7-25-2007

Interview with Rabbi Bernie Raskas, Professor of Religious Studies

Bernie Raskas

MACALESTER COLLEGE

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Oral History Project

Interview with:	**Rabbi Bernie Raskas** Professor of Religious Studies, 1985-2004
Date:	**Wednesday, July 25th, 2007, 3:00 p.m.**
Place:	Bernie Raskas's Home
Interviewer:	Laura Zeccardi, Class of 2007
Interview run time:	1:17:43 minutes
Accession:	2007-12-21-41
Agreement:	Signed, on file, no restrictions

Subjects

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Experimenting and challenging the congregation
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Interview with Bernie Raskas

Laura Zeccardi, Interviewer

July 25th, 2007
Bernie Raskas's Home

[00:00]
LZ: My name is Laura Zeccardi and I am a new graduate of Macalester College conducting interviews for the Macalester Oral History Project. Today is Wednesday, July 25th, 2007 and I am interviewing Rabbi Bernie Raskas, Professor of Religious Studies, at his home.

RB: My uncle named—after whom I was named Solomon—was killed in the Holocaust, and I wanted his name to live on. Therefore, officially, I am Rabbi Bernard Solomon Raskas, but really I'm just Bernie. So what can I tell you?

LZ: Well, let's maybe start with what you were doing prior to coming to Macalester and then how you started to become involved in the college?

RB: I came to Minnesota about fifty-four years ago, and one of the reasons I did was I had the choice of being in a small congregation, or being an assistant, and they needed an assistant at the Temple of Aaron. And so I applied, because I reasoned if I was in a bigger temple, or synagogue—very few synagogues are called temple—if I was an assistant I'd get to see all phases of operation. So as an assistant rabbi I was a youth counselor, I was a school director, I went up the ladder. I really went up the ladder, and it was a wonderful experience. Difficult sometimes. And then when the senior rabbi retired, I became the rabbi. So, I was there for about

four years or so. [Waves to someone off-camera] That's the social worker; she's everybody's business. What else do you want to know?

[01:58]

LZ: So how did you become involved—how long were you at Temple of Aaron then, in total, before you came to Macalester?

RB: Yes, there's another reason. I was born in St. Louis. And I love the Mississippi River, and I loved Mark Twain and all of his writings about the Mississippi River. And when this congregation wanted an assistant, I came to see that we were next to the river, and not too far away. Little did I know that I would be involved in building a huge structure, which happened about three or four years later, I began the process. And lo and behold, my office window was big, white glass overlooking the Mississippi at mark twain. Because Samuel Clemens was a river pilot, and you could only drive the boats wherever there was mark twain, the second mark. And right outside of the window I could see the river, which was mark twain, and every morning I'd walk in and I'd said, "Good morning, Mr. Clemens" [laughter]. And I'd begin the day with something like that. So, I have a deep affinity for the river, and it's Old Man River, and to me it just keeps flowing along. And that's really what life is, it just keeps flowing along. I've seen people riding their speedboats on the Mississippi, and I've seen unfortunate drownings in the Mississippi, but it's like life—it just keeps flowing along. And I like water, water attracts me, although I ended up in the upper middle-west, upper northwest, where there aren't—but then I came and I found there were ten thousand lakes here, so that made me feel good. So that's about how it all started. I don't know if you know the building, the synagogue; it has won several

prizes, including the Guggenheim Prize, and just this year on our fiftieth anniversary it won the Golden Solomon Schechter Prize. The building was built. Unfortunately, most of the congregation was involved in raising money, or they wanted to know where the cloakrooms were, and they completely ignored the art. So my wife and I decided to be chairmen of the Art Committee, so we took several summers and we traveled along Massachusetts and where the artist colonies were, and we started to just pick artists. And that's why it turned out to be such a unique building. Not because we were smarter, but because everybody else let us alone! And when we first came in, they said, "What do we have here?" Then after a year everybody said, "Isn't this marvelous?" Well, if you pick the best artists, you're going to have a great structure, and not necessarily the most well-known but the most adventurous, talented artists. And so, this is how we got the building. And the building, when I came there were four hundred, began to grow, when I left there were fourteen hundred. And the building has added on three times physically, and so I suppose that means something. But when I was beginning to reach sixty-five, I knew I wanted another kind of profession, but I had never lost my interest in teaching, reading, and writing. I have written seven books that have been published, and I have also written seven syllabuses, because I was teaching in areas that were new. Because what fun is there for me to go over old stuff? And I liked working with young people because they were so challenging. And so to me it was exciting. Also something else working with young people: they let you know what the future is. The future lies in the universities, in young minds, in probing minds, and if you go along with them, that's what's going to be the future. So I enjoyed meeting them, and I enjoyed their stimulation, and I enjoyed sometimes even when they were obnoxious—and there were some times, I'll tell you a couple. And I was there largely during the Wellstone election, and saw the tensions and counter tensions. I had my opinion, but I kept going along.

And I always, always fought for freedom of religion at Macalester College. Now what else would you like to know?

[07:17]

LZ: What year did you come to Macalester?

RB: I came to Mac the year before I retired. I retired in ’86, but I, in ’85 I taught one course part-time at Mac to see if I would like it. And I found I *loved* it. So I was able to teach—and in between, I always arranged funerals an hour before, an hour after, and I was teaching in the meantime, but I was loving it so I went right to Mac. And they needed someone in the Jewish department; they didn’t have a teacher of Judaism. As a matter of fact, they just added it after my yelling, a teacher of Islam, but now he left. And by the way, the teachers were fascinating people; four of them had their Ph.D.’s from Harvard, and they were typical university with odd ideas and stuff like that, and the kids were trying all kinds of schtick, all kinds of new ideas too. So I always liked to go to the new things they did. And then when I came there, I found at Macalester there were Jewish students, but they didn’t have a Jewish chaplain. So, since I was a rabbi and I was teaching Judaica, I began to drift in that direction and I became the first Jewish chaplain. They had a Protestant one and a Catholic one, and then I’ve seen several changes. Then suddenly they found that there were Jews there. There were eighty Jews. And so they needed a chaplain too, and I just drifted into the chaplaincy until it became—now it’s an official position, but I was the one who started it. I liked the chaplains on campus, because they were always people probing, and always dealing with young people. So you’re dealing with ministers, priests who are being challenged by young people. As a matter of fact, it made me even more

liberal. I did something I thought I would never do. There was a Catholic study group and a prayer session, and the priest, my fellow teacher in religion, said to me, "I can't make it tomorrow night, would you conduct the service for me?" So I said, "Man, are you out of your mind?" And so he says, "No, Bernie, you'll do it." And I did it! And I didn't hoke it or change it, I used the liturgy and I did it straight, because that was helping a human being. You know, I probably fudged a little bit [laughs] on some of the liturgy, but it was a wonderful experience. That's what Mac has done for me, exposed me to new ideas, new people. And ideas that I thought were holy, I found were only ideas, they were conjectures. Then I saw where the future was. It was in the kids! By their challenges. And I knew one day, before anybody, that there would be computers. And so I said to the second class I taught, "I'm not going to read any of your papers unless they're typed out. Nothing written, nothing written." And I did not, and I taught it in four segments. After each segment, they got a quiz and that was their grade. I didn't believe in cramming and pushing; in other words, if you couldn't take your first quarter and pass, so why should you go into your second quarter? Well, most of them could pass, you know, they could all pass, because they all had various talents. But I liked to know them better, so what I would do is ask them, every quarter, they would get a quiz and then they would also have to write two, two-page essays. Not one, but two. One had to be on a subject in the course, and one had to be on something that had nothing to do with the course, something that I should be interested in. And one year, one guy wrote all the baseball scores [laughter]. I thought it was the funniest thing I ever saw, and so I started to follow baseball—see, he interested me in baseball! And they would also, I did one other thing too, I insisted—some of my classes got too large and that was a pity—I insisted that every student have coffee or lunch with me. I insisted I know them as people, and I see what they're interested, what their problems were if they wanted to tell

me, or how lousy they thought the class was. And you do that over a cup of coffee, you do that over lunch, and so, you know, and so they got to know me and they were allowed to ask any questions. By the way, the students in class, I would not answer them unless they called me Bernie. I said, "We are co-learners on the path of life. I may have read a couple of more books, but I'm learning from you, and you're learning from me. And that's the way I want to learn." And it worked out. I wrote six or seven syllabuses because I was teaching in areas that nobody else was teaching in religion. So it made me write every year in advance, of course. And I published the books, but I gave it to the class free, I felt that was—there were no fees or anything and it had to be completely open. So, it was a great experience, I enjoyed it. What else do you want to know?

[13:42]

LZ: What subjects were your classes primarily focused on?

BR: Well, the first one I did "Introduction to Judaism". I thought there were so many non-Jews, they'd want to know. Then I taught the ethics, the ethical structure of Judaism. Then I would take one book of the Bible, like Genesis, and only study Genesis from about four or five points of view. From those who believed it was literal to those who believed it was filled with myths. So we went the whole range of discussion and it was an exciting time. I even taught—and it was revolutionary—a rabbinic commentary to the New Testament. And I had to write my own syllabus, there wasn't anything. And I found out the first day I walked into the class there were about twenty kids ready to fight with me. [laughs] I told them a couple of dirty jokes and then afterwards, we just laughed, and then we learned from each other. And I didn't do it from a

critical point of view, I did from a point of view of trying—is there some mythology in Catholicism? Of course. Is there a lot of mythology in Judaism? Of course. And I was starting to teach—I don't know if you know the works of Joe Weber [Joseph Campbell?]. Joe Weber taught and wrote a book called *The Hero as a Myth*, and he introduced understanding religion through mythology. In other words, the facts before you as written were not just facts, they were telling you something. And it was a different kind of a concept, it wasn't a question whether this story in the Bible was right or wrong, but what is this story trying to tell you? For example, Cain killed Abel. Now, there's something wrong here, because what was there to fight over? You take South America, I'll take North America, they're the only two people in the world! What are you fighting about? No. It was sibling rivalry, you see, there you get the first studied case of sibling rivalry. If you looked at it from another point of view, you saw another aspect revealed. And even the creation of man and woman; if God is a male and God created a man, first place, how could he? There was no woman around, where was the embryo? Where was everything else to breast feed? So, it couldn't be that way that God was only a male, because it didn't make sense, and then you began to see the myth. People farmed their views of God in terms of their own culture; he was like the Superman of the culture. But God is deeper than that, He's not understandable. See? I made a mistake, I said "He." The one we call God is not understandable, and sometimes you get some insights, but God's not the mini-manager of the universe. He doesn't—I suddenly discovered, what is this business? Kids are dying of cancer, would a God of love permit that? Six million people were killed in the Holocaust. So, I taught the Holocaust. You know, we used to have the month courses there, you teach for a month. But I taught it through film, every class I showed half a film, half a documentary. And do you know how many students I had in the class? Drove me crazy, I had eighty students. Then I discovered nobody

was teaching the Holocaust. But I was doing it through film, because that's their media. That's the media of young people, you use a starter film for twenty minutes and then you begin to discuss things and shape it. But they see things, students, that we don't see. What you see is going to be twenty years from now. And you guys are on the horizon, and it's my time to sit back and watch…and criticize [laughter].

[18:18]

So, I've loved teaching, and I've loved teaching at Mac. I like its openness, I like its liberalism. You can be what you want, you can say what you want, and even though there's been a lot of criticism of Mac because they're too liberal—but what's the point of a university if it isn't open-minded? You're not learning anything. You got to be open-minded and you got to teach other people to be open-minded to other people. I was almost going to tell you a story, but I don't know if I should record it or not. I'm going to record it and use another word. I always left ten minutes at the end with a question, so they should walk out of the class discussing. And so once in the ethics course, I taught a course and at the end I started on the death penalty. Man, they really got heated up. And so, I said, "Hey, hey, take it easy, take it easy." So one guy said out loud, "Blank you!" So I said, "To a professor you say 'blank you?' To a professor you say 'blank you, sir.'" [laughter] Well, the class was mine after that one, after that joke, I mean, and I said the real word, the real four-letter word. After that, they learned they could say anything they wanted to. And what I found—they came to me with their most serious problems. Problems with the course, problems in their family life, and problems with growing up in a university, meeting all these new people, all these new ideas, and these wacky guys and stuff like that. But that's what a university is, that's what it should be. So, I think I was fortunate to be at Mac; it wasn't that I taught them, they taught me. And that's what I liked, it was mutual learning.

And they would probe me, and I let no subject be taboo. I let them talk about sex, I let them talk about death, I let them talk about—any way the course was moving, I would move with the course. Then I saw that was the need they needed, and I related the course to this main stream. It was never a rigid, you know, aim. It was not a mathematics course—even that shouldn't be rigid. But I watched them, and I read their papers carefully. And I took it seriously. I mean, not that I wouldn't tell dirty jokes in class, but, you know, it's learning, it's teaching.

[21:03]

LZ: Were your classes that open with discussion from kind of start to finish? Have you found throughout the twenty years that the students were always like that?

RB: Yes, yes. Except I did team teaching with the Protestant minister, who was a woman, and a Catholic priest, we taught a story called *The History of God*, and it's a *marvelous* book. It's put out, this nun who left and became a publisher, and we took it, and we'd have—it was a one month session and we were two—one hour we would discuss the ideas of the text, and one hour we would bring in a guest. It might be a minister. Long before everybody started to get interested in Islam, we had leaders in the Islamic movement, we brought in other people, other religions, and, very important, we brought in African religion, which is very heavy on mythology and teaches us a great deal. And we taught Far Eastern religions. And we always brought in people from that field, not one of us saying this is what it is, but *you* tell us what you believe and then you fight with the class [laughs]. And we just try to keep order. But it was a wonderful class, because they insisted we teach it again, but not only did they learn, did we learn. And I became best friends with the priest and the Episcopalian woman, you know, who had the clergy

position. And she was one of the first ordained women, and so we had a lot of challenges along that line and straightening out the liturgy. How can you keep saying is God is "He" is "He" is "He?" Where is "She," "She," "She?" Then some of the woman started to change the liturgy and they used "She" for God. And then they used "S/He," so you could pick your choice, well, "She" or "He." And well, you know…I think horses think God looks like a horse. That's why I think we think God is made in our image. Or we in the image of God, you know. God can't be an image, because an image is limited from here to here, or here to here. But God has no limits. So I try to introduce new ideas, and some of the Hindu ideas were very valuable, and some of the Islamic ideas—except I found some of them too extreme, as we're all finding now. But every religion, when it has been dominant, has been extreme. When a religion becomes dominant it tries to make everybody else join the club. This is what happened to the Catholic Church and the Holy Roman Empire, this has happened when the Jews first left and came to the so-called Promised Land. I don't know how many religions got promised the land to, but…you know. [24:44]

And also, my wife and I had something else that helped us. We bought a home in Jerusalem. And we went there every summer for two months, and every day I took an hour in a different neighborhood. And I really began to see what Jerusalem was. Now it's deteriorating, but when we were there it was an exciting place to be, and I wrote most of my syllabuses in Jerusalem. And I transferred them to my secretary, first through airmail, then through fax, then through email. I progressed—and some of it was typed straight out of the email text. And so, but I had to do a lot of reading, because sometimes I'd take a chapter from this book, sometimes a chapter from that, and sometimes I would just write the article myself. So, the book was meant as a sideline to the textbook, read side-by-side, and discussed side-by-side. I think I met wonderful

people at Macalester. And some of them are pretty nervy. I stayed away from them. And I liked the Jewish kids who were probing too, so they kept challenging me too. I saw what they were doing, and therefore I—every year on the High Holidays, I created a new liturgy book. We use a new liturgy book, used the new processes of printing and so on at Mac, and we used a new prayer book, because every High Holiday wasn't just the same; you're confronting new problems against ancient texts, and the idea is to learn. And the word "rabbi," by the way, means "teacher," and so I always felt my role was the teacher. I wasn't the guy to hand down the rules—well, when they got into rules, that's another ballgame. I learned how to change them at Mac [laughs]. I learned there were times that the rules don't work, and you've got to have a new set of rules. The rules that will help people; the ultimate goal is to help people. And therefore, sometimes, you better come across new ideas to help people. We have to do something for you, because after we go, you guys are going to get old. And you're going to meet an aging population you never saw in your life, and so whose going to pay for the taxes? And also an ethical issue, what is a proper tax? How outrageous that the Bush Administration should cut the taxes of the wealthy. It should be just the opposite, the wealthy should pay more and the poor should pay less! Doesn't that—and he says he's religious. Well…no more comments [laughter].

[28:04]

LZ: Have you found that Macalester has been a very welcoming atmosphere for not only Jewish students, but other students of multiple religious—

BR: Extremely so. And sometimes, [unclear] didn't understand—that one of the well-known students was, you know, the head of the UN—Annan, Kofi. And he was among the first early

colored students to come to Mac, students of color. We had to transfer our whole vocabulary. And so, and he said he thought these people, or Minnesotans, were nuts because they were walking around with earmuffs. And he said, "What kind of idea is that?" And then he saw when it got twenty below, he started to wear earmuffs. [laughter] So he learned what earmuffs were. And so—but there are certain things you've got to learn about certain cultures; they do certain things because that's what they respond to in their environment. And so, teaching is also learning. If it isn't mutual, it isn't teaching. If your students aren't teaching, then they aren't…your class isn't right. They've got to challenge you, and *then* you know your class is working. If they just sit there and take notes, or pass notes at each other, then they're not listening to you. And by the way, who said teaching is always you speaking? Teaching is a mutual enterprise where the class is speaking up. I mean, I learned about farm boys from Kansas from kids in the class, I learned from baseball players, I learned from all kinds of people, I learned from people from Africa, and also—would you believe this, some of my best friends were Muslims. Because I was open, and when we were talking about religion we were talking about religion. We didn't try to prove we were better than anybody else, we accepted each other. As a matter of fact, oh…after teaching there about ten years, my wife took sick and went to the hospital. And would you believe that the Muslim community offered prayers on her behalf? Now how close can you get, you know? And there was a boy in my class from Ethiopia, and he was good, he's a comer. And when he graduated he had a party, which was about forty-five minutes away from Mac, and I went to the party. And I went to the party because I wanted to show him that I cared just as much about him as I did about a party for a student next door. And I did, I did. He sends me postcards, he does this, he does that. And then, it's also learning about farm boys who want to be pitchers in the big leagues, and how do they see the world, you know.

How do—learning is a mutual experience, and if it isn't, it isn't learning, it's just mouthing words. If you want to learn, I'll give you a book. That's not learning, that's reading—some learning, but real learning is dialogue.

[31:40]

LZ: Were most of your classes then discussion-based?

BR: What?

LZ: Were most of your classes discussion-based then?

BR: You betcha, baby. [laughter] You betcha. I took about ten minutes to outline the main points of the text they were reading, and then we went right into discussion. And one of my students had open-heart surgery, so she was successful, so I asked her privately to tell the whole class what's it like to have open-heart surgery. And, you know, what's that got to do with Exodus and Moses? But it's got a lot to do. Do you understand what a person who has to undergo heart surgery, a young eighteen-year-old girl, must feel? And so she told them, and it was one of the—you could hear a pin drop. From the beginning when they found her heart needed surgery because when she was born with genetics she had some fault, until she went through the full surgery. But they were listening; you could have heard a pin drop. What's it like feeling imminent death? What's it like? And so, when somebody was in a certain field, I asked them. Sometimes we had people from the heart of the Congo, and I said, "Tell us, how did you grow up? How did you eat? How did you make a living? How did your parents feel? How

was it like working in a village where you don't have any medicine except a visiting doctor every week? How do you do that? How did you teach your kids?" And you know, in some ways, they know better, because they were doing breastfeeding long before we were. They had intuitively picked up things which were wonderful. So, you see, this international business works both ways; it enriches our lives and it enriches their lives, and when they had different customs they would tell us about the customs, they felt free and comfortable. But that's what learning is, and when I had a problem I would sometimes ask them, "What should I do? If you were the rabbi and somebody came in front of you, what would you do?" It's the story of the woman who came to the rabbi with an argument with her husband, and the rabbi says to the wife, "You're right." And then says to the husband, and he says, "You're right." And his wife is listening behind the curtain and she says, "How could they both be right?" He says, "You're right too." That's the whole point, that's the whole point. In accepting there's more than one right, and then working something out. They have a right to do this, you have a right to do this, but you have no right until you accept their right. The only thing is, if you're hurting somebody. If you're hurting somebody that's not right. That's really what God says. God says, "That's not right." You know it from your own body—somebody hits you in the jaw, you know what it feels like, you know? So, by respecting somebody else's rights, your rights in turn become respected. And so, I think that's one of the problems America is running into, it's breaking up, and I think somehow or other we have to be more understanding of Islam and Islam has to be more understanding of us. It works both ways. And if we do that then we, then we're—I never had any problem with Islamic students. And when they insisted on saying their prayer in Arabic, which they do, I said, "Say it in Arabic, but just translate for us. Say what you want." So, and I also found it an invaluable experience being with professors who almost all had their doctorate.

In our department, four people had their doctorate from Harvard, and they were all nuts. But you know, they'd spit out new ideas, we'd meet and there were new ideas, and among the faculty there were peoples to meet. So I helped the Jewish community, helped organize it; as a matter of fact it became a paying job when I left, because I said, "You can't have somebody doing this and not give them a certain amount of reward for what they do." So, but now they're having trouble having a chaplain again, so I don't know. You got to understand that sometimes students in a religion will do nutsy things. So, you look at them and you laugh, and sometimes you say, "Hey, you know, they're really right. You know? They're really saying something, listen!" But most of the time they're nuts. But that's okay. But that means *I* think they're nuts, but they think I'm a nut. But that's okay, I don't care, I've been called worse [laughter].

[37:25]

LZ: When you came to Macalester were the Jewish students on campus, were they fairly well organized in terms of—I guess, was the Hebrew House established at that point?

BR: They were organized to this extent: the most aggressive ones took over and they didn't leave anybody else room to move. They didn't accept that there were minority views in Judaism itself. So my problem was to work out a *modus operandi* where they would understand each other and accept each other. "Okay, you want to do it this Friday night this way? Fine, next Friday night we'll do it her way." In other words… And that's why I wrote my own book, because I didn't think things were relevant there. I took, in the High Holiday book, I used songs from the Broadway musicals, because they tell about certain things. And I used music that the Beatles sang, and I used all kinds of stuff, and we did all kinds of things. But I thought a service

at a university should be experimental, just like the university is experimental, because if you don't experiment how are you going to learn new things? So…I don't know what to tell you…

[38:49]

LZ: Were you involved then each Friday night with those activities and with holidays?

BR: Yes, I had a problem. I would help them start church, but in the Jewish tradition you always had Friday night with your family. So, I would not leave my wife alone or my kids, and I couldn't come on Friday night. The High Holidays I didn't care. To me it was once a week, that was family, and family came first. But I would help them organize the service and do it, and we had kids who knew how to do it, and all that sort of thing. But Friday night in our lives, we were all together for the Friday night meal. That's the one time everybody was there, sure.

[Note: The following exchange is included on the video, but has been edited out of the audio file of the interview.]

[BR: You got a Kleenex?

LZ: I don't have one…

BR: Women usually have a Kleenex. Wait a minute, I got one! Yeah, I got something here… Oh, I've got to show you something. Are we on TV? See, women always have Kleenex, I know that. [laughter] I know that from my wife, from my daughter. I'll tell you what, when my daughter was going to college, and my sons, they were obnoxious. They were really obnoxious.

Now I'm older, my wife happens to be in the hospital, they are so wonderful. They couldn't be nicer! They don't want me to drive there if I don't have my, you know, my mind's not…they don't me let eat alone, and they stay with her. And we just moved here to the Wellington, and they're marvelous! And I said to one of my kids last night, we were eating, I said, "You know, you're the most marvelous kids in the world, I can't believe it!" They said to me, "It's because we had marvelous parents."]

You know, Jews wear a skullcap to show you how different—when they say a blessing. Well, I've got one, it's Macalester's. [laughter] I wear it; when I was teaching at Mac I wore Macalester kippah! And then I used to wear caps, and I had caps made out of Macalester colors, you know, and I became one of the group, you know, I was, you know… But this is something I shouldn't say, because it was irresponsible: I never went to faculty meetings. Because I never saw such heavy arguments over such petty things. I thought it was a waste of my time. "Why don't you want to come?" And I would say, "I'm busy" [laughter]. Actually, the faculty should have meetings, but I couldn't stand when they would argue about nothing. Serious argument I could understand, but arguing about whether the school class should be five minutes longer or five minutes shorter? I mean, come on, give me a break. So, I wasn't getting into that stuff. But I did get along with the faculty and, by the way, when any of them, whether they were Jewish or not, had to go to the hospital, I visited them in the hospital. I felt if I was the Jewish chaplain, I was the chaplain for everybody too. And I always went there, and I always did something else that no other rabbi would have done. You know you have your Christmas Eve service at Mac before…I went every Christmas Eve service. Because if you show them that you're open, then you got to be open. I went, and I used to listen to the hymns, and one day when Mike was

president, Mike [McPherson]…I forgot his last name, before this guy, before Brian was president, "What are you doing going to Catholic services?" I said, "In the first place, I want to show my respect. And in the second place, Jesus was Jewish, what are you getting so excited about?" So we had a good laugh and he got the message. He got the message, and imagine all these kids seeing a rabbi sitting there at a Christmas service. Well, why not? I know the music. You'd have to be, I don't know what, not to know carols and grow up in America, and this and that. So, when it said some doctrines that I didn't agree with I thought, "How interesting…now why did they come to that conclusion?" And so I'd sit there and I would meditate. When in the service that I felt I could participate, I participated. And so, like when they would sing "round yon virgin." How could a virgin have a child? And so I went back and researched. The word is not "virgin"; the word is "young lady." You see, if you take the words in their original Aramaic, it's a young woman had a baby. That doesn't mean—I mean, how could God impregnate anybody? What kind of business is this? God needs to do that? If he does, then he has human needs, and he's no longer God. If God has human needs he's not God.

[42:08]

But on the other hand, someday God and I are going to meet. And the first thing I'm going to tell him: "Have you heard this latest dirty joke?" [laughter] And the second thing I'm going to ask him, "If you were a God so powerful, how do you let little kids get polio? How do you this? How do you let accidents happen? How do,"—even though I think it's mostly genetic now—"even child molestation? How do you permit stuff like that? How do you let them—," I think it's a function of a twist of the brain, but if it is, that doesn't mean we shouldn't stop it. But, "How do you let people like that be created? How do you let that…?" And so I've given up on God for a while; I'm going to meet him pretty soon so we'll have a chat. But you see God can't

talk, because if it does, if you say that, God has a mouth. And a mouth is limited, so how could you limit God? Somebody says, "I heard God speaking." How could God speak? That means God has a mouth. Or the Bible says, "God got angry." What do you mean God got angry? Since when does God get angry? You know? So, I do believe in God, but in a different kind of a God. I believe there is some mystic spirit over the whole universe. But the most important thing to me in religion are the ethics. If you don't keep the ethics then you're not religious, I don't care *what* you say. If you harm somebody, you're prejudiced against an idea, and you don't think, then I don't think you believe in God. I don't believe that God wants that at all. See, "God wants that"—so how do I know what God wants? But anyway, it just doesn't make sense. And, you know, the way I'm talking to you is the way I talk in class. Oh, I'll stick more to the subject, but I didn't mind wandering off. If this is what a student wondered, then other students wondered. So let's take it, and the trick was, how do you make that relate back to your main course? My challenge was always, when we stray off, how do you pull it back? And so you either tell a joke, or you find some way and say, "Hey guys, what's this got to do with the course?" That was…right or wrong, that's the way I did it. I did my own unique way, and apparently it worked. You don't get any kids to come to your class if you're not offering something. And when you're just being foolish, they know it. If you haven't prepared for class, man, they know it! They can tell you in five minutes, they'll smell you out. So you can't fake with the students. You'll find your answers there. So…but I thought it was a great experience, teaching and learning in reverse, both were a function of each other. And then meeting with the faculty, getting new ideas. And I used to read the latest books on religion and get them from the library or the bookstore. Remember, the old bookstore is now where, what's it called—Patagonia! And so, I spent half my day in Patagonia, looking at new books and stuff like that.

Why not? I wasn't doing anything else. I was retired, so I wanted to make the maximum use of my retirement. But what else you want to know?

[47:11]

LZ: Did you continue to be associated with the Temple of Aaron once you left—or, I guess, did you ever really leave the Temple to work at Macalester, or…?

BR: They gave me an office, they gave me a secretary, and three years later they named me rabbi laureate. And you know why? I never commented on anything that happened in the synagogue. The politics, the rabbis, the staff, I stayed away. Sometimes I thought it was stupid and dumb, but I never opened my mouth. I was the former rabbi, but I was not the present rabbi. I had nothing to say. When somebody would say to me, when they were fighting around—as churchgoers all do—when they were fighting around, they'd say to me, "What do you think?" And I would say, "What should I think?" and I'd walk away. I would never discuss it with anyone—except my wife. I had to have an outlet! [laughter] I'd talk to her, and she thought I was nuts part of the time. But that's okay.

[48:25]

LZ: I wanted to ask you about the process of getting Hebrew to be taught at Macalester, because that wasn't always the case.

BR: I was after the…what do you call him, the dean of—you know, the one who has the most power next to the president. I guess it's the dean, isn't it? I was after the dean for about four

years to put Hebrew on the—I said, "You got Latin, and there's the Bible, there's the Testaments, shouldn't you be teaching it in Hebrew?" Each time, "No. No. No money." So after five years, I hit on a big idea. I called on one of my congregants and I asked for a contribution of twenty-five thousand dollars to put Hebrew into the college, and then I got it. Then I got twenty-five thousand the second year, and by the third year they caught on [laughter] and Mac paid for it. But that's the way you always do it, so I figured, "What the hell?" I wasn't fooling around. I'm in the process now of working to get a professor of Judaism, but it's very difficult because the base price of a professorship is two million dollars. So, I've been going around asking everybody for two million dollars [laughter]. And the word in the Jewish community is, "Don't have lunch with him, don't have lunch with him" [laughter]. But if you can't get it one way, you get it another way. So, I haven't stopped, I haven't quit. I'll get it, I'll get it one of these days. Maybe in a *will*, but I'll get it. I'll get it, because I think there should be a professor of Judaism, like a professor of Christianity or—now I think Islam is, they had a full time teacher but I think he left. The religious department was always getting into fights, so what the heck.

[50:34]

LZ: Have you seen an increase in courses that have been offered at Macalester that have to do with Judaism and just kind of the history in that sense?

BR: Yes, a lot of—not a lot, many professors are Jewish, but sometimes they try to hide it. Like anybody else, sometimes people try to keep their Catholicism private, or whatever. Now what's the word for witchery that the girls are doing? I forgot—witchcraft? I don't know. Anyway, so but a lot of them have good Hebrew backgrounds. And for example, one of them teaches the

Holocaust, Holocaust is always taught, and occasionally a Jewish professor. But they want to be known for their field and not because they're Jewish. See, that's an inner struggle they have. But I think it will come about, I think there's an increase in Jewish students. Most of them used to come from the East Coast; some of them came from the West Coast, now you're getting a mix of all over. You're getting a mix of—and even when the first foreign students came, first they were sort of, sort of, black, but they'd come and they were really black. Then I knew we were succeeding, then to me that was a success. And I like the Chinese, I like what they bring, and I like what everybody brings to the table. I mean, everybody's got something to say to you or to teach you, and I don't think the word primitive exists. I think that's just the way you do certain things, but now we do them differently. We used to go in a horse and buggy, now we go in a car, pretty soon we're going to go in a rocket, that's coming too. But, by the way, they're selling tickets for a rocket trip around the world already. It costs fifteen thousand dollars, one guy went. But they're going to have trips, they certainly are. And why not? There are no limits to space and there are no limits to learning. There's no limiting. And also, not to be afraid to learn that you're wrong, that's also—that's part of learning, you know. If I found that Judaism was wrong in certain places, I said it! And I said it from the pulpit and I said it in print. I have written two hundred and fifty articles that have been published, but I said what I wanted to say. And then they said, "There he goes again." There was a woman who went to New York. You know, after a death some Jews say a prayer for eleven months. Every day they come to the service. But it used to be only men, and I started the custom of including the women. So one woman went out east for her father's funeral, and the rabbi said, "Oh, should we hire—"; there were no men, sons, there were only daughters. And she said, "No! I'm going to say the prayer myself!" And he said, "Are you counted in there?" She said, "Yes." And he said, "Goddamn that Raskas." It

didn't matter! It was a mark of pride to me. So, I, you know, I never felt uncomfortable making change. Sometimes our congregation did, and I got holy hell! So, I said, my answer was always this: "I always experiment! I won't do it again." Under my breath I said, "Until the next time." [laughter] "The next time I'll do it." But if you're not experimenting, you're not teaching and you're not learning. And you're not even godly. Because God is dynamic, God is not stationary; the whole concept of God is being dynamic. And so, I think when religion solidifies, I think it does something harmful. It solidifies falsehoods too, because all religions can't be perfect. They think they are—some Jews I know think they are too. They sure as hell are not, I can tell you that.

[55:25]

LZ: You wrote a fair amount of articles for the *Mac Weekly* if I'm not mistaken.

BR: Did I what?

LZ: Write a fair amount of articles for the *Macalester Weekly*, the student publication?

BR: Oh yes, I wrote for the *Macalester Weekly*, and I wrote the introduction for the rationale for doing volunteer work. I was one of the committee that started it, but I wrote the basic justification in the *Mac Weekly*. And I wrote in the *Mac Weekly*, but it wasn't always on Jewish subjects. I felt free to express myself and I did. I mean, some of the faculty would say, "You're a nut," so I said, "Probably. It takes one to know one." So, I don't know, why shouldn't students hear what the professors say? And just as often I was answered in the *Mac Weekly*.

And I was pleased with that. At least somebody read it. [laughter] So, I felt comfortable with that. And by the way, I think I mentioned, I told jokes in class and sometimes I told dirty jokes. What, you're kidding yourself? What do you think is going on out there, you know? I mean, I don't know why, and then I—I was the one who helped introduce alarm boxes, and so on, on campus. I said, "Just because a pretty girl is walking down the street and she's a co-ed, she won't be raped?" I said, "What are you talking about?" You've got to do that, and you got to tell the guys, "Hey guys, there are limits. The limit is 'no.' When somebody says 'no' that's where you stop. If you want to try, try, sometimes you might get 'yes,' I don't know." But I feel that we should be open-minded about sex. We should teach it to our kids, and in more sophisticated ways in college. And then, listen, after you're eighteen, you're going to make your own decision. And you know why? Because your genes and your—will make you. Don't worry about that one, your genes will make you. So it'll make you search, but then you have to have the intelligence to have a set of rules by which you're going to live. By which you're going to live and somebody else is going to live, and you'll respect each other. It never bothered me, the sex business never bothered me, except one or two cases when attempted rape by one of the male members of my class. Hey, do women rape? Why do we always say men rape women? Do women rape men? They lure men, but do they rape them? I don't think so, what do you think?

[58:24] [Note: tape change]

LZ: So, I did want to ask you two kind of specific questions, and one had to do with the Ten Commandments exhibit, which is now the library, but I looked at that and I was curious how your involvement in the project, and how it came to be housed at Macalester.

BR: The Ten Commandments…the way I discovered about the idea was with my walks in Jerusalem, the very last street on Jaffa [Road]—right across the street is where the Muslims lived. And you didn't go across street. But there was a Christian bookstore at the end of the street, before the Muslims, so I used to sometimes go into the Christian bookstore just to see titles and sometimes buy them. One time I'm walking by and I see two stones in a window, and I said, "*Woah*." I walked in and I said, "Where did you get the Ten Commandments in proto-Semitic?" Proto-Semitic is the language that was used before Hebrew, that's why it's called proto-Semitic, and it's written like early, you know, scratches and all that sort of thing. I said, "Where did you get that?" And they said, "Across street is a monastery, and they work at either making up the writ texts, or they actually copy a Latin text," and something like that. I said, "Can you get another one of these for me?" He said, "Sure, all it will cost you is money." So I bought one, and I taught myself proto-Semitic, because I know the Hebrew so I know what letter has to be there. So I learned that, and I said, just a minute, what about the Latin? The Vulgate that Jerome did in, you know, four hundred B.C.E.? What about the Syriac? What about Arabic? What about the first, the Vulgate—so, it began to dawn on me and I began to do research, and he introduced me to the monks. And the monks began to tell me where you get this text, I said, and I also got a photograph from the Gutenberg Bible. And I said, "I'd like to see the Bible in ten languages. That would be a nice idea." So I began to collect. Every year when we went to our home in Jerusalem, on the way back we'd go through Europe and we'd stop for five days. So I've been to most of the capitals of Europe. And I began to find out how you get this text, how you get that. I even went to where Gutenberg lived in Germany and saw the presses he used. And so, I decided, hey: *ten*. And I began playing with, why did they use Ten Commandments?

Don't you know why? Because when the Hebrews came out of Egypt they were ignorant, they couldn't read or write, they were slaves. So Moses had to teach them the Jewish religion. The first thing he taught them was Ten Commandments, count them: one, two… And that's how he taught them ten. The ten basic values. So, I began to figure—and they were on the decimal system. The Babylonians were on the duodecimal systems. By the way, you'll find these things that Moses said in parallel literatures, Ugaritic and other languages, but you don't find them put together. That was Moses' genius; he was able to do this sort of thing, if he really did it. Somebody else—by the way, there's a theory that most of the Hebrew Bible was written down around the year a thousand, before the regular calendar, was written by a woman. She was a calligrapher, so there's a theory that a woman actually wrote it, which is interesting.

[1:02:55]

But anyway, I thought, "Gee." So I began for about two years to, you know, write to librarians and, you know, ask if I could get a reproduction of a page. Not a fax, but a reproduction. And I finally got the Ten Commandments in ten languages—but *ancient* languages. I have a page from the Gutenberg Bible, and that's how it came. And then I was showing them to Mike McPherson, who was president then, he says, "Why don't you do an exhibit?" So I found out to do an exhibit costs money. He just says "do it" but he doesn't give me a budget. So I went to a friend of mine who was making a lot of money, and I said, "Why don't you do something for the community. Do the Ten Commandments, you're appealing to everybody," and stuff like that. And he says, "Okay, I'll pay for it." So that's how we got it, we got a reception, and we got a *tremendous* amount of press. By the way, the first big shot of Hebrew understanding at Mac was when I got a page of the Dead Sea Scrolls. We had thousands of people. How did I get the page? I went to this Syrian priest, he was visiting [New York? unclear], so I said, "How about"—they had

purchased several of the Dead Sea Scrolls—"How about giving me a fragment to show?" He said, "Okay!" So he assented. But then Mac drummed up publicity, we…the Dead Sea Scrolls now are in Jerusalem in a vault, and temperature controlled, but I got the guy who was a curator to come in for a weekend to speak. So we had a lot of attention and stuff, and it was a very exciting—if you give me your name, I'll send you a copy of the thing that advertises it. And we just got a ton of people coming through. Because then the Dead Sea Scrolls was very exciting, now it doesn't happen to be on the agenda, except every time they find something they try to make it a big deal but it turns out to be a fake. You see, they'll make a scroll and they'll bury it underground and then they'll put in a crack and then they say they found the Dead Sea Scroll. Archaeology is the most dangerous of all courses, because people fake it. You can produce fakes, and the way you age them is you just put them in the ground for a couple of years, and they age! So, I began to collect pottery from that area because of that. And I found—you know what I found? A little thing of clay, and it's the first woman goddess. Its visit's about five thousand years old. But if you look at it, it's very interesting. You see, nowadays people think that women are beautiful if they're thin, and now they got to be thin. You're never too thin or too rich, that's the saying. But in those days they didn't. See, they wanted women to be reproductive, they wanted them to be like cows, you know? You know, Kirche, Küche, Kinder—to be with the Church, to be in the kitchen, and to take care of the kids. And of course, then they didn't have any birth control, so they had ten, eleven kids. But you got to also understand, one third of the kids died at childbirth. Another third died before they reached adolescence, because you didn't have any drugs to fight bacteria, and you needed a big family to run a farm. You had to have twelve kids because you were going to lose about six. By the way,

that was true of early America too. The most common disease in the early America was scarlet fever, and Abraham Lincoln's kid died of that, so it doesn't matter your station in life.

[1:07:58]

LZ: In what year did you retire from Macalester then, was that really recently?

BR: What do we have, 2007? About three years ago, I retired and they gave me the usual send-off, you know big time luncheon and stuff like that. And I thought I wanted to do something for Macalester. I thought it over and I finally—there's no place in town that has a full rabbinic library, in Hebrew and in English. So I decided I would give mine to Mac, that was my alma mater. So I decided to do something nice, we're in the process of trying to design a logo for it, but I want my name on it in Hebrew. And they don't care as long as I pay for it. So the library has several thousand books, but most of them are basic books. They're—if you wanted to study to be a rabbi, then you could do it with just that library. By sitting in the library for four years, you could become a rabbi. Because most of the texts are translated into English so, you know, just like anything else. And so I wanted to leave that for Mac. And I do have something that's coming that is the first American translation of the Talmud and it's in English and it's seventy-two volumes high. And guess who gave it to Mac? Bobby Dylan! Yeah, I used to gossip with Bobby Dylan's mother when they had the café next to the bookshop there. So, after we did the funeral—we didn't have a public service because he said they would tear his clothes to pieces, and we'd have a lot of people there to take pictures of him. So we didn't have the service here, we had it in the cemetery near Duluth, because he comes from the [Iron] Range. So, we did it there and he wanted to give me some money. By the way, in the rabbinate I never accepted fees.

Not for a wedding, not for a funeral, not for anything. So they started to give me ties and handkerchiefs. So I said, "This is ridiculous, I don't want to start a haberdashery shop." So I publically wrote and said whatever money you give me, give it to this charitable fund, and let me be the custodian of where it goes. So they would make out checks to the rabbi's fund. And then, every so often, kid needed five hundred dollars for something, I was able to give it to them. Or somebody needed food, before they started the whole business of food shelters and stuff, and so I would use it for that. That's the only thing I was never accountable for. And by the way, I never handled any money in the synagogue, or at Mac, I wouldn't do that. So we had a full-time administrator, and at Mac it goes through the offices, I won't touch that kind of money. I'll put in a request for it, but… The interesting thing is, we're going to dedicate the translation of the Talmud and when you put it, seventy-two books, when you put it from the ground up it's higher than me! I look up at the top of it and we're going to take a picture of that. When we had the funeral for Bobby Dylan, his mother, after the funeral is over—it's a cemetery near where he comes from, the Range—and they only have one gravedigger. So after the service he says, "Who's going to cover my mother?" So I said, "I'll show you." So I took a shovel and I put some dirt in and I said, "Now it's your turn." So he went and then he took a shovel and he gave it to his kid, and they kept passing around the shovel until everybody filled it up [laughs]. And I thought it was sort of neat! It was just the family, just his kids, and the people who buried his mother were just his kids. Instead of all the hoopla and the publicity and stuff like that, it was done the way it should be done, you know, by your family who lovingly puts you to death. It's like the blanket, and that's nothing to be afraid of. And so, when I first came they used to have the coffin on a kind of a lift, then everybody would leave. Didn't everybody wonder what the heck they were going to do with the coffin? So then slowly we started to introduce the shoveling,

one member of the family. Then that started, then everybody began. They did what they did in Europe. In Europe they don't have gravediggers, the family does it. It's a personal thing. So Bobby Dylan never dreamed he'd bury his mother, and so he looked at me and he said, "You know what? It felt good. It was a good thing, I put her to bed." So it turned out to be nice. And every once and a while he'll send me some money and I'll put the money in the Mac library. He sends me money—first he wanted to send me an honorarium and I took it and I sent it back to him, so he took it and sent it back to me, he says, "Do what you want!" I said, "Put it in the library!" Hoping someday he'll give me the two million [laughter].

[1:14:13]

LZ: Are you involved much with Macalester anymore since you retired or have you moved on to other things?

BR: What I have done is, I've done writing and a lot of book reviews, and I come around Mac to visit and mostly to use the library. It has one of the best libraries in the country and it's interconnected with every—like if I want a book in Japan or a reference they—and I don't need the whole book—they, what do you call it? Fax it! They'll fax me pages, and I can get pages from anywhere I want to, from South Africa, and they send me the faxes, to the library. So the library—all libraries are international, and they're going to change the Dewey Decimal system. The whole thing's going to be rebuilt, and you're going to find a lot of libraries are going to be, not the book itself, but you press a button and you get the book, you see? Because what's the point of having all this space with the library? [To person off-camera] You look like Kofi

Annan; did you ever see his picture? [laughter] You've got the same kind of beard and the same kind of moustache.

[1:15:30]

LZ: Well, I don't have any more questions for you, but I was wondering if you could give us a good story or perhaps, a joke to end our interview.

BR: A joke I gave you already.

LZ: Oh, you're not going to give us anymore? [laughter]

BR: Yes. [laughter] A good joke, a good story? Yes, yes. By the way, when I meet people they say, "What's the latest story?" And, you know, it's a way to relate to people. They laugh. A minister is up there preaching, the pastor, and he says, "After services I want everybody to stay." And they all stay, he says, "I've loved you, I've served you for ten years, given you my best and you've been nice to me. But my kids are going to college and I need more money. So I'm going to have to go to a bigger congregation just to get more money." So, up comes a man and says, "Everybody knows I'm the biggest car dealer in town. I'm going to give the rabbi, the minister—the pastor a Cadillac and a Honda for his wife to take the kids to school." Well, that was pretty nice, so another guy raises his hand and he says, "Everybody knows I'm the richest man in town and what I'm going to do is, I'm going to start a fund and I'm giving you the first twenty thousand dollars to send the kids to college." And an old ninety-one year old woman stands up and she says, "I volunteer to sleep with the minister once a week." So he says, "What

did you say, ma'am?" She says, "I said to my husband, 'What are we going to do for the preacher?' and he said, 'Screw him.'" [laughter] It's almost clean! By the way, I used to get this all the time. What's the latest joke? And you know who told them to me? The presidents of the college! [laughter] You know, they're so holy. They're not really; they're always walking around looking for money.

[End of Interview, 1:17:43]