INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL FISHBANE
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Professor Fishbane, you are a world-renowned scholar of the Bible who has been writing on all aspects of Judaism from the Bible to modern Hebrew poetry. Tell us about your life: how did you become who you are today? And what was it like to grow up as a Jewish kid in America in the 1950s?

Autobiographical reflections are inherently selective and the product of features that have retained significance over time. I shall do my best to be fair and concise in dealing with these issues. Let me begin with the second question—which will provide the segue to the first topic. I was born in a suburb of Boston in 1943 and came to maturity (or at least, self-conscious awareness) in the 1950s. My family and home was a traditionally observant Jewish one, in the manner of Conservative Judaism of that time. This meant that it was suffused with eastern European traditionalism, a sense that America offered new opportunities and new challenges to Jewish life, and a thin sense of the meaning of Judaism (and I should say that my lifelong search for a thicker intellectual matrix for Judaism was sprung from this setting). In particular, I had a strong sense of religious identity, but was aware that the dominant Jewish tone was not to be too Jewish or too visible in its public expression—and that included the modes of express identification with the nascent State of Israel. Being a “good American” and safeguarding one’s social acceptance were crucial. This was given particular expression in the person of my father. He had a strong Jewish identity, and was also a proud American—who not only fought in the Normandy Invasion (where he was severely wounded) but, upon returning from the “Conflict” (as they used to say), became a Commander of the Jewish American War Veterans. In his inaugural speech he spoke of the sacrifices of the war for liberty and the need to preserve the dignity of Jews in America and promote and protect the integration of Blacks, as well. Thus, a commitment to Judaism and Jewishness was coupled with loyalty to America as the “land of the free.”

But my childhood was also deeply influenced by narratives of Jewish persecution (the Holocaust was not yet an explicit topic of discussion) and
personified by my maternal grandfather. He escaped conscription into the Russian Army and made his way to America in the early twentieth century. He endlessly recounted his memories of pogroms and murders, of his escape through Europe, and of the hardships of early immigrant life in America. This narrative became the subsoil in which my Jewish identity and sense of American difference took root. Everything about his life—its traditional piety and stubborn memories—inflected my own. He gave me my first sense of persecution and Jewish historical consciousness. And so, my parents' home was derived from the past but always trying to make it in an open-ended present; whereas my grandparents' home was focused on the present but always looking back to the past.

As a young boy, I was acutely aware that the “total” Jewish religious life that I lived separated me from my peers in the public schools, but also that this Jewish life had a surface topicality to it, and was dominated by an American “lingo” for its verbal expressions and justifications. And so I was doubly alienated: my strong sense of Jewish tradition and its symbols (suffused by its forms of ritual and linguistic expression) set me off from the larger secular society of America in the 1950s; but this same sense of identity was also cut-off from my own internal sense of religiosity—which was more an inner spiritual longing than anything intellectually specific. These aspects dominated my life and sense of self already before my bar mitzvah. The modalities have changed over the years; but these were fundamental formations.

Let me say a bit more about the primary Jewish education that shaped me. In addition to the inestimable imprinting of synagogue life, there were formal factors as well. Afternoon Hebrew (synagogue) schools gave the day a dual valence: secular studies at public schools in the morning and Jewish content every afternoon. I never perceived a conflict; they were two parts of who I was, and the melding was at first organic (jagged disjunctions were not then part of my consciousness). This double dimension continued as a formative feature of my studies into high school and well beyond—for beginning with high school I also attended afternoon and evening classes at the Boston Hebrew Teachers College in Brookline, Massachusetts. I had a sense of the significance of that experience even as a young teen—though it was not always appreciated then for the impact that it had. First and foremost, I was immersed in the Hebrew language every day for hours (6 p.m.–9 p.m. on weekdays; 9 a.m.–1 p.m. on Sundays)—not only the entire range of traditional texts and literature from antiquity to the present, but the very tone and timber of spoken Hebrew (since that was the language of instruction). Second, there never was a split between traditional learning and