Narrator: Blindfolded and asked to guess where you are at the moment you might say an auction or a Hebrew telephone exchange. As a matter of fact it’s Morning Prayer at a yeshiva, a seminary. This one is a transplant from New York and many of the students are American.

Voice 1: Praying is not making ourselves audible, it’s rather making ourselves attentive, listening.

Voice 2: Jews became a chosen people because they responded. Perhaps everyone heard God’s calling, but it was Abraham the first one that said here I am.

Narrator: At a certain point in the service there’s a reading from the five books of Moses, the books of the law, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. Collectively, the Torah, which is kept in a place they call the Ark.

Voice 1: The Torah, the Rabbi says, is a letter written to every Jew by his father in heaven. This closest image that one gets to, to God is his word, is his letters, the letter that he sends us. Ah, we can’t see him, but we can see his Torah and that is why on many occasions ah the joy of dancing and kissing may seem to an outsider as a mad event but someone who feels that this is a letter from his father from whom he was exiled and cut off for many, many long months is very much in place.

Narrator: Torah scrolls are always handwritten by a scribe. It can take one man a year or more to finish a single scroll.

Narrator 1: All the time I was in Jerusalem, and long before I got there, I had a tussle with the idea of the covenant, this special agreement between God and the Jews. I gather that the Jews claim there is a contract made between them and God, called the Covenant. Is that fair?

Dr. Steven Katz: That’s exactly right.

Narrator 1: And it was made between them and God when?

Dr. Steven Katz: Well initially with Abraham and then it was reconfirmed and expanded through the Exodus and at Sinai when the law was given.

Narrator 1: The law, did God according to the biblical claim, speak in words, speak to somebody?

Dr. Steven Katz: Well that’s a very great point. Nobody knows what he said. Some people think he spoke, and some people think that he just sort of inspired Moses, and some people said he gave a tablet in places speaking and Moses sort of took the rest down through inspiration, we don’t know.

Narrator 1: But, out of whatever the mystery of the confrontation there being, there emerged some sort of law

Dr. Steven Katz: That’s it, the Torah, which is better perhaps translated as teaching than as law.

Narrator: My teacher on that occasion was Steven Katz. He is associate professor of religion at Dartmouth College New Hampshire.

Dr. Steven Katz: We do feel that God knows what he’s doing, his ways are not our ways it says in the Bible and it’s hard for us to put a finger on exactly what it all means, but we believe that it does mean something.

Voice 1: Judaism teaches us that the word of God is something which one has to search for. Nobody can tell you open this book or that book and you’ll find all the answers. By the comments and translation and the actual life of the word of God is not clear cut at all.
Narrator: I could easily have left Israel without learning that the word Israel has a root meaning if someone hadn't shown me a verse in the book of Genesis. It means something like "he who struggles with God and man and wins." Not "he who lets God trample him underfoot," or "he to whom God is a total stranger," but "he who struggles with God and man and wins." And here before me is the record of the struggle, the Talmud. Layers upon layers, and centuries upon centuries of argument, not about whether God spoke—that's assumed, the books of Moses are safely under cover—but about what exactly God meant. To look at a page of Talmud is like a cross section of a tree, oldest at the core, ringed round by argument—some 2000 years old, some more recent—and there's space outside for more growth.

Narrator: Study in the yeshiva is done out loud and in pairs.

Dr. Steven Katz: If a person studies by himself, he can fool himself sometimes. While studying Torah, studying Talmud, is a religious duty, a religious act, at the same time it's an intellectual effort.

Narrator: But isn't the way of learning made clever as an end in itself?

Dr. Steven Katz: The purpose of learning is not learning. The purpose of learning is living.

Narrator: So it would be wrong, would it, to see the Talmud as an encyclopedia with ready answers?

Dr. Steven Katz: It's actually an encyclopedia, has encyclopedic knowledge, but not arranged according to gentile encyclopedias, in alphabetical order. It is like an ocean, with waves. You never know which wave is coming to you next. Like swimming, you don't study, you swim.

Narrator: Does the argument ever slip into pride, rather pleased with yourself for "scoring a point?"

Man with beard: It does sometimes, but the truth is it's not really supposed to. There's a classical example that's mentioned in the Talmud itself where two people were arguing a point. And when one got stuck, the other one says "okay, now, according to your opinion, this should be your answer," and then after he gave the answer they went on. The idea is not "I gotcha" the idea is "let's find out really what the truth is."

[Music]

Narrator: Israel is the name given to Jacob when he struggled with God. Israel is the name of the people which has kept the struggle going. Since 1948, Israel has been the name of a secular state. One of the more taxing parts of this search has been working out when a Jew talks about "Israel" exactly what he means.

Voice: The existence of Israel is the greatest chance that was given to Judaism in modern times. It opens up new messages not only to Jews but also a new message of Judaism to the world at large. Like the Bible came from Zion and from Jerusalem 3000 years ago, there may be a new Bible in the making in Israel, in the very life that Israel is creating there may be a new message of hope to the world, and it may also spell the end of the world. Sometimes we ask ourselves, is Judaism taking this trip to die in the Holy Land? We hope not.

Narrator: Spoken or unspoken, behind any conversation with a Jew lies the holocaust, the fact that between 1939 and 1945, six million Jews were exterminated.