Conversations with Bill Kristol

Guest: Leon R. Kass, Madden-Jewett Chair, American Enterprise Institute

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I: A Turn to Bioethics (00:15 – 24:11)

KRISTOL: Hi, I'm Bill Kristol. Welcome to CONVERSATIONS. I'm very pleased to have as our guest today, Leon Kass, who taught for decades at the University of Chicago and has written insightfully and incisively on topics ranging from medicine and science to the Bible, the Greeks, and America, and many other things besides. Leon, welcome.

KASS: Nice to be with you, Bill.

KRISTOL: Good to have you here. So, you were – gotten an MD at the University of Chicago, were studying for your PhD in biochemistry at Harvard. But didn't end up becoming a full-time MD, PhD, doctor and researcher. What happened?

KASS: Well, actually it was during, well, the real beginning was the summer of '64, my wife, Amy and I are taking a trip out West camping, and we're listening on the radio, we're somewhere in Kansas. And we heard about the murder of the three civil rights workers – [Michael] Schwerner, [Andrew] Goodman, and [James Earl] Chaney – and we just said to ourselves we have to get involved in this activity and promised the next summer we would do some, some work in the South. And –

KRISTOL: Had you been involved in political things much before that?

KASS: Oh, sympathizers. I was a young man of the sensible Left, particularly interested in race relations and integration. And, in fact, I had been a member of the NAACP when I was in college at the age of 16. So, that's an old story.

And the following summer, Amy and I went to Mississippi with the Medical Committee for Human Rights, ostensibly to use medical issues as a means of organizing a rural black community in Holmes County. What we wound up doing was trying to get people to register to vote. Lived with a black family, went to meetings of what became the Freedom – Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party.

It was an eye-opening experience, and it was – it was life-changing in an unexpected way because when I returned back to the laboratory at Harvard where I was studying, doing research in biochemistry, I was struck with this question. Why did it seem that there was sort of more decency and integrity and honor in these uneducated, impoverished sort of black farmers in rural Mississippi than – forgive me – in my fellow graduate students at Harvard who were looking out only for number one? They would cut corners on – to get ahead of you in various relations.

And it was a real question and it, it sort of dawned on me that I was missing something. And that after reflection, it seemed to me that perhaps this could be attributed to honest labor, strong community, but especially religion. And I had been raised in a completely secular home. I was a, without doing it so much by book reading but by kind of rearing, a believer in the Enlightenment view that as knowledge progresses, you will eliminate superstition, you'll get rid of poverty and prejudice and oppression and human beings will flourish and become the perfectly moral creature that only these obstacles prevent them from being.

And my closest friend, Harvey Flaumenhaft, at that time said, "Kass, you should read this." And he gave me Rousseau's *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* to read, which as you know, argues that progress in the arts and sciences does not go hand-in-hand with improvement in morals and politics, but, in fact, the reverse. And as the sciences improve and the arts develop, morals decline and tastes debase, and you have talented people but you don't have citizens.

And this was a shock. I mean, this really was a shock because if Rousseau were right, or could he possibly be right, then everything I had been led to believe was up in the air. And that was really the beginning of my education. And also thanks to Harvey Flaumenhaft whose next books for me to read were Huxley's *Brave New World* and C. S. Lewis' *Abolition of Man*, I realized that you didn't have to go to Mississippi to find large moral problems but they were right there rolling around at my feet.

And that they were, in fact, more challenging because whereas in Mississippi, the moral right was clear, and the question of what to do about it was difficult, but racial segregation and racial hatred was simply wrong. Whereas the problems of the brave new world are brought you to by the decent well-wishers of human kind, and the evils, if they are evils, are deeply embedded in the goods that all of us want.

So, I began to think about some of these things. It was also, by the way, a time when the new biology had just taken hold. Watson and Crick won the Nobel Prize in '62, I think, for research published in '53. It was a very heady time. There were meetings on genetics and the future of man, and there were scientists going around saying that thanks to this new science, human beings can now engineer their whole future and perfect the human being out of the grip of chance and necessity.

And this seemed to me arrogant, arrogant foolishness, and that there was a lot of work to be done here. So I continued in the lab and even went on to NIH for a few years. But I began organizing discussion groups to talk about some of the emerging bioethical issues.

KRISTOL: Yeah, I think the first time I knew of you was when I read an article. I was a student, I guess an undergraduate at Harvard, in 1972, I think it was in *The Public Interest* – "Making Babies," which was, raised concerns about technological progress, scientific progress that was being widely heralded, and in certain ways for good reason, I suppose. That we were overcoming the traditional problems or limits of infertility and so forth.

And I remember that article. For me, it was – I mean, I was more open maybe than you had been because of my year or two in education at Harvard to the notion that progress was problematic in certain ways. But, still, that was a very bold article, I would say. And it's impressive that you got there so quickly after 1965 or '66 to 1972. What, I mean, because that's really beyond, it's beyond Huxley, but it's sort of that you had really thought things through at that point.

KASS: The ground is really paved by Huxley.

KRISTOL: You think that's really the key?

KASS: For me, for me. Huxley shows you a world of the future in which all of the goals of progressive liberal humanitarianism have been achieved. There's no war. There's no poverty. There's no disease.

You've overcome envy and shame and grief. You have overcome – although there are classes, rigid classes, genetically determined classes – everybody is happy with their lot, so there's no class envy.

And there's stability, there's prosperity. And even though they get their pleasures from the bottle, everybody is content. And what he shows you, really, is what the world would look like if, in fact, the humanitarians were to succeed in their wildest dreams. And he shows you that you – the result is creatures of human shape but of greatly stunted humanity. They don't read, write, love, think, or govern themselves. There's no art, there's no science, there's no politics, there's no friendship.

What there is is comfort, health, and pleasure. And it begins, in part, by destroying the parochial attachments. In fact, the whole novel begins in the central London hatchery where they're engaged in artificial fertilization. And then when the embryos are a certain age, they condition them. And then when they're born, there's *hypnopædia* so everybody is indoctrinated with the teaching.

And it's genetics, neuroscience, and a perfected psychology – educational psychology – and a pharmacology that deals with the miseries of the human condition. And it's suddenly made to clear to me this, the things that science is doing to relieve the miseries of the human condition are available thanks to the bio-prophets of a post-human future for engineering new kinds of human beings.

And the question is whether they're going to be better than us, are going to be radically dehumanized. So the question of the dehumanizing possibilities of the beneficial progress of science and medicine has been really for almost 50 years, getting close to 50 years what's been on my mind.

KRISTOL: And what's impressive to me is that I do think a lot of people – thanks to nuclear weapons – a lot of, there was general concern that, I think it wasn't uncommon to say, "Well, gee, science is a double-edged sword because we could blow the world up." But it was very much that focus I think, and the biological focus, the dehumanization as opposed to simple destruction of everything. I think that was as much of a hook. Huxley died – if I'm not mistaken – on the same day that President Kennedy was assassinated. I think C. S. Lewis, Huxley, and Kennedy who all died on November 22, 1963, or within a day of that or something. And they were – but that wasn't the only reason. I think Huxley had faded a lot. I guess his later work was somewhat cranky.

KASS: Well, he also partly recanted. I mean, he began talking about the expansion of the mind through drugs, which – *that* Huxley became very popular around that particular time.

KRISTOL: So, I guess was there any intellectual world, which you found in the late 60s, early 70s that was sympathetic to these concerns? How alone were you in sort of addressing issues?

KASS: Well, I found in a symposium the writings of the Christian theologian and ethicist, Paul Ramsey, who taught for years at Princeton. And Ramsey had –

KRISTOL: He was still alive at this point?

KASS: Oh, he was alive then. In fact, he came – he came to give some talks, to do some study at Georgetown. He was brought to Georgetown from Princeton because he wanted to work on medical ethics as seen by doctors. And a book called – I won't remember it – *Fabricated Man*. It was published in 1968 – no, maybe 1970. And I got myself invited to these faculty only conversations with Ramsey.

And he let me read in draft every one of the chapters, both from his book, *The Patient as Person*, and his book, *Fabricated Man*. And I would meet with him in an evening for three hours to discuss each of these chapters. So I got free a kind of education at his feet, admittedly with a strongly Christian emphasis. But he was wonderful.

And through him, I got invited to the founding meeting of the Hastings Center, which was the first American think tank on ethics and the life sciences. And we had a research group on ethical issues of death and dying, on the determination of death, questions on allowing to die. There was a research group on behavior control through Skinnerian methods and pharmacology.

There was stuff on genetics, genetic screening. Richard Nixon, you may remember, had an advisor whose name I'm not remembering, who thought that you could get genetic tests that would show predispositions to criminality. Remember the XYY. That was in the air.

So, this group, the Hastings Center, was founded in '69, and I was active there and on the board for 26 years. Ramsey and I were on the sort of conservative end of things. Most of the people there for the most part – not true of Dan Callahan – but most of them, their ethical concerns were the benefits of technology were not going to be equitably distributed so the distributive justice questions, they were concerned about abuse of power, they were concerned about privacy.

Nobody but – nobody but me was really interested in the dehumanization question. And that really is the hard question because we all want longer life, relief of suffering. I'm not in favor of misery. On the other hand, the boundaries between healing and enhancement are vanishingly small. And what's the difference between drugs for clinical depression and Dr. Feel-Good who – or the illegal drugs which are all over the place? If you had these now, drugs that could be made safe, would you really want a society in which people got their jollies out of the bottle? Then it begins to look like that degraded world of the Brave New World.

KRISTOL: And your work on this – which people can and should read – I guess culminated, from a practical point-of-view, in your appointment by President Bush to chair the Bioethics Council where you and the Council produced many reports well worth reading on these topics. I'm curious, practically speaking, I guess – two questions. It seems to me that these concerns are more respectable to be raised today than perhaps they were 50 years ago.

On the other hand, in sort of the real world of medical progress, scientific progress, actual policies, it's hard to fight promises of relief of suffering and longevity of life and happiness, even if it's, you know, pharmacologically produced. And I'm curious what you think, you know, how does it stand, and is it harder than you thought it would be to wake people up or to actually make or to actually change the progress of this, of all these developments?

KASS: I mean, this is a very tough area to do anything about. The party of progress is well-heeled, it's very profitable, it occupies the high moral ground because they're doing great good in the relief of human suffering. The public is 100 percent behind it. Yes, there's some issues around the edges about whether you can use embryos in research. And as you know, we were mired in that subject for five years. But the party of go-slow has no, has no backers. And the party of caution wrings its hands but can't do very much.

Insofar as, well, and also we have a – we have a highly decentralized medical profession, unlike say in certain countries in Europe, our public politics in the bioethics area are radically distorted by the abortion question, which has dominated the politics close to this area you know for getting close to 50 years. And this was one of the frustrating things in our work on the Council.

And I realized that the only allies that I would have, politically speaking, were the people for whom the sole question was, "Don't kill nascent life, and don't practice euthanasia or assisted suicide" – positions with which I'm sympathetic.

But to put it somewhat provocatively, I met with prominent people in the pro-life movement who made it very clear that they really didn't care how babies were born as long as embryos didn't die in the process,

so that when we proposed a list of – we got a unanimous set of proposals out of this very diverse council, including some, many Democrats and vigorously pro-progress scientists.

We proposed a series of modest legislative recommendations that would place the burden of proof on the innovators against crossing certain boundaries – that we should protect the boundary between human and animal. So, no fertilization of human egg by animal sperm or vice versa, and don't put a human embryo into the body of an animal for any reason.

And in private meetings, the most prominent pro-life organization couldn't agree to the second. Why? Because if putting an embryo in the body of an animal was the only way to rescue the embryo and bring it to birth, they couldn't oppose such a restriction. And I'm scratching my head. I mean they would prefer to have a baby have a pig for a mother rather than see an embryo die.

And I realized that in a way, the whole country is in the grip, really, of the life question. On the one side, and the argument is embryo research is going to save lives and cure Parkinson's disease. And on the other side, embryo research is going to destroy life. And life and death, decisively important things. But killing the creature made in God's image is an old story. What to do when human beings decide to change his nature by their own ill-conceived thoughts, that's what's new.

And it's very, very hard in the present climate to get anybody to focus on it. And the stuff just moves along. And especially in the neurosciences where, I think, the ability of genetics radically to alter the deep things that make us human is going to take a long time because the genetics is very complicated.

But the stuff we're discovering about the brain, about appetite, about desire, about pleasure, about control, self-control, and so on, this opens the way to all kinds of interventions and the boundaries between healing disease and serving people's needs or serving the interests of the state in certain places, that's going to disappear.

KRISTOL: And I think the libertarian impulse will just, if people want to do this for themselves or have a doctor help them do this or even not a doctor but someone else do this – very hard to say no and then you're on a road to, yeah. . . .

KASS: And this is really my view. It's in the Brave New World, it's a world-state, and everything is done governed by the world controllers. But you don't need – there's such a thing as voluntary self-degradation – you see it all around. And the question is what would it be like with a perfected pharmacology of pleasure or various other kinds of ways of screwing around with your mind and your soul.

KRISTOL: Isn't it being a little unfair to your party, the other party than the party of progress, to say it's simply the party of go-slow or caution because you, I think, struck upon the formulation that in a way what's at stake is human dignity. And you've addressed that in several essays. And I mean isn't the other party somehow the party of dignity?

KASS: Now, that's a welcome correction, Bill. And I do think I mean in certain quarters you get beat up for talking about human dignity. It's said to be an empty slogan and subterfuge for really Christian – in fact, not even Christian but Catholic teaching. I think it's obviously wrong.

I think that, look, science itself is one of the manifestations of what's dignified about our humanity. And you cannot be simply for freedom. Freedom itself is in danger of destroying its foundation if you don't have it tempered by some view of dignified humanity, of a way of being in the world that treasures real life and friendship and love and work and loyalty and devotion to a community and things of that sort. And, finally, also, a certain kind of awe and reverence for the fact that the gift of this life is ours not because we had it coming. These are, these are – this is part of our tradition both philosophical and religious.

And the new science not only doesn't bother itself with it, but, to some extent, and this goes beyond the technologies now, the, but the ideas of the science as they diffuse into the popular culture tend to undermine our confidence in those inherited notions. And, yes, my friends – and many of them are steeped in the religious traditions – are the party of human dignity – but they, I'm not sure they're getting the upper hand.

II: Toward a More Natural Science (24:11 – 42:07)

KRISTOL: Now, it seems to me in your own progress, you became very quickly concerned about the social consequences of scientific progress and about the moral consequences, I guess one might say, political consequences, too, but you quickly also went beyond that, I think to really think about sort of science itself, or how true this account of human beings, the scientific account was as opposed to merely what bad consequences it might have.

And a lot of people, I think, don't do that. A lot of the discussion, which is fine if that's what people are interested in is much more on the social consequences, and how do we stop this or that? But say a word about your, what led you sort of beyond worrying about the consequences to actually thinking about how true is modern natural science or how good an account is it of what science is supposed to give an account of?

KASS: Right. I mean, it was triggered by a point I just made, namely that the technologies raise troubling ethical issues, but the underlying scientific notions challenge our very notions of morals and our self-understanding as creatures of freedom and dignity.

And so I began really to examine the foundations of modern science back in the 17th century with the writings of René Descartes and Francis Bacon and the emergence of a new understanding of nature based upon mathematical physics, which I better say quickly is one of the monumental achievements of the human intellect. I mean it's really just astonishing.

If you would have been around in the beginning of the 17th century and you read Descartes' analytic geometry and you read his claim that on this basis we would have a new science of nature, which in Bacon's terms, would relieve man's estate, you would sort of say these guys are kooks. But look what's been accomplished and thanks to that new science, the poorest people in America live better by and large than dukes and princes a hundred years ago.

And one shouldn't, one shouldn't do anything but praise its accomplishment for the improvement of human life. In the beginning, those ideas were not simply intended to replace what the humanities and what religion had to teach. But especially as the sciences become more powerful, more and more talk, more and more, the claim is that science has the monopoly on the truth, not just about human beings but about nature as a whole.

And when you look at it, you discover that the science of nature is not nature as either lived or experienced. It's abstract; it's objectified; it's mathematical. It prides itself on knowing the laws of nature but not the nature of the beings. It doesn't know anything about the inwardness of beings. It doesn't concern itself with purposiveness. It doesn't ask the question of why they are here or what they're for or what their aspirations are.

And yet those scientific thoughts now filter out in the larger culture so that science has a kind of authority, which no other body of knowledge has. And in the last few decades with the rise of genetics, evolutionary psychology, and neuroscience, we now a new species of bio-prophet, and they are peddling scientism, teaching that you can have an account of life in which the soul has no place and in which all of the things that we treasure really at bottom are the product of evolutionary mechanisms, electrochemical events in the brain, love is a high concentration of a peptide in the hypothalamus, etc., etc., etc.

And that the mysteries of human existence are just names for our current ignorance to be fixed by the progress of science. And, by the way, if you look at the sort of metaphors that we now to use to speak of that and information technology, we now describe all of our doings with inputs and outputs and things of that sort. Freud did it with the technologies of his time. I mean, then it was, you know, hydraulic pumps and pressure, the metaphors came from engineering. And so but I had, anyway, two ways to –

KRISTOL: You had a suspicion somehow this was not an adequate account of either human beings or of nature? And what did you go back to, I guess is my –? Or did you?

KASS: Well, I thought if this is the beginning of modern science, what did people think before this, because I had been reared on this. I'd done medicine, I'd done biochemistry. I was a creature of modern science.

And I was introduced to some contemporary European biologists who sort of thought about organisms in a more holistic, less reductive way. Erwin Straus, a phenomenological psychologist, Adolf Portmann, a Swiss biologist who taught beautifully about the appearance of animals and why you can't explain them in terms of protective coloration or sexual selection – attractiveness to a mate.

But mostly I went back to Aristotle's biology, the parts of animals, the generation of animals; Aristotle's *Physics*, and especially his treatise on this soul, which was absolutely eye-opening for me. I had originally that thought the soul was like a ghost in the machine. The body is a machine, and if there's anything else there, it's just this little homunculus. And I was surprised to discover an account of the soul, which is neither that, nor is it the Christian soul, which departs the body upon death but is a kind of bio-psychological notion in which it's the organized powers of a formed body and it is the principle of vitality, the principle of awareness, of appetite, of action on the world.

And that if you really want to understand an organism, and leaving the notion of a soul aside for a moment, you really had to understand the powers and the activities of living things and not just the mechanism and not just where they came from.

KRISTOL: I guess I should go read. I've never actually read *De Anima*. I guess it's not really very prominent these days.

KASS: No, it was –

KRISTOL: Did you teach it, have you taught it to undergraduates?

KASS: This was a piece of my stupidity. I was then – I was hired for a short period of time to teach at St. John's College in Annapolis, the great books college where I got a huge dose of my education. I mean, it was a really wonderful time there. And you were allowed, they have one elective there called a preceptorial and you can – tutors offer whatever they want. And I was working on the definition of death, and I figured, look, Aristotle might have something to say on this, so I said, "I'll offer a preceptorial on *De Anima*."

And I went eagerly to this trying to see, maybe he could help me figure out what's the difference between a man alive and a man dead? And I was astonished that Aristotle is not at all interested in death. And death occurs, I think, maybe once in the whole thing. We are inclined to think you find out about life when the candle is being lit and when the flame goes out, right? Aristotle is interested, if you want to know about life, you look when the candle is burning most brightly and see what it does.

So the book is not about coming into being or passing away, the book is along about nourishing, reproducing, sensing, imagining, desiring, thinking, the activities of living things and in their hierarchical arrangement. And it's through that that I began to see, look, you cannot, you cannot possibly give a simply material account of any vital activities, not even of nourishing of the amoeba. You can discuss the

mechanism of it, you can show how things work, but what that activity is you have to know by what function it has for the organism as a whole.

And he has – this seems to me a foolproof argument, it can't be refuted. At a certain point, he asks the question in discussing sensation and seeing, he points out the eyeball, the eye. You can hold it in your hand, the eye is a material thing, it has extension, etc., it has parts and you can now study it microscopically, he couldn't do that. But if you ask what is sight or what is seeing, you can't point to it. It's not without the eye, it depends upon the eye. But it's a power and it's an activity, and those things are made possible by material but they're not material.

And then you can go on to talk about speech and thinking. And science itself is inconceivable on a materialist understanding of thought. Science, thought requires the independence of mind, otherwise, what's going on right here is simply the working of your nervous system and my nervous system, and all we can say is, "It seems to me," and the possibility of truth disappears.

So, I became quite convinced that we needed a different account of nature and of science than – what we have now is very good as a partial account, it gives us great power, it's miraculous in the power it provides, but it's not true to lived experience. We know from the inside what it is to love, to desire, to grieve, to befriend, to think, to feel, to want, to care. And nothing that science is going to teach us, should ever lead us to abandon this inside knowledge that we have.

And yet the culture is being sort of hoodwinked and borrows – they think that these brain scans are somehow true explanations for what it means to get angry. Aristotle had this sorted out. The question: What is anger? He says – I think, it's in the chapter, Book One of the *De Anima* – if you ask the *fusikoi* – the naturalists, our biologists – if you ask them, "What's anger?", oh, he says, "They would say it's a certain warming of the blood around the heart." That's the material explanation.

If you ask the people who give an account, the *logikoi*, the people who speak about it, they say anger is a pain experienced by the experience of a slight with a desire to give revenge. And for the first account, you go to the biochemists, for the second account, you read Homer and you read about the wrath of Achilles. And Aristotle then says and which one – which one is right? He says, both together.

KRISTOL: Okay, I'm going to read, I will read *De Anima*. Portmann, who you mentioned, someone recommended him to me I think when I was in graduate school. Maybe someone had been told about him by you or a friend of yours. And I actually found it in a used bookstore, I remember, at least, one book of his, which I found really fascinating and also quite accessible. I mean, a lot of it is just – not just but it begins with just observations of animals.

KASS: Animal appearance.

KRISTOL: Well, why do they do certain things, and is it really explicable on a kind of purely materialist survival of the fittest? I wonder if that's even in print now, Portmann.

KASS: I think it's out of print. The Europeans had a certain kind of – they were much richer in organismal biology. A lot of the ethnologists and animal-behavior people – those were Europeans. And they were strong also in the phenomenological position, which really takes its bearings from what animals do and not just what you do when you take them apart and see how they work.

KRISTOL: And you have those wonderful essays, which are collected, I think, in a book, *Toward a More Natural Science*. And then you wrote a book with "soul" in the title, now that I think about it, *The Hungry Soul*, which is in a way Aristotelian, I suppose, the mixing of the hunger which in some ways is a material desire but ascribing it to the soul. Say a word about that.

KASS: Yeah, that, *Toward a More Natural Science* was a collection of some essays on bioethical, practical problems, some essays on the nature of medicine and its goal, trying to hold the line that the goal of medicine is healing and not enhancement and not social control, and finished with some essays – the last one in fact inspired by Portmann on animal appearance, which invited the thought that nature might have some – nature rightly understood might have some pointings for ethics.

And Portmann's essay points to nature as a teacher about the beautiful, that the meaning of animal appearance is not just utilitarian but that the animals in a way show off, they announce in the language of visibility, Portmann says, their individual standing of their species, who they are. And he deals with some of the higher animals and shows how the look is a look to another to be seen with a whole esthetic dimension.

The Hungry Soul was my attempt to try my hand my hand at a more natural science, to give an account of things, to show how you could speak about the lowly phenomenon of eating and metabolism and work up from a naturalistic account of the phenomenon of eating to human eating, the problem of human omnivorousness, which is the bodily mark of our potentially tyrannical posture in the world in which we turn everything into material to be homogenized for our own use and then moving into the customs that restrain that appetite and perfect.

I mean, the book is *The Hungry Soul: Eating and the Perfecting of Our Nature*. Laws of hospitality and the taboo against cannibalism, table manners, and moderation, the dinner party and wit and grace, and then, finally, grace and gratitude and the sanctified eating. And it was an attempt to connect biology, philosophical anthropology, and what began to be more my interest, culture and cultural anthropology.

And the connection between the naked human animal and the clothes that are designed to fit him and then the question is which of the clothes that are designed to fit him actually help him become the upright being that is advertised in his singular posture. And that was an ambitious book.

It's – I think known only for a gratuitous remark about licking ice cream cones. Actually, your father is partly responsible. The question about restraining human appetite and eating in public –Leo Strauss has somewhere in the discussion of moderation a kind of maxim which I adopted. "No participation in someone else's digestion." In other words, as a way of not eating in people's faces, which led me to think about the way we eat on the street and in public, and I made this remark. But your father pointed me –

KRISTOL: Which was that it was somehow one should refrain from having ice cream cones while walking down the street?

KASS: Yeah … licking, licking was a cat-like activity. If it's one sentence I've ever written that I'd like to take back, that one.

KRISTOL: Right. Became sort of famous when you were appointed by the president to chair the Bioethics Council?

KASS: But your father got me a quotation from the Talmud, which said, "A man who eats in the street acts like a dog."

KRISTOL: There you go.

KASS: Ancient wisdom.

III: The Beginning of Wisdom (42:07 – 1:11:12)

KRISTOL: *The Hungry Soul*, as I recall, ends with a discussion of Jewish dietary laws, Kashrut, and I think you had already become interested in – you were always interested in Judaism and the Bible but more interested. You had taught the Bible at that point for several years, I think.

KASS: Yeah, well, that's a kind of a funny thing happened to me, really. I wasn't reared on it. As I told you, my Yiddish-speaking, secular, socialist home never was in the synagogue, knew nothing really. The prophets without the law, basically.

KRISTOL: Were you bar mitzvahed?

LEON: No.

KRISTOL: Really? So it really was just like you –

KASS: It really was a completely secular home.

KRISTOL: But very pro-Jewish traditions somehow.

KASS: Yeah, I mean I didn't realize at the time that I thought I was just getting the education that my parents had had and their parents had had, etc. My parents were European-born, immigrants. And only later on, I guess, when I read an article by Ruth Wisse, it was made clear to me that my Yiddish education was really one side in a large culture war, it was an attempt to provide a secular, linguistic, and cultural alternative to religious Judaism. So it was a kind of Jewish identity, but and with some – I mean, there's a kind of built-in certain even moralism in the teachings, parasitic on the religion as I later would learn.

But no God. And the Passover Haggadah that we used to read at the third Seder in my Yiddish school, God isn't mentioned, Moses is the hero of the whole story.

KRISTOL: Somewhat contrary to the intention –

KASS: Exactly the reverse. But no, I got into the Biblical studies in two ways. One, Amy and I and a few colleagues designed a new common core course at Chicago called "Human Being and Citizen." We talked about it in the conversation when Amy was here. And because these were to be exemplary texts on the subject of what is an excellent human being and excellent citizen, we thought we should read the Bible. So I put it in there, and we started to read it. And I found that the stories in Genesis just they got a hold of me.

I mean, and we'd take them home and talk about them at dinner and so on. And then I gave a lecture at St. John's College. It was, I think, the fall of '78. The lecture was on Darwin, Darwin and teleology. And Bob Sacks, my friend, a tutor there, I said the next day – it was the Sabbath and I wanted to go – was there a place where I could go dig for fossils? I was in a Darwinian mood. And I'm sitting on the ground in this quarry chipping at rocks and Sacks sitting next to me.

And while I'm chipping at rocks, he's regaling me with story after story from his new commentary on Genesis. And it was astonishing. I mean, he was reading this book with the same care that I would be reading Plato or Aristotle or Rousseau or what have you, because it never seemed to me that this was a book that could be read with the same spirit and with the same care. And he gave me as a gift, I mean, a paper – it wasn't yet published – he gave me a copy of his manuscript and I took it home.

And the following year, that year and the next, Amy and I had a faculty colleague and three or four students would meet every Saturday and read the portion of the week that's read in the synagogue. By this point, I had joined a synagogue. We had children, we were doing something different. And we went through, over two years, went through two cycles in reading all of it. And so I was getting introduced to it,

and I was sort of teaching it, and I mean, it's sort of ironic that you go give a lecture on Darwin and you come home with, deciding to undertake kind of serious study of the Bible.

KRISTOL: Robert Sacks, I remember, looking at parts of those articles, and they were published as two or maybe more long articles in *Interpretation*.

KASS: Yeah, he couldn't get them published by a book publisher, so they were published seriatim in *Interpretation*, I think, probably over 10 issues. And it's, I mean, it's very elliptical. But he had studied with Strauss. He had gone –

KRISTOL: So, Strauss was the, had first shown him that it was able to be done. It's super-impressive, the Sacks commentary.

KASS: Really impressive. Sacks reports, I think, in the introduction, he spent a year in Jerusalem in '54 or '55 when he was a young man, and Strauss happened to be there that year and they had a conversation and Strauss said to him, "Mr. Sacks, you don't know the first thing about the Bible. Come next Saturday, we will read."

KRISTOL: And Sacks at this point was a student of –?

KASS: He was, he had been at St. John's College, I think.

KRISTOL: Though well-educated in Jewish things or –?

KASS: Yeah, he'd known Jewish things. And so I don't know how many times they met but he got the opening from Strauss, and then he produced this commentary, and he's much more subtle than I am. I'm more inclined to, you know, lay everything out. But he was the real guide in my original reading.

And it took several years, a few years before I got up enough nerve to do something with it. I had by invitation only convened a reading group of 10 students, and we met one night a week and read Genesis in the evening for three hours.

And it was, it was just stunning. I mean, the stories. I mean the stories of Genesis, they just teach themselves. I mean everybody has got, everybody gets into them. They're gripping, and yet there's also, they're spare. So there's a lot of interpretation that's required. In fact, that's part of the genius of the book. You cannot simply, you should not simply take at face value, you cannot think that what's there is the whole story. It requires an effort to interpret, to fill in the lacunae and so on. And that's why there are mountains and mountains of commentary.

And then about five years later, I decided, "What the heck?" The people who teach Bible are mostly doing source criticism. No one is reading it as a possible source of wisdom for important human questions, by which time I had decided that this was a book that at least in my understanding of it could more than hold its own in the pursuit of wisdom with the things that are explicitly called philosophical.

I was not reading it in an orthodox way; I was reading it really and trying also by the way to learn. Not having been either blessed or burdened with an orthodox education, I was trying to do with the book what I try to do with most books – try to figure out how this book wants you to read it. And that, Sacks lent some help in his commentary. But going over and over and over again. And so I finally decided look, I'll offer a course and put it in the course catalog, figured I wasn't going to do anybody any harm.

KRISTOL: And what was the course on, just Genesis?

KASS: Just Genesis, 10 weeks. And I think by the end, I did it about 10 times, I couldn't get it done in 10 weeks, so I did it in 20 weeks. And we just, you know it's 50 pages altogether probably. But we went

very, very slowly and boy I got an education from those classes. And eventually it produced the book called *The Beginning of Wisdom*.

KRISTOL: Now, I remember though reading several articles you wrote over the years on the particular stories in Genesis before they produced the, before the book. And I can't remember, which was the first you wrote about? Do you recall or did one sort of strike you as, did you have a particular insight that began or just the whole book?

KASS: Well, I guess there are – there were about three that were towards the beginning. One was on Babel, on the meaning of Babel. Babel, I saw, really, as from the Bible's point-of-view, the paradigmatic city. And that's in a way the project of human kind united after the flood. It's a project based upon speech, reason, and technology and the arts. And it aspires to nothing less than the radical self-creation of human beings.

Most people emphasize the tower reaching into the heaven but it really, every city has a tower, I mean, oriented towards some view of what's up there. But this is from the Bible's point-of-view, its first take on the meaning of the city and it's not favorable.

KRISTOL: But also a city that's peculiarly—this fits in with your, I suppose, work on modern natural science—it seems peculiarly cosmopolitan and scientific.

KASS: It's cosmopolitan, technological, rational.

KRISTOL: You could have had just a normal ancient city with its gods, which the Bible also has something to say about, I suppose, but –

KASS: But I think – but this was partly, this sort of began to feed also other thoughts. The Bible's first take on civilization is negative. The founder of the first city is Cain, he's a fratricide. And shepherds, tents rather than houses and city dwellers.

Babel is the universal city. Sodom and Gomorrah are dens of iniquity. And, eventually, God gets his own city with Jerusalem, but, by then, the law has been given. In other words, before there's civilization, I mean it's bizarre about the Jews, right? Before there's an economy, before there's a land, before there's a settlement, they have a law and an aspiration. So and that's because one has in a way to address the evils that lurk in the hearts of men before you're prepared to turn them loose in their own place, and even then, the troubles abound. So, Babel was one.

The story, which, I think, is the deepest story for me, given my interest in the subject of men and women, is the Garden of Eden story and which I worked on and worked on and worked on and worked on. And there I learned a lot from the students.

I remember a spectacular class. Maybe we talked about this before and if I did, you can stop me or they can edit this out. But I think we talked about this. We were talking about the Garden of Eden story and this wonderful speech where the man, God brings the woman and he says, "This now is flesh of my flesh and bone of my bone. She shall be called woman, *isha*, because she was taken out of man, *ish*."

And I thought this was the most beautiful, beautiful sentence of complementarity. He names her. He sees her first and then discovers his own being only in relation. I said, "What's this about?" And some lusty young student in the class says, "This is sex. This is the speech of lustful desire." Flesh of my – he would read it with this kind of –

And then I began to see that this is an account, really, of not of some kind of ideal condition, but with the help of this story, I began to see that what's going on in the early chapters of Genesis is not so much ancient history or ancient history as an attempt through stories to give an account of not what happened

once long ago, but what happens always, that is to say, what's the deep structure of the human psyche, of human social relations.

And in that story, you have three aspects of human sexuality presented as if they were three stages. Basic sexual desire with its lust, desire for union, they shall be one flesh. Then when their eyes are open and they discover they're naked and they cover up and make themselves fig leaves, the concern then is a concern for approbation and admiration, or at least not disgust. And you don't simply want to couple but you want to be approved.

And both the man and the woman seek, adorn themselves and seek respect and admiration from the other because nakedness is somehow a sign of their weakness. And, then finally after the so-called punishment is announced, the man renames the woman with no reference to himself. She will be called Eve, *Hawwāh*, because she's the mother of all living, and he sees in the woman the generative, redemptive power in relation to mortality, which the man can only look upon either with appreciation or perhaps with envy.

And, I mean, then you really see a kind of deep anthropology of the meaning of our sexuality and the problems that it causes, rather than some kind of fairytale of a beginning idyllic existence. And then with that story, you sort of march forward and you see, ah, Cain and Abel, that's not – that's the paradigmatic brother story, and Babel, that's a paradigmatic story. So by the time you get to Abraham, you've seen what humankind uninstructed will do.

And when God calls Abraham a reader who reads having suspended his disbelief and reads sympathetically, he's willing to as it were, take a walk with Abraham to see if the world can find an alternative to the disastrous ways of humankind into which you have been, which you've been initiated.

KRISTOL: So, Genesis is an account of human beings, I guess, without the law or prior to having the law. And prior, each other even to the instruction that Abraham gets.

KASS: Right. Abraham gets very little instruction. He has these adventures in which he picks up a number of things so that when his final examination comes with the binding of Isaac, he at least according to my understanding of the text and my own trembling sympathies, I think he passes. I mean, there are lots of people who think this is an abomination. And God doesn't speak to him again. But I think –

KRISTOL: Sarah doesn't speak to him again.

KASS: But the question finally is what's first in your heart, Abraham? Do you love the rewards of the promise that I have made to you, or do you stand first in the world with awe before the promiser?

KRISTOL: Even so, Genesis doesn't have a happy ending in a way, right? I mean, they're still, even with the awe of being the chosen people, I suppose –

KASS: Well, it depends on where you're starting, Bill. I mean look we are the heirs of a civilization, which is informed by several thousand years of Biblical religion. To begin with, Judaism, but made massive really by the coming of Christianity and notwithstanding the significant differences between these two Abrahamic religions, they have in common a certain moral teaching, a certain teaching of man in the image of God, a certain view of a need to confront evil –

KRISTOL: I was just making the more simple point, trying to make a more simple-minded suggestion, which is that it does seem that one of the teachings, isn't it, is that the Abrahamic view or Abrahamic revelation, I suppose, isn't enough because they end up in Egypt?

KASS: Oh, of course.

KRISTOL: That's what I meant by Genesis doesn't have a happy ending, you need the law and you need to be a people, a free people. I guess both those things really.

KASS: Yeah, well, but if you say – and this is not the whole story – but if you say having shown the reader what human life is like uninstructed from Adam and Eve through Cain and Abel to the generation of the flood to Noah, who is in a way a new Adam and who gets the law, gets the first law out of the state of nature, who then gets blind drunk and is shamed in his tent. And then to Babel, the universal city. You're taken through all that, and you start over. God is looking to find just a tiny toehold in this world for a new way.

And the question is can He, at least, succeed with Abraham? And it's hard work, but okay, then the question is: Can Abraham pass on what he has to the next generation, especially when the preferred heir is not half the man his father was? And thanks to the cunning of Rebekah, the blessing of Abraham is passed to the right son, rather than the one that Isaac prefers. Isaac preferred Esau because he liked his venison, whereas Rebekah had somehow a sense that Jacob was more fit.

So they manage through three generations to pass on the germ of this new way without fratricide, which is the model of every household, right, up until this point. The generation from Jacob to Joseph, and his sons, their 12 sons, Jacob prefers Joseph. He's his mother, Rachel's, beautiful son. There's almost fratricide, almost fratricide. But they wind up in Egypt, thanks to Joseph's administrative cunning, and there they become an incipient nation in slavery.

And so one shouldn't be disappointed, if one's expectations are low, if one thinks that it's going to be darn hard to get something that survives from household to – the story of the household is naturally the story of tragedy, not the story of brotherly love and good parent/child relations and the children turn out exactly the way the parents wish – darn hard.

So, Genesis succeeds and by the end, Joseph has – Jacob has produced what could be said to be an incipient nation, an incipient nation without fratricide. But they have to then wind up in a place—God is not going to take some existing people and reform them, he's going to take a group of people that are going to be emptied out of all of their customs, they're going to start at the bottom. And to make this people, you need to produce people who have absolutely nothing, are to begin with, have to be shown that there is a power higher than the most mighty nation on earth.

And have eventually to want to come, have to be willing to enter into a covenant, which then obliges them to aspire to righteousness and to aspire to holiness. And that really is the, the motion of that story.

KRISTOL: It is striking, it's always struck me that somehow it is important. I mean, it's necessary to the account to the story in Exodus that there be a Jewish people who sort of understand themselves as a people. Moses understands himself as one of the Jews. They seem to have maintained a kind of national sentiment in Egypt, or sentiment as a separate people, let's say, even though they seem to have abandoned – well, they never, I mean –

KASS: There wasn't much to do.

KRISTOL: There wasn't much to do. I guess they didn't have the law then but it does seem that's sort of interesting that out of Genesis there is that, without that, so it's not quite true that they're entirely emptied of everything, right? They have a certain sense of –

KASS: Actually, actually, the first, if you look at it, the first person to call them the "Children of Israel," is Pharaoh. A new pharaoh who emerges who knows not Joseph. Well, you read between the lines, you imagine this man has a political problem. In fact, there is even a question of his legitimacy. What does he

do? He finds a group of people that seem to be doing very well, and he makes – he scapegoats them. And he's the first one to call them the Children of Israel.

Yes, they're living separately in a place that Jacob – that Joseph, Joseph had in a way given them a very favorable place so that if they, in fact, prospered unbeknownst to Joseph, they would become the envy of the surrounding people and they'd be hated for it.

But the Pharaoh, as has been done in many generations since, singled them out, blamed them for all the difficulty and in a way wages persecutes and oppresses them. So in a certain way, they get their identity primarily because they've been marked out by others.

They resist absolutely, almost absolutely, they resist their deliverance. I mean, there are baby steps made. After the plagues demonstrate that Moses has a pretty powerful, he either is a powerful magician or he's got a big friend upstairs. When the time comes actually to go out of Egypt and the command is, "Mark your door," they have to at least vote to go out. It's the first, it's the kind of first step toward becoming a people. Up until that point, they just took it. They took it.

And what's really beautiful about this story is it's very easy to get the slaves out of Egypt, it's very hard to get the slavishness out of liberated human beings. And that's – I mean, this is a continuation in a way of the bioethical themes, right? I mean, to get people to want more than the fleshpots and the comfort and even of enslavement, to be willing to step up and answer a summons to live a life that's worthy of the gift of being here and being the upright creature that can potentially harken.

KRISTOL: Yeah. I suppose, I've always, it always seemed to me that in the tradition that Genesis was taken, I mean, Exodus was taken to be so important, both the liberation and then the law. I do think the notion that Genesis is crucial – but in a way when you think about that for a minute, it's, well, why Genesis? I mean, what does it really matter much, honestly? Obviously, Abraham matters in some sense, but you know that's about it, just designation of the people, the people are there in Egypt and everything happens thanks to Moses. But I suppose Genesis is important for two reasons. A, there is an actual experience, but, B, the lessons that it teaches seem awfully important to the Bible.

KASS: Yeah, and it's interesting because, I mean, the traditional Judaism, which is we have to add the ingenious invention of the rabbis after the land is lost and they are responsible for having kept this alive for almost 2,000 years.

KRISTOL: An impressive achievement.

KASS: Really an astonishing achievement. But that's, I mean the original teaching was a political teaching in our sense. It was to be a law to govern people living in their own land. And so what the rabbis have done has been to use the text as a source of a code of law, a kind of totalitarian code of law in the sense that it covers absolutely every aspect of life. They don't read the book as a book. In other words, they mine it for precepts. But the book happens to be a book and whoever put it together and however it got to be this way, it's very striking that it doesn't begin with the law; it begins with creation.

KRISTOL: Which it seems to be unlike other religions, in the more common-sense way to begin is when did the people become a free people and/or when did the law that governs them become their law? That would presumably be, you know, the way ancient cities understood themselves, for example.

KASS: Which means that this law is embedded in a larger teaching about what the world is like and what governs. And I think this I learned really from an essay of Leo Strauss. The most important thing really about the beginning of Genesis, which if you look at it really carefully raises as many questions as it settles. I mean, what does it mean, empty and void, or what was there before the beginning? I mean, these are deep mysteries, right?

But the important thing about the beginning is that it is a polemic against the worship of nature, which is natural to all human beings, absent the instruction of the Bible. Human beings left to their own devices look up and worship the heavenly bodies, which are eternal and regular in their perfect motions and the sun is the source of warmth and light and growth and so on.

And these beings move as they were, in fact, divine. I mean, it's not silly. I mean, we have sun-worshipers, and we have now, in fact, the return through the deep environmentalists, the people who believe that the earth should rightly be called Gaia and is in some ways divine because she's the mother of all living and so on. So I mean nature-worship is the natural human way. The Bible comes along and silently polemicizes against this.

The sun and the moon and the stars, they're creatures of the fourth day. There's light before the sun, there's vegetation before the sun. And there's day and night before the sun. It's a way of demoting the standing of the sun. And this is important because what comes out of the first chapter is the human being is the god-like creature, not those things that travel aloft in their perfect and beautiful motions. And this is a tremendous insight.

IV: Athens and Jerusalem (1:11:12 – 1:40:38)

KRISTOL: Now, but an insight as opposed – Socrates, Plato, Aristotle would mostly agree with, I mean, in a way, right? So on the Athens and Jerusalem question. Let's get into that. And it seems to me, your account both suggests the contrast, but also the similarity, really, in a certain way, I mean, between the Biblical account, it's what you've been saying about the problems of the family, the tendency towards fratricide, the need to ultimately have a nation with a law. A lot of that is not that dissimilar from what takes to be Aristotle's account of the polis and the greater dignity of the polis than the family, the necessity to get beyond the family to the polis or –

KASS: Good. What can we do with this? Look, as between, I mean, with respect to a kind of large quarrel between ancients and moderns, the Bible and Plato and Aristotle might be said to be friends, and there are even giant figures in the Middle Ages, who tried to not only split the difference between them but to assimilate them.

I mean, Maimonides reads the Bible and interprets it to say that the highest way of worshiping God is to study Aristotle's Metaphysics, basically. And you have similar figures among the Muslims, Al Farabi, Averroes, and Thomas Aquinas also tries to effect a synthesis between Aristotle and scriptural religion.

But I think although man might be for Plato and Aristotle the highest terrestrial creature, the fixed stars have a certain higher standing because they're thought to be eternal and they are of a higher and purer substance because they don't die. That's a little too simple. But what's different, and I think importantly different, is – and this is not unrelated to my own sort of I would say transformation, I still have a large foot in the Greek philosophical, and, by the way, also, poetic camp because I, thanks to my wife, really, have come to see that the poets have a good portion of the truth here that the philosophers tend to wink at.

So Homer and Sophocles and Aeschylus along with Plato and Aristotle. But there are a couple of important differences that, I think, are different, have crucial implications for our civilization. I think that you don't get out of Plato and Aristotle an account that would sustain the view of the equal dignity of every human being. You would not get the foundation for liberal democracy out of that. I mean you –

KRISTOL: The Bible is more egalitarian than –

KASS: Yeah and it really rests on the sense that first stated, both man and woman, equally made in God's image, and echoed – echoed in the teaching of the Sabbath when masters but also the household servants and even the animals are to receive Sabbath rest in imitation of the Divine rest on the seventh

day. So whatever human distinctions emerge naturally because of human affairs, nevertheless, the ultimate relation to the Divine Source unbroken and a kind of dignity has to be acknowledged.

And therefore I would want to say the Bible is really the ultimate source of a kind of humanistic politics of the sort that we enjoy. Never mind whether in the Declaration of Independence, "Endowed by their Creator," is, whether those are God-given rights because you don't find rights given in the Bible. Okay.

And the second thing is – there are two more things that, I think, are important. The peak of the Aristotelian ethical virtues is the great-souled man, the man of consummate nobility and goodness who goes in the city as if he were a god.

And by the way, it says several times, "He wonders at nothing because nothing is great to him." It's really like Gulliver among the Lilliputians. There is a suggestion there that from the Greek point-of-view, at least from the philosophical point-of-view, there's nothing to be in awe of. In fact, Aristotle says in the *Ethics*, "*Aidōs*, reverent awe is not a virtue, it's a useful passion in the young but a grown man has no reason to feel this." That's a specific attempt to cut off what looks like veneration of something higher than the human.

If there is something that substitutes for it, it's the kind of philosophical quest to know the primer mover or to know a god who doesn't care for us. So, whereas from the Bible's point-of-view, nobility, or the beautiful or the aesthetic, the aesthetic takes on the virtues – not reliable when it comes to justice, not reliable when it comes to having a kind of general – speak in loose terms – no fear of God to restrain the darker impulses.

KRISTOL: The Greeks might agree that beauty isn't reliable as a check on justice, they might just have a slightly different valuation of justice and beauty or the noble.

KASS: I think, but I mean, the purpose of the city is finally to produce the exemplary human beings, and the exemplary human beings are the beautiful ones.

KRISTOL: Right, and in ambiguous relation to the city's justice.

KASS: And have – right. Whereas –

KRISTOL: The Bible is more pro-justice.

KASS: Yeah, and the greatest man in the Bible is Moses. And here look this is a kind of confession, too, and it may have to do with my rearing, which was parasitic on this tradition, unbeknownst to me.

But I think that if you read – this ties to my reading of the first chapter of Genesis, which I don't read as a historical account of how the world came into being, but, with Abraham Joshua Heschel, as a kind of song of praise and gratitude for the fact that the world is in being. And I would add, for the fact that there is a human being here who can appreciate this. I mean, we really, the sun and the moon and the stars can't sing the first chapter of Genesis and couldn't understand it.

That's a kind of living proof that this text, which is addressed to us, demonstrates our special standing in the creation. Okay, that's – you could say, that's a theoretical posture of appreciation. But the philosopher's first passion is wonder. The human being who stands and reads the account of the creation and his own place in it not only looks upon the world with wonder, but I think with a certain kind of awe at the mystery of it, at the source behind it.

And just as the world has been summoned into being through speech, it seems to me, that with the help of the text, you realize that if we were truthful to ourselves, we stand in the world somehow listening for a summons to make something of ourselves, to vindicate the gift of this kind of special place in the world.

And that means that we're all ears. The Greeks don't present the human being as being all ears to be called to measure up, to justify the kind of gift of god-likeness, whereas the reader in the Bible – see, and I want to say, I would like to believe, I would like to believe that this isn't just me in my old age or that it's even my Jewishness.

But I think it's really true that if you scratch human beings to the bottom – Machiavelli and his friends notwithstanding – human beings want to be able to say, "By the time they get to my age, I've made good use of this time, and I'm prepared in a way to answer for my life." That, it seems to me, is a Biblical teaching, it's a teaching of responsibility, it's a teaching of duty, it's not just being in the world with your hand out and take from it. But to be called or, at least, to be open to be called. And I love that. I mean I really I think it – I think it speaks anthropologically truly.

KRISTOL: I suppose one question – one could say, the Greeks, particularly through the poets and through the philosophers' understanding of the poets, I guess, one might argue, appreciate that. I mean, they certainly are not ignorant of piety, of awe, of a sense of duty and responsibility. There are characters in Platonic dialogues who express if God knows – the plays, the poets seem very appreciative of this part of human, of the human psyche.

Part of it, so, part of it is the question is whether did they kind of understand it quite the same way, appreciate it in the same way. And I guess part of it is did they rank it in the same way. That I think is pretty clear no. I mean, ultimately, the philosophers would seem to say that's nice, you know, and a lot of people – it's going to always exist and it can lead to very impressive deeds, but somehow it's depreciated a little bit, but comparison as you say to wonder and to searching for the truth, I suppose, to a certain kind of standing and perspective of the truth.

KASS: The poets have for the most a part a tragic view, by which, I mean, we are creatures of a day, we are mortals, and the gods don't really care for us. That means that they can best teach us to not be too big for our britches. And the ones who aspire too high get struck down so the rest of us can learn the lessons and live more moderately.

KRISTOL: Which isn't that far from the Biblical view.

KASS: Which is not from the – the Biblical view isn't tragic.

KRISTOL: Right. It's tragedy plus God. So then it's not tragic. The Greeks might still say it's tragic.

KASS: The question, well, yeah, there are two takes on this. The question is whether, I mean – in Christian tradition, death requires redemption by Christ's coming and an afterlife. The Jewish tradition, there is a kind of later developed teaching of the afterlife but it doesn't play a prominent role. But the redemption in Jewish life would be something like the perpetuation of a way into the next generation and that you are part of something, you are part of something, you are part of a certain kind of an immortal quest to make human life here worthy of its having been produced. That's not nothing.

KRISTOL: No. That's quite the contrary. I've always been struck – I think you've written on this, I know you've written on this – but on the Sabbath which does have a kind of special standing; it's given before the rest of the law in Exodus in a way. They know about it somehow. They should be observing the Sabbath before Sinai in a way. That's always had a very high standing in the Jewish tradition. But it seems utterly foreign –

I was thinking about this – one doesn't think Socrates thought it was particularly important to take one day a week off, you know – either just off in the sense of rest or off in a higher sense of not doing the normal things he did and, you know, reflecting and refraining from doing certain things. And that I think is a pretty deep difference, less on the kind of more of a – you see the human difference there more, I think.

KASS: You certainly see the human, see this human difference there. And but it, look, I mean, what it seems to me Biblical religion permits is to see the sanctification of everyday life, rather than to find it solely in the temples of the Greek gods or to see it in the special precincts of the philosophers where they try to partake in the eternal in the only way human beings can, namely by thinking eternal truths.

Here, holiness is to be found in the most prosaic of things, and the Sabbath is in a way the touchstone of this. If you look, this is very striking, and I have a recent essay on interpretation of the Ten Commandments, the Ten Commandments is – they're not actually called commandments, but never mind – these sayings are the beginning of God's official relationship with Israel. The children of Israel said, "Yes, we want to enter into this covenant," they've agreed without knowing what they've agreed to, but here it is.

And he says, "I am The Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make any graven images. You shall not take the use of my name in vain." What's the positive thing, what are they supposed to do? Nothing is said. There's no statement about what their positive obligations are until the fourth commandment: Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. You shall do no manner of work, you, your wife, your servant, your etc., etc. Why? Because God rested on the seventh day.

How are the human beings supposed to be in relation to God? They're supposed to imitate him in the rhythm of the week. The entire week is supposed to be a kind of memorial of creation, an imitation of it, and the seventh day set aside to remember the creation, to recapitulate it, to think of its source, to think of our relation to it. And, basically, God is saying to the children of Israel – be like me but be like me not in some sacred space but by sanctifying the time of your life, which is astonishing. I mean, it really is.

To regard the rhythm of time as not governed by the motion of the sun and the moon and the stars but by a kind of source of it all who is solicitous for human beings enough to give them some instruction so that they can live culminating in an account that they could imitate divine rest, contemplation, gratitude, and so on. It's exquisite, Bill. It really is extraordinary.

And I think, you know I think America has lost – I mean if one wanted to propose some kind of new thing for our culture that would – it's bad for the economy, I suppose I will be told immediately, but Sabbath observance, an interruption of the shopping and the buying and it would be a leavening. I mean, the getting and spending has done wonderful things for us, and I don't take many of that back but we may have lost our balance here. And there's a kind of – there's a kind of deep and not only Israelite wisdom, that's partly maybe what I'm arguing.

KRISTOL: Right. And I suppose it's true. Historically, the week, the seven-day week is a, I mean, which we call, all of modern civilization observes, at least in the sense of the calendar, it works that way and is something from the Hebrew Bible. The months are, the months are, I don't know what they are exactly, Roman, I think, sort of and –

KASS: Yeah, but they're no longer simply the lunar calendar either now that we've gotten –

KRISTOL: Right. So the week really is the –

KASS: The week is.

KRISTOL: But now everything is open Sunday, so the week is less – I think. First, there was the Saturday/Sunday issue, of course, but that doesn't matter.

KASS: I'd settle for Thursday. But and the other big thing which is, the other big thing which is not Greek is honor your father and mother. I mean, the two positive commandments the Sabbath day and honor

your father and mother are, in addition to monotheism, those really are the Hebrew Bible's, I think, major innovations against the – people might have honored their fathers and tried to imitate them but to honor the father and the mother equally. And when the Holiness Code is repeated in Leviticus, it said, "Let each man reverence his mother and his father and keep the Sabbath, be holy for I The Lord am holy." Those two things are singled out as of the essence of imitation and the honoring the –

KRISTOL: I suppose the "and mother" part is really important because certainly important certainly the Greeks, I mean everyone was, I mean, they were patriarchal, as we say, society, and there was a lot of deference to the old and to the men, to the older men.

KASS: Yeah. And this is part and parcel of a certain kind of domestication of masculine ambition, of making transmission the major work of the people, of – although you couldn't know this from the feminist critiques of the Bible – of elevating the standing and the dignity of women against the prevailing norms of the ancient Near East. And of along with those laws of Leviticus which are now sort of an embarrassment, to cabin sexuality and make it serve the all-important task of being fruitful and multiplying and making way for the next generation.

We now live in a world where those passions are again unbridled. We haven't quite made it back to incest but, I think, we're able to present it on television without embarrassment. And the question of the relation of the generations and whether we can perpetuate what we have is a big question. In fact, Bill, one of the reasons apart from my own intellectual opening to the Bible and the fact that it began to get ahold of me, I really began also to shift my teaching in the college my last – I still taught Aristotle up to the end almost, but I taught Genesis probably ten times and then I taught Exodus half a dozen times partly because I felt that wonderful as the Greeks are, the Greeks presuppose a certain kind of proper upbringing of gentlemen and ladies.

And they're a kind of an adornment to a good moral education. But I began to feel that the culture was really in tatters and that one needed something more democratic, more foundational that touched more the ethics of everyday, of life, of duty and self-respect and self-command, and regard for neighbor, and self-restraint, and all of the things which are much closer to the teachings of Biblical religion than are the lofty peaks of the great-souled man and warrior courage, much as we need those things still.

So Amy still, Amy and I – this is a kind of parting. She continues to think, "Look, you read and teach whatever book you teach, you're, in a way, by the way you model yourself and the way you talk, you're modeling a certain kind of virtue which is good for everyday life here and now." But I'm inclined to think – and I don't know if we talked about this before but there was an old – did we talk about Simon Kaplan the last time?

KRISTOL: No, I don't think so. Go ahead.

KASS: This is wonderful. Simon Kaplan was a Russian-born, German-educated, beloved tutor who came to St. John's College, escaped from the Nazis and arrived '39, '40. In addition to teaching the regular curriculum, he taught in the evening a course on Hebrew Bible. And they asked Simon Kaplan late in his life if he had to design the curriculum of a college, undergraduate education, what should it be.

He said, yes, he says – I won't imitate his accent – "First year, Bible with beatings. Second year, Kant to show the limitations of reason. Third year, Hegel to show reason gone astray. Fourth year, Bible, no beatings." And the thought really was, I think, that in a certain way the things that we've inherited from the Bible – look, the natural rights teaching of the Founders is very important, limited government, the rule of law, Bill of Rights, all of these things, democratic capitalism, very important.

But the roots of the culture, the place where we nurture the next generation, those things we have as an inheritance really from Biblical religion and from the fact that it's a Christian society until recently. And I think that this is a source that we can repair to both for its theoretical wisdom, for its moral instruction,

and we still share enough of it that we could recover some of the sources of the arguments to make it more deeply our own.

KRISTOL: That's really terrific. I suppose, I mean, to say one word in defense of the Greeks, I mean, you've said it much more than I have, but I sort of feel odd defending them to you. But, you, I don't think would have gotten to your reading of the Bible without the prior education in the Greeks, basically, and not just the Greeks. But and I suppose it's an interesting question whether that somehow is necessary or just happened that that, you know, was your history, your intellectual history but that you could teach the Bible.

And you've done it to 19-year-olds and they would sort of learn that they don't need to read the – there is something uniquely opening, isn't there, about the Platonic dialogues that I'm not sure the Bible itself could quite do for young people.

KASS: Absolutely right. Although the way the Platonic dialogues are taught, they killed them. I mean but, no, you're absolutely right. I mean –

KRISTOL: That is Mr. Kaplan's –

KASS: Mr. Kaplan taught Kant regularly.

KRISTOL: And it showed his actual, if one went through his curriculum, you would end up I think very impressive – knowing a lot and make for a very good character and a real appreciation of the Bible, but you would miss something somehow, right? You can't just put the Bible versus Kant and Hegel.

KASS: Point well taken. He didn't say Plato and Aristotle to see how reason went astray. And I would say this, look, it goes back to the question why the beginning of Genesis. Is it just polemicizing against the natural philosophy or is it an invitation to keep open the ultimate questions?

I mean, the first letter of the Hebrew Bible, as you know, is a Bet, right? And there's a kind of midrash, a rabbinic commentary which asks why is the first – am I reading from right to left, how am I reading? Yeah, I'm reading from right to left. The first letter is this way. And the question is, why is the first letter a Bet? Answer: Because if you want to know what's before this, it's closed. That's the orthodox rabbinic answer. Don't ask what there is before here.

On the other hand, the first – the first few sentences are filled with mystery. And you could say if all the text is interested in is obedience, it wouldn't have to bother with this stuff at all, we would begin with the law.

KRISTOL: So I'd say, don't you think, in some way, beginning with the second letter invites, of course, the question, well, why? This is odd. You know, how did we know what was in the beginning, it's not quite the beginning because the beginning is the silent and all this?

KASS: This is partly, partly what I want to say is that it's perfectly possible to be well brought up on instruction that's rooted in the Bible, either directly or indirectly, without having a lobotomy. And, in fact, to ponder the text is to discover the mysteries of the text. And including the mysteries about which – about which the Greeks and the Bible's – the Bible have an endless controversy – is the world eternal or did it have a beginning, which is all about this question of what there was in the beginning?

So I would say Jewish orthodoxy, although not as practiced necessarily, is open to philosophy, but there have been giants who have done so, including in our own time, even the Lubavitcher Rebbe who studied physics and Soloveichik who deeply is rooted in these things. So I don't want to make it a strict either/or. On the other hand, if you ask me if I wanted to do good for young Americans as they now come out of the

culture, do I want to sit them down and teach them the great-souled man, or do I want them to meet Moses?

KRISTOL: You're with Moses. Although one could do both, maybe.

KASS: I'd do both but if forced to choose. And after they've spent some time with Moses and if they turn out all right and they've done their army service and made a living, this is what Plato says, right, the time to study philosophy is after they're 50, not when they're 20.

KRISTOL: Thank you very much, Leon. And thank you for joining us on Conversations.

[END]