An Interview with Rabbi Harold Kushner

Note: Rabbi Harold Kushner is the author of When Bad Things Happen to Good People, *along with numerous other books addressing the relationship between religion and lived adversity. He served as the congregational rabbi at the Temple Israel of Natick for over twenty-five years. Gregory A. Prince cofounded Virion Systems, Inc., a biotech company dedicated to the prevention and treatment of pediatric diseases. He is the author of* David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern Mormonism *as well as several other books on the history of the priesthood.*

Interviewee:	Rabbi Harold Kushner
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Interviewer:	Gregory A. Prince

Prince: Let's start by considering the question of how religions understand themselves in relation to other traditions. I think if we had enough data points we would probably find that most, if not all religious traditions at some point in their maturation process either said, "We are better," "We are the best," or, "We are the only." I think that the ones that I would consider more mature have softened those stances.

Kushner: Yes, due to reality.

Prince: The Mormons immediately populated the top one and have been very reluctant, or incapable of vacating it.

Kushner: My take on that was that to say, "Our religion is the best" is like saying, "Our baseball team is the best." It's not a statement of fact; it's a statement of loyalty.

Prince: Yes, and "My family is the best."

Kushner: Yes, right. "My mother is the best cook." It's not factual.

Prince: My mother was—I don't know about yours.

Kushner: My mother was a very indifferent cook, but I loved her food anyway. It's not a statement of fact, but it's a statement of identity.

Prince: And you would hope that that is the expression of their identity. You would hope that any group, be it religious or otherwise, doesn't think that it is mediocre.

Kushner: Yes. I think what we want people to believe is, "This religious system works for me."

Prince: Yes.

Kushner: It doesn't have to mean, "It's better than your system."

OK. Let me start with the disclaimer that the ideas you are about to hear are the personal reflection of Rabbi Harold Kushner, and there may be nobody else in the world who agrees with them.

My first reaction, looking at the questions you sent me, is that there is a unique difference between the Jewish and the Mormon ways of responding to these questions, and it's rooted in the fact that Judaism sees itself, first and foremost, as a community, and only secondarily as a theological system. We don't have to believe the same things, we don't have to practice the same things, we don't have to agree on anything except that we feel like members of a family. That makes it a little bit easier to be flexible on issues of definition. More than that, I think theology has never been that prominent in Jewish thought. It has been present over the generations, but we never really defined ourselves in theological terms.

Prince: As I think about the role of any religious tradition, to me it seems to have two components. One is that it tries to impart meaning and value to the congregants. The other is that it tries to give them access to the Infinite. If it can succeed on both counts it's amazing, but even if it only goes one-for-two, that's not bad.

Kushner: I would add a third: it sets you in a community. I think that's more important in Judaism than maybe in other faiths, perhaps because our theological system is not as important.

Prince: This is an area where I think Judaism and Mormonism have some stronger parallels, though through different pathways. Our congregations are defined geographically. Very few tradi-

tions do that. We draw the line right down the street and say, "If you live on this side you go here, and if you live on that side you go there." That has pluses and minuses, but it does tend to give a stronger sense of community than other traditions whose membership in a particular congregation is arbitrary.

Kushner: An idea that is probably more emphasized in Judaism than in any of the Christian traditions is to minimize the theology and maximize the sense of community. We had a service here on Saturday morning and we had maybe 180 people. I have no idea what they believed. I suspect if you gave them a yes-or-no quiz you would get a very low rate of coherence in believing the same things. But they are loyal and they find kinship. It's a way of being assured that you are not alone in this frightening cosmos.

Prince: And this is a lesson that Judaism has to teach us. If we could get there, we would be in a much better place.

Kushner: Yes. It's easier to conjure up the presence of God in the presence of other people who are trying to do the same thing.

Prince: And who are defined more by their struggles than by a list of catechisms.

Kushner: I found the first question on your list to be the key question, the one I think is the most interesting: "What do you do with the claim that scripture is God's will?" I read a marvelous book, the most intellectually exciting book I read last year. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, who is retiring as the chief Orthodox rabbi of the United Kingdom, has a book called *The Great Partnership*. It deals with the relationship of science and religion, and the fact that there doesn't need to be an antagonistic relationship between them. The key to his thinking is to draw a distinction in theology between right-brain and left-brain thinking.

Left-brain thinking is linear. It starts with a statement, a corollary, a derivative, a conclusion. It's unassailable. If you acknowledge the question and the evidence, you have to end up with the same conclusion that the speaker has.

Right-brain thinking is different. It is more diffuse. It is more individual. Perhaps the best example that I can think of—and Rabbi Sacks is an Orthodox rabbi, and doesn't bring this—every Christian friend I have, when I asked him, "What do you remem-

ber about when you first started studying the New Testament? How did you respond differently to the Gospels and to the Epistles?" They all said the same thing: "I could understand the Gospels. I could relate to them. But the Epistles lost me." The reason is that the Gospels are right-brain thinking. They don't come to a conclusion; they tell a story.

For us as Jews, this is a key idea. It means we can relate to the narratives in the Bible either in a left-brain mode or a right-brain mode. When we read, "King David reigned for forty years in Jerusalem. He died, and his son Solomon succeeded him"—I have no problems with that. I can say, "Yes, that's true." When I read that God created the world in six days, alternating between this task and that task, I don't take that as fact. I take that as suggestive. It's a story. It doesn't mean it's not true—it's true at a different level. It's true the way fairy tales are true and the way Shakespeare is true. It captures an essential truth, and the essential truth of Genesis chapter 1 is not, "How long did creation take?" but "What can we learn about this tale of creation?" We learn that it's an orderly process. It is a creation that has within itself the seeds of its own creation. It alternates between the celestial world and the earthly world. And it says some important things about human beings—and I think, by the way, that Western culture has totally misunderstood the Adam and Eve story. But that's a different story.

That approach makes it a lot easier to deal with the question, "Do you believe this is true?" My answer to somebody who asks, "Do you believe the story of the six days of creation is true?" is "Yes, I do; but not as an accurate report of historical fact."

If one can acknowledge that, without feeling that one has given away the store, then I think it's a lot easier to relate to some of the problems in scripture. Did God really divide the Red Sea so that Moses could walk across on dry land? Probably not. I have no idea what happened, but what I know is that at one point the Israelites were on the western side of the water—probably the Gulf of Suez—and somehow they got to the other side. How they got there doesn't matter. What happened was that they escaped and they saw this as God's providence. Did the sea literally have to split, or was this a poetic exaggeration?

The best example of this is Joshua causing the sun to stand

still at Gibeon. As you may remember, Clarence Darrow, in his debate with William Jennings Bryan, said, "If that literally happened, every building on the planet would have collapsed. We don't have evidence of that, and therefore it didn't happen." Now, I see it as a right-brain story. It's a poem. To say "May the sun stand still in Gibeon until our battle is over" is a poetic way of saying, "I hope the day is long enough for us to finish what we have come here to do." I don't have to take it at a factual level.

Now, that works if you can get devout believers to accept it. What's your idea of the feedback from the devout of the Latter-day Saints?

Prince: We are primarily a left-brain outfit.

Since you mentioned the Genesis creation narrative, a Pew survey done in 2010 showed that the level of acceptance by Latter-day Saints of biological evolution was only 22 percent. Only the Jehovah's Witnesses, with 8 percent, had a lower percentage. As a scientist I find that deeply troubling.

Kushner: You could put some orthodox Jews in that category too. I have had orthodox colleagues who, when I asked them about dating of dinosaur bones, say, "Either God planted all the bones there to test us, or Noah's flood messed up all the dating."

Prince: There *are* strong parallels between the two traditions, because our people could have said the same thing.

Kushner: Yes. But the orthodox are at least a minority, and they do have some intellectuals who are prepared to say, "I don't have to take it literally."

Let me frame the question this way: Is this a problem for people who hold these ideas, or is this a problem for people who are embarrassed by having co-religionists who hold these ideas?

Prince: I think it can be a problem for both of those. In the first instance, if it somehow impairs their interaction with the world around them, then I think it becomes problematic. Those who are able to build a wall of insulation—and some do—may be able to function without impairment. I don't envy that lifestyle.

The others, for whom it's an embarrassment, maybe that's a lesser issue. I think they can still get along with life in spite of the embarrassment.

Kushner: How would the Genesis story have any practical implications?

Prince: If they were in my field it would be a big problem for them. Acknowledging what the processes of biology are is crucial to being a biologist. The young-earth story of creation and the denial of biological evolution would make it pretty tough for a person of that bent to be a successful experimental biologist. That's an extreme example, but nonetheless it shows that there is a practical handicap to that type of worldview.

Kushner: Where else does this problem come up? Finding the tablets of Mormon scripture?

Prince: Yes. There we are talking about something that is mythical in the sense that we have no current evidence of those tablets. We have the word of people who say they saw them, but even that is nuanced, because one of those key witnesses later said, "It was with my spiritual eyes that I saw the plates." Whether there were literal gold tablets or not turns out, in my opinion, to be much less problematic than a worldview that denies biological evolution.

Kushner: Yes, I suppose the latter would be more of a practical problem.

Prince: Either viewpoint of gold tablets can embrace the Book of Mormon as canon.

Kushner: Right.

Prince: Its position as canon does not depend on being a literal history versus a figurative history. So we can come at that from either direction, and it works.

Kushner: Yes, and that's the way that I handle scripture. Some of the embarrassing passages of scripture were written by people long ago who either didn't know better or were articulating what was an accepted point of view back then. But I have to believe that as human knowledge has increased, we have left some of this behind.

One of your questions, for example, was about handling the acceptance of gays. We have gone through this with some pain but came through the other side in the last couple of decades. It's been rather astonishing how quickly that changed for us, but your church still has a problem with that.

Prince: I don't know how deeply embedded with the laity the problem is. As you go down through the age range, certainly young Mormons are much more pliable than old Mormons; and probably young Mormons are on an equal ground with their chronological peers in other traditions.

Kushner: Is it possible to make a distinction here between believing that sex between two people of the same gender is a perversion and acting politically to rule it out-of-bounds?

Prince: I think it is, absolutely.

Kushner: I believe you and I think it is, but is it possible for the elders of the Mormon Church?

Prince: Yes. We need a "Pope Francis moment," but we don't have a Pope Francis right now who can cut through that and say, "There are more important issues facing the world and facing the Church, and we need to pay attention to those and not get sidetracked." That's an approach that I would love to see them take.

Kushner: I think that would be ideal.

Prince: Now that said, we have made an enormous leap just in the past twelve months. There is now a Church website called mormonsandgays.org that has moved the needle 180 degrees by saying, "This is not a chosen behavior." For decades, from the top, we were on the opposite side of that.

Kushner: That was the whole argument.

Prince: Yes.

Kushner: "People have chosen to behave perversely."

Prince: Yes, and once you remove that foundation, then all of the structures you built on it, in terms of policy and doctrine, are going to collapse, and will have to be reconstructed on a new foundation.

Kushner: Yes, this was my approach. Once you realize that this is innate, if you have a problem with it, complain to the manufacturer. In terms of gay marriage, once you recognize that people are born with this inclination—I have spoken to any number of gays who have told me, with a sense of horror, that they discovered at the beginning of adolescence that they were attracted to their own sex, with dismay and fear—once you realize that this is

not a choice, then these people are going to form erotic associations just like we do, and we have to honor that.

Several years ago I gave a high-holiday sermon on the first day of Rosh Hashanah. We read the story of God commanding Abraham to sacrifice his son. I said, "For years I have hated this story, but what I finally came to terms with was that I recognized that God speaks twice to Abraham, once telling him to sacrifice the child, and once telling him to spare the child. Abraham's challenge is to identify which is the authentic voice of God."

Then I talked about the whole argument we were having about ordaining gay men as rabbis. One very traditionally oriented colleague of ours said, "My heart goes out to those candidates. I think a lot of them would make superb rabbis, but what can I do when the Torah says I am forbidden to endorse what they are doing?" My answer was, "What can you do? You can do what Abraham did. Hearing two messages from the Torah, one of condemnation and one of compassion, you could say the compassionate one is the more authentic." And I think that's what we have done.

Prince: I think other policies that are in the Torah could be interpreted similarly.

Kushner: Absolutely.

Prince: I don't see much stoning going on these days.

Kushner: I know. I think it's kind of a cheap shot for some of my Christian colleagues to compare the morality of the New Testament to the morality of the Hebrew scriptures. You have between five hundred and a thousand years of evolution. Compare it to what other Jews were doing in the first century.

Okay, on to the next question that you sent me: "Mormons have been obsessive record-keepers almost from the day the Church was founded in 1830. While this allows us to examine our past in almost unmatched detail, it also obliges us to confront many 'inconvenient truths' that other religious traditions lacking such records never confront. At the same time, our internal narrative has become increasingly burnished, to the point where there is a *de facto* expectation of infallibility. Largely because of the Internet, data and infallibility often clash. How do you move people from an idealistic view of their tradition and its leaders that is

not consistent with the historical record, to a realistic view that is consistent with the record, while at the same time preserving their internal faith and their loyalty to their tradition?"

First, I have to tell you my favorite Mormon story. After I wrote one of my books—I think it was *Who Needs God?*—I was invited to speak at Brigham Young University. I had no idea what sort of reception I would get. The turnout was so heartening—they had to move it from the auditorium to the gymnasium. I began my talk by saying, "Thank you for inviting me, and thank you for turning out in such numbers that you had to change the venue. I have to tell you that one of my dreams when I was a teenager was that one day I would be cheered by thousands on a college basketball court. That it happened this way proves to me that God answers prayers and God has a sense of humor."

But I got a very nice reception, and at a lunch afterwards Rex Lee, who was the BYU president, said to me, "You've created a real problem for those students. Here you are—somebody who doesn't believe in Jesus and doesn't believe in the tenets of the Latter-day Saints, and you come across as such a profoundly spiritual person."

When you talk here about the "inconvenient truths that other religious traditions lacking such records never confront" and the internal narrative becoming increasingly burnished to the point where there is a *de facto* expectation of infallibility—what do you have in mind? Do you mean something like the exclusion of African American men from the priesthood?

Prince: That would be a minor data point compared to the overall narrative. We have crafted a very sanitized, glossy, "faith-promoting" version of our history; and yet at the same time we have this mountain of data, with records going back almost to the founding hours of the tradition. The dissonance between the two is a real problem. It was less of a problem before the Internet era, because people could content themselves with the burnished version and not be confronted with the fact that there was anything else in the background. Now, with the Internet, it is inescapable. That was what caused the crisis for Hans Mattsson, the Swedish Area Authority. Your letter to the *New York Times* was in response to his crisis. I have spent quite a few hours with Hans, so I have some fa-

miliarity with what he encountered. For a third-generation Mormon at that level of the hierarchy not to have been aware of these data is appalling.

Kushner: Remind me of the specifics. I reacted to it comparing it to the infallibility-of-scripture problem that we have with the Orthodox.

Prince: I think that is an apt comparison. In the process of carrying out his ecclesiastical duties—his official title was Area Seventy, which roughly is the equivalent of a Catholic Cardinal—Hans would be confronted by local ecclesiastical officials who would say, with increasing frequency, "Our parishioners are bringing to us tough questions that we haven't seen in the past. We're handing them off to you because we don't know the answers." I think at first he boldly thought, "Okay, I'm the ecclesiastical authority and so I'll answer these." But he found out that they were tough questions, and so he did what most people do, and that was to go to the Internet for the answers. What he found almost tipped him over. It almost caused him to abandon the tradition. On the first level, his question was, "Why didn't I know the answer to this?" But the deeper and more troubling question was, "Why did my tradition shield from this question and other questions?"

Kushner: Let me make a distinction between the infallibility issue—that is, statements we are asked to believe that defy belief—and the misbehavior issue—that is, stuff that was done by people in positions of responsibility that are very hard to countenance as religious. The second one I can handle. I gave a Yom Kippur sermon about two months ago, and I spoke of the story of Moses going up Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments. They were inscribed in stone by God himself. Carrying the statements down, Moses saw the Israelites worshipping a golden calf, and he threw the tablets down and shattered them. Then God told him to go up the mountain again, after God had reconciled himself to the people. This is the crucial part: This time God told him, "I will tell you what to write, and you write it down." My interpretation—and this is not original with me—is that the original tablets, written by God, carried the perfection of God. But human beings cannot be perfect. The ones that Moses was inspired

by God to write, and translated into human language, are tablets meant for fallible human beings. They leave a margin for error.

It will happen sometimes that the perfect will of God, as to how we should behave, is misunderstood by human beings because of our limitations—because of our selfishness, because of temptations we are subject to—and that we simply have to learn to see religion as an ideal translated into action by fallible human beings. So even if one were to posit that the inspiration behind Mormon scripture—or the inspiration behind Jewish scriptures—was direct from God, the implementation of this by flawed human beings will always have mistakes.

At one extreme this could be priests who abuse little children sexually. At a lesser extreme it could just be a misunderstanding. Somewhere in between it could be the idea that informs the Book of Leviticus, that homosexual behavior is a perversion chosen by people who didn't want to play by the rules; and it has to yield to discoveries later.

The same thing about the inferiority of women—women as communicators of impurity because of the misunderstanding of the whole menstrual problem. God knew what he was saying to us, but we human beings either misunderstood it, because we are not God, or willfully distorted it for our own benefit.

Prince: What you hope, with any tradition, is that in the long play you get better at it.

Kushner: Yes.

Prince: Maybe the chief paradox of Mormonism is that, on the one hand, a foundational belief is continuing revelation, but on the other hand is almost the inability of the tradition to handle change.

Kushner: Interesting! Change is where we all come from.

I'll tell you what I do with the issue of infallibility in Judaism, and what I tell my Christian colleagues about the infallibility of the Church. I think the Pope is infallible in the sense that the umpire is always right. Even when he makes a mistake, he calls it. Sometimes he has the grace like the umpire last year, Jim Joyce, who blew the call that cost the pitcher a perfect game, to say, "I blew it." That was to his credit, but the call still stood. That's what

I would suggest for infallibility. The people who have to make decisions will have those decisions accepted. If, in retrospect, it turns out they were wrong, they can amend the decisions. But once those decisions come down, you have to have the discipline to say, "I am a member of this system, and this is one of the rules of the system."

Prince: And we can always say, "Wait until next season!"

Kushner: Yes—or even next week. But it's a matter of somebody being in charge. What you don't want is, "On the one hand/on the other hand."

Prince: Too often, on various levels, our first impulse is to throw the baby out either by openly criticizing the leaders or leaving the tradition, rather than acknowledging both the fallibility of our leaders and the necessity of accepting their sometimes flawed, and yet well-intentioned leadership.

Kushner: Yes—we want to simplify, make things black-and-white.

Your third question is interesting: "During the first century of the existence of the Mormon Church, diversity of thought was generally tolerated and often encouraged. As the twentieth century unfolded, however, the tradition moved in the direction of an orthodoxy built on a foundation of fundamentalism. In an increasingly pluralistic society, this orthodoxy is increasingly challenged. How do you move a religious community from orthodoxy to pluralism without weakening members' sense of identity and tradition?"

How did Mormonism move towards fundamentalism? Do you have any sense of it, having lived it from the inside?

Prince: I think that it was largely a response to the "modernist heresy," or "higher criticism movement" of the early twentieth century. Particularly as the Protestant biblical scholars—because the Catholic scholars were kept on the sideline by the Pope—employed a scientific approach to the study of the Bible, the fundamentalists reacted by panicking. Rather than seeing that this may take them to a better ground, they dug in and were fearful that the whole game was lost. I think that was an existential-level fear within Christianity in general, and some branches of it reacted by taking an anti-modernist approach to scripture.

At the time that happened, Mormonism was under a second assault. In 1902, Apostle Reed Smoot was elected to the United States Senate. His election touched off a firestorm of protest. Initially he was accused of being a polygamist, but that was taken off the table very quickly when it was clear that he was not. The more troubling allegation was that, as a general officer of a church that was viewed as being un-American—with substantial justification given what had happened in Utah Territory over the prior half-century—he was not fit for office. The protest started a three-year hearing in the Senate as to whether he could retain his seat, but it really was a three-year tribunal concerning Mormonism.

Kushner: Let me guess that the response of the Mormon community was to huddle inside the faith system, close the windows and shut the door.

Prince: Yes. The President of the Church at that time, Joseph F. Smith, wrote what was initially a course of study for the male priesthood, which is an all-lay priesthood in our tradition, and later was published as a book, *Gospel Doctrine*, that has remained in print ever since—nearly a century now. I think that was the first fundamentalist approach to Mormonism. Because his son, Joseph Fielding Smith, became an apostle and ultimately the President of the Church, and his grandson-in-law, Bruce McConkie, followed in the same footsteps, the thread of fundamentalism became the predominant theme in the fabric of Mormonism, and still remains so.

Kushner: There was a somewhat parallel process in Judaism. The founder of Conservative Judaism, for example, has been quoted as saying, "Higher criticism is the higher anti-Semitism. An attack on the accuracy of the Bible is an attack on Judaism." We have, for the most part, outgrown that. I think the position we came to is that Truth is one of the names of God, and if something is true, it has to be something that is compatible with God. One response, of course, is to say, "If it contradicts God's word, it can't be true." But faced with scientific evidence, the fact that things make sense, predictability—all the things that you and I are familiar with, you as a scientist and I as a student of the modern world—if it's true, you have to make room for it.

The secret weapon of Judaism is what I alluded to at the be-

ginning of our conversation: the sense of community. We feel we belong to each other like a family, and a family can tolerate ideological differences.

Prince: Including crazy cousins.

Kushner: Exactly. The initial response was to withdraw into the circle of the people who agree with you, and not let anything else in—not only don't read books by atheists, but don't read books by modern Jews. That Spinoza was excommunicated, for example, remains an intellectual embarrassment for Jews. But even at that point we still saw each other as kin, and we can tolerate this.

I am increasingly convinced that human beings are shaped less by what they believe, and more by who they belong to. I have read a number of books recently that tend to endorse that. I recommend to you Jonathan Haidt's book, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*. He is a psychologist who teaches at New York University. It's an analysis that begins with the question of why Republicans have been more effective at changing peoples' minds than Democrats. He said there are something like six emotional appeals that people respond to, and while Conservatives operate five out of the six, Liberals operate only two or three out of the six. Conservatives are better salesmen. But there are ideas that people recognize as true, and we form communities based on what we share.

Prince: A book that had a profound influence on me, that I read over thirty years ago, was Wilfred Cantwell Smith's *Faith and Belief*. He was raised in Asia by missionary parents. His exposure to Eastern religions allowed him to segregate faith and belief as two different entities. He said, "Western religion has combined the two, and muddied the water in the process."

Kushner: Precisely.

Prince: He said, "In the East there are religious traditions that have virtually no belief system, but that engender intense faith." I think this gets at what you are talking about.

Kushner: Absolutely. I cut a column out of the *New York Times* a couple of months ago that I am going to use somewhere. The author describes herself as a liberal Evangelical. She said that at the time the King James Translation was being made, the age of

Shakespeare, "belief" did not mean what it means today—assent to a proposition. Belief meant something closer to "cherish." It's related to the German "lieben"—what you love. Belief is not what you believe is true, but what matters to you.

Prince: And to what you are willing to surrender yourself.

Kushner: Exactly. I connect that to the faith of Abraham. It's interesting that we have learned to speak of the Abrahamic traditions, including the Muslims, but while we all look back to Abraham, we all see Abraham differently. To Judaism, Abraham is the smasher of idols, the iconoclast. To Christianity, he is the paradigm of faith. To Islam, he is the model of obedience. Three very different Abrahams.

Prince: You used a term a few minutes ago, and I'm sure you didn't use it loosely. You talked about "God's word." I think it's crucial to know the difference between "God's word" and "God's words."

Kushner: Yes.

Prince: If we could get our parishioners to understand the difference between the two, a lot of the problems we are discussing would either dissolve or be reconciled easily. "God's word" means "Yes, it is God's word *as it flows through whoever the prophetic figure is who is delivering it.*"

Kushner: Precisely. I have used an example, and I try to make the case to bright adolescents who challenge me, "I'm sure you've had the experience dozens of times of having an idea and trying to put it into words. Somehow, the words never capture the purity and clarity of the idea." This is scripture: we suddenly, through the grace of God, realize a profoundly important truth, and we try to put it into words. The words are helpful, but ultimately inadequate.

Prince: Since you brought up basketball, I'll use another sports analogy. In Olympic diving you get two scores: one is performance, and the other is degree of difficulty. The degree of difficulty here is trying to translate the infinite into finite language.

Kushner: Exactly—aside from the fact that it can't be done! The purity of intent, God's will, is there in scripture. And I will concede that it is there in Mormon scripture as well. It is translated into hu-

man language, which will *always* be flawed and *always* be finite. Any attempt to capture the infinite in finite words is going to be less than perfect.

Prince: And I think it is flawed for two reasons. One is because that infinite-to-finite transition can't be done on a one-to-one basis, and the other is that the instrument of translation, the mortal person through which the process occurs, is a flawed individual. So it's a double-whammy.

Kushner: Yes. Having said that, what problems does that solve?

Prince: If you can understand that, then you say, "This process gives us access to something that is very dear, but it is a conditional access. We need to have the humility to step forward and say that we understand what the limitations of that are and that we rejoice in spite of those limitations."

Kushner: Yes. For us, as Conservative Jews, that was the key to extending certain privileges to women—becoming rabbis, becoming cantors, being called to the Torah. My Orthodox friends still shudder at the idea that a woman, during her menstrual period, might be called to touch the Torah. But what we are saying is that there was a time when women were seen in a certain way, and we have outgrown that. We have access to new information. The will of God about every human being fashioned in God's image is inviolate; but the way in which we understand that has been conditioned by what we have understood, how we felt, our emotional problems, the fear and anger men have of women—all this stuff. And you can translate this, as well, to what we do with gays, and on any issue. The revelation of God's will is perfect, but the human perception, translation and implementation of that will can never be perfect.

Prince: Doesn't this mirror what Martin Luther King said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice"?[1]

Kushner: Yes.

Prince: This isn't a random process of jerking forward through time; there is some purpose, some direction *if* we are doing our part. I don't think it is inevitable.

Kushner: No, it is not. But that goes in several directions. One of the unfortunate developments in the modern world is that as peo-

ple were liberated from blind obedience to the word of scripture, they have given themselves the right to do all sorts of terrible things. To say that the Bible is an imperfect, human writing down of God's revelation is fine. But to say that the commandment about adultery reflects an ancient idea about wives as husbands' property and therefore can be disregarded is an interpretation that people will make. I don't think that is the intent of scripture, but they will say to me, "You have grown in your way, and I have grown in my way."

Prince: And yet if you measure the outcome of those two paths, there is a feedback loop that informs. It's not just an arbitrary decision with no consequences.

Kushner: And that's certainly what I believe.

Prince: And I think it goes beyond belief. I think that you can demonstrate that there are adverse consequences to going down one road versus the other. If you want to call that natural law, so be it. It may just be cause and effect.

Kushner: I think it says something profound about what it means to be a human being.

All right, we've been talking about your fourth question, "How can a religious tradition be responsive to changing conditions, while at the same time neither lessening nor abandoning its core messages?" Is there a dimension of that that we haven't faced up to?

Prince: No, although I would say that key to not abandoning the core message, at the same time you are moving along whatever that arc is to take you to a better place, is the prophetic voice. I think that that is a voice that all traditions, whether they acknowledge it or not, are trying to gain access to.

Kushner: Yes, I believe that. And I firmly believe that there is something in the human soul that responds differently to right and to wrong.

Prince: Yes.

Kushner: That is why the word "rationalize" exists in the English language. It's a way of saying, "I want to do this, but I know it's wrong so let me try and paint it over."

Can the leadership of the LDS Church accept and articulate the idea that the perfect revelation of God was imperfectly understood in terms of African Americans, or in terms of women, and we are slowly beginning to understand it more accurately, and I'm sure we have a long way to go?

Prince: On the pragmatic level of policy, yes. We have done that with our policy of denying priesthood ordination to black men of African descent. But on a different level we have yet to be able to step forward and dismantle the scaffolding of folklore that was constructed by well-intentioned people to prop up the policy for over a century. The policy was not there from the beginning, but once it was instituted, a larger and larger scaffolding was constructed whose sole purpose was to justify the policy.

Once the policy was abandoned, the scaffolding remained, and it continues to do damage. We have yet to be able to turn that corner, because some of the architects of that scaffolding were at the top of the hierarchy. We have yet to be able to figure out a way of saying, "You know, they were wrong." We may have started to turn that corner last month. [Several weeks after this interview, the LDS Church published a position paper, "Race and the Priesthood," (http://www.lds.org/topics/race-and-the-priesthood) that for the first time disavowed many of the elements of the referenced scaffolding.]

Kushner: Last month was pretty recent.

Prince: It's about as recent as it gets. We have an extraordinary, charismatic man who is very near the top of the hierarchy, a German national by the name of Dieter Uchtdorf. In the Church's most recent general conference, he got up and said, baldly, "There have been times when members or leaders in the Church have simply made mistakes." We're almost 200 years into our tradition, and we finally were able to articulate that message at that level. That may have opened the door to resolving some of these other issues. If we can have the humility to say, "We are always looking for the word of God but we haven't always gotten it right," we'll be fine.

Kushner: I can understand that at a certain point in time, having a certain perception of African Americans, of women, of Jews seemed clear. For example, people made what was an understand-

able judgment call based on the evidence of that time, when most blacks were uneducated, had no aspirations really, were on the margins of society through no choice of their own. But this was how we saw them, and we formed a judgment based on that. It was a long, slow process for society to realize that this was something that we had imposed on blacks, and not an accurate statement of what they were like.

Prince: We created a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Kushner: Oh, yes. And the same thing with women. We thought they were fragile—until all the men were drafted into the army during World War II, and women had to go out and take over their jobs. The same thing with Jews. We were marginalized, and then people came to certain conclusions because all the Jews they knew had been marginalized people. That perception probably changed when the G.I.'s served overseas with Jewish comrades and realized that they were just like themselves.

This synagogue—Temple Israel—was founded in 1945. For its sixty-fifth anniversary I was asked to speak. I took as my theme, "1945 as the turning point in American Jewish history." And I think it was. The G.I.'s coming home, having met Jews for the first time; the flight from cities into suburbs where all the guys from the farms found out they had to learn from Jews how to live in the city and in the suburb—things changed radically. There is a process in which what seemed like a totally reasonable judgment at one point, in the light of new evidence is seen as mistaken.

Prince: Was the turning point also informed, in part, by the Holocaust?

Kushner: I think it started before the Holocaust. I think you're right, however, that there was an element of that. The G.I.'s who had just spent three or four years of their lives fighting against Hitler were not about to come back and implement Hitler's policies in this country. So I think that was part of it, but I don't think it was the strongest part. I think it was the face-to-face encounter. If you lived on a farm in Iowa, you probably had never met a Jew.

My military service was at Ft. Sill, Oklahoma, in Lawton, the southwest corner of the state. For a lot of the citizens of Lawton, I was the first Jew they had ever met. They had images based on old

books, old sermons, old ideas—the *Merchant of Venice*, Dickens, whatever it might be. It was an awakening—a slow awakening, but an awakening. This was 1960.

Again, we come back to what is the key of what you and I have been talking about for the last hour. If you recognize that the word of God is perfect, and the implementation, the understanding, the translation of the word of God is a task performed by flawed human beings—sometimes well-intentioned human beings, but sometimes human beings with agendas of their own—then you don't have to go against the word of God to revise the way in which the word of God was implemented. All you have to do is recognize that all of the people who took passages from the Book of Leviticus and turned them into doctrine regarding the isolation of women, were men, and some of them may very well have been having a complicated relationship with their own wives.

For example, one of the things I have been preaching is that we totally misunderstand the Garden of Eden story. I can prove, from the Book of Genesis, that Eve was not created from Adam's rib. It's clear. It is undeniably clear. First, the word used for "rib" twenty times more often means "side." What you have is the same thing you have in Plato's *Symposium*. The first human being was conjoined twins, one male and one female. Because God could not find a mate for that hybrid creature, he put it to sleep, cut it in half, closed up the incision and then, when they woke up from their sleep, they saw each other and God said, "You are now two parts, so when you come together you will become one whole."

What happened was that at some point male fear, male discomfort, male vulnerability, male resentment of the capacity of women to make us lose our cool translated into a strong anti-feminist, misogynist agenda.

Prince: And we have yet to resolve it.

Kushner: Absolutely.

Prince: The Mormons are in the throes of this right now. This is being called the Third Wave of Mormon Feminism. The First Wave was in the 1870s and '80s, and the Second was in the 1970s with the Equal Rights Amendment. This one may be more durable, and perhaps more far-reaching. It is now accompanied by a female demographic that we didn't have before: highly educated,

highly motivated, and with markedly different expectations than their foremothers.

Kushner: And not willing to put up with second-class status.

Prince: Yes. This Third Wave is broadly based, but it is bifurcated. The bifurcation deals with how we embody equality amongst the women of Mormonism. One branch of it, which is a minority, says, "We want full ordination to the now-male priesthood." The other, which I think will be the more persuasive arm of that bifurcation, says, "We want authentic voice. We're not so much concerned with how that is embodied, but we are concerned that it be embodied." There is a growing acknowledgement—perhaps even consensus—right now that the status of women within Mormondom is not of equal voice.

Kushner: Right. And it makes it less attractive to a lot of people out there, not simply as prospective converts, but as people evaluating Mormonism as a credible voice.

Prince: Yes. And adding to this wave is the fact that the LDS Church recently reduced the age for missionary service. It had been twenty-one for women, but a year ago it was dropped to nineteen. The result of that has been a tsunami of female applications. Before, female missionaries accounted for about 13 percent of the missionary force. Now, we may be approaching parity. When that occurs, you can project in broad outlines what is going to happen when these women come back from their missions.

Kushner: And I think that is what it is all about. The day I spoke at Brigham Young University, when I was sitting next to Rex Lee afterwards at the luncheon he told me that when he was a young man he did his missionary service in the Philippines. He said, "I came back after two years, and I had not made a single convert to Mormonism. But I had made myself a Mormon with a permanence I had never had before." I suspect this is the real benefit of the missionary program.

Prince: This leads into one of the other questions, and that is that I see, across the board, that the older generation has trouble keeping the younger generation in the same tradition—even if that tradition is atheism! I think this is a systemic problem, and none of the traditions that I have spoken to, including our own, has a real

good handle on it. How do you engage this generation now that is, by all measures, more spiritually inclined than their elders, and yet less churched? I have come to you for the answer.

Kushner: That was your first mistake! I don't know what the answer is.

Prince: Do you see it within Judaism?

Kushner: Oh, sure. We're having a difficult time with our young people because they find even the good congregations of their parents to be sterile, and the average congregations hopeless. I'm embarrassed to say it, but they are right. Some of them are attracted to a liberal orthodoxy. There is a movement called Chabad that does missionary work among Jews, mostly of college age.

Prince: As in Chabad House?

Kushner: Yes, that's exactly it. It's an alternative to the mainstream Hillel House. They will invite them to services with a lot of singing and a lot of liquor and a lot of good food, and no ritual or theological demands. Ultimately, they want people to become thoroughly observant and orthodox, but they want to get them in first. What they perceive is that they are looking for community, which I have been talking about all morning, and they are looking for magic. I wish I had a better word for it, but I think that's part of it. They are looking for something that transcends the understandable. I think liberal Judaism has failed this generation because we make sense. We are so insistent on making sense, and they say, "I don't need a religion that makes sense. I get that in college. I want a religion that touches my soul, that sets my soul on fire."

Prince: That respects mystery.

Kushner: Yes. That's a better word for it. I'm sorry that I didn't think of that. The word is really mystery. "I want something that speaks to the side of my mind that neither my history professor nor my philosophy professor nor my calculus professor is able to reach." I think you guys can do this. I think Orthodox Judaism, when it wants to meet us halfway, can do this. I think my kind of Judaism can do this if people would only hold still and listen to it.

Prince: But it becomes a very delicate balancing act to try to reach the youth without perverting the tradition in the process, and

we've seen plenty of that within the mega-churches of Christianity. They become religious country clubs.

Kushner: Yes.

Prince: That may work for a limited time, but we are already seeing that they don't have the same success with the second generation.

Kushner: And probably not even with the original generation, if what they are selling is not really Christianity. The "Gospel of Wealth," for example, which should be an embarrassment to any serious Christian, is much of what they are selling.

I hope you're enjoying this—I'm having a great time.

Prince: I think I'm as close to a state of ecstasy as a Mormon is allowed to get.

Kushner: Your next question is, "What advice do you have for shifting our emphasis from growth to maintenance?" I think it's going to be a problem for Mormons.

Prince: It is going to be a tough one, because when you define yourself by numbers for so long, you have a long journey to get to somewhere else.

Kushner: Not only that. While the public image of Mormonism is that they go out and try to convert, the perception in the non-Mormon world is that if you do convert, how long will it take to be accepted as a real Mormon?

Prince: Yes, and the answer to that question often depends on geography. I was a missionary in Brazil in the late 1960s. In the entire country at that time there were 20,000 Mormons. Now there are well over a million. So if you are part of a fairly new church, inclusion is a lot easier than if you are a convert on the East Bench of Salt Lake City.

Kushner: Yes. In Robert Putnam's book *American Grace*, one of the points he makes is in a table about the degree to which Americans of one religious identity are open to accepting people of other religions. What he finds is that Mormons are on the bottom of the list for acceptability. People are suspicious of them, along with Islam. Putnam suggests that the reason is that you tend to be insular.

Prince: Yes, we are insular.

Kushner: So how can you be insular and at the same time a missionary?

Prince: That is a paradox, and we pay a price for it.

Kushner: Yes. The opinion of Jews in America was fairly stingy until recent years, when it skyrocketed. One of the reasons is that so many people now have Jewish relatives. A cousin has married a Jew, a brother has married a Jew. This doesn't happen with Mormons. Few Protestant families have a Mormon brother-in-law, and so they don't know Mormons.

Prince: And there is another dimension to the problem. Several years ago I went golfing with David McAllister-Wilson, the president of Wesley Theological Seminary. My wife was the first Mormon ever to enroll in degree courses at that seminary, and that was how I made his acquaintance. I thought we were just going to go out and have a good time playing golf, but on the third tee he said, "All right, tell me about Mormonism." I had no intention of doing that when we started the day, but for the next sixteen holes we talked Mormonism.

When we got back to the clubhouse for lunch he said, "You have a good tradition. You should be at the table." I said, "David, the reason we are not at the table is that we have yet to acknowledge that there *is* a table." That still is our problem. I am on one of his steering committees now, but I am still the only Mormon who has ever served on a committee at that seminary. We need to fix our insularity.

Kushner: What you mean by that, Greg, is that Mormons perceive various Christian denominations as flawed?

Prince: I wish they would at least get to that depth of thought on the subject. I don't think they think it through at all. I think it's just a reflex that says, "That is other. We are here, and we will build a wall around ourselves." The president of Wesley said he used to do ecumenical events. "But," he said, "I found that that was the wrong way to do it. When I say ecumenical, that says to you, 'You need to give up part of your identity so that we can all get along.' What I do now is interfaith events, because that says up front, 'We respect what you are. Now let's come together and work for a common good.'" That's where Mormons need to be. They

need to understand that by getting involved on an interfaith level, not only do they not surrender their identity, but they will help define their identity at the same time that they gain fellowship with other traditions.

Kushner: Yes. We have a parallel situation with the Orthodox Jewish world. To them, everyone who is not a Jew is goyish. Distinctions between Episcopalian, Catholic, Mormon, Hindu—these are meaningless.

Prince: And we do the same thing. You know that in Salt Lake you can be a considered a Gentile. Where else in the world can you go and have that privilege?

Kushner: The dean of American Orthodox Judaism, a gifted, sensitive, charismatic man, was invited to take part in interfaith activities. He said, "I have no time for it. My only message to Christians is, 'Keep your hands off our children.'" He was saying, "I have nothing to learn from Christians." I can't say that. My faith has been profoundly deepened by encounters with Christian individuals, Christian resources, and love.

Prince: And my faith has even been deepened by interacting with atheists.

Kushner: Yes!

Prince: When I am dealing with an atheist who is of superb moral character, and many of them are, that takes the rug out from underneath what some of my assumptions were. They are doing something because they see inherent rightness in it, not because they seek a reward. To me, that is a profound lesson.

Kushner: Of course, what some people do is to consider atheists "anonymous Christians," or something like that.

These questions about religious pluralism lead back to the question of responding to the tendency of youth to leave the tradition. You asked what insights Mormonism might gain from Judaism's response to this problem? That's one thing we can't teach you. You're probably doing a better job than we are.

Prince: I have thought that it would be a fascinating exercise to get perhaps a dozen traditions around the table informally—no scripted papers to read. The entire conversation would respond

to this statement: "Tell us what you perceive to be the problem in retaining youth in your tradition. What have you tried, what has worked, and what hasn't worked?" I think by the time you made one lap around the table, everybody would realize that there are some good ideas out there, but in order to make this thing work, everyone has to get together to come up with common denominators that will work for everyone.

Kushner: That's interesting. I like the idea and I'd be fascinated to be part of that discussion. I'm finding myself with a very ambivalent answer. Part of me says that we are not retaining our youth because our inflexible, tone-deaf articulation of our values is turning them off. They are more idealistic than we give them credit for being. But part of my perception is that we are not reaching them because they are more selfish than we would like them to be.

I attended a debate between Christopher Hitchins and a rabbinic colleague whom I regard very highly. It was in downtown Boston before an audience that I suspect was made up largely of graduate students. Hitchins's big applause line of the evening was, "I do not recognize the right of any religious tradition to tell me what I may or may not do with my sexuality." Outstanding applause. He brought down the house. I would have liked to confront him afterwards and say, "Did you really mean that? Do you really think there are no issues of right and wrong in how your articulate your sexuality? Is there nothing wrong with a young co-ed getting a fellowship she is not entitled to because she is sleeping with her instructor? Is there nothing wrong with having an affair with a person when you are married to somebody else? I think those things are wrong. I don't think they are wrong because the Bible is against them; I think they are wrong because that is my perception of human relationships."

There is something about the younger generation that says, "You cannot confine us, with these ancient doctrines, from things that we want to do." Sometimes they are right, and they are wonderfully idealistic; but sometimes they are wrong, and they are dismayingly selfish.

Prince: I agree with you that this is a two-sided dilemma. One side of it leads to an imaginary conversation with Bill Marriott, who has worshipped in the same building as I for decades. My imagi-

nary conversation goes like this: "Bill, what does your company do?" "We rent hotel rooms." "What did it do fifty years ago?" "We rented fewer hotel rooms, but we were essentially doing the same thing." "Couldn't you save a lot of money if you just ran the same ad campaign for fifty years? You're still doing the same thing." His response would be, "That shows how much you know about business."

You have to do the balancing act of on the one hand maintaining a quality product that probably isn't changing a whole lot after a certain stage in corporate development, but on the other hand presenting that to your potential clientele in such a way that it remains fresh and appealing over time. I see that as a challenge for all religious traditions. All of them are still providing "hotel rooms," but somehow they have to reach out to and engage a changing constituency over time. I think that most traditions, including ours, have dropped the ball on that. We have almost gotten so far as to hang out the banner saying "Truth," and go home, thinking that we have won the day.

Kushner: I'm in the middle of writing something now that may be the beginning of another book. It's about things I have learned since I was ordained as a rabbi that I wasn't prepared for. One of them is that I received a superb rabbinic education at seminary. I came out of it full of answers, and the implication was, "These are the answers to questions your congregants will ask you. If your answers don't fit their questions, educate them to ask better questions." What I have had to do is throw that whole system out, and start with people's questions.

Prince: When I was a missionary we memorized a script, and if our investigators weren't giving the answers we wanted, we kept re-asking the question until they got there. Same dilemma, except we never learned our lesson, and you did.

Kushner: I did as an individual, but a lot of my colleagues don't. Many of them still believe that the answers they gave them in seminary should fit people's questions, and if not, they are asking the wrong questions.

So let's go back to the young people. Partly we have to listen to the questions they are asking; but partly I think we have to search for questions that they should be asking, that they don't realizing

they are not asking. I'm not quite sure how to articulate that without sounding like we are saying to them, "I know what you need better than you do."

Prince: Do they need something different than their parents needed? Or do we know yet?

Kushner: In some ways, probably. The assumption that a lot of synagogues have been working under—and it's a tricky one, because we lose a lot of people—is that we have very little to offer young adults before they get married and start having children; but then we have a nursery school and a Hebrew school and family events. But we don't seem to have anything for singles. Now this congregation is out here in the suburbs, and there are very few singles out here. It's a cruel environment for the unmarried.

Prince: I sense, in my kids' generation, that they are looking for something that my generation didn't ask for. I think they view the world in a much more coherent mental image than we did. We were focused inward. Maybe that's a Mormon thing, because we have become such an insular religion. But I see their generation as turning 180 degrees and looking outward instead of inward, and saying, "If my tradition is going to work for me, it also has to work for this world, because that is where I am going to be."

Kushner: I respond to a lot of that. I grew up in a very strong, very active congregation in Brooklyn, and I adored and idolized my rabbi. He was a wonderful preacher. To this day, every time I sit down to write a sermon I feel him looking over my shoulder and making sure I'm being authentic. He was considered one of the best preachers in the country, but when I think back to those sermons they were all about what we had to do to make Judaism stronger. My sermons are all about what Judaism can do to make your life better. I think it's in those terms that we have to speak to the younger generation. "Give me a better idea of where the shoe pinches. What bothers you about life? Is it your sense of insignificance? Is it your sense of the indestructibility of evil? Is it your discomfort with parts of yourself that you are embarrassed by? What is your spiritual agenda, and let me see if there is anything in my armamentarium that can be helpful to you."

Prince: I think that's half of it. I use the verbal image of two voices.

One is the priestly voice, and one is the prophetic voice. What you said to me is consistent with the priestly voice.

Kushner: Correct.

Prince: He is meeting the parishioners on whatever ground they occupy and helping them to solve their problems. But they also need the prophetic voice that is calling them to a level on which they don't function yet.

Kushner: You are absolutely right.

Prince: I think our tradition functions much better at the priestly level, and maybe that's something we share with other traditions. Getting the prophetic voice articulated in such a way that the people both hear it and respond to it is the real trick.

Kushner: I think Judaism tends to be stronger in that direction. We make a very strong case for social justice, but we still have trouble getting the average person to respond.

Prince: I have been meeting with a new officer in the State Department. Secretary of State Kerry set up a new office several months ago that is similar to what other branches of the federal government already had, of faith-based outreach. I said, "Shaun, do you have any guess at the ratio of Mormon missionaries to Peace Corp volunteers?" He didn't, and I hadn't until the day before, when I looked it up. It's 10-to-1. We have 80,000 Mormon missionaries, and we have 8,000 Peace Corps volunteers. I said, "Shaun, think of what we could do if we could convince my crowd to liberate even a portion of that workforce, and then create some type of faith-centered, but not exclusive humanitarian mission corps." Clearly the Peace Corps is running out of gas if it is only composed of 8,000 people after fifty years. I think about that, and about young Latter-day Saints—not being an enclave in a large, humanitarian effort, but working intermixed with all other religious traditions—and even people of goodwill who don't subscribe to a religious tradition. If that was focused worldwide on some of the truly important issues, it would not only make a difference in the world; it would transform a generation.

Kushner: You already know how to get these people to give you two years of their lives. I don't know if the leadership is capable of say-

ing, "Go out and use those two years to sell goodwill toward people," rather than to sell Mormonism.

Prince: Yes, but that's my dream.

Kushner: Good luck to you.

Note

1. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Our God Is Marching On!" in *A Call to Conscience: The Landmark Speeches of Martin Luther King,* Jr., edited by Cayborne Carson and Kris Shepard (New York: IPM/Warner Books, 2001), accessed December 27, 2013, http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/kingpapers/article/our_god_is_marching_on/. King, as is commonly acknowledged, was paraphrasing the abolitionist and minister Theodore Parker (1810–1860).