TM: Our guest today is rabbi Zalman, and I’ve never been quite straight. Is it Teichtel? Teichtel?

ZT: Teichtel.

TM: Teichtel. OK. Who has been in Lawrence I guess for couple of years now with the Chabad-Lubavitch movement within Judaism and has, by all accounts, brought a real burst of energy to Jewish life in Lawrence. So, I’m kind of interested in finding out what it’s like jumping from New York City to the heartland, as we like to think of it. So, anyway we’ll proceed down that line and see what we can find out. Just to be clear about what we’re doing, we are trying to turn this into a web site of just a real mosaic of all kinds of Kansas religious experiences so this will be posted along with the other things. So I guess what we’re trying to do is kind of combine your personal story with the larger concerns of the community that you’ve lived in and so forth. So, you know, something about your background, your childhood and the process by which you came to Kansas and so forth, but it’s pretty much up to you. You can go wherever you like with it, and I know you’re pretty good at storytelling and things like that so…

ZT: Good thing button has a click when the tape is over. Or how many hours do I have?

[laughter]

TM: Well, we’re going to stop you after about an hour or so.

ZT: OK. Well, I’m just kidding. We’ll keep it brief. So my name is Zalman. I’m from New York City. I moved from small town Brooklyn to big city Lawrence. It’s hard to speak to a crowd when you don’t know who you’re talking to. I don’t know how many of you are from the Midwest or… How many of you from the east coast? OK, great.

TM: It’s pretty much all Midwesterners, right?

ZT: Wonderful. So just a little background. I grew up in a small community within Brooklyn known as Crown Heights. It’s a very unique community in the sense that it’s a real blend of the Jewish people and African Americans who live together, not only side by side, but literally house-house, integrated with each other. The stores on the avenue are really a representation of a Jewish community, the Jewish culture along with the African American culture, and as long as I remember growing up there besides very, very unique situations there’s been a great friendship, and that’s something which helped me grow up in a sense of realizing how it’s all of us together that make the world a beautiful place that it is. So I grew up in a community where we were one of the large families, and when I say large I mean really large. I have 12 siblings. My wife has 11 siblings. So although there’s only a few thousand families but that automatically means thousands and thousands of people. Often little children running around. That’s where I grew up. In Brooklyn, some of you may be familiar that Brooklyn is well known and the fact that there’s a number of communities there that are very, very Hasidic. What does Hasidic mean? Generally if you walk down the street and you meet somebody who shows some kind of sign of being a Jew, whether it’s a skullcap known as a kippah or it’s a beard that means that this person, this individual perhaps it is more active, more proactive in the quest into Judaism. Hasids, also
known as Hasidim, are unique in the sense not only we wear a kippah, but a lot of times we wear black hats, black coats sometimes were called the men in black. And that’s unique about Brooklyn that there’s a number of communities where there’s literally of thousands of families that all belong to that Hasidic sect within Judaism, and that’s where I grew up. What brings me to Lawrence, Kansas? In a real nutshell, what’s unique about the movement that I’m affiliated with is called Chabad, which is spelled C-H-A-B-A-D, and this movement is unique that on one hand its philosophies and its beliefs and its lifestyle is rooted very deep. It’s been the same for hundreds of years. That hasn’t changed a bit. On the other hand, it’s the only Hasid movement that embraces the need to merge the gap between what some may call religion, spirituality and the physical, secular society. So, while other Hasidic communities are more insular in the sense that they stick within their own community so when you get married you move a block away from their parents, and that’s where your children live and you basically stick together. The movement that I’m affiliated with is founded upon the belief that the reason that we’re in this world is because we have a mandate and that is to do whatever we can to make this world a better place wherever that may be. And therefore in my education I was encouraged that it’s not enough to just stay in Brooklyn but we have this passion to move out to other communities where we can perhaps contribute to spiritual life, and that’s how I ended up in Lawrence, Kansas a couple of years ago when my wife and I, after we got married, we both had this passion to move out there and sure enough we found Lawrence, which is a story unto itself, and we moved here four years ago. So, that’s briefly a little background about our movement. I only touched upon it very, very superficially; really the Hasidic movement that I belong to is a very lengthy topic. It could be a course to itself and the reason for that is because there’s a very deep philosophy connected to this idea and is called the philosophy of Chabad. There’s hundreds of books, scholarly books written by many rabbis throughout the past 300 years since this movement has been founded a little over 300 years ago, and these scholarly works talk a little more at great length about the concept that I just touched upon briefly, about this idea that we view the responsibility of every individual to feel for society at large. It’s not enough for person to say, “I am comfortable where I am.” Rather, there’s a responsibility within every single individual regardless of how far you can reach to make a difference. That’s in a nutshell.

TM: OK.

ZT: Now, for me it’s easier to talk when there’s dialog. If there’s any questions or conversation please bring that up or there’s anything specific that you would like to focus on.

TM: OK.

ZT: You mentioned something about how do I view Kansas and the picture…

TM: Sure, yeah.

ZT: …and that tradition. I’ll tell you what’s fascinating that were having this talk today because this morning I had a moving experience. I spent some time with the governor of Kansas doing what? It wasn’t budget planning. I told them I’m in sales not in management, can’t help with the budget. What’s a rabbi doing in the state capitol with the governor of Kansas? If it was New York or, you know, someone might say all right they’re probably doing
something that’s Jewish. That make sense. Believe it or not this morning I was in the state capitol with the governor lighting the menorah for the holiday of Hanukkah, something which never happened before actually in the state capitol, and I was telling the governor that I’m so moved to be here today because that really exemplifies and highlights the uniqueness of the Midwest in the sense that back east people don’t have that sensitivity. They don’t have that respect and awe from religion. As I was telling someone today, the governor’s aide, that back in New York people don’t have the time to think about what really matters because the whole mentality is that everyone’s rushing, rushing, rushing, rushing. Ever went to New York City? Who’s been to New York? Did you ever ride the subway?

TM: Sure.

ZT: It’s a horrible experience. You need to recover afterwards. No one even looks at you. All people care about is getting to the next stop, and there’s something unique about the mentality of the Midwest and what I found in Kansas is that people are extremely focused on what really matters in life, and it’s not a contradiction. Even if you’re in a rush to stop in the street and say hello to somebody, smile to a child or reach out to someone in need. This ties in as well to religion. People in other places don’t perhaps have that sensitivity to realize that there’s a higher purpose to life. Something beyond rushing to the next thing, and that’s something that I have found personally in Kansas. Something unique that people are willing to hear, to listen, to grow. People have an interest. People have a thirst and most importantly people have a respect for what really matters, and that’s the feeling I had this morning and on the way here I was thinking about, you know, what can we talk about? I remember the e-mail you sent me about the purpose of this conversation and I thought how befitting that this morning I had an experience which really highlights so much this idea of how really just walking through the capitol with the menorah and seeing everybody’s excitement and having the Jewish celebration in the capital. That’s something which I think brings the point even stronger that I have found, since I moved to Kansas, a tremendous respect and interest and just a general sense of… I’m not sure what the right word would be. Help me out.

TM: Well, pluralism or…?

ZT: Pluralism and diversity and acceptance.

TM: I wonder, do you have a sense this is beyond Kansas? Do you have a sense the whole country is moving somewhat in that direction? I mean real anti-Semitism is not ancient history, and Kansas has had plenty of it.

ZT: Right.

TM: Do you think maybe we are?

ZT: I think that any anti-Semitism that I have encountered in Kansas has been lack of knowledge. I could tell you a story that… I’m only saying this to you to highlight. I don’t know where you are from. Some of you may be able to relate to this, but I was once in a gas station. I travel a lot throughout Kansas. Officially, my territory, so to say, where we have
three other centers and the state of Kansas and we divide up, and I officially have what’s called all the way except Colorado. I don’t know what you want to call it. Western Kansas or and I travel a lot to out lying communities where I need different people of the Jewish faith who perhaps we can help them out in any way, and I was once at a gas station in the middle of nowhere in Kansas. And when I say in the middle of nowhere I mean a place where I’m from New York, so when I go to a gas station I always like asking people how many people live in this town just to get an idea, and this was really some very, very small place and I went this gas station and had nice conversation with the person behind the counter very friendly, very kind, but the person was a teenager and had a very innocent question and he meant it with all sincerity. He wanted to know where are my horns.

TM: [laughter] Your horns?

Student: Wow.

ZT: In all sincerity. So I said I smiled and said I left them in the trunk.

[laughter]

ZT: And I said let me talk to you a little bit, and I spoke to him. And he’d never met a Jewish person before in his life. Ever. All he knew was maybe a film that he’d seen or something he’s read and the whole art of…

TM: But you’re talking devil’s horns?

ZT: Yeah! It has a basis because of the famous painting.

TM: Well, Moses, yeah but that’s a mistranslation.

ZT: 100%, but, you know, the heart of Hollywood is that they can portray anything and make you think it’s it, you know? And my message of the story is to show you how he didn’t do anything bad at all, and I had no hard feelings. It was just a matter of knowledge, education and that’s the only sense of what one may call anti-Semitism that I have encountered in the state of Kansas and that was really just people that never met a Jew before, but that’s something which may be a new experience. If someone comes from a small town where there aren’t many Jewish people it’s usually curiosity. It’s not necessarily…

Student: I’m sorry.

ZT: Go ahead.

Student: You said having a question would help you. I don’t mean to interrupt.

ZT: Sure. Go right ahead. Not at all.

Student: Well…
ZT: I’m from New York. The way we talk is by interrupting.

[laughter]

Student: Just following on that note, I suppose we Midwesterners tend to think of New York or Brooklyn, you know, as a very cosmopolitan area. Very diverse ethnically, you know, in many respects, and we often tend to even stereotype ourselves as being kind of narrow-minded, you know, backwater, you know, we’re Midwesterners. Whatever. So with that I mean the single account of what you might, you know, call anti-Semitism have you encountered any anti-Semitism in any respect in Brooklyn throughout your life that might be comparable or is there another example of that?

ZT: I have encountered it. In Brooklyn it was different means. There were slurs. There were shouts. There was name calling. Maybe in not the best neighborhood. It wasn’t lack of… it wasn’t an innocent question. It was of course it also has to deal with the education they received in the upbringing those people grew up in, but it definitely wasn’t that same sense of innocence.

Student: So do you feel… so you would contrast the general ambience or cultural circumstances of the Midwest or Kansas specifically with that of Brooklyn being slightly more open?

ZT: Well, it’s hard to generalize. This is my personal, my personal journey has been that yes people in Kansas have been more welcoming, interested and accepting. I see that in my line of work. I interact with people from all different backgrounds and doing different whether it’s programs or events and I’ve always encountered a tremendous amount of respect and interest. How can we help? Now, it could be there’s other different theories about that, you know? I guess the community’s smaller in Kansas so there’s more of a… You know, in New York there’s so many so it’s not the same attitude, but this is just my personal experience.

Student: There’s uninformed, but then there’s misinformed. So someone told him or he learned that.

ZT: True.

Student: And that’s a little alarming.

ZT: In today’s day and age, people get their information from all kinds of places. So, for all we know it could be the Internet which came from far away from small town Kansas.

Student: Might have been Fox News.

ZT: Yep. I tend not to in order to alienate anybody I tend not to give examples but that may be as well. You know, it’s very possible. Someone sitting in a small town where they’re very supportive of the Jewish people but their information is not being fed from their teachers. It’s being fed from somewhere, somewhere in line, somewhere else. I have also I work with
students most of the time, which is a fun part of my job, and I would say I never had this personally but I’ve had students that have been suffered a little bit or been influenced by this misinformation. So, in other words there have been students that I’ve been involved with, Jewish students, they came to me for guidance had to deal with a situation where they were getting unpleasant remarks. Again, maybe not out of hate but out of misinformation.

Student: Can you say that? As long as it doesn’t get, you know, it can get very out of hand as we know, but it normally says more about them or it says everything about them. Nothing about you.

ZT: 100%, but sometimes as a college student imagine you get to know under your door saying something about who you are, about your [UNCLEAR], about your culture.

Student: Like that movie Class Ties?

ZT: Right. Right. Exactly. So, for me I was able to rise above it and I was like I sat I said let’s have a coffee together and we’ll sit down and we’ll talk about it, but sometimes when you’re on the receiving end it’s hard to take it that way. And I would mention that the university here has a tremendous respect for diversity. They’ll do whatever. In fact in that situation they treated it very, very harshly and there were no two ways about it. You know, when such a thing happens they just they deal with it very, very seriously.

TM: Can you say something about in your childhood growing up your education? The Chabad movement has its own schools, right? So you didn’t go to public school.

ZT: Right. Correct.

TM: And all that. Can you describe what that was like?

ZT: Sure. Our education the reason we don’t go to public school is because a very large component of our education is a Jewish education. In fact, when we start off our day for the first 4 hours of the day strictly Judaic studies. From first grade, grade one. So, from the beginning we divide the day in half where we learn, of course, all the secular subjects, the regular subjects, but the primary focus in the first part of the day the Judaic studies. That’s why we have private schools, our own network where all the local students local children studying the same skill. Our system also works different that when we reach high school the class load is less than perhaps in an average high school. We do just enough, of course, to get the diploma and go to the basic education, but we do increase our hours tremendously, and that’s called yeshiva. That’s the term used, which is Y-E-S-H-I-V-A. From ninth grade and on, we change our hours. We study from 7:30 in the morning until 9:00 at nights with some breaks throughout the day, and the reason why we have so many hours is because we have to make up for the hours that we spent studying other subjects to study Talmud, Jewish law, Jewish philosophy. When we finish high school instead of going you have a choice. You can go to college, but in my situation, and this is what hundreds of my peers do, we go instead to a Yeshiva, which is called an intense [UNCLEAR] seminary where we study basically from seven in the morning until eleven at night strictly Judaic subjects. Everything pertaining to Judaism whether it’s law,
whether it’s philosophy, history, whatever it may be and as the years go on it intensifies. So, by the time you’re 20 years old you’re increasing in the hours. You’re increasing in the intensity. There’s no breaks like spring break, fall break, summer break. You take up here and there but basically 12 months a year you’re starting from 7:30 in the morning [UNCLEAR] 10:00 at night and at the end of when you’re 21 or 22 if you choose to be a rabbi that’s when you add two more years to actually get your ordination. Something very unique which is very, very different in our model of education that we don’t study for a degree. We don’t get a degree for all those years that we studied in yeshiva. So technically someone could study for 7, 8 years in Yeshiva and besides their high school diploma, of course, they do not have to get a degree. If you decide not to add that extra year or two you could spend 7, 8 years studying Judaism without actually getting a degree and that says something very, very meaningful about the way we view our studies that unlike when you go to college some people say I go to college; it’s a means to an end. You know, the end is to get the degree. The proper approach probably is that you go to college to become a well rounded, educated person and that’s why a lot of the classes and coursework we take may not necessarily directly relate to our degree, but it’s something important to be an educated person. We view our Jewish studies as well the same way that we’re not studying the Torah in order for a degree. It’s not a means to an end, but we feel that our… what gives meaning in our life is when we simply search for hours and hours studying Torah. That is an end to itself, and that’s why spend so many years studying the Torah regardless if it’s going to lead to a degree or not. Personally, even though I grew up in Brooklyn, there’s many yeshivas all over the world that are very well known. So, many times we travel. I spent three years in Israel and two years in Paris in some very well known yeshivas [UNCLEAR] seminaries. Although there’s many of them in Brooklyn, I guess some that are particularly well known for particular things and that’s where I gravitated towards, but if you go, for example, to Israel there’s hundreds if not thousands of such institutions where you have hundreds of people and all they’re doing all day is studying what’s known as a Torah which is the Bible and its teachings.

Student: Does all that studying raise more questions or does it answer more questions?

ZT: That’s a great question. In Judaism the most important thing is the question and the only bad question is the one not asked. So, 100% right. It’s all about questions. The reason why we sometimes we study the same thing over and over again in fact in Jewish tradition we take the Torah, which is the Bible, and every week we read another portion. And at the end of the year, which is usually an October time, we celebrate the conclusion of the cycle and then we start again. They’ve been doing this for thousands of years. So, what I’m studying this week for this Sabbath I just studied a year ago, but I’m still doing it again and again and again. And the reason for that is because, as you mentioned, every time that you study you get a deeper understanding. A deeper layer and a deeper question which in turn leads to more understanding not more questions. The Talmud said of the Torah, the Bible, is like a river, like a sea. It’s endless. If you take a drop, you still have a lot more to go.

Student: And you stay together basically you have a few different branches of Judaism whereas with Protestantism we have more types of Baptists than France has cheese.

ZT: Right.
Student: Because they split. If they disagree they go.

ZT: Right. There are some core differences in different sects within Judaism as far as beliefs, but I don’t believe the differences are that vast.

Student: Is there any point where in your education or completing all these Talmudic studies or not Talmudic but studies of the Torah or various texts and everything is there ever a point where you’re encouraged or required to take more what we would consider liberal arts education? Like maybe the equivalence of an associate’s or bachelor’s degree. Something, as you said, become more well rounded is there ever a point where you’re...

ZT: That’s a great question. The answer is definitely so and it’s up to each individual. So, in my graduating class of high school there were different groups... While I was studying in a yeshiva because that’s the path I chose, parallel to that I had many friends that went to study in a liberal arts degree or study in universities across the country. So, without a doubt, you know, parallel to my growth in my field there’s others that focused in other areas as well. So, there is a minimal amount of energy that we all invest in Torah study and then there’s a certain point that we definitely branch off. I always decided I always had this passion to be a rabbi. So, I knew that for me I’m going to have to go through all these years, but you touched upon more of a broader question about it is true that there’s a larger percentage in my community that pursues a rabbinic degree. That ties into a separate conversation about what’s the reason for that and a lot of it is simply that’s the upbringing that we get, and that’s the motivation and passion we have, but there are many individuals in my community that definitely went on to college and got a degree in other areas. There’s many professionals. There’s lawyers and doctors. There’s accountants. There’s all kinds of professions. Artists, musicians in my community as well that pursued their careers.

Student: Do you feel that with I mean I would imagine that just like you know with anybody you’d probably get to an age, you know, in middle school or high school that, you know, there might be some resistance just because of rebellion or whatever. I mean because there’s so much, and this is on education, do you still, you know, face that problem? Or how is that handled?

ZT: Definitely so. Definitely, definitely those individuals and that’s where they make different choices, and the parents always supportive. You see it’s not a contradiction. Tying to when I spoke earlier on, there are some movements within the Hasidic groups that are very insular and the way they shun an academic career or something or other professions beyond something, you know, sticking to the yeshiva program until the end, and they might not be as supportive perhaps if someone in the family chooses otherwise. I grew up in a community where there is a very big focus on a merger of both societies. So it is definitely very common that you stick to your religious lifestyle, but you still do not take the path of studying in yeshiva for so many years. Definitely does exist. You have some people that grew up in my community that’ll drop the whole religious thing too. You know, they couldn’t adapt to that lifestyle. That happens as well especially if you have large families. You know, you have a lot of different children.
Everyone’s different, and some people in the same family you could have some people that are rabbis and some that are professionals and some that totally left the whole religion.

TM: Well to pursue the matter of education, OK, so you grew up in Crown Heights. That’s pretty easy.
ZT: Right.

TM: Yeshiva is available and all. So, what about your kids? How are they going to get that equivalent education? I mean are you doing it personally?

ZT: That’s a great question. The challenge begins very, very early in life because as mentioned our kids don’t go to public school already from, you know, first grade from the beginning. In fact, even when they go to Pre-K they go to specifically a Jewish school because we believe that a child is like a tree. When you plant a tree, if the seeds or if the roots are a little bit crooked, the whole tree is going to be crooked. Meaning that we don’t want that they should go to public school where it may be a great school but there’s no Jewish knowledge which I understand. I respect that, but the fact is that I want my children to discover Judaism from when they’re very young. If I wait until they’re 10 years old, at that point they may already not have that same appreciation and may not be in the same stage and they’re ready to grow into this Judaism. So that’s why from the beginning we put our kids in private schools, and that’s the reason why usually you don’t find a religious Jew like me living in Kansas. The only time you’ll find a rabbi who’s religious living in a community where there is no Jewish infrastructure is if they’re a Chabad rabbi. Now, there’s over 4,000 centers around the world that are Chabad, and these centers are everywhere and anywhere. I have a friend in Montana. I have a friend in Cancun, Mexico. I have a friend in Siberia. I have a brother in Germany. I had a friend in Champaign, Illinois, U of I, where there’s also a very small Jewish community. So, really it’s very unique to find a religious Jew who lives in such a community where you don’t have kosher food. Do you know what that is? In New York, everywhere you go there’s kosher food. I only eat kosher food so that means in Kansas I can’t really find kosher meat or kosher chicken. That means I need four freezers. I have to have everything shipped in. I don’t have a synagogue where I can go pray three times a day. In Brooklyn, where I grew up, three times a day you would go to synagogue. You would meet probably 100, 200 of your friends and you would pray together, and here, I’m the only person praying three times a day in a hundred mile radius. Education. There is no Jewish school in Lawrence for my children. So, really these are challenges that that’s the reason why you don’t find a religious Jew living out in these communities besides the Chabad rabbi, and the way we handle those challenges right now actually I take my kids there’s a Jewish day school in Kansas City and I take my kids there. That might be tough as they grow older. It’s a little bit of a commute. I’m better off than my brother in Champaign, Illinois; the closest Jewish school is three hours away which is obviously not a practical commute.

TM: Yeah.

ZT: It’s interesting. We have an online school. It’s called Chabad Online School just for Chabad rabbis and their families that live in the middle of nowhere. So, I have a nephew in Champaign that has classmates from all over the country. My nephew in Germany tells me that
his best friends live in Belgium because he goes to online school for the past six years, and when you go to this online school, it’s based in New York and you have teachers that teach the children from all over and they all have one thing in common, that they all don’t have the school to go to. So, they interact and once a year we have a conference in November where all the dads get together and the moms and the kids, and the kids have their own conference and they get to meet their friends and meet their teachers. It just happened two weeks ago. In fact, if you Google it, it’s a fascinating thing, it’s called the world’s largest rabbi picture. They take a picture with over 4,000 rabbis in front of Chabad headquarters, but they have to block off the big parkway to do that and the photographer always says, “Hey, rabbi. Move to the right.”

[laughter]

ZT: But it’s usually a picture that turns a lot of heads because it’s a lot of people from all over the world to get together. And most importantly education starts at home. So, I mean all of you can relate to this I’m sure, but think about making the list of who had the greatest impact on you in your life, top five people. Chances are, or top three people, chances are there [UNCLEAR] many great teachers, one of those people would be one of your parents, hopefully. Best case scenario, both parents. Really education starts at home. So, my children they know that they have a different lifestyle than many of the children they know in town and their joy in the Jewish education really starts at home even more than I had in Brooklyn because we have to make up and compensate for what they’re missing in a Jewish education.

TM: You mentioned the challenges of kosher diet. Can you say a little more about that?

ZT: So, what do you guys know about kosher? What makes food kosher?

Student: That the way that the animal is killed, the way it’s handled, mixing different foods, can’t mix meat or dairy.

ZT: You know your stuff. Very nice. And of course ingredients. Some foods are kosher, some aren’t. Many people think that what makes food kosher is a blessing. Someone comes in, the rabbi comes in and gives a blessing, abracadabra and it’s kosher.

[laughter]

ZT: If only! Kosher food would be a lot cheaper if that was the case.

[laughter]

ZT: Kosher is like these three components. Number one, most importantly, certain foods are kosher. Certain foods are not kosher, and there’s guidelines how we know what’s kosher and not kosher. With animals, they have to have certain symptoms. If its fish, they have to have fins and scales, etc. In addition to that, even those animals that may be kosher, we only eat them if they’re slaughtered properly in a very humane way, and in addition to that, they need to be cleaned in a way that we don’t taste any of their blood. Blood is not kosher. As far as ingredients are concerned, we don’t eat any insects. Most of the fish out there we don’t eat, and
there’s many other different criteria, but practically speaking if you are a vegetarian it’s much easier to keep kosher, but even then that you pick up a can or any item in the grocery story if you look at the ingredients there’s many, many ingredients that you have no idea what it’s talking about. Flavor, food coloring, a chemical even beyond that. There’s also many ingredients that are not listed on the ingredient list according to the requirements. So, how do you know something’s kosher or not? The only way you know is if there’s a kosher symbol, and I’m involved a little bit in kosher, and I do some kosher in some plants and I could just tell you that for example here Lawrence, right outside of Lawrence is a huge plant called ICL which actually stands for Israel Chemical Laboratories. It’s fascinating. It’s based in Israel, but they actually make when you open a can of Pepsi and you have that fizz? They make the chemicals they give it that effect. Now you would think what’s the big deal, right? Well that needs to be kosher because there are certain chemicals that are derived from certain elements that are not kosher. So, you look at a can of Pepsi. You would think that you have to... And that’s how extensive kosher food actually is. So when you go shopping today, thank God, 80% of the items in the grocery store are kosher. Just look for a little OU or OK, one of those symbols. That’s quite simple, but when it comes to dairy products it’s much more of a challenge. When it comes to meat and chicken, that’s worth a challenge because in Kansas there’s no kosher slaughtering operation going on, and if it is happening somewhere else no one’s going to ship to Kansas because there isn’t enough clientele. So, thankfully in recent years there’s been growth and there is one store in Overland Park that carries some kosher chicken. It’s very expensive because of the fact that they get smaller shipments. There’s actually, believe it or not, there’s a kosher Subway. There’s only eight in the entire world, and there’s one in Kansas City. Don’t ask me why. I’m happy.

TM: Is everything there kosher in the whole place?

ZT: Everything is kosher in the kosher Subway. It’s the only place that I eat out of my home.

TM: So they don’t have pepperoni or...?

ZT: No pepperoni. They have soy based pepperoni.

Student: Where is that?

ZT: It’s at Lamar and College. I don’t know if you guys have ever been to Overland Park. There’s a big convention center, Overland Park Convention Center? It’s right across the street. Now, I’ll be honest with you. You can’t find a five dollar footlong.

[laughter]

ZT: It’s $10.99 or $11.99, but it definitely tastes different. You can try it out. The reason why it’s here is because there’s a family that wants to invest in it. It’s their thing. But just so it gives you an idea, that beyond that if you want to have kosher chicken or kosher meat you have to get it shipped in.
Student: Is there... there used to be a kosher deli out in the Overland Park area. Is that no longer...?

ZT: Thank God there’s a kosher deli. It closed for a while and now there’s a new one opened up a couple years... it’s in the Henhouse at 119th and Roe, and they have a fairly large kosher section, but everything is relative. You know, I was just a New York two weeks ago and you walk into this huge supermarket the size of Dillon’s, everything is kosher. So it’s quite a different world.

TM: So, you accept the U level of certification I think you’re saying, right? But there are some people who don’t. Some are stricter than that.

ZT: Basically. It depends. I am stricter for meat and chicken. Wine, kosher wine, is a challenge.

TM: What about fresh fruit and vegetables? Do you worry about certification on those?

ZT: No, fresh fruit and vegetables are whole kosher.

TM: That’s what I thought.

ZT: But we don’t eat any bugs or insects so you have to check and you have to wash. We wash all our lettuce, all our strawberries, all our broccoli extensively. We wash it with soap. We wash it with water because in Jewish tradition we eat a piece of lettuce and it has bugs, that’s against our law.

TM: What would happen if you did accidentally?

ZT: Lightning strikes you.

[laughter]

TM: No, seriously.

ZT: What happens is you learn from your mistakes.

TM: But I mean is there any ritual cleansing or something?

ZT: The ritual cleansing is to try to make a resolution to improve in a specific area. So, usually it doesn’t happen intentionally and if it does then you just make up for it.

TM: OK.

Student: Well, and not knowing too much about microbiology, there’s going to be bugs.
ZT: Some people, I’ll be honest, don’t eat strawberries. There are many religious Jews that
don’t eat strawberries at all because that’s one of the hardest and broccoli as well. So, you’re
down. It’s a challenge. In fact, there’s an institution in Israel that all they do is study the bugs
and they have notices that go out letting everyone know which season, which vegetables are
worst, what to look out for.

Student: But bugs go way down to…

ZT: I hear you. I agree with you. That’s why I’m saying that when we make a salad we put a
lot of work into that salad. If you go to a kosher hotel or kosher restaurant in New York City,
there’s an extra fee. Everything costs more money because there someone in the kitchen
checking every single piece of lettuce. Now there in Israel there’s certain greenhouses that
lettuce is grows in a very safe environments and you could actually buy prepackaged lettuce that
officially has a stamp on it that there’s no bugs and that’s obviously a lot more expensive and
you obviously can find in Kansas.

Student: But you know what I’m saying is what level of size do we…

ZT: That’s a good question and you do what you can. You know, obviously if you can see it
you’re exempt. There’s nothing you can do about it.

Student: OK. All right. I don’t want to nitpick, I just…

ZT: Excuse the pun.

Student: Do you have to use a special soap to clean everything with?

ZT: There is a special spray.

Student: A spray?

ZT: But the truth is, as long as you wash it very well you could use regular soap as well. But
there is a special spray. It’s called a kosher bug spray that’s safe on the food.

TM: Let me shift a little bit and ask about marriage and marriage practices. You’re married.
For one thing, I’m curious. Do you get married… You had all this education. Were you
married before that was finished? Or do they prefer that you not be married because you can
obviously stay more focused on that?

ZT: We try to finish it first, but usually… right. We have a tradition that after we get married,
we stay another year and study before you actually and it’s called, you know, what they maybe
postgraduate school here. You study for a year. They support you. They give you a monthly
stipend because now you’re married and you have to support yourself. All the years you were
in yeshiva you lived in their campus and they’d support you but now when you’re married they
pay for you a monthly stipend for 12 months and you study and then after that year that’s where
you decide if you want to follow your profession whatever it may be.
TM: And I believe in some Hasidic communities—I don’t know about Chabad, but I think in many of them that marriage is a match, right? Rather than a…

ZT: OK. So, you just opened up a can of worms.

TM: Yeah? OK.

ZT: How much more time do we have?

TM: No, we can go for half an hour if we have to or what’s available for you.

ZT: This also may be something very new to some of you, how we… our whole dating. Any of you familiar? Beyond what you’ve seen in the movies which is always misrepresented… OK. Believe it or not when I grew up I had minimal interaction with people of the opposite sex and the reason for that is because in my community there was a strong emphasis on focus on your studies and your self-growth and you could easily be distracted. When you’re in an environment which is very deeply engaged with members of the opposite sex so when high school just imagine this. I went to an all male high school. Not only that, out of the classroom setting there was minimal interaction. I didn’t have a girlfriend growing up. I had a lot of sisters, but no girlfriends. So, our interaction with, you know, boys and girls mingling together, the social scene, in my community didn’t really happen. So, what happens when you’re ready to get married? So, how does all that happen? How does it start? So usually, in my community, it’s usually when you’re around 22 or 23, somewhere between 22 and 25, and there are no rules in the game. That’s very important to understand. There are no rules. If anyone wants to lead a different lifestyle the option is there, but this is generally the way it works. When you’re ready to get married… What does it mean you’re ready to get married? How do you know when you’re ready to get married? Most people feel you’re ready to get married when you have enough money in the bank. That’s the way it works in society. You have a secure job. You could support a family. Maybe now I’m ready. If I have to wait until I’m 40, that’s what I’ll do. My community, and it had nothing to do with money at all, the emphasis was are you mature enough? Are you ready? Is your identity solidified enough that you could now connect with another identity? Do you know who you are? Before you want to connect with somebody else? And that’s what it’s really about. So in my case I was 22 years old and I felt with the guidance of my mentors and my teachers and my parents that I’m ready. I feel that I know who I am. That’s what I thought at the time, and I’m ready to get married. So, now here comes the problem. I never dated before. Not only that, you know, where do I start from? So like I have a thousand Facebook friends and they’re all waiting for me.

[laughter]

ZT: So, how do I go ahead? And even more importantly we don’t date for fun. We date for marriage. Now, you can date as long as you need but as long as it’s for purpose, for marriage not for fun. Therefore to begin where do you start? So the way it works is there are people which are called matchmakers. Now what does that mean? That means that there are people in the community that know a lot of people, and they find it their duty to know everybody. When I say “know” it means they know who has a child this age and what kind of personality that person
is and they have these amazing minds and they keep it all on track. It’s not so farfetched because everyone in this room knows a lot of different people. So, they happen to know a lot of people and they also have to have a good memory. You know, they remember things and they put these together. So, in many situations what happened was a matchmaker would say, “Hey, you know, I know you a little bit. I know your personality. I know someone who actually has a similar personality, someone I think you’ll connect with quite well.” So, understand that this is very different than meeting someone at a bar. Because what’s happening here is before the dating even begins, you’re made sure that you have something in common. But you still don’t date. You actually find out about each other. You get references. OK?

[laughter]

ZT: So, let’s say Jake is told, you know, this wonderful person her name as Sarah. She fits your personality so great. OK. Sounds nice. I’ll think about, you know… Give me some references please. So, now without Jake and Sarah interacting the matchmaker as the middle gives Sarah some references about Jake, gives Jake some references about Sarah, and Jake goes and or he does it himself or people help him, his parents, his friends and they do a series of phone calls. “Hi, do you know Sarah? Can you tell me about her? What’s her personality?” And they do a lot of research. And by the time they meet Jake and Sarah go out the first time on a date, they know about each other, more than a couple dating for a year perhaps in today’s society. Now when they date, so the first few times you get to know each other, you have coffee with each other, but it’s very much, you know, it’s not I mean there is of course the play of emotion. It’s not just strictly a business meeting, a checklist, but the focus is pretty much on getting to know each other. And by the time you go out two, three, four, five times, ten times, twenty times, whatever it is you get to know about who you really are and you have very deep, meaningful conversations about what you want from yourself. What do you want from your life? Do you want children? How many children do you want to have? Where do you want to live? You know, how would you bring up your children? You talk about issues that will happen 40 years from now that you’re planning on getting married forever. Now, in my case it was a little different because I have a younger sister who studied abroad for year in Australia and she made a very good friend in her study program, and she came back from Australia and drove me nuts for six months until I said, “All right, all right, all right!” So, we met through my sister so to say, but we went to the same process. Before my wife and I met the first time we knew a lot about each other. We knew that we were very similar. We knew what our differences are. We knew all about our weaknesses to the extent that people know, and when we dated the focus was on getting to know each other. And that leads to something else that may be very shocking. In our community we also don’t actually have any physical interaction. So, not only we don’t have intimate relations my wife and I when we dated we didn’t even touch our fingers. So, imagine spending hundreds of hours with someone at your side without touching that person.

Student: You end up with 12 or 11 kids.

[laughter]

TM: What?
Student: When you can.

ZT: No, not at all. On the contrary, it takes the whole… I don’t want to get too much into marriage and relationships here. That’s not the topic of the talk, but you got it wrong because on the contrary when you’re so into it before you got married it has so much less meaning when you’re married, but I don’t want to get into that now. Let’s talk more about the dating. So, when we date for so many hours and hours we don’t actually touch each other which what that does is that helps us get to know each other on a whole different level because when you’re intimate with somebody or when you’re close to somebody physically it doesn’t allow you to get beyond that stage. You get stuck there. You don’t really get to know each other, and you can’t be objective either because you’re so intimately connected on a physical level that you can pull back and actually talk about who we are as people. That’s unique about our dating process.

Now, what happens if you’re dating and it doesn’t work? This is a very important component. We’re very secretive about are dating. Why? What happens if Jake dates Sarah and they realize they’re not matched after a couple of times. They’re not a match. So they say goodbye to each other and it’s a mutual agreement. And then Jake might go ahead and marry someone else in the community who he will ultimately find. So, we don’t talk about who we’re dating. We keep it top, top secret. We don’t date in the neighborhood. We date outside the neighborhoods.

TM: So like you go out and meet someone somewhere…

ZT: We meet somewhere outside the community. You don’t pull up in front of the house.

[laughter]

ZT: It’s quiet. Far out, you know, the outskirts of the neighborhood. Sometimes you even take the subway and meet someone mutual out of the neighborhood and from there go in a car. And really it’s about keeping it quiet because some people have to date five, six times within the same community. Now, not necessarily the community as in New York. My wife’s from Michigan, but the same Chabad community which is all over the world. You know, you really you don’t want to have to talk about it. Now, this system has its, you know, faults in a way and I’m not going to negate that, but I can tell you from personal experience that it is very unique and very special. I have eight siblings that are married and in fact my brother married a girl from three houses down the block. They never met each other because that’s the society we grew up in.

TM: Wow.

ZT: We always joke, “You met [UNCLEAR] in the backyard,” but that’s not what happened. They met through someone who introduced them answered they’re happily married because they got to know each other in a whole different level. Now, this is unlike the misconception that we meet each other the day we get married. Some people think, “Oh, you probably met your wife the day you got married. The parents made the match.” The match is entirely up to us. The only difference is the legwork. A lot of that is done by our parents. Our parents are the ones
that are very involved in the process, but once we start dating the parents let go and it’s totally up to the two individuals involved. What they want to do.

Student: You said that because of concerns about what if it doesn’t work out or something you keep who you’re dating very secret.

ZT: Right.

Student: How do you manage to do that with so many people involved in the vetting process.
ZT: Everything is very, very quiet. Even growing up my parents never spoke about my brothers’ or my siblings’ datings in front of the kids and the matchmakers were very, you know, they were people that were very respectful of the privacy and nobody would ever talk about anybody or anything. There’s another great benefit involved. If I was dating a girl and I’m not comfortable at certain things I could have the matchmaker be a go-between, and the matchmaker could say things on my behalf or could find things out for me that I’m uncomfortable finding out. And this, again, helps you get to places further. Some people are married for 10 years and they don’t really know each other. Just to mention that the divorce rate in our community is--there’s definitely divorce, but it’s minute. Statistics-wise it’s in a much smaller scale than for general society. I’m not advocating that you try this out.

[laughter]

ZT: But I would advocate that you could definitely take some of this… I’m not here, you know, to preach but I could definitely tell you… you’ll throw me out the window here in a minute… But I could tell you working with college kids for four years that it’s something unique when your relationship is based on getting to know each other, each other’s souls, each other’s beings rather than each other’s bodies. It makes a big difference.

Student: I want to ask you a question. I know you’re running short on time. I heard that when in the fifties when they put the highways in New York and they cut up a lot of the neighborhoods do you know? Does your grandparents or anyone talk about that? How that really disrupted a lot of neighborhoods.

ZT: I’ve read about it but not firsthand.

Student: Oh, OK. It just seemed like this person was a real terrible person that did it and as [UNCLEAR] in New York but it just went everywhere and I wonder if you…

TM: Yeah, it would make a difference.

ZT: Very good question. I know the demographics changed drastically. Like the community that I grew up in, in the 1950s wasn’t a very Jewish neighborhood. It was actually Brownsville and upper Canarsie, but now it’s switched. Those neighborhoods are very different, populated much more by other communities. So, there’s been a lot of changes in the demographics and probably as a result of this.
Student: Does it seem like everyone still stuck together and found a way to…

ZT: Generally communities move together.

Student: OK.

ZT: That’s how it happens.

TM: I wanted to ask one more question before we let you go. I’m curious about finances. You come out here. I don’t think you’d go and get an 8-hour-a-day job. You wouldn’t have time to do all of the things you do that way. So, how do you make it work financially? Does the larger Chabad community support you?

ZT: Our organization is funded by donors. So, part of my duty as the director of the local Chabad branch is to raise funds. So 100% of our budget comes from supporters, people that value the work that we do. So the short answer is no. There is no central funding. Everything is funded by alumni of the school, people who live in the area, parents of students and other people who care for what we do.

TM: Do you get decent support out of Lawrence Jewish community?

ZT: Yeah. It’s not often enough of course. It’s a small community. A lot of us probably come from all over the country. People that are affiliated with the university in some level.

TM: So there’s a lot of generosity behind it? I would say.

ZT: There’s got to be.

TM: Are there other ways to make money? I mean you could conceivably run a Jewish school for non Chabad children or what--do kosher certifications? I could think of lots of things that’d be compatible.

ZT: That’s true.

TM: But that’s not…

ZT: I follow my passion and part of that passion is making it happen. If that takes the hat which I hate wearing which is a fundraiser that’s what you’ve got to do as well. It also has a reason for that because many other Jewish organizations are centrally funded, but our organization is not because the impact is greater if it’s funded locally. Any other questions before we wrap up? Well, I just want to mention, I always say this at the end, that there’s two. If you ever want to learn more about Judaism we have a fascinating website which is jewishku.com. It has over 20,000 pages of Jewish information. If ever in class you have to look up something you could definitely look it up. There’s every topic you can imagine related to Judaism. Or you could e-mail rabbi@ku.edu. I’d be happy to help you out if there’s any questions.
Student: I’m sorry. Really quick question before you wrap up and this could go on for a while so just give me a brief answer. How is proselytism handled?

ZT: That’s a good question. The only reason I’m rushing is because I forgot the afternoon prayer before the sun sets.

Student: Oh, I’m sorry.

ZT: No, I’ve got a couple of minutes. The answer is Judaism does not support conversion meaning we don’t solicit conversion. We support it if someone wants to convert. Judaism is not about we have the truth and buy into it otherwise you’re going to hell. Judaism is about every single person has a unique mission in life, and your mission is where you find yourself to be. So, if I wasn’t born into a Hasidic family in Brooklyn, New York and you were born where are you from?

Student: Wichita.

ZT: Wichita. Did you practice any religion growing up specifically?

Student: I was raised religious, yes.

ZT: Well there’s… OK. Which religion?

Student: Lutheranism.

ZT: OK. Lutheranism. Imagine I was born in Wichita and was raised Lutheranism and you were born in Brooklyn, New York in a Hasidic family. That would mean that that’s our purpose in life. The reason why you were born in Wichita and I was born in Brooklyn and we grew up with different religions is because we have our own unique missions. So, when someone comes and says I want to convert we are actually commanded by the Torah to say, “No. What are you doing that for? Are you crazy? What are you missing?” You know, “Go and enjoy a cheeseburger.”

[laughter]

ZT: There’s no reason why you shouldn’t. We have different missions. You know, what I accomplished by not eating the cheeseburger you accomplished by eating the cheeseburger. It’s not, you know, better-worse it’s difference and that’s why we don’t support, we don’t solicit. Not only do we not solicit but if somebody comes and says I want to convert we brush them away three times and if they still nag you then you help them if you got to, but we very rarely do conversions.

Student: That’s actually what I was hinting at. Is the [UNCLEAR] traditionally a three year request model still? I mean is that actually still implemented today?
ZT: Well, how do you do it today? Someone sent me three emails. Is that three times? Click, click, click.

[laughing]

Student: If there were a proselyte [UNCLEAR]…

ZT: I think it’s symbolism of how much you really want like I’m devout with people that I get called all the time. I want to convert. Sure. I come back. We meet. We talk a few minutes. OK. Sure. Usually I just say all right this is what you got to do 1, 2, 3, 4… Oh, OK, thank you so much rabbi and nothing happens, but, you know, very rarely there’s a situation in where somebody and usually it’s because of family. Someone marries someone Jewish or the like, and that is different because they have something pulling them in. They have a reason why they want to convert, and they’re very serious about it. But that’s where we serve as a support, but we don’t proselytize. All right.

TM: Well if you need to get out we better let you get out.

ZT: Yes. Sorry about that.

TM: Thank you very much.

ZT: Sure. Four to five right?

TM: Yep.

ZT: Next time we’ll get some more time.

TM: That’s great.

ZT: But it’s really a pleasure to be here again. I want to tell you all a personal note. One of the very first people I met when I moved to Lawrence, I think I was here for week, was your professor and he was very kind and generous at the time. He really is my transition to the state of Kansas, and I consider him a dear friend and you also, I must say, out of the many, many people that teach in this wonderful university, it’s a blessing to have him.

TM: Well, thank you very much.

ZT: Thank you.