda as opposed to well, they just don't understand that things are nice in Israel, they're ill-informed.

WISSE: That's right. Right. And not – not giving them the credit that they have organized their politics in this way because it serves them in some way and unless you take seriously the way in which it suits them and why they use it and how they use it, you're not doing them a favor in the long run. You're really just you know helping them along.

KRISTOL: Yeah I want to come back to that in one second. But I'm just curious about Kafka. (Well, no, that was very interesting.

And how much did Kafka think – I mean, he somehow thought this was about the human condition generally, presumably, and politics, generally. But did he think it was about the Jewish situation as well?

WISSE: Well, in some ways, he absolutely thought it was about the Jewish condition because he published some of his stories in that time in a publication which was called *The Jew*. It was a Zionist publication. He was studying Hebrew soon after that.

You know, he was part of a Zionist circle, and he was concerned with that. However, he was also he had internalized many of these instincts. In his own body, he had problems with his own self in relation to his father, in relation to his family; so the psychology of it did come into play. Of course, you can read this on a human level because Joseph K is never defined as a Jew or anything else.

KRISTOL: There's nothing Jewish explicitly in the story.

WISSE: No, no. But there's nothing Czech explicitly either and everybody can recognize the terrain. So, no, he made very sure that this was – I think that he was giving a picture of the deracinated modern individual, really, and particularly, perhaps, the deracinated Jew, but others as well.

But you do see in this the larger truth that the problem with Joseph K, I mean, you can see this in a philosophical way and even in a transcendental way, you know, how the individual stands before God and whom he doesn't understand and whose authority you know is in question. But I think that it's a very instructive political text.

KRISTOL: That's terrific. And so in terms of fighting back. Let's just develop that a little more. You sort of implied that the Jewish tradition isn't the best perhaps in informing Israel or Jews in the West as to how to fight back against anti-Semitism.

WISSE: I think that Jews – you know I tried to write this book, *Jews and Power*, but it could have been called – thank you – it could have been called *Jews and Politics* because the real point there is that everyone thought Jews – non-Jews, philosophic thinkers, historians, people who looked at the situation – actually said that they thought Jews had been out of politics for 2,000 years, that they left politics when Rome conquered Jerusalem and then the rebellion of Bar-Kochba was defeated in 135 and that was the end of Jewish sovereignty in the land of Israel. That was the end of Jews in politics. And then Jews reclaimed their political sovereignty with the Zionist movement in the late 19th and 20th century.

Again this is preposterous, absolutely preposterous, because Jews were consummately political. What does it mean that they were out of politics? They had to negotiate a political reality with every ruler, with every polity in which they found themselves. But they developed a politics which was dramatically different and, I would say, really opposite to the politics of many of the people among whom they lived.

They did not seek to conquer anyone. They were just interested in, if you will, self-conquest. They had to prove themselves to God. That was the ultimate judge and authority. And if they would ultimately prove themselves excellent to God, God would protect them and God would intervene somehow in history and make it possible for them to eventually reclaim their sovereignty.

But in the meantime, they developed a politics of accommodation in the best sense. Some Jewish writers later talking about the *myofas* Jew. *Myofas* is a song that the Polish landowners would somehow ask the Jews to sing. "Dance for us and sing the *myofas* song." So they would caricature the Jews being this, you know – yet cringing person who always came to request and so forth. I mean, I think that's a horrible caricature. I think 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, time and time again, 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 it is that they acquired or created. And this made them a no-fail target, that it was always profitable to go against them, whether to kill them or to expropriate them or to drive them out, always profitable at a certain moment in time. And there was never any political price to be paid for doing that because the Jews were not going to take revenge, right.

So if you become that way, a convenient target again and again and again, and the news gets around, you know eventually even before our period of you know faster communication, you develop this reputation above all others, that you are a very convenient political target.

So it is political. From the start, it was political. And Jewish politics are not – I mean it's always a mistake to say for example the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. I mean, that seems to suggest you know two parallel entities like the German-French conflict, right. It's not that at all.

It's a complementary, which Jews created. How could they fit in to the political requirements of others? And this became a Jewish talent. I'm not – I would never sell it short. In itself, it's a wonderful thing. I mean, you know, talk about change, talk about adaptability, all the things which we admire in entrepreneurship, you see. That's fine. But if you don't have the ability to defend commensurate with what you can create, then you have set yourself up politically. And then anti-Semitism kicks in when it becomes an ideological movement as well as this practical way of just simply, you know, taking over what the Jews have created for us.

KRISTOL: And did any of the, in your opinion, early Zionists or late 19th and early, mid-20th century, Zionist or Jewish thinkers for that matter sort of grasp this? I mean, it's interesting.

WISSE: Well, I'm hardly – they grasped different parts of it. But, you know, I think maybe you couldn't grasp everything until it played itself out that way because as I said, if you looked at things from the point-of-view of the end of the 19th century and the 20th century, I think I would have been one of those people who might have hypothesized that "Yes, it's probably because we are everywhere and nowhere that we are hit upon in this particular way."

And you know so within the European situation, which was really the major context that we're talking about here, I think that – I think that it would have been perfectly reasonable to suppose that. And Zionism was in a way, of course, the answer to one side of the problem because Zionism did make it possible for Jews finally to defend themselves. So, that's a big gain.

But for many Jews, that's not enough and I can see their point, too, what – are we going to defend ourselves into eternity? We want to remain just a small people. I mean, you notice Israel is not intent on conquering Jordan; it's not intent on getting to Damascus or to Cairo or to anything else – all it wants is to be accepted. This makes it so vulnerable.

KRISTOL: And what do you say to the people who say well we want to be accepted and your picture is just a kind of endless conflict and having to fight back and not persuade their neighbors of anything or –

WISSE: Well, if you don't mind a bit of a jump, I would say to them the same thing that I would now say to Americans. Americans have that same desire, right, and they have a lot to learn from the Israelis in this and from the Jewish experience in this.

I think that the two polities are very much alike, even though America is so phenomenally large and looks like, unconquerable, in some way. But you can see the same thing. No appetite for aggression. No reason to aggress against any others. That's wonderful. No appetite for war. That's a wonderful quality, except that if you are not prepared to defend what you have created, you are going to be taken over, you are going to be. And the more you create, the more vulnerable you become.

So in what one sees in America, at least in the second decade of the 21st century and beginning a little bit earlier, is almost what one sees to some extent in parts of Jewish experience that is encapsulated in the saying, "He who lies on the ground cannot fall."

So isn't it wonderful to just be the loser? If you cast yourself as the loser, you know, you become a banana republic. Okay, nobody is going to want to conquer you. So the impulse becomes not to become stronger, not to become wealthier, not to become better in some sense, but, no, to become shrinking. And you shrink and you shrink and you shrink and you think if you shrink yourself into nothingness, no one is going to want to take you over. So I would say –

KRISTOL: If you give less offense, then people won't be offended but it doesn't quite work that way, I suppose.

WISSE: No and I would say that the Jewish example is worth studying for what it tells you about – it's the opposite.

KRISTOL: That's great.

II: The Politics of Anti-Semitism (34:28 – 45:50)

KRISTOL: And again I'm struck by your understanding of anti-Semitism as this really self-conscious political program. You said something the other day that – I think heard you say or heard about your saying it that struck me in this respect about anti-Semitism. Let's talk a little more about that. Yeah.

WISSE: Well, the, I guess the thing that one would like to convey is that anyone who thinks about politics seriously should begin to understand that anti-Semitism is a very sophisticated subject for them to address themselves to. Not parochial, not small, but very large, very important and –

KRISTOL: And not only important to Jews. I mean, the major part of European history and Middle East history now, right.

WISSE: Absolutely. And that it actually harms those who are infected by it so that the ultimate casualties of anti-Semitism are always going to be those who misdirect their politics at the Jews because by misdirecting, they postpone dealing with the problems that they actually have and they only get worse and you can see these societies becoming more and more violent, more and more frustrated because they are not solving the problems really.

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, the Jews, 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.

I think there's a direct correlation between the refusal to deal with internal problems, the use of Israel as a means of really misdirecting attention away from the problems at home and away from actual reforms to let's get rid of you know this intruder in our midst. There's a direct correlation between that and the astonishing rise of this pathology in the Arab world and the rise of violence. The same thing that happened in Germany, the same thing that happened on the European continent can be witnessed in Arab and Muslim societies.

So that's the complexity that I would wish with that people would pay more attention to. On the other hand, I think that there's a – there are some things which are very, very simple, much plainer than one may think. Since politics direct themselves against the Jews and since anti-Semitism can be defined as a politics of grievance and blame, it's very simple to see that an anti-Semite is someone who holds the Jews responsible for the sufferings of another people. So, anyone who held Jews responsible for the evils of capitalism was an anti-Semite. Those who held Jews responsible for the evils, the repressions of communism was an anti-Semite. Those who held Jews responsible for the misery of Germany in the 1930s was an anti-Semite. And for the misery of Poland.

Now, I think that one to understand the misery was real, the problems were always real, but the attribution of blame was completely false; and, therefore, exacerbated the problem by not really dealing with it. And the end thing to say about this is that the worst case of this has been that Israel has been held responsible for the misery of the Palestinians. Anyone who thinks that Israel is to blame for the misery of the Palestinians is absolutely an anti-Semite. That is the definition of anti-Semitism.

Now, anti-Semitism is legal. And anyone who wants to can become an anti-Semite, and there are plenty of them around. But they should understand that by definition, to hold Jews responsible for the suffering of an Arab people, given the amount of land that the Arabs have, given the fact that the Arabs were the ones who denied the Palestinians their state, etc., etc., this is really the crux of anti-Semitism. And it does not make things for the Palestinians.

The longer this fantasy is allowed to, you know, perpetuate itself, the more desperate the situation of the Palestinian people will become because the suffering is real but to say that Jews – Jews are the last people who can do anything about it because we know what lengths Israel would go to if it could to solve that problem. The fact is that the Jews are the last people who are able to solve it; it is not their problem and I think that those who think that they want – that they can sort of parachute in and solve it by this means or by that means really contribute to the problem.

KRISTOL: And some of the – many Israelis have thought, or do think, I suppose, still, somewhat, that they've contributed to the problem or that they somehow have to explain that they didn't mean to contribute to the problem. I mean, I'm –

WISSE: Yeah. But you can see why, because if we say you and I can solve this, suddenly we're optimists, suddenly we say, "Oh, it only means, you know, withdrawing to this and this border, what's wrong with that?"

KRISTOL: Do you think the Israelis have become – have a learned a lesson over the last 20 years or so since Oslo and the new Middle East and how much they internalized that lesson, how close are they to the Ruth Wisse view of the situation, and how much are they still sort of thinking if only our PR were better and if only we explain that it's a nation with a lot of entrepreneurship and, as you say, good treatment of gays and women and so forth, that the dislike of Israel – not just dislike, but the really organizing as you say of political agenda around being anti-Israel. How much of that would go away? It still seems to me there's quite a lot of that, even in Israel, right?

WISSE: Of course, there is and there will continue to be because I think that this tendency to, first of all, to want to be optimistic in that way, that every problem has a solution, it's only for us to find the solution and therefore it can't be imposed or it can't be found. That's such a really wonderful trait in some situations. It's just not a wonderful trait when you are in a situation such as mortality, for example, that cannot be ultimately solved.

And I think that in a sense, within our lifetime, the idea that one is going to reform the Arab world to the extent that it is going to make its peace dramatically with Israel, this is really I don't think it's going to come about. However, if you know that there can be no shortcut, that there can be – nothing can be done unless that is a first step, that it's for them to reform themselves, that optimism can only come not if you have false faith in them and place false faith in them but actually make demands on the other side that can be met.

If they could begin to reform themselves – and the first step of that would be a generous recognition of a kind of tolerance. Why not? Why not? The descendants of Ishmael and the descendants of Isaac, you've got the descendants of Ishmael. I mean, just look at it, guys. In a sense, you can say, "We've won the game, just look what we have and look what you have." But you do have to say, "Yes, there are descendants of Isaac, you know, and they do have that land, that is their ancestral territory." That would be a tremendous beginning and wisdom, political wisdom would come from understanding that. Whether you can get anything done or not, at least understanding that and not pretending otherwise.

And are there more Israelis now who understand that? I think there are more today than there were in 1993 when the Oslo Accords were signed. Are there enough? This remains to be seen. But the problem is that, for the first time, I worry in this sense more about the American polity than about the Israeli polity. I think that Israel has learned a great deal more in this sense than liberal Americans or those who like to call themselves liberal. I call them "gliberal" because they're gutted liberals. They're not really – I just don't want to call them liberals because that would mean that liberalism has failed.

KRISTOL: Yeah, it hasn't been flourishing for the last – The one thought – I just wonder if you agree with this. Just prompted by thinking about this is: it does seem to me that one group that has somewhat correctly analyzed the dysfunction of Arab societies, the use by their rulers of various excuses to divert the population from the failure to have policies that actually help them or even care much about them, of course, are the Islamists, who in a sense,

I mean, one of the big stories of the last 30 years from the Middle East is the decline of, let's call it, old-fashioned Arab nationalism and the rise of Islamism. And in a way, they did see that the Arab nationalists didn't, you know were just using the anti-Semitism as a diversion and an excuse for their own hold on power. Now the way they went was an even more extreme version, you might say, of anti-Semitism but in a way more – I don't know – maybe more powerful in a funny way, it's more deeply grounded or something. It does seem to me they've routed the old fashioned glib Arab nationalists you know who –

WISSE: Well, I can't disagree with your description, but obviously, I think it's obvious to us that if you are really thinking of the ultimate self-improvement of the ordinary Arab person, that they are moving in the

wrong direction. And that makes all the difference. The right direction – and there are Arab voices, I mean, unfortunately not movements yet.

But there are individual voices that do recognize what I've been saying. I mean, they are the people who recognize it first. They are the ones who have said, "Think of what would have happened in 1945 and 1948 if the Arab leaders had simply accepted Israel and gone on, gone about their business." Think of how different the Middle East would be. There are Arabs and Muslims who are now saying that. However, this has not coalesced into a movement.

And the big disappointment is that does – that on American campuses and in America where one is free to investigate everything and to explore everything and to seek out the truth and to seek out you know the better impulses in politics, it seems to be at least the vocal voices are going in the other direction –

III: Israel on Campus (45:50 – 56:04)

KRISTOL: Well, let's talk about that. I want to get to Yiddish. Let's talk first about American campuses and American liberalism because that is we've come naturally to that point anyway. I mean, what is happening?

How – it's been astounding to a lot of American Jewish leaders of kind of mainstream American Jewish organizations that here – no more discrimination, the Jews are doing great. These campuses are a quarter Jewish. Jews aren't offending anyone. They're bending over backwards to be very nice, in fact, to everyone. And there's more hostility to Israel but really hostility to Jews, I think, on these campuses than one could have imagined, don't you think 35, 30 years ago.

WISSE: Absolutely. Well, I think the driving impulse of it from the beginning were the Arab groups on campus and still are. They are funded by others to do exactly what they do, that is to say to keep the war against the Jews, the war against Israel going, going. And it is deflect attention from everything that is going wrong in their precincts.

So you see that not on the part of the students but you see this in Middle East studies. I mean, Middle East Studies has been a lie. I mean, what it deals with is the grandeur of – you know, the grandeur of Arab civilization. Well, I will grant you the grandeur of Arab civilization, but the problem is really what's happened to that grandeur in our time. So instead of investigating all of that, it's become Israel, Israel, Israel-oriented, and some of what goes on in Middle East Studies in the United States is just simply intolerable.

And again intolerable not only because of how hateful it is to the Jews but because it completely fails to help in any way analyze how Arab society really could be improving itself through whatever means possible in every possible realm.

So that's the catalyst I would say, the driving force. Without that, there would not have been this coalition that you get on campuses of Arab students and the Left, which is always there. And the Left is very interesting because Arab propaganda actually began to work in the West when it moved from the language of the Right to the language of the Left. For 25 years, the Arabs said, "We're going to drive you into the sea, we will drive Israel into the sea." That's the language of the Right.

KRISTOL: And their sympathizers in the West were mostly on the Right, sort of relics of this quasi-fascist –

WISSE: Exactly, quasi-fascist, exactly. But then because of the Arab-Soviet alignment, the Soviet language began to go into Arab propaganda and this made all the difference that suddenly you were not using the language of the Right but what you were saying is that actually Zionism is really part of that kind of imperialist, colonialist enterprise. And that was, that comes straight out of Soviet propaganda. And that really galvanized the West's leftist elements who had nothing left.

KRISTOL: And I think that's the key point, yeah it is for me.

WISSE: Nothing left in Communism. I mean, what are they going to point to, Cuba or what? But this horrific element of being against the Jews because the Jews were supposed to be the leading internationalists, that the Jews if they've become nationalistic and if they turn to religion, that is really the, you know, that's reaction, that's the reactionary element. So that's a very toxic mix.

The Arab students going forward and feeling righteous about them that the right is on their side and using all this language of apartheid which – you know, which defines their societies, actually not Israel. And then the Left which suddenly has a cause that it never had before. And, you know, one is really disappointed in that the smart students are sometimes the stupidest. I hate to say it but this is right.

KRISTOL: Tradition about smart, smart-stupid. I think my grandmother used to say that about various intellectual friends of her children and of others floating around who were brilliant but foolish.

WISSE: We've seen that, yes. Well, they think that it's so wonderful to have a passionate cause and so they hook into this which looks to be such a – but if they thought about it for one minute, what kind of a cause is that, you know, to be with these – with, I mean.

KRISTOL: But that's sort of your earlier point in a way answers that question. I mean, I'd say I've made this mistake. So I think about five years ago, Noah Pollack who runs the Emergency Committee for Israel, wonderful young guy. So he said to me this, "The BDS, the Boycott Divestment Sanctions movement on campus is really going to be a big deal and we need to sort of organize and encourage others to organize to fight it much more effectively." I said, "Oh, come on, it's so ridiculous. I mean, really American college students are going to think that what, selling shares in a corporation that invests or deals with Israel or not having an academic conference in Israel or not inviting Israeli academics to a conference here, that that somehow is going to help the people they want to help, which is suffering Palestinians or I don't know."

It's so ridiculous – I mean, just on its face, irrelevant really that why would it get any steam, and it's sort of obscure also. I mean, it's not really if they want to fight about gay rights here in the U.S. or for universal health care, those are at least actual issues in the country they're living in, if you could imagine mobilizing people around.

And, of course, people have mobilized. The whole boycott divestment, I just thought it was so silly and strange and foreign. And I totally misunderstood it actually. I really missed the point you made earlier that this could be an organizing principle for a Left that didn't have actually much to offer in real domestic policies but somehow could get people worked up about it. It is really extraordinary when you think about it though.

WISSE: It is, it is. But we make this mistake on every level. Two things here, one is the tendency of intellectuals to write off the obvious.

I remember walking with Irving Howe many, many years ago when the UN had just passed its resolution of Zionism being racism and I immediately said, "We've got to fight this, this is the most dangerous thing that has happened because that's the language." You see, now they've got the language of accusing Israel of racism; they are the ones who are racists in not accepting Israel and now they are holding Israel responsible so it completely inverted the language of morality in the terminology that counts in our day. So I said, "We've got to do something." And he patted me on the shoulder and he said, "Oh, Ruthie, no one pays any attention to the United Nations." And, you know, from his perspective of an intellectual, I could see that in his exalted circles, nobody paid any attention to the United Nations. But there's a world out there, right, and that worked.

KRISTOL: And its ability, the staying power of it. So I was in the first Bush Administration and Bush wasn't in every respect a great friend of Israel. But I did work very hard, John Bolton worked on this actually, to repeal the "Zionism is Racism" resolution, which we did in 1990 as the Soviet Union fell apart

and the Communist bloc fell apart and the votes weren't there anymore to support the Arabs. And I remember thinking and we all said, "You know, well, okay, that's sort of that ugly chapter is over," it was really based on Soviet power. I mean, it was in a very practical sense. And now we can, let's move on. But that was also short-sighted and wrong. It's stronger now than it was when the Soviet Union was ascendant in some way. They must need it more now, I suppose than they did then.

WISSE: That's absolutely true. But you know when you ask yourself and we ask ourselves so what is this tendency to write things off, is it just that we're careless? I don't think so. I think we work very hard politically.

But the – our disincentive for getting involved with something which seems to us to be so patently wrong, so foolish, so mistaken and misguided, to devote your energies to fighting this, I mean, it's asking a great deal of people who have other things to do with their time. And that's another reason for its success.

KRISTOL: I think this was always a problem for anti-Communists, I mean, that at some point, it became so ridiculous intellectually to think that you're going to refute Communism. It was so obviously a fraud and the dictatorship and it wasn't working and the idea that this was something you were – but of course, for that reason, the less sophisticated people were actually the more effective anti-Communists in some ways.

You know, Phyllis Schlafly was more effective. Didn't Susan Sontag say that at one point, I think as the Berlin Wall fell, one of the rarely, rare admissions she made – but it was impressive I think that she made it, I think it was she who made it that, you know – "I and all my friends were less correct about the Soviet Union and Communism than people we had contempt for" – like a conservative crusader like Phyllis Schlafly. There's a lot of truth to that.

WISSE: Well, there is, but it's always said after the fact because one doesn't have the – yes, and then the very people who don't want to make the effort to do this write off those who are making the effort and they're saying, "Oh these rightwing fanatics who are involved in this and so forth."

So it's not just that they sit neutrally by and that they don't do anything. It's that they vilify the very people who are trying to set the record straight, which further complicates things. And especially on campuses where –

IV: The University in Decline (56:04 – 1:12:43)

KRISTOL: Well, yeah, so let's talk about campuses. You've been in Harvard and you speak at a lot of campuses. I mean, how bad is it? It's a little hard to tell from the outside. Again, one has a slight tendency to say, "Okay, there are 100 activist students, 300 activist students. But there are 8,000 undergraduates at Harvard and all these other people who aren't involved in this and so it's just some idiotic group and –"

WISSE: Well, the worries are very – my worries are very large for the university, and I don't think that this is their primary focus for me.

The primary focus for me is the one thing that I tried to say at a couple of faculty meetings was that liberal democracy is not biologically transmitted. I really don't think that the schools understand that. Either they are the enemies of liberal democracy and really have no confidence in what America is, no appreciation for it – which is true of some people but it's certainly not true of the majority – or they are so careless that they just think that it perpetuates itself through the ether. But this is not true.

You have to laboriously educate students in democracy, which is difficult. I mean, you see what it's like every two years, every four years, half the country has to wake up and think, "Oh my God, oh my God." This is a difficult thing to live through and to understand why you have to live through the frustrations of it, why you have to pick yourself up the next day and say, "Okay, I'm back in the battle because I still stand for this and this." And why you have to work through compromises.

You know, I mean, one has to study *The Federalist Papers* to see their grandeur. One has to be educated in the Western tradition to understand how hard people have fought for it. But there's nothing of that on the campus as far as I can see.

You know, what has hurt me most was this 40-year ban on ROTC, the Reserve Officer Training Program. Behind that, a core, behind that lies an animus of a kind. You know, "I hate the military and I hate what the military is doing to this country." Well, I mean if you hate what the military is doing to this country, ultimately what you're saying is, "I really despise this country and I don't care what replaces it."

And so from a cultural point-of-view, you know, I just don't feel the grit of the campus. And I keep thinking that sooner or later, the 60s are going to have to play themselves on the campus and something else is going to have to replace it, some other kind of grittier phenomenon is going to have to take its place through the student body which demands it. And you see individual students like that.

I mean, I've had the good fortune to see so many amazing students one by one by one. And in each of them, I see the future of America writ large and wonderfully. But they do not go into the academy, by and large. They do not go into teaching. It's as if this is now something that they have given up.

KRISTOL: Well, because it's hard for them either to be accepted in the academy. In a very practical sense, they get their Ph.D. and they don't get a job. Or they don't think of it as satisfying, the kind of environment they'll be in, which is the university you were just describing. I'm very struck by that change from my generation to our kids.

WISSE: Sure, we thought – in our generation, being a professor and being able to do that, that was a very honorable and exciting thing to do.

KRISTOL: And enjoyable. One would like having intelligent colleagues and talking about these interesting books and ideas. And I don't think that's the vision the universities provide for the future.

WISSE: No. Well, I confess that I have called it the "culture of pusillanimity." I was never in such an environment until I got to Harvard because McGill where I taught for 20 years was not, it just didn't work in the same way.

For one thing, there wasn't a legal department that was as strong, so the legal department also plays a role here, because the legal department is always sending out directives as to what one dare not do, cannot do, and now and it sort of filters down into what one dare not say or think or whatever. So that's one level of it.

And then the bureaucratization had not yet taken place, which is another damper. You know, you can't get anything done because any time you try to change something, something stands in your way. So that was debilitating, I think. And I keep hoping that that will reverse itself but it will take some doing and really I would love to see the impulse come from the student body. But you know they change every four years and –

KRISTOL: Right and they can have the impulse and they can resist it, and I think a lot of them do and it's sort of water off a duck's back. They don't really take it seriously what some professor is saying. They don't get as good an education as they might. They don't necessarily internalize what they're being told.

But they can't – they have no real incentive to spend a lot of time changing the colleges and universities because they're going to leave when they're 21 or 22. And you know, I mean they could be in activist student politics a little bit but they're going to move on and be active in other places and so that's the problem.

The faculty and the administrators are the ones who are there permanently and it becomes a bit of a vicious cycle, I think. As we were just saying, people don't go in. And it's hard. Unlike other businesses where an organization that ran that way would get challenged from the outside. It would be, you know it

would be like the taxi companies and then having Uber, you know. I mean, if you're just being run for yourself and for your convenience in a complacent and a bureaucratic way, someone comes along and says we'll offer better service cheaper. But the university somehow – I mean, that could happen. One could imagine such competition rising up. But I'd guess the prestige of the elite universities and the difficulty of entering that – you know, being the Uber to the equivalent, you know, is very great. I mean, so it's harder to change.

WISSE: Well, the impulse for change has come. I don't know how you look at this. I think that there are now outside organizations, which have undertaken to do an end-run around the universities and to –

KRISTOL: Yes, I'm very sympathetic to that, yes.

WISSE: Yes, I am sure that you are. Magazines and these kinds of CONVERSATIONS and so forth to make available to students what they don't get in the classroom, which is wonderful. It's a wonderful impulse, very important. But it kind of does allow for the institutions themselves to keep slipping further and further into this comfort zone of thinking that they are actually accomplishing something and in the meantime don't even make the effort.

I mean, what surprises me for example are how many students come from abroad. And yes teaching Yiddish literature, you would think well, how many does one see, but I was beginning to see quite a number of students coming from China. Now, one calls them students but the people I saw were really professors in their own right who come across a Jewish text or a Yiddish writer in translation and they're very serious scholars. And so they say, "Hey, I don't know enough about this." So they look up Harvard because they think that's it. But then they would go to other places as well. And they come to the university to study.

Now if they come into Yiddish literature to study, you can imagine how many there are. There are thousands and thousands of people coming to study from China alone, let alone from other universities. The university makes no effort to provide a program of study about America. You're coming to America to study, you have got to study about Americanism. This is the first thing that you do. I mean this is – it's not propaganda, it's just something, an offering, really. This is what you do when you believe in yourself and you believe that you really are welcoming people to your shores. And this is people looking for an education. This should be the first thing that you provide is a package of courses of this kind, let alone to your own students, right, that you make this available and if not required. So yes, there's a whole idea of that kind of civic education and a seriousness about how difficult democracy is.

KRISTOL: Well, that's the key. They don't understand that – they don't want to even think about the fact that universities don't flourish everywhere and that they depend on a liberal democracy, which in turn depends on certain institutions and beliefs and habits.

WISSE: Exactly, which have taken so long to formulate themselves.

KRISTOL: It is true. The lack of self-awareness, I guess, of the professors strikes me sometimes. They're in such a bubble and talking only to people who agree with them. But the pusillanimity is really striking.

I mean, when I went to college, of course, the professors were mostly liberals and a fair number of Marxists, because this was the early mid-70s and late 70s. But there was this sense that it was fun to be somewhat outrageous or contrarian or challenge – just think of, you know, in class this would always happen. Someone would say, "Well, I don't know that much about that, but why couldn't the opposite be true?"

And I'm very struck when I speak on college campuses today. And I try to be a little outrageous just to provoke students. But they don't even really want to be – sometimes occasionally they'll heckle or whatever – but they don't really want to – they don't – somehow they've been, the universities – the students are better than the faculty and the administrators. But the degree to which they don't even rise to debate is, I guess, what strikes me. They don't see the intellectual charm and interest in being

provoked and being forced to think about maybe they've got things exactly 180 degrees wrong. I don't mean in some big deep way that their whole worldview is wrong, just in some little thing like interpreting an historical event, you know. They're so conformist intellectually, I think, and sort of psychologically. It really –

WISSE: Well, in small ways, I would say look, they're very, the students I've had, the good –

KRISTOL: No, I'm talking mostly about the faculty here.

WISSE: No, I see. The faculty, you know, I'll tell you what the most disturbing thing is and students who have come to speak to me about faculty members have found this alone to be – this is the complaint that I hear – and that is not that a professor will stand up in the classroom and talk and present his point-of-view or her point-of-view, that's perfectly legitimate. But that they assume that everyone shares this point-of-view.

This is now the – this is now the aura of the university, sort of. Professors didn't used to speak that way. I mean they would know that they were presenting their point-of-view and in many cases, they would say, "Look, this is now where I veer from the text, and I'm presenting my point-of-view." But now they really make fun of the politicians who they don't approve of and believe that everybody is going to laugh. Now, because I was a conservative on a liberal campus, I happened to see all the students who really do disapprove of professors who speak that way. But they would never get up in the classroom and say that, that's not their way. And I don't know whether that's out of contempt. It's not out of fear exactly. It's just because –

KRISTOL: "What's the point?" I mean, that's what they tell me, I mean, do I need the grief and maybe they will get marked down a little bit and there's a lot of competition to get into law school and get jobs but also so there's a little bit of fear or prudence, let's call it, caution.

But I think a lot of it is contempt. You know, "I'm in this class for 3 hours a week. I can put up with it. What do I need to – I'm not going to convince the professor, most of the other students are not paying much attention either or anyway so why bother," sort of.

WISSE: Yes. So that completely undermines what's supposed to happen in a liberal, you know, in the humanities and in the social sciences certainly, and in the sciences as well. I mean, this is the educational process, right, where you're supposed to challenge and chew it up and really see what you can digest and what is indigestible really. And you're quite right. I mean I'm amazed.

In a conversation with a student, I said to her, "Look, what do you need me for?" I said, "I see the group that you're a part of. There are 15 people there, among the best people I've ever seen. You're all articulate. You all know what the thing is. Go on." And she shook her head and she said, "Professor Wisse, about this, you're wrong." She said, "What I say and what my fellow students say to one another does not matter. What faculty says matters." Says, "You may not like it but that's the way it is."

I was really – I was really surprised because I was thinking of myself as a student and when I was a student, what a professor said didn't matter a hoot. I mean, I never put any faith in my professors. If one could learn from one of them, great. I mean, and you followed them around like a puppy dog. But that was one out of, you know, 100.

And take them seriously? It never occurred to me. But they, she was actually quite genuine about that, that what we say to another, she said, really does not matter. She said, but what a professor says matters. And if that's the case, we're in bad shape.

KRISTOL: Yeah, it's funny that at a time when allegedly there's so much rebelliousness and standing up for yourself and thinking for yourself, it's quite the opposite. I totally agree with that. There's much more deference than we had.

But the best professors would have said over the years that a lot of their best students were people who came into class rebelling against them. Allan Bloom, many people who turned out to be his best students and ended up teaching political philosophy came into the class and disliked what he was saying, argued with him feverishly. And that was true in many cases and for both left and right, incidentally.

I mean, Ed Banfield when he was teaching at Harvard, very crusty, kind of wanted to provoke the students to argue. But they did get the sense that he welcomed the argument and he wanted them to think differently and to challenge various assumptions.

And you just don't get that. That is one of the most depressing, actually, about the campus today is less the – it's not simply that it's left and all that, it's that it's so, as I said before, performance might not be the right word, you know sort lackluster, just sort of. And as you say, well, if it doesn't matter – and that's the problem for the students, do they have an incentive to really force the issue or force a fight? It's just –

WISSE: Well, maybe the function of the university has now really changed and maybe it's become more like just simply a professional school and so you get, go there to – and you look for your intellectual challenge elsewhere.

I mean, maybe that is what will happen and the universities will become more and more certifying institutions that you go there for your certification as an economist or whatever it is. And basically the work of the humanities and of thought and of conflict and this gets done elsewhere. And as you see, if one takes advantage of it in this way, you can – this is called CONVERSATION, I mean one can create conversation in this way. And –

KRISTOL: And I think there are – I don't know much about this but I think there are historical precedents that I think if you were, and the reason there was the *Encyclopédie* in 18th-century Paris or the Royal Society, I think this is true in 17th-century London, is that the universities were not places where there was robust debate, they were dominated by whatever the orthodoxy of the time was, in most cases, the Church, really. And so actual debate took place in salons and –

WISSE: Café societies and so forth.

KRISTOL: Right, I mean a lot of that tradition. So it's ironic that we're wasting all these hundreds of millions of dollars or billions of dollars on these colleges and universities in this case. But and people have tried to fight within them but it may turn out that the actual intellectual life will end up flourishing more outside of them.

WISSE: Well, we'll do our bit.

KRISTOL: Life is full of ironies, right.

V: On Yiddish Literature (1:12:43 – 1:47:53)

KRISTOL: So let's talk about the academic field that you were the preeminent and are I think the preeminent scholar of but also almost single-handedly created, I would say, which is Yiddish literature but also Yiddish and comparative literature.

I think most Americans, most American Jews, even ones who might think they're mildly well-educated don't know much about Yiddish literature. So what brought you to it, I guess I would ask, and then why should others study it or read it?

WISSE: Well, I think it's clearly I think it's fascinating but one would have to provide an answer, and I think it would begin with literature. For me, there was never another discipline but literature because to me it was the most encompassing; everything was in it. I found philosophy, you know, dry and every other discipline I found limiting. Whereas if you plunge into the best of novels and the best of stories and poems, there's such richness there and everything is there, everything is in it.

So I went into literature and basically I went into English literature, although I took many other subjects as well – Russian literature, German literature. And then I had the good fortune to meet a poet, a Yiddish poet, a very important Yiddish poet. I had met a great many Yiddish writers as it happens in Montreal. And I had read some Yiddish literature before in school and so forth.

KRISTOL: And you knew Yiddish?

WISSE: Oh, yes, I knew Yiddish from home. I knew Yiddish from home. It's not my mother tongue.

KRISTOL: So that was a big advantage.

WISSE: It was a big advantage, and it was a big advantage that my mother had a kind of literary salon where she would invite writers to meet other people and to sell their books and so forth because there wasn't much of a market for Yiddish literature, certainly not after the Second World War.

And so, you know, there was literature in Yiddish and then I was in literature and this Yiddish poet, Abraham Sutzkever, was a great, really a great poet, came to Montreal and I was – I arranged his speeches, his talks. And once he said to me, "What are you going to be studying? Surely you're going to continue with your education." I said, "Oh, yes. I think I'm going to go on and get an advanced degree in English literature." And he said, "Why don't you study Yiddish literature?" And I laughed. And this was – I laughed and I said to him, "And what would I do, teach Sholem Aleichem?" And as I spoke these words, I was absolutely horrified. He, of course, was terribly insulted but I couldn't understand where did this, where did my reaction come from?

You know, thinking about, it's easy to see where it came from. I had been to a university where the word Jew was not mentioned. You read Jewish authors, you studied about the Rothschilds in a class on economics and so forth. But Jew was, you didn't mention Jew. And I was there in the 50s, right. This was see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil. It was sort of. And so it never occurred to me. I just didn't have the imagination to think that one could actually study Yiddish literature at an advanced level and teach Sholem Aleichem.

So but no sooner had I made this horrible error than the next day, I called Columbia, which was the one place in the country where you could actually study Yiddish linguistics, anyway, and combine it with a degree in Comparative Literature. And I asked to be – you know, I asked if I could come. And things then were much more fluid than they are today. And the next thing I knew, I was at Columbia getting an advanced degree in Yiddish literature.

KRISTOL: And I suppose if one were interested in things Hebrew, Hebrew literature or whatever, that would not lead you to Yiddish – lead one to Yiddish literature, either. So if you had gone to spend a year at Hebrew University, it's not as if people were teaching Yiddish literature there; they were teaching Hebrew.

WISSE: Well, they were teaching Hebrew literature. And as a matter of fact, they did, at just about the same time, introduce Yiddish literature. But one course. I mean, if one was going to study Yiddish – Jewish literature in Israel, clearly one would be studying the tradition of Hebrew literature.

But Yiddish literature really is more fascinating than one can really imagine because, firstly, the Jews were very literate people, and you had by the 19th century, by the middle of the 19th century, you had millions, millions of Jews concentrated in the Czarist empire, mostly in Poland, in Polish, what had been Polish territories. And so you had a tremendous critical mass of literate people.

KRISTOL: Whose first language was Yiddish.

WISSE: Whose first language was Yiddish.

KRISTOL: So they knew presumably the language, they had to deal with Gentiles then, right?

WISSE: Absolutely. So they could. Right. But and so –

KRISTOL: And Yiddish, being just to explain for people who didn't grow up in households where their grandmother, at least in my case, spoke Yiddish, is what German, sort of – give a quick –

WISSE: A quick summary of Yiddish.

KRISTOL: A quick summary of a very complicated language.

WISSE: Well, I think the language really goes back 800, 900 years at least and formed actually in Western Europe and then began to consolidate as a language more and more when Jews moved to Eastern Europe where there was no co-territorial German-speaking population.

And so the language became more and more independent, absorbed elements within it of, you know, of Slavic languages as well. And Mencken actually said that Yiddish was a lady of easy virtue. That in other words, it didn't care where – you know, who came into the boudoir and –

KRISTOL: And written in Hebrew.

WISSE: Written in Hebrew letters.

KRISTOL: But mostly German and –

WISSE: Well, the base of – the base is German but you can speak Yiddish –

KRISTOL: A huge number of other –

WISSE: Yeah, and my late teacher, Max Weinreich, who wrote the history of the Yiddish language, insists on calling it “a language of fusion,” which is like most languages are, not a language of borrowings or anything as if it's put together, you know, like jigsaw puzzle.

But this is an organic thing. And it's fascinating in its origins because of why it was needed. If you think about it, it really tells you something about how the Jewish people were constituted. Had they lived entirely in their own enclaves, they would have been speaking an entirely Jewish language, Hebrew, Hebrew Aramaic, or some entirely Jewish language. Had they been entirely assimilated or acculturated as they are in America, for example now, they would all be speaking English. But –

KRISTOL: Or in those cases, Russian or Polish or German.

WISSE: Exactly, Russian or Polish or another language. But the degree to which they both lived as a people apart and interacting with others tells you why a language forms that absorbs so many elements of the co-territorial language into itself – draws from Hebrew, Hebrew Aramaic sources, and from earlier Jewish languages because there were other Jewish languages in addition to Yiddish – and then keeps absorbing historically as it moves along.

Anyway, by the end of – by the middle of the 19th century, Yiddish the language itself was already extremely ripe and had developed a tremendous folklore, folk song repertoire, joking repertoire, humor repertoire and so forth. And the eureka moment came when these young people began to read Western literature. It was to many of them a kind of a shock because they had grown up as Talmudic scholars, as you know, very intensely literate and intellectual with a strong intellectual bias. And they were so much more educated than the peasants among whom they lived. Suddenly, now, you realize that here were Christians, here was a Western tradition that was in fact producing Goethe and Schiller and so forth and how exciting was that compared to the Talmud, which suddenly seemed to be much drier than it had appeared before.

So they were wildly excited about this literature. And, at first, it kind of touched a – I mean, I would say that they were a little apologetic in their posture before the Western world. But it did not take long before they gained their self-confidence and began to write in Yiddish and said, “You know, really if we are going to affect anybody with our thinking, if we are going to have readers who really grab and buy our books and read us, we have to write in the language that people know.” And only a minority actually was proficient in Hebrew. And so Yiddish literature began.

And once it began, this is really what’s so, one of the things which is so fascinating about it, the compression is enormous because what happened in Germany, in German literature, in French literature over a longer period of time, happens in Yiddish literature like instantaneously and you get sort of the generations –

KRISTOL: So this is mostly what, the 19th century –

WISSE: The end of the 19th century and then the beginning of the 20th century.

KRISTOL: When is it generally considered? I’m so ignorant. When is Yiddish literature generally considered to have begun? I mean what’s the sort of –

WISSE: Well, the grandfather of Yiddish literature –

KRISTOL: I mean, these things are always a little artificial.

WISSE: Yes, of course. But I would say 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 Sforim. And he became so well-known by this pseudonym that it took over his real – He became known as Mendele.

Really a fascinating personality. I think one of the most fascinating personalities in all of 19th century literature, period, because he stands at the origins of Hebrew literature as well as Yiddish literature. So you have a founding figure of two modern literatures. Himself, really an intellectual, kind of bitter, a little sarcastic and so on, who creates this persona of a book peddler who goes from place to place picking up books from the large cities because that’s where they were published, and then disseminating them, selling them all over the countryside. Now, what he carries are both religious books and the new secular books. What he carries are works for women and for men. What he carries are for the traditional people who are studying the old things and the younger people who are looking for new materials. So he invented for himself kind of the perfect figure, you see, to consolidate a brand new literature.

So, in work after work, this book peddler, Mendele, brings you a new text, introduces it to you and brings it to you. And this really is – so he’s one of the figures of modern Yiddish literature. Terrific satirist. So he begins as this scathing satirist, satire of Jewish provincialism, of Jewish ignorance as he sees it. Small-town mentality. Defensiveness, dirt, beggary. I mean, you know, in the Hebrew, in the Israeli school system, it’s very interesting.

Of course, they began when they began the school system in Israel, they began by teaching Mendele because everybody had to begin at the beginning. But then there was an objection and he’s hardly taught at all and not only because of that objection but partially because they said is this what we want them to think of that world of their, you know of the – especially when that world was destroyed in toto. Is this what you want to study, these works of satire and so forth?

Well, it’s a big mistake to let it go. Really a big mistake. One, because this is your process of modernization. This is how Jews became modernized. All the texts are there. You know and if you read them, you’d see. Philip Roth, what is Philip Roth compared to Mendele? You know how he – what he saw, what he knew because this was an informed critique. You know, it wasn’t – I mean, Roth did wonders with what he had but as a Jew, he didn’t have very much. He couldn’t play off languages, he couldn’t play off literary traditions or anything. You know, it was. Anyway, I mean, he was just one figure.

KRISTOL: And then he's followed by –

WISSE: Well, he's followed by Sholem Aleichem who calls himself the grandchild of Mendele. That's how he defines himself and he builds this concept of a tradition in which there's a grandfather and a grandson, however, there's nobody in between. So it's also a brilliant construct of how you build the idea of a literature. So it's absolutely fascinating.

And then a figure about whom I've written and will continue to write is I. L. Peretz, who was as famous as Herzl in his time but really spoke for Polish Jewry. He did not want to focus elsewhere because what he saw was 3 million Jews in Poland alone with this vernacular, with this developing culture, with the school system that was emerging, with the idea of minority rights, you see, that you could hope would allow for Jewish self-government almost, cultural self-government certainly within a larger context. Well, he, you know, if you wanted a body of writings for a school system, Peretz alone would be enough for you.

And then all the younger people who, I mean of all kinds, I mean, romantics, anti-romantics, impressionists, expressionists. Yes, I mean, it's just huge.

KRISTOL: Were there religious – vague – I have a vague ignorant impression that they were mostly secular or somewhat – debunkers is too strong to say – about religion. But not pious. Is that fair to say about the spirit of Yiddish literature is not –

WISSE: Well, it is fair, well, it is fair to say is the same – well, it's fair to say to the same degree that you would say it about English literature, that literature itself, modern literature is a kind of an acknowledgement of the fact that the guardians of our morality and of our ethics and so forth, who used to be the priesthood, and now are being replaced, as it were by writers. And so we have to do this job, not just of entertaining but also of really providing the cultural basis for this people. So it's extremely rich.

And then unfortunately, it's made richer by simply the history of the Jews during that period. In every way, I don't think that history pressed in on many peoples as violently and as forcefully as it did on the Jews. All of that is reflected in Yiddish literature.

So I would say if you are interested in the tragedy of Communism, really exploring what it was, now that one thinks that one doesn't have to fight it as much but to see really what were the impulses, how did it work, why was it so attractive to intellectuals and so forth? Boy, do you see a story in Yiddish literature that you don't see in – I don't find it in its equivalent in English literature. Of course, it's there in Russian literature, of course, it's there in Russian literature, and in Russian-Jewish literature.

But Yiddish literature records it in a way through the minority's prism and you see what the carrot was and what the stick was and how one took the carrot so eagerly. Because the Soviet Union said that Yiddish was the national language of the Jews, forbade Hebrew because Hebrew was the language of clericalism and of nationalism, so Hebrew was outlawed. Suddenly, Yiddish writers were subsidized. Never before had this happened, never again would it happen that the state was subsidizing Yiddish writers. So they came back to the Soviet Union to be part of this, you see to be subsidized. And each person's character defined the degree of compromise that he made, what kind of literature could come out of it.

And then at various times when Stalin needed them, particularly in World War II, he realized that if he sent these Yiddish writers abroad as his ambassadors, they could connect with Jews in the United States, for example, and the largest pro-Soviet rally ever in the United States was in 1943 when two Yiddish personalities, one a poet and the other the leader of the Yiddish theatre, Mikhoels, came to the United States. And oh, my God. And lend-lease, you know, was what Stalin was after. So you know this is a whole story and a sub-story in itself within Yiddish literature. And then, of course, as soon as the war was over, he dissolved the Jewish anti-Fascist committee which he had created and they were all liquidated and they were the last ones who were not killed in prison or who did not die in camps and so forth, were shot on August 12, 1952.

So this is so – even teaching it is difficult. What does one do? You can't retroactively condemn people who were condemned much more violently than you would ever think of condemning them. But it does sort of tell you that a full story within itself.

And I haven't gotten to the essence of the literature itself, which how they worked it all out, what they did, how they described their own experiences, sometimes in a kind of secretive language if they could, you know, to get out what it was that they were trying to say. So it's all, it's all tremendously moving and important. Again, it's really so significant. One never reads this literature with a sense of this is insignificant.

And then there are the women who are in the 1920s saying, "Hey, you know, what, there's a role for us, these guys who are writing who are all Talmudic scholars and who all use a certain kind of language, they're not describing the erotic life." And so you have all this erotic literature coming out, the women on their own, out of their own personal voices and so forth and that's a whole, again, just a whole segment of the literature. And I could go on. So you see that there's almost no point that one touches that isn't – that doesn't resonate really.

KRISTOL: Does the field now flourish to some degree here in the U.S. or elsewhere or in Israel or as a field of study? I mean.

WISSE: Well, this is an open question. Yes and no. I mean, there are many more people teaching Yiddish literature and studying Yiddish literature today than when, of course, I went into the field when I was the only student in this program and had to convince my school to introduce this subject. You know, there are students out there who are marvelous, absolutely wonderful.

And one of my former students, Aaron Lansky, has actually built a beautiful institution, a remarkable institution, called The Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, Massachusetts. Again, it sounds really out of the way and old-fashioned but it's an extremely modern institution and just beautiful on the setting of Hampshire College, where he is found an entrepreneurial way of collecting Yiddish books, selling them to whoever wants them, building libraries for startup programs and so forth. So there's a lot going on in the field now.

KRISTOL: And the literature itself, is it in any way a living literature?

WISSE: To some degree. One of the surprises for me is that I never really encouraged students to write in Yiddish except when, except as a way of getting them into the language. But I never required them to write papers in Yiddish because I thought I wanted their thinking to be at the level of their own thinking at its best and I knew that they did that in English. So if they wrote Yiddish papers, which they occasionally did, they came in at much lower level of, well, of control of the material because they had to – they had to dumb-down the language, you know, in order to get that done. But, surprise, surprise. Some of my students have become interested precisely in writing Yiddish. It is interesting.

KRISTOL: So it's not like Greek and Latin where they're great languages and great literature and they're studied seriously, but, of course, all the literature about them is in English or German or French or whatever. But that's and no one is writing Greek and Latin literature anymore, you might say.

WISSE: No. Except for the odd student who would find this kind of intriguing. And maybe a phenomenon of that kind. But you still have the so-called ultra-Orthodox communities, those who want to – for whom it's a living language. And –

KRISTOL: So it wasn't entirely destroyed by the war, by the Holocaust – by the destruction of European Jewry.

WISSE: Well, the base of it was and the base of it, really the cultural base of it was because these ultra-Orthodox or these Orthodox communities are precisely the ones that will not read modern Yiddish literature.

So this is what I first wanted to do when I set out to teach. My dream was to teach those communities because I thought I wanted to bring the literature back to the people for whom it was originally written and to really, you know, seal again the rift that had been created by history. And in a sense, one can do that. But it's not the major work that one does in Yiddish literature by any means.

KRISTOL: I suppose we don't know whether there's some very bright 23 year old in a yeshiva somewhere who knows Yiddish, which the rest of us don't, is reading thanks to your work, is reading Yiddish literature and thinking about things in a way that he wouldn't be encouraged to do probably by his teachers.

WISSE: Well, it is absolutely happening. And just may I just say, because of Lansky's Yiddish Book Center, this is the first literature I believe that's almost completely digitized because it's so almost finished as it were.

KRISTOL: It's like Greek and Latin too, actually, also.

WISSE: Yes, exactly, exactly. Which Susan – Yes, exactly, exactly, which, yes. So it's easier to digitize and besides there's no copyright on much of this material so that you can do that. And so yes they have access to this now.

KRISTOL: And I'm just curious, I know so little about it. So of course if you've grown up in New York and you have older relatives and you learn that there are different – I don't know if dialect is quite the right word – written Yiddish, spoken Yiddish. But the language was, the written Yiddish language was – had enough in common that one could live in Romania and read someone who wrote in Yiddish in Poland? I mean how – or were there differences?

WISSE: Well, it's a very interesting subject in itself.

KRISTOL: I'm sure it's much studied by scholars –

WISSE: Well, studied but it's also intriguing because it's the beginnings of English literature. If you look at the early English literature, Shakespeare, things, for example, you realize that a word like *word* can be spelled four different ways because there was no standardized spelling. So the same process takes place in Yiddish literature as well, where at first, there's no standardized spelling but then by the mid – by the 1920s and perhaps even earlier, you have a strong movement now for the standardization of Yiddish spelling. And so you have actually –

KRISTOL: But even a pre-standardization. I mean, this is just an empirical question. But young Yiddish-speaking men in Romania could read stuff written in Poland or Ukraine. If it was Yiddish – I mean, Yiddish was one language.

WISSE: Oh, no, there's no question, yes. Sometimes the –

KRISTOL: There might be some terms that would be –

WISSE: Of course, of course. There were some terms that were local. And in fact, one of the jobs of the writers was some of them really played with the idea of what was specific to their area because they wanted to underline the regionalism of their writing, whereas others really worked very hard to take out regionalisms so that they could really be part of this movement for a standardized language. But it's interesting that one of the questions posed to me most in the emails – could you possibly read this letter which I found in the attic which is from an aunt and so on? And there the spelling is unbelievably different. You know you can –

KRISTOL: It was pronounced differently and –

WISSE: Yes. People just wrote as they heard and the phonetics were really different to each person. But the literature consolidated and –

KRISTOL: And how distorted is – is *Fiddler on the Roof* a good thing or a bad thing? I'm sure it's a wild distortion of the spirit of the literature but, on the other hand, it did, I suppose, make it famous. I mean, so –

WISSE: You said it. That's the good and the bad. Part and parcel of it. It did make it famous, for which one is very grateful.

And the distortions are powerful. About this, I have written quite a bit because it's always on my mind, mostly because "Tevye the Dairy Man," this work of Sholem Aleichem's, who is still I think one of the greatest Yiddish writers, certainly, and certainly one of the great modern writers. The stories of "Tevye the Dairy Man," are incomparable as works of literature, they are really important.

And so the *Fiddler on the Roof* is based on a very important text, a key text. Sholem Aleichem wrote this over a period of 20 years. Not many novels are written over a period of 20 years. Because he created this character of Tevye who was so great, he was so much in love with this character that he would bring him back every few years to cope with whatever crisis had arisen in Jewish life. And the way he did this was to make Tevye the father of many daughters. At first, he's the father of 7 daughters, so that each daughter then comes to him and wants to marry someone and he wants the girl to marry someone else.

KRISTOL: They get to have a discussion about –

WISSE: They get, so the clash, whatever the clash is at any given time.

KRISTOL: And when is this happening? I mean chronologically he's writing –

WISSE: Between 1890, he creates him in 1895, and then he continues almost until his death in 18 – no, in 1916. So the last Tevye story was still in the process of being written when Sholem Aleichem died and you know he would do – and it's clear at least to me, I've made, tried to make a very strong case of the fact that this is the most in a sense autobiographical projection of Sholem Aleichem's.

He created a character in the same way that Abramovich created this character of Mendele who was so different from himself. Sholem Aleichem created a character who was intellectually at a different level from him in a way. Much less learned and much less cosmopolitan than himself but whose speech was the liveliest speech you will ever find of a Yiddish speaker. I mean, Tevye's speech is extraordinary and also his moral balance.

If you really if you want to introduce people to one text of what was East European Jewish civilization, I would always recommend that, because the way we meet Tevye the first time, he has been hauling logs for a living. He's just hauling logs through the forest. He is a villager. He lives out in the country. He supports his wife and these seven daughters. But he's bitterly poor and he's coming back at night.

And this is all in the form of a kind of monologue. He's coming back at night. He's telling this to Sholem Aleichem, to Mr. Sholem Aleichem, the writer. Coming back in the evening after a day's work with almost nothing to bring to his family. And suddenly it's time to say the evening prayers. And so at just that moment, the horse starts to run off. So he's running after the horse reciting his prayers. Now these are prayers that everyone would know. These are the basic, you know, 18 benedictions that part of every, every prayer. And how does he pray? He prays dialectically, you know, sort of, "Thou hast chosen us from among the nations. Why did you have to pick on the Jews? God provides. If only he would provide until he provides. You have raised us from this. You better raise me now because I'm six feet under already and so forth." You know just.

So this is kind of—and this is all drawn from Yiddish humor that was already folk humor. Sholem Aleichem consolidated something. Of course, he added a lot to it. But a lot of the joking, a lot of this irony, of quoting in Hebrew and then taking it down into Yiddish, the Hebrew being the affirmation, the Yiddish being the skepticism, the dig, the self-doubt, the doubt you know. I mean, this is just – I mean, I think it's the way many of us live, right. It's the way many of us truly live. We will never give up that, you know, that higher level, and we never want to give it up. But how can we give up the evidence of our lives, which is sometimes at such odds with the –

KRISTOL: This is really fascinating. So I'm sure – and there are good for people who don't read Yiddish, there are now good editions, translations of –

WISSE: Well, Hillel Halkin who's one of the best translators of Hebrew literature and Yiddish literature, translated the Tevye stories and also translated other Sholem Aleichem stories. *Railroad Stories*, he translated *Motl*, *Peysi the Cantor's Son*, and he translated a wonderful collection of letters between Menachem Mendel and Sheyne-Sheyndl. These are the three, four masterworks like of Sholem Aleichem's really –

KRISTOL: So we who don't read Yiddish have no excuse for not reading this great literature, any more than those of who don't know Russian have no excuse for not reading Dostoevsky or –

WISSE: Dostoevsky, exactly. And Tolstoy. It's there. It's definitely there. And now there are more teachers out there now also to interpret it and to, you know, to be the intermediaries between the text and the reader.

KRISTOL: Good. So this has been a fascinating conversation in general. But at least we've practically perhaps will inspire a few people. I myself will go out now and – I feel bad that I've read so little of it. But it is a great world literature, that's your point.

WISSE: That is my point.

KRISTOL: It's not just – I mean you didn't come to it from the Jewish point-of-view in a certain way or from a tradition that you happened to know this language. You came to it because of your love of literature in general and that this really stands on the stage comparably to Russian and French and English literature.

WISSE: Yes. And all the students who come to study it, it's interesting that one of the assignments I once gave in a class about Tevye, which is one of the first texts we take in one of the classes. I said you can write about any experience – I don't usually do this. We ask different kinds of questions.

But it occurred to me that I could do this. I said you could write about any experience in your life from the point-of-view of Tevye, write it as a Tevye story. The best work came out on the Puerto Rican student who had adapted it to his grandmother and who had her be the speaker.

And it was unbelievable because it was exactly a Tevye creation but transposed into the Puerto Rican experience. And immediately got the point. I mean it's so universal this clash of language – of generations and so forth. I mean, it's just unbelievable. Yeah.

KRISTOL: Well, only in America. It's a universal point. But it's also only-in-America kind of point.

Ruth Wisse, thank you so much for joining me today. It's been a fascinating conversation for me. And thank you for joining us on CONVERSATIONS.

[END]