Professor Samuelson, you are an ordained Reform Rabbi, a Professor of Jewish Philosophy, a constructive theologian, a historian of Jewish philosophy, and a scholar, who has written a lot on Judaism and science. Please reflect on the interplay between those dimensions of your intellectual life. How do you integrate these intellectual activities and how did you develop these interests?

It didn't happen by a plan. It just kind of happened. I started out being really interested in philosophy. And every philosopher I read in college, I followed him for the first year. And it was just the most exciting thing in the world, to have ideas, to deal with ideas. So I was going to go into philosophy. And then I found that in school, because my school was not good, there was nobody to talk to about philosophy. But in my synagogue, which was very good, particularly in my Reform synagogue in the Chicago area, Beth Emet, which was led by Rabbi David Polish, you could talk ideas all the time. So, from very early on in my life there was a wedding between being Jewish and engaging in philosophy, a result of the accident of the bad public schools and a really good Reform synagogue.

Can you say more about the public school and about growing up in Chicago?

There was nothing unique about bad public schools in those years. The neighborhood where I grew up, Rogers Park, was half German-Jewish, half Irish-Catholic. And the Irish-Catholics all went to parochial schools, which means that the school was about 98 percent Jewish. The other two percent were the few Protestants that lived in the neighborhood. The teachers were all Irish-Catholic. We, being post-Depression children, identified with the views of the political left, that is to say, our politics ranged from Franklin Delano Roosevelt on the right to Eugene Debs, whom most of us supported. By contrast, our teachers were all Republicans who voted for Harding and Coolidge. The last Republican president before FDR was Herbert Hoover,
but he was too far to the left as far as the teachers were concerned, although he was actually a good guy.

So, we, the students of working-class families, identified with the labor movement and even with revolutionary sensibility. Consequently, we committed ourselves to making our teachers as miserable as we possibly could, which was good training in debating techniques. For example, we would have fights about whether or not we may quote Eugene Debs in the papers we wrote for civics class, and things like that. So, I absolutely hated public school and thought everyone was just dumb, contrary to the Jews I met in my religious school who were smart. My family belonged to Beth Emet, the synagogue of Rabbi David Polish, and all the Jews I met there were smart. Therefore, I extrapolated that Jews are smart, whereas Gentiles are dumb. That entailed that if I am interested in philosophy, the only kind of philosophy to do is Jewish philosophy. Only when I got to college did I discover that there were also smart non-Jews.

**And how about not-so-smart, or dumb Jews?**

No, I had to go to the Hebrew Union College to find out that there were dumb Jews. So, I got over those biological prejudices fairly quickly. But by then it was too late. My mind was set on Jewish philosophy as the intellectual course of my life. I was totally focused on Judaism and on doing Jewish philosophy. In particular I loved medieval philosophy because in the 1950s there were two forms of dominant philosophy: Pragmatism was still very popular, and analytic philosophy was beginning to become popular. At first, I liked analytic philosophy, but by my junior year of college (1956) the English translation of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* appeared, so that book consumed me. By comparison to Sartre, pragmatism just seemed empty, and William James had no color to him and no particular quality. His *Varieties of Religious Experience* was just emotionally empty. At first, I was a great believer in analytic philosophy because I believed, as most of us did at the time in philosophy, that Bertrand Russell's *Principia Mathematica* and the tools of modern logic would solve all the problems. Within ten years, I knew it didn't solve any of the problems. But the narrowness was going to be the basis of a growth of dealing with everything. It was really a hopeful period in analytic philosophy. I think anyone who had any intelligence had to find out within ten years of being exposed to analytic philosophy that, given its method, analytic philosophy couldn't deliver what it had promised to deliver. When you reached this awareness, you began to look for other things and other intellectual challenges.