

1 ORAL HISTORY OF: Rabbi Sherwin Wine  
2 INTERVIEWED BY: Susan Citrin  
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4 LOCATION OF INTERVIEW: Jewish Federation of Metropolitan  
5 Detroit  
6 SUBJECT MATTER: Jewish life, his career as a  
7 rabbi and as founder of the  
8 Humanistic Judaism Movement and  
9 philosophy of the movement

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11 MS. CITRIN: I'm Susie Citrin. Today is June the  
12 21st, Summer Solstice, of 2005, and we're interviewing Rabbi  
13 Sherwin T. Wine of the Birmingham Temple.

14 Sherwin, do I have your permission to use this tape  
15 for any kind of publicity or educational purposes?

16 RABBI WINE: Of course.

17 MS. CITRIN: Thank you. Well, we absolutely have to  
18 interview you because you really are someone who has looked  
19 into the future and has tried to make a plan for the future.  
20 So we should probably start off with the past, and perhaps  
21 you'd like to talk about your early days in Detroit because  
22 you have a wonderful, rich history to talk about.

23 RABBI WINE: Well, I was born and raised in Detroit.  
24 I was born on January 25th, 1928, just before the Depression.  
25 I don't remember the day of my birth, but I remember a few

1 years afterwards. I grew up in the Depression. Times were  
2 hard. I went to the schools that were part of the Jewish  
3 ghetto because I lived in the Jewish ghetto on a street called  
4 Clairmont, near a famous Jewish street called Twelfth Street,  
5 now called Rosa Parks Boulevard. I went to Crossman  
6 Elementary and then I went to Hutchins Intermediate, and then  
7 I went to the school that gave you Jewish identity, and that  
8 was Central High School, from which I graduated in January of  
9 1946.

10 My family was Conservative. My parents were  
11 immigrants. My father was a trouser cutter. He worked for  
12 his cousins at a pants company. He was a devout Conservative  
13 Jew. He observed shabat and were members of Shaarey Zedek, so  
14 I grew up in Shaarey Zedek. The rabbi when I grew up was  
15 Abraham Herschman. When I was ten years old, in 1938, a  
16 young, brilliant rabbi came to Shaarey Zedek. His name was  
17 Morris Adler. He also became a teacher and a mentor. So I  
18 grew up in a wonderful environment of Jewish education.

19 My connection to the synagogue was one of great  
20 affection because I really enjoyed the Jewish culture that I  
21 got from it. But I must confess that I was not ideologically  
22 convinced of the teachings that I received. I went faithfully  
23 because I was getting a good education and because my father  
24 loved to go, and I went with him, and it was an important part  
25 of my life.

1           I realized that when I was already in the middle of  
2 high school that I wasn't a Conservative Jew, but I had a very  
3 strong sense of Jewish identity. Of course I grew up during  
4 the Hitler era. I graduated from Central High School, as I  
5 said, in January of 1946, and then I moved on to the  
6 University of Michigan, where I majored in philosophy and sort  
7 of minored in history, and it was during that period of time  
8 that my philosophic convictions were completed. Not totally.  
9 I mean my mind is open. The structure of my convictions were  
10 completed.

11           I discovered that I was a humanist, and almost all  
12 my professors at the University of Michigan in the Philosophy  
13 Department -- it was wonderful -- were humanists, and most of  
14 the great philosophers I studied were humanists. It made  
15 sense to me; it clicked. So the big question for my life was  
16 I want to do something philosophic and since I had a very  
17 strong sense of Jewish identity, I wanted to do something  
18 Jewish. So how do you do something philosophic and something  
19 Jewish simultaneously? That was the question. Not only  
20 philosophic, but humanistically philosophic.

21           That led me ultimately to my choice of a career.  
22 Already in my third year I was reflecting on what I wanted to  
23 do. Did I want to teach philosophy? I could have chosen to  
24 do that and pursued graduate degrees in philosophy. I did  
25 complete a master's in philosophy, but pursuing the doctorate

1 meant that I would choose the academic world. But I didn't  
2 want the academic world. I like working with people.

3           So I then said to myself again if I want to do  
4 philosophy and I want to do something Jewish, what profession  
5 best suits that, and of course the profession that seemed to  
6 sing out was the rabbinate. And since I was obviously liberal  
7 in my opinions, I chose the most liberal rabbinate available  
8 at that time, and that was the Reform rabbinate.

9           **MS. CITRIN:** I noticed in reading a little bit about  
10 your history that you liked history itself.

11           **RABBI WINE:** I love history. I had difficulty  
12 deciding my major. I loved philosophy and I loved history, so  
13 I took a lot of philosophy, I took a lot of history. What's  
14 undergraduate school for? And then I continued my philosophic  
15 studies for one more year. I got my master's. I stayed five  
16 years at the University of Michigan.

17           And I was one of the unusual students. I liked  
18 dormitory food. So I stayed -- people thought I was insane --  
19 in the West Quad for five years actually while I was there at  
20 Michigan.

21           **MS. CITRIN:** I know also that you were active as an  
22 orator in high school and college.

23           **RABBI WINE:** I did a lot of speaking.

24           **MS. CITRIN:** So you had all of these things that all  
25 came together.

1           RABBI WINE: Well, it certainly fit the profession  
2 that I was choosing, so whatever speaking skills I had could  
3 certainly be utilized as a rabbi. I enjoy teaching, I enjoy  
4 public speaking, so it all seemed to come together, and if I  
5 could do what I was doing with integrity, then it was fine for  
6 me.

7           The first thing I did was go down to the Reform  
8 seminary, which was the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati,  
9 and I spoke to the admissions director, who was a rabbi, and I  
10 told him very clearly that I was a humanist. He said that  
11 there would be no problem, that there were lots of humanists  
12 in the student body, which indeed was true.

13           I enrolled and I did very well at the college. I  
14 was a very good student, and I enjoyed my teachers and I  
15 enjoyed the learning process, the whole thing, and I was  
16 looking forward to becoming a Reform rabbi. I graduated in  
17 June of 1956.

18           I at that time had an obligation. I was deferred  
19 from the draft. The Korean War was going on when I entered  
20 the seminary. I was deferred from the draft, and I had a  
21 moral obligation to enter the service. So I entered the  
22 service as a chaplain, but they weren't able to take me as a  
23 chaplain right away, as a Jewish chaplain. I had to wait  
24 until January of 1957. So in the interim the rabbi of Temple  
25 Beth-El, Richard Hertz, was going to Israel for the summer.

1 He needed a replacement for the summer. So he asked me to  
2 come and work there, and that was my first experience of being  
3 in a Reform temple, and I loved my work at Temple Beth-El.  
4 They asked me stay as the assistant rabbi. But I left for two  
5 years for the chaplaincy, and then I returned the end of 1958  
6 to be an assistant rabbi at Temple Beth-El.

7           It was then that I began to experience difficulties  
8 because being a humanist, I discovered that if you're a Reform  
9 rabbi, you have to do a lot of prayer, and I was very  
10 uncomfortable with prayer because I didn't believe that there  
11 was anybody to address in prayer. I remained for two years at  
12 Beth-El.

13           Then I went across the river to Windsor, Ontario, to  
14 organize a Reform temple there, and I was there for three  
15 years, and I organized the temple, and we put up the building,  
16 and I loved the people and I loved my work. I love being a  
17 rabbi, and I'm a pretty good rabbi. However, I still had this  
18 issue of conscience. I was conducting services with which I  
19 was uncomfortable.

20           The question of course was very simple. If I wished  
21 to preserve my integrity, do I leave the rabbinate, or do I go  
22 out and try to create something that would be Jewishly more  
23 satisfying for me. It didn't take me long to answer the  
24 question. I didn't wish to leave the rabbinate. I like it.

25           What happened at that time, I found eight families

1 who were looking to establish a new congregation in suburbia.  
2 There actually were 16 families that were interested in  
3 organizing a new Reform temple in the Birmingham area, and  
4 they had contacted me, and I met with them in July of 1963.  
5 That's 42 years ago. We had a wonderful meeting, and I told  
6 them exactly what I wanted to do. Eight of the 16 didn't  
7 agree, but eight did. And out of those eight families and  
8 myself came what we call the Birmingham Temple.

9 We called it the Birmingham Temple because we  
10 couldn't figure out what Hebrew name to choose anyway, and  
11 we're meeting in Birmingham, so we thought temporarily we'd  
12 keep the name, but then we discovered the name became part of  
13 a controversy, and once it becomes part of a controversy, you  
14 can't deny it. So it has remained the Birmingham Temple.

15 From the first meeting that was held in July, this  
16 new congregation emerged. We didn't have a name for the  
17 philosophy. We knew we weren't Orthodox for sure, we knew we  
18 weren't Conservative, we knew we weren't Reform. What was the  
19 name? It took us until June of 1964. By that time we had  
20 about 120 families. It had grown from eight to 120 in one  
21 year.

22 We had incredible enthusiasm. I think one of the  
23 reasons was the people who came for the first time in their  
24 life were engaged in the discussion of ideas. It wasn't  
25 "please join because it's Jewish, please join to preserve your

1 Jewish identity." Of course that was part of the agenda.  
2 Please come and be part of our community and engage in this  
3 discovery process.

4           One of the things we did at the very beginning which  
5 I thought was really wonderful, instead of my sitting  
6 everybody down and telling them what we Jews believed -- I  
7 used to find that rather odd. People would come up to me and  
8 they would say, Rabbi, what do we Jews believe? I would say,  
9 well, I know what I believe. Don't you know what you believe?  
10 But I know what they asking. It was an official set of  
11 doctrines. So tell me what they are. Whether I believe in  
12 them or not is irrelevant. That's what the official is.

13           So we started out -- and that's what made the  
14 congregation very exciting -- by having everybody sit around,  
15 and then we went around and asked, what is it that you  
16 believe? And you believe? And you believe? And people were  
17 really struck by the novelty of it and by the power of it, and  
18 we started to engage openly and frankly in what it is that we  
19 indeed believed.

20           **MS. CITRIN:** Well, you empowered people to do that,  
21 because I know even when you ask someone today whether they  
22 actually believe in God or they don't, they may secretly tell  
23 you that they really don't believe in God, but it's part of  
24 our cultural tradition to do this.

25           **RABBI WINE:** And they feel uncomfortable even



1 challenging it.

2           What we discovered was almost all the people in the  
3 group were humanists. Then I realized that there's a large  
4 body of humanists among Jews who have never been able to find  
5 a place that they were totally comfortable with. Many of them  
6 were members of Conservative congregations, many of them were  
7 members of Reform, but most of them were unaffiliated. The  
8 people who came to us were essentially unaffiliated people.  
9 They had not found any place in the Jewish community where  
10 they could be comfortable.

11           It was very clear to me that one of the ways to  
12 rescue these people for Judaism was to provide them with a  
13 home where they could feel honest about what they said and  
14 did. So it was an exciting first year.

15           It's hard to recreate it because that first year we  
16 didn't have a building, we didn't have anything. We just had  
17 ourselves talking to each other. We didn't even have a school  
18 for kids.

19           **MS. CITRIN:** But then you had to create all of the  
20 literature and all of the accoutrements that go with starting  
21 a new congregation and a new philosophy really.

22           **RABBI WINE:** The thing that first happened which  
23 allowed us to do the rest with great devotion was that the  
24 congregation was built not around the children -- many people  
25 who join say, well, my child needs an education. The people

1 who came and joined joined for themselves. It was nothing for  
2 the kids initially beyond some little celebrations. Once they  
3 themselves felt that this was their community, the place where  
4 they could express their own beliefs, then they could go out  
5 and create all these other things.

6 We had a bond. When we started out, we had  
7 attendances from the congregations. On a Friday night there  
8 would be 250 people that would come, and they were all young  
9 people. I was even young then.

10 MS. CITRIN: I know. You were about 33 or 34.

11 RABBI WINE: I was 35 in 1963. In those days I  
12 thought it was young. Today it's even younger.

13 MS. CITRIN: But to have that vision is one thing,  
14 To actually go out and implement it and gather people together  
15 who have like feelings and thoughts.

16 RABBI WINE: It was a great adventure. There were  
17 various challenges. The first obviously was the hostility  
18 that we encountered. There were many people in the Jewish  
19 community who were very hostile to what we did, and they were  
20 to be found in all denominations. There were Orthodox people,  
21 Conservative people, Reform people, it didn't make any  
22 difference. They honestly disagreed with what we were doing.

23 Some concern had to do with the non-Jewish world,  
24 hat would they say? Would they say that Jews were atheists?  
25 There was that concern. And obviously the third concern was

1 that many people felt that there were members of their own  
2 congregations who really believed this, and obviously our  
3 saying it out loud would give them permission either to seek  
4 other places or to say it out loud themselves, and that would  
5 be certainly complicating. So there was all this hostility.  
6 Some of it very, very intense.

7 MS. CITRIN: Do you want to describe any of the  
8 incidents? Because that's really a part of our Jewish  
9 community.

10 RABBI WINE: Well, sure. In 1964, what happened was  
11 for the first year we molded the congregation and the  
12 community knew about what we were doing. In the fall of 1964,  
13 because we had started out using a public school in Farmington  
14 called Eagle School at Middlebelt and Fourteen Mile Road, but  
15 that very quickly proved to be inadequate. We moved to  
16 another school called High Meadow, which was in Farmington  
17 Township. And then, because the crowds kept growing, we  
18 rented space from a new building that was built in Bloomfield  
19 Hills called the Birmingham Masonic Temple, and it was a space  
20 that could hold almost 600 people. Now all kinds of people  
21 came. Many of the people who came were simply curiosity  
22 seekers. Other people were people searching for some kind of  
23 Jewish philosophy that made sense to them.

24 At that time there was a newspaper strike, so what  
25 was going on was passed by word of mouth, but not by newspaper

1 publicity. But in December of 1964 the publicity now became  
2 very public because the newspaper strike ended, and then there  
3 was a front page article in the *Detroit Free Press* that  
4 there's atheist rabbi or whatever, and that created enormous  
5 furor. It was picked up by *Time Magazine* in an article that  
6 appeared in February of 1965. Then the *New York Times*. Then  
7 the *Los Angeles Times*. Then there was international publicity  
8 that picked it up from there. Within three months, early  
9 1965, we suddenly realized we were at the center of some kind  
10 of international controversy.

11 We received like tons of letters from all over, some  
12 hostile, some of them friendly. It was overwhelming. And  
13 during this time in the Jewish community, and particularly  
14 outside, there were hostile forces who said, well, Sherwin  
15 Wine should be defrocked. Of course I didn't have frock.  
16 Throw him to the lions. Whatever it was. Get rid of him.  
17 The whole thing.

18 They wrote to Hebrew Union College to tell Nelson  
19 Glick, the president of Hebrew Union College, which was the  
20 seminary from which I graduated, that he should defrock me,  
21 and he contacted me and said that was silly, it would never,  
22 never, never happen. So that furor began to die down.

23 But it was also expressed in the fact that we  
24 weren't given space sometimes in the Jewish newspaper,  
25 recognition. So we were facing hostile forces. I must say it

1 was a very trying time for the members of our community.  
2 There were people in our community who decided to leave  
3 because they couldn't handle the hostility. You couldn't walk  
4 into a Jewish living room in the Detroit area and say I'm a  
5 member of the Birmingham Temple without everybody jumping on  
6 you, and then you would have to sit around talking and arguing  
7 and whatever, and some people found it too exhausting.

8           We had such incredible discussions during that  
9 period of time within the community, and we created a support  
10 system. I do want to tell you the bonds of friendship and  
11 solidarity in the Birmingham Temple were so intensified by the  
12 controversy. We were in this together, we believed in this  
13 philosophy, we were going to live it and defend it, and we  
14 were prepared to invest enormous amounts of our time and  
15 energy into making this congregation work. And it worked.  
16 And over a period of five years the hostility began to  
17 diminish, and the reason is very simple. There is nothing  
18 better than success. We grew, and along the way we did the  
19 things you asked about.

20           Along the way we had to, first of all, create our  
21 own services. So what do we do on Shabat? What do we do on  
22 Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur? So we had to write the  
23 services. So we created this special committee, ritual  
24 committee, and we worked on that.

25           Then we had to great a school for kids. So we

1 created the education committee and the curriculum, work it  
2 out. We were starting from scratch. Then we had to begin a  
3 whole adult education program, which had already begun in the  
4 first year. So bit by bit the pieces were put together, and  
5 by 1968 and 1969 everything was in place. The congregation  
6 had grown at that time to about 250 families. So we were  
7 established, we were secure.

8           Now we could turn to a question. There were two  
9 questions actually. We are gypsies. What are we using? The  
10 Birmingham Masonic Temple was interesting. We were evicted.  
11 The Masons, who weren't Jewish -- it all became public news --  
12 came to us and said we can't have any organization that  
13 doesn't believe in God using our building. So my response to  
14 them was, well, I just want you to know, if any Masonic group  
15 needs a place to meet when we have our building, you're free  
16 to use it, under any circumstances. And I do want to say the  
17 first year that Birmingham Temple put up its building in 1971,  
18 a Masonic group in Farmington came to us and we gave them  
19 complete hospitality.

20           So then we had to go and find public school  
21 auditoriums. We were in Oak Park at Robert Frost School. We  
22 used the Levy School in Southfield for our Sunday School, and  
23 we opened up a little office for our meetings and our mid-week  
24 school.

25           **MS. CITRIN:** Nomadic tribes.

1           RABBI WINE: We were, as my mother said, gypsies.  
2           So the first question was could we cease to be  
3 gypsies? Could we find a place of our own, a territory of our  
4 own, create a home of our own? We bought land in 1965. It  
5 was our way of saying we are here to stay. We put a sign up  
6 on the land, which was on Twelve Mile Road between Inkster and  
7 Middlebelt. That's where the Temple is presently. We didn't  
8 have much money but we bought that land, seven acres of it,  
9 and we put that sign up. You would drive by the sign and it  
10 would say "The future home of the Birmingham Temple."

11           Finally we raised enough money in 1968 and 1969 to  
12 begin the construction in 1970, and in June of 1971 we opened  
13 the temple, the home of the Birmingham Temple.

14           The second question was that going all the way back  
15 to January of 1965 when the publicity broke, there were people  
16 all over North America and beyond who wrote us saying, we want  
17 to organize something similar, and we wrote back saying at  
18 this stage of our development, we can't help you. We have to  
19 get our own act together first. But by 1969 we had gotten our  
20 own act together.

21           Then we created what was called the Society for  
22 Humanistic Judaism in 1969, the purpose of which was to help  
23 organize other communities like ours around North America. We  
24 already had created a second congregation in Westport,  
25 Connecticut, and we created a third congregation in suburban

1 Chicago in Deerfield, Congregation Beth-Or. So the three of  
2 us met in a meeting in June of 1970 in what was called the  
3 Stouffer Building. It's now abandoned. They haven't torn it  
4 down, but it's been abandoned for many years. It was a hotel.  
5 And our first meeting of the Society for Humanistic Judaism  
6 was held there.

7 I must tell you, it was very gratifying because we'd  
8 been through very, very difficult times, but the sense of  
9 mission was overwhelmingly strong, and in fact we found that  
10 the second generation going to our school programs were  
11 enthusiastic about what was going on. So we were sort of  
12 sailing, we were moving forward, and that was the beginning of  
13 the 1970s.

14 **MS. CITRIN:** What's interesting is that as it keeps  
15 growing and growing, you find other groups, not only here in  
16 the United States and in Canada, in Toronto, but also in  
17 Brussels or Argentina, all over the world that have this same  
18 philosophy and same thoughts about it, but they don't know how  
19 to go about it. This is a more formalized way of doing  
20 things.

21 **RABBI WINE:** We found at first the Society for  
22 Humanistic Judaism. That was the outreach to North America.  
23 And we kept establishing new groups in the major cities of  
24 North America: Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York, Boston,  
25 Washington. Then having done that, we reached out to other



1 secular Jewish organizations in North America that existed  
2 because there were groups that had been created before us. I  
3 refer to humanist Judaism as second wave secular Judaism,  
4 because after all, we are secular. But the secular movement  
5 for a long time was hostile to any kinds of institutions that  
6 smacked of the old religion. They wouldn't have rabbis, they  
7 wouldn't have congregations, whatever.

8           One of the things we had from the very beginning was  
9 an understanding that many of the institutions that came from  
10 the past weren't the enemies of secular Judaism. They could  
11 be friends. Why couldn't there be secular rabbis? Why  
12 couldn't there be secular congregations? So we made contact  
13 with some of the older groups, and a meeting was held in 1982,  
14 which created the Leadership Conference of Secular Humanistic  
15 Jews. We met in New York.

16           Then in 1983 we ventured out to Israel. Actually,  
17 in 1981 I took a group of people from the different  
18 congregations to Israel. We met with various Israelis. We  
19 had already met an extraordinary woman who helped us. Her  
20 name was Shulamit Aron, a great civil libertarian in Israel,  
21 and she was a humanistic Jew, and she wanted to help. So we  
22 held a conference, and from that conference emerged an  
23 organization, an Israeli version of what was going on in North  
24 America. After all, most Israeli Jews are secular, but they  
25 didn't have any kind of organizational structure to give

1 expression to this philosophy. So that was organized.

2           Then, together with the Israelis, we planned another  
3 meeting in 1985. In 1985 there came a very important person  
4 into our movement, the first president if you will of the  
5 international movement. Yahuda Bower, one of the great  
6 Holocaust scholars, if not the greatest, of the world. He  
7 identified with the movement, and in 1985 in Jerusalem we  
8 established a school. We knew we needed a school for the  
9 training of leaders, and ultimately rabbis. So in 1985 there  
10 was established what is called -- it's hard to answer the  
11 telephone it's so long -- the International Institute for  
12 Secular Humanistic Judaism. And you hope they don't hang up  
13 while you're announcing the name.

14           Then one year later, 1986, was the great moment.  
15 Representatives from ten countries, Jewish representatives  
16 from secular groups and communities in ten countries, showed  
17 up in Detroit at the Birmingham Temple for the meeting that  
18 established the International Federation of Secular Humanistic  
19 Jews. We had people from England, from France, from Italy.  
20 We had people from Argentina and Uruguay, people from  
21 Australia, and obviously from Canada, and lots of people from  
22 Israel. It was just a very exciting time.

23           I really felt at that moment that all the work we  
24 had done was turning into something that would have a kind of  
25 lasting value. And that's where we are now. We have an

1 international movement, and we have a school that trains  
2 leaders for our future.

3 MS. CITRIN: I think what's interesting is that  
4 people came from all over the world, and I guess maybe you  
5 could talk about the pluralism of secular humanistic Judaism.

6 RABBI WINE: The variety that exists within it.

7 MS. CITRIN: Right.

8 RABBI WINE: Well, there's a great deal of variety  
9 because one of the principles of secular humanistic Judaism --  
10 and maybe it would be a good idea for me to articulate. The  
11 first principle of secular humanistic Judaism is that the  
12 Jewish people is not a religious denomination. The Jewish  
13 people is a people. It's a historic nation.

14 For most Jews their membership in that nation or  
15 that people is the result of birth. For many people, they  
16 choose to join the family. They're adopted into the family.  
17 As in most families, there is no single set of ideas that  
18 characterizes every member of the family.

19 The second principle of course is pluralism. That  
20 since we are a family, not simply a religious denomination,  
21 there are many different points of view within the framework  
22 of this family.

23 The third was the definition of Judaism, which was  
24 affirmed at the first meeting of the International Federation,  
25 and that is for us, just as the Jewish people is more than a

1 religious denomination, Judaism is more than a religion.  
2 Judaism is the historic culture of the Jewish people, which  
3 may include religion, but it also includes all the elements of  
4 culture, from literature to music, to dance, to life styles,  
5 whatever it may be, ethical values, and all of that  
6 incorporated under this rubric that we call culture.

7 MS. CITRIN: I also got the sense that the history  
8 was based on fact, not on someone's ideas.

9 RABBI WINE: Right. So those are like the Jewish  
10 principles.

11 And then our philosophy, which for us flowed from  
12 the experience of the Jewish people, involved a further  
13 principle, and that further principle was that the best method  
14 for the discovery of truth was something that we call reason,  
15 and reason means responsibility to facts. That is, when we  
16 have facts to support the statements we make, then we affirm a  
17 statement to be true. If we don't have any, we may say that  
18 it is false. When we only have some, we say maybe. There is  
19 no conviction that we have about the world that is absolute  
20 because we live in the age of science, and there may be some  
21 delicious piece of new evidence that will show up.

22 This evening, to refute the statements that we  
23 formerly held -- and one has to be -- in order to be a  
24 humanistic Jew, one has to be strong enough to be flexible, to  
25 say I was wrong, and now I've changed my mind, and to live

1 with uncertainty so that you don't have to have answers that  
2 may be false simply to make you feel good. You're able to  
3 wait for answers that you believe are really true. So that  
4 was very important.

5           What followed from that is at the very heart of what  
6 we're talking about. That is that the power for solving human  
7 problems is not to be found out there in some supernatural  
8 realm. That power is be found within us, and that's  
9 expressed, I think, in one of the theme songs of humanistic  
10 Judaism, which goes:

11           Where is my light?

12           My light is in me.

13           Where is my home?

14           My hope is in me?

15           Where is my strength?

16           My strength is in me.

17           We need each other, and also in you.

18           And that sort of summarizes where we are, and it  
19 also defines this human connection, the realm where we feel  
20 Judaism is centered. This world, this life, with people.

21           **MS. CITRIN:** It's so foreign from the traditional  
22 Jewish experience, where you go to a traditional service and  
23 you pray to a larger power, and you get direction. There's  
24 rules to live by. How do you counteract that whole  
25 philosophy?

1           RABBI WINE: People will say to me that philosophy  
2 isn't Jewish, and I say, well, if you look at the history of  
3 the Jewish people, there have been many philosophies. Jews at  
4 one time were polytheists and then they became monotheists,  
5 and now in modern times many of them have become humanists.  
6 There's no single one.

7           But more important, humanism flows from the very  
8 experience of the Jewish people. Traditional Judaism  
9 maintained that if you looked at Jewish history and Jewish  
10 experience, what you will see is the chosen people. The  
11 chosen people means that they enjoy special protection and the  
12 special providence coming from God. So if you look at Jewish  
13 history, what you will see is a people protected and defended  
14 by God.

15           In the century of the Holocaust, the last conclusion  
16 you would come, if you look at Jewish history, is that we  
17 enjoy somehow the special favor of the fates. If any history  
18 demonstrates the fact that you cannot rely on the kindness of  
19 the fate, Jewish history does that. So I always say to  
20 people, humanism isn't something foreign to the Jews. In the  
21 end, built into Jewish history and the Jewish experience,  
22 century after century after century, is the experience of  
23 living in a world in which you know you cannot count on the  
24 kindness of the fates. Ultimately you have to count on  
25 yourself and other people.

1 MS. CITRIN: It seems reasonable to me.

2 RABBI WINE: And that's how Jews have survived;  
3 right?

4 MS. CITRIN: That's correct.

5 RABBI WINE: So it isn't that humanism is foreign to  
6 the Jewish experience. It may be foreign to the official  
7 ideology of Orthodox Judaism, but it's not foreign to the  
8 Jewish experience because it's left its impact on Jews.

9 For instance, Jews are always called believers.  
10 Well, when I was growing up in Central High School, most of  
11 the Jews I encountered were famous for skepticism. that's what  
12 made them very good, do you understand? Intellectual things,  
13 science, whatever. And that skepticism is old.

14 If I look at Jewish humor, Jewish humor is a  
15 reflection of the other side of what we call the Jewish  
16 response to their experience. One side said, oh, God loves  
17 us, God takes care of us, and the other side says what Tevya  
18 said in *Fiddler on the Roof*, Would you mind choosing somebody  
19 else for a change? So it's left its imprint on Jewish humor.

20 Even Jewish ambition. It says in the Talmud that  
21 every man should accept his portion, whatever he receives out  
22 of life. Well, Jews have never done that. Jews are a highly  
23 ambitious people. One of the reasons is they know they live  
24 in a world in which they cannot count on either the kindness  
25 or the justice of the fates.

1           So there's so much about the Jewish experience that  
2 confirms the connection of humanism with the Jewish people,  
3 and that's what we affirm.

4           **MS. CITRIN:** It seems, too, that Jews in America are  
5 so different from Jews of shtetl life or centuries past where  
6 they were always slaves or beholden to some sort of royalty or  
7 they had to answer to some sort of hostile government.

8           **RABBI WINE:** You've hit on a very important point,  
9 which is the revolutionary effect on Jewish life of coming to  
10 America. Never before in the history of the Jews did we live  
11 in an environment in which any person could stand up and say  
12 exactly what he felt and believed.

13           **MS. CITRIN:** So why would a young person today for  
14 example choose to be Jewish? If you look at the way  
15 traditional religion goes, it's not as relevant as it has been  
16 in the past.

17           **RABBI WINE:** Obviously traditional people would  
18 disagree with that because they would say that modern culture  
19 is deficient, not traditional Judaism.

20           **MS. CITRIN:** Well, there's something to be said  
21 about being in a group and being part of a larger community.

22           **RABBI WINE:** We love being part of the Jewish  
23 people. We love identifying with its history. We learn from  
24 its history the lessons of that history, and the lessons of  
25 that history only reinforce humanism for us as the heart of a



1 reasonable Jewish message.

2 MS. CITRIN: So what do you see for the future of  
3 secular humanistic Judaism? It can only get better and better  
4 I would assume.

5 RABBI WINE: Well, we're growing. We're not growing  
6 spectacularly, but we're growing gradually. A recent survey  
7 was taken. It was conducted by Agon Mayer, who recently died.  
8 He certainly was the leading Jewish demographer in America.  
9 He went out and did a survey of the American Jewish public,  
10 and he asked the question, of the two words, religious or  
11 secular, which of them defines who and what you are? 47  
12 percent of the Jews in North America said secular. That's an  
13 overwhelming number of people.

14 Large numbers of these people are simple  
15 unaffiliated. We've only touched a very small percentage of  
16 these people. We need more congregations and we need more  
17 leaders and more rabbis in order to reach this public. But I  
18 don't doubt that if we're able ultimately to graduate a fairly  
19 substantial body of humanistic rabbis from our institute who  
20 can go to all the major cities and organize significant  
21 congregations, that we'll be able to reach a fairly wide  
22 audience.

23 MS. CITRIN: That would be incredible. That's very  
24 interesting. The number is also interesting: 47 percent,  
25 because sometimes people don't want to be known as secularist.

1 They would rather say I'm a religious Jew, even though they  
2 may not be.

3 RABBI WINE: Right.

4 MS. CITRIN: Haven't you encountered people who at  
5 first blush look as though they're Conservative Jews, and then  
6 you actually find out that they're secularists?

7 RABBI WINE: Well, if I look at the lifestyle of  
8 what I would call non-Orthodox Jews in our community, whether  
9 they call themselves Conservative, Reform, or Humanistic, I  
10 find great similarities. Almost all of them secularized. By  
11 that I mean their lifestyles no longer feature intense  
12 religious devotion. What they do with their life and their  
13 Jewish connection is to express it in a humanistic way.

14 Most people I know who are solving problems don't  
15 solve problems the way my Zeda used to solve problems. He  
16 would talk to God. I think in the Orthodox world they do  
17 that. I wouldn't say that's the standard procedure if I  
18 called the Reform or Conservative world. I mean we have human  
19 counselors, we have other resources that we normally turn to.

20 When it comes to the cultural choices within  
21 Judaism, the things that excite Jews today are generally not  
22 things that are what are conventionally called religious.  
23 Often it's the culture of the state of Israel. Often it's the  
24 secular literature, the songs, the music. Often it's the  
25 idealism of pioneers who created a new land. Or it's pride in

1 the achievement of all the people from Einstein to Freud, who  
2 left their imprint on the general world of knowledge and  
3 culture. So this is very pervasive in what I would call North  
4 American Jewish life.

5 One of the things we want to do as our mission is to  
6 reach out to all those Jews primarily unaffiliated who are  
7 cultural Jews, who are looking for a Jewish home, and to help  
8 them find that home.

9 **MS. CITRIN:** That's a wonderful goal.

10 I'm sort of curious as to your thoughts about Israel  
11 because you've been there. The movement certainly has been  
12 embraced there, because, as you said, probably 80 percent of  
13 the Israeli population is secular. At least that's the fact  
14 that I've heard.

15 **RABBI WINE:** I think it's closer to 60 now because  
16 the Orthodox have grown in number. I would imagine that  
17 somewhere between 60 and 70 percent of the population is  
18 secular, and there's a hard core of most likely 20 percent who  
19 identify themselves as Orthodox Israelis.

20 First of all, humanistic Judaism embodies the basic  
21 principle of Zionism. The basic principle of Zionism is that  
22 the Jews are a nation, not a religious denomination. If we  
23 were a religious denomination, why would we need a country of  
24 our own? Presbyterians don't need a Presbyterian land,  
25 Methodists don't need a Methodist land. We are a historic

1 nation. That's how we are described in the Bible, with a  
2 culture and a language of our own. So that principle which is  
3 at the heart of humanistic Judaism is also at the heart of  
4 Zionism. So we celebrate that and we feel that affinity and  
5 connection.

6           The second thing is that so much of the pioneer work  
7 that created the state of Israel is built on humanistic  
8 idealism. The decision to create a better world in a society,  
9 that could be a role model to others, and if you want to talk  
10 about the affirmation of human power against overwhelming  
11 odds, to drain swamps, to build the land, to develop it, to  
12 take a language that hadn't been spoken for over 2000 years  
13 other than by scholars and to turn it into a popular language,  
14 all these things that were done by sheer human determination,  
15 all of that is part of what we would call a humanistic  
16 perspective.

17           Now, what we recognize in the state of Israel today  
18 is that there is a dichotomy. Since 1967 large numbers of  
19 Orthodox Jews have moved to Israel, and they now constitute a  
20 very substantial part of that society. They do not believe in  
21 the separation of religion and government. They firmly  
22 believe that the Torah should indeed be the constitution of  
23 the state of Israel, in particular as it is interpreted by  
24 them.

25           So the concept of a Zionist state that is a modern,

1 liberal, secular, democratic state, which was part of the  
2 foundation principles of Zionism, is now being compromised by  
3 this other community. So now there's a tension in Israel, and  
4 it's all being dramatized by the attempt to find peace. We  
5 now find that many people in the Orthodox community are  
6 threatening civil war if indeed any part of the historic  
7 territory of Israel is described in the Torah is surrendered.  
8 That's very disturbing to me.

9           There's what's called in Yiddish and in German a  
10 kulturell Kreig, a culture war going on. It's like the  
11 culture war going on in the United States of America between  
12 the fundamentalists and the secularists. Do I believe that  
13 the fundamentalists will win? I do not. I'm optimistic that  
14 the forces of reason as described by the initial idealism of  
15 the Zionist movement will prevail. So we support that.

16           Our connection to Israel is very intense. We now  
17 have two branches of our school. One is in Jerusalem and one  
18 is in Detroit. In Jerusalem we now have 16 students who are  
19 studying for the humanistic rabbinate in Israel. Up until now  
20 we haven't had humanistic rabbis in Israel. We had madrahem.  
21 But now a very brave woman by the name of Silvan Malchin Maas,  
22 who's the daughter of one of our great leaders, Yakul Malchin,  
23 was ordained as a humanistic rabbi in 2003, and she went out  
24 to organize a rabbinic program in Israel. Now there are 16  
25 students, enormously bright people, men and women, who are

1 studying to be humanistic rabbis, and they will make an  
2 enormous difference in Israel because they see themselves as  
3 both intensely Israeli and intensely humanistic.

4 MS. CITRIN: She has a connection to Detroit, too.

5 RABBI WINE: She was here for two years.

6 MS. CITRIN: It's interesting because there does  
7 seem to be this upsurge in fundamentalism. For those of us  
8 who have a more liberal bent, it's a little threatening and  
9 surprising.

10 RABBI WINE: That dichotomy exists not only in  
11 Israel; it exists in Jewish communities in the Diaspora,  
12 including America and Detroit. We now find this  
13 confrontation, which I don't remember in my childhood, the  
14 confrontation between the ultra Orthodox and what I would call  
15 the secularized community, and in that I include the  
16 Conservatives, the Reform and the Humanistic Jews. It's  
17 overwhelming and it can be very, very dangerous. It needs to  
18 be minimized.

19 MS. CITRIN: We seem to be intimidated by the  
20 Orthodox movement in some way. They seem to yell louder. I'm  
21 imposing my own opinion.

22 RABBI WINE: Well, the intimidation comes from the  
23 fact that they claim that they are the original voice of  
24 Judaism, and therefore they have more rights because they are  
25 the original voice of Judaism, and everything else is simply

1 phony or sham. So what we need is what I call self-esteem,  
2 and that's one of the things we try to train members of our  
3 movement to have in the Jewish world.

4 Our view of Judaism is as legitimate. It arises out  
5 of the same experience as the Orthodoxy appeals to, only we  
6 see that experience of the Jewish people differently from the  
7 way they do. Our roots are as deep culturally. If you feel  
8 that in your bones, then your self-esteem enables you to speak  
9 out and say no. The only kind of Jewish world that will work  
10 is a pluralistic one. It's a world in which we live with  
11 great diversity. That's what a democratic society has, great  
12 diversity, and in that diversity each part of that diversity  
13 is able to give respect and understanding to the other parts.

14 **MS. CITRIN:** If you had a crystal ball and could see  
15 25 years hence, what would you hope to see and what do you  
16 think, projecting in the future, you might see?

17 **RABBI WINE:** Well, if I look at North America in  
18 particular, what I see is increasing diversity. We are in a  
19 free society. We all know this. You can no longer corral  
20 people into conformity. They will choose their own way. So I  
21 assume in Jewish life there will be great variety and people  
22 will have many options to choose from. I think that diversity  
23 will increase.

24 One of the issues in Jewish life is obviously  
25 intermarriage, which is increasing in Jewish life. It's not

1 because people are evil and they're protecting their Jewish  
2 identities. It's because they live in an open society in  
3 which they meet all kinds of people who they fall in love  
4 with. So one of the great challenges to the Jewish community  
5 in the next 25 years will be how we deal with the spouses and  
6 the children of intermarriage, because the old procedure,  
7 which is one of rejection, simply doesn't work and is  
8 ethically wrong. So how do we accommodate all of those  
9 people? That's one of the great challenges. There is no  
10 congregation in this community, other than ones in the ultra  
11 Orthodox community, that are not affected by this great change  
12 in Jewish life.

13           And the third thing of course is our relationship to  
14 the outside world. The society we live in is changing. For  
15 instance, Detroit has changed. So what does it mean to be  
16 Jewish and live in a world filled with Muslims? Before we had  
17 Presbyterians, Episcopalians. We knew how to deal with them.  
18 But how do we deal with all this variety, Hindus and  
19 Buddhists, all these people coming from so many different  
20 cultures? The only way America is going to work and the only  
21 way the Jewish world is going to work is to have great  
22 openness and diversity.

23           Let me just say that I'm a Detroiter and my roots  
24 are in Detroit, and one of the things that I'm very proud of  
25 is that we were able to start this movement in Detroit. I



1 must say that the only religious movement in the Jewish world  
2 that has started in Detroit is Humanistic Judaism, and my  
3 connection and affection for this community is very, very  
4 strong.

5 MS. CITRIN: Don't you sometimes gasp and say, wow,  
6 over 40 years ago this all started.

7 RABBI WINE: Right. Forty-three years ago we  
8 started, in 1963.

9 MS. CITRIN: But it's been part of your soul.

10 RABBI WINE: I must say, speaking about my own life,  
11 I see all these people who do work they hate, all these people  
12 who do work that they're indifferent to. It's just work for  
13 them. I love my work. I love what I do, I love what I've  
14 done. And there may be people in this community who may not  
15 agree with the value of what I've done, but I have enjoyed it  
16 thoroughly, and there's a special excitement and sense of  
17 fulfillment in everything that I've tried to do.

18 MS. CITRIN: I have one more question or two. I  
19 wanted to ask you, it's one thing to have a following of  
20 people who have the same basic beliefs you do, but how do you  
21 create the underpinnings, the literature, the curriculum, all  
22 the good stuff that goes with it? That is really -- you  
23 talked about it a little bit, but that's quite a difficult  
24 task. And I wanted to talk also about things that you have  
25 written yourself.

1           RABBI WINE: One of the things that was very clear  
2 that we needed from the beginning was a body of literature  
3 that enabled people to understand Humanistic Judaism very  
4 clearly. So there are four books that I had on my list to  
5 write. Three of them I have completed. The fourth one I'm in  
6 the process of completing. I've written the text; I just have  
7 to finish the footnotes.

8           The first had to be a book about the philosophy of  
9 Humanistic Judaism, and the name of that book is called  
10 Judaism Beyond God. It tries to express in the language of  
11 lay people what are the basic principles of Humanistic Judaism  
12 and what is the basic lifestyle of Humanistic Judaism. That  
13 book proved to be important because it was something that  
14 people could read. Many people came to us and said, oh, I've  
15 believed this all my life, but I don't really know how to  
16 articulate it. So it enabled them to articulate their own  
17 feelings and their own ideas.

18           The second had to do with our celebrations. Along  
19 the way I, together with other people, wrote many, many  
20 services. Each of the services was built around a special  
21 theme. So I created this book called Celebration, which  
22 includes the ones that I wrote for Shabat, for Rosh Hashanah,  
23 Yom Kippur, for Pesach, for Succoth.

24           It also addressed another issue because people said,  
25 well, what do you as humanistic people do about bar or bas

1 mitzvah? We created in the Birmingham Temple a wonderful  
2 format that we use and is used in many of the other  
3 congregations. The child in celebration of his growing up as  
4 Jew and as a person, chooses a hero from Jewish history --  
5 they study Jewish history -- that he or she admires. The  
6 person could be Moses, it could be Isaiah, it could be Sigmund  
7 Freud, it could be Albert Einstein, it can be Golda Meir. You  
8 can pick whatever person it is that you identify with and that  
9 you view as a kind of guide to your own personal development  
10 and moral development.

11 I must say that program has proved to be  
12 overwhelmingly wonderful. People who come to our bar and bas  
13 mitzvah who don't even share our ideology are often very, very  
14 moved by it because it has such great meaning for the child  
15 growing up who participates in it.

16 The Celebration book includes all of this. How do  
17 we a wedding, how do we do a funeral, all of it. It all went  
18 into the Celebration book, and it was intended to provide a  
19 guide in some way to that.

20 The third had to be a book on what I call how do you  
21 lead your life. These are our beliefs, but how do you lead  
22 your life? What does it mean to lead your life as a humanist  
23 and as a Humanistic Jew, facing the daily adversities? Out of  
24 that came a book that I called Staying Sane in a Crazy World.  
25 We Jews know that we live in a crazy world, don't we?

1 MS. CITRIN: Absolutely.

2 RABBI WINE: How do you stay sane in that world and  
3 live a life that is sane and reasonable. So that was the  
4 third book.

5 My fourth book is the book on history. I've  
6 finished it. It's called A Provocative People: A Different  
7 History of the Jews. I've completed it, and it should be out  
8 this coming year, and it's an attempt to describe the history  
9 of the Jews not from a traditional perspective, but from a  
10 secular humanistic perspective, and that's a very important  
11 text because at the foundation of Judaism is the experience of  
12 the Jewish people. What was that experience as best we know,  
13 both from science and from our understanding of Jewish  
14 history? So those are the four.

15 Then a fifth book showed up. When I retired from  
16 the Birmingham Temple, some very kind people put together a  
17 book about me and my life and my work, and I had the  
18 opportunity also to reflect on how the movement grew and was  
19 organized. So it was kind of a history book on how Humanistic  
20 Judaism emerged, the roots of secular Humanistic Judaism. So  
21 that's kind of the fifth book.

22 So now we have a library of five books. There will  
23 be many more books because there are going to be lots of other  
24 people writing books, and other people have written books.  
25 But coming from me there are five books which can serve as a

1 kind of guide to somebody entering our movement, trying to  
2 understand what it's all about, how they can participate in  
3 it, how they can live their life as Humanistic Jews.

4 MS. CITRIN: The last book is called A Life of  
5 Courage, which was an absolutely perfect title because you  
6 really are a very courageous person to not only believe in  
7 something which other people believed in but could not  
8 articulate themselves, but to have the courage to move ahead,  
9 and you are an example of Humanistic Judaism par excellence  
10 because you took the power of your convictions and applied it  
11 to what you really believe in.

12 RABBI WINE: One of the most important things for me  
13 in my life was to be a teacher, both of young people and of  
14 adults. I test my ability to influence the lives of other  
15 people through my effectiveness as a teacher, and I regard  
16 myself primarily as a teacher is how I see myself, both as a  
17 rabbi and as a person involved in Judaism, and that has been  
18 enormously gratifying for me.

19 MS. CITRIN: When you were 35, could you have  
20 envisioned that you would have had a rabbinic center and  
21 summer camp for kids?

22 RABBI WINE: No, I didn't imagine that.

23 MS. CITRIN: Congregations all over the world?

24 RABBI WINE: At 35 what I wanted to do was create a  
25 congregation that was a place where people who shared

1 convictions like mine but felt intensely Jewish would be  
2 comfortable. Then after a few years the vision began. Then  
3 it became clear to me that it worked and that there were lots  
4 of other people out there who shared this vision and wanted to  
5 be part of it. So that's been part of the excitement of  
6 Humanistic Judaism.

7 MS. CITRIN: Do you have any more books in your  
8 head?

9 RABBI WINE: One of the things I want to do after I  
10 finish the history of the Jews is I do a lot of public  
11 lecturing, not only to Jewish audiences, but to non-Jewish  
12 audiences as well, and I lecture on a variety of topics:  
13 philosophic, historic. One of the things I want to do is  
14 write a history of the world from a humanistic perspective,  
15 and I have it all mapped out in my mind. I think it will be  
16 of use certainly to humanistic Jews. I think it will have an  
17 audience even beyond the humanistic Jewish community.

18 It has to be short. It has to be something that  
19 ordinary educated readers can understand and appreciate. But  
20 I think I have a few unique observations about the history of  
21 humanity deriving from my humanism and Humanistic Judaism that  
22 would provide kind of a unique flavor to this kind of history.

23 MS. CITRIN: When you write a book, are you doing it  
24 on a computer, or are you handwriting everything?

25 RABBI WINE: There is a part of me that's archaic.

1 I'm attached to my fountain pen, and I find that I think  
2 better when I have it. It depends on how you were raised.  
3 Some people were raised with computers. You need the  
4 computer. The computers are access to this big brain that has  
5 all the information in the world. The computer is the access  
6 to communicating with other people through e-mail and  
7 whatever. So of course the computer.

8 But when I'm trying to think creatively, since I  
9 didn't take typing --

10 MS. CITRIN: Your one flaw.

11 RABBI WINE: Well, boys didn't do that in school.  
12 That was something girls did. I regret that I didn't. So I  
13 don't think creatively with the keyboard. I think more  
14 creatively with my pen. And I like to see my handwriting, not  
15 some formal letters, unrelated to me, on the screen. So  
16 that's part of my creative process. When people say that I'm  
17 not traditional, there it is. So how traditional I am?

18 MS. CITRIN: Do you want to say anything at all  
19 about your travels? You've traveled so extensively.

20 RABBI WINE: Well, one of the things that has really  
21 inspired me throughout my life has been my ability to travel.  
22 It's my favorite recreation, and I've traveled everywhere in  
23 the world. I think I've been to almost every country except  
24 Antarctica. I still have to get there. And I've taken people  
25 on trips. I just find the human race endlessly fascinating

1 and the different human cultures and the diversity. And what  
2 I've learned through all my travels is that underneath all  
3 this diversity there lies a shared human nature, and that  
4 makes me an optimist.

5 MS. CITRIN: Thank you so much.