

CD-1057 Transcription

Lecture at Itasca Seminar [2]. 1979.

Marc Tanenbaum:

-- together the capacity literally to destroy the world 20 times over without adding another intercontinental ballistic missile. That's why something like [Sol 2?], that's why the forthcoming address of the pope in which he will plead, as I understand it, for universal nuclear disarmament -- not isolated, one-sided disarmament, but universal nuclear disarmament. That's why in a world in which we spend \$400 billion a year on maintaining armies and defenses but somehow cannot find the resources to provide food and shelter for 800 million human beings in the world today, a whole generation of young children are already mentally and physically retarded in Asia and Africa and Latin America, because there simply is not enough daily protein to them to survive. I mean, there is a kind of moral insanity [01:00] in the world. Priorities are out of skew. And that's where the role of leadership comes to play, people committed to something more than profit. Profit is not obscene. Profit is the basis of providing for material benefits, which are biblically warranted. One must take care of the body as much as one must take care of the soul, because without a body adequately provided for the soul will suffer, will not be able to fulfill

itself. But a leadership which must come to recognize that it's not business as usual. We live in a world that is increasingly threatened by nuclear proliferation, by toxic pollution -- 55,000 dumps of toxic pollution in the United States alone -- by the capacity literally to create a global Auschwitz. So there is a moral obligation to realize that if we really [02:00] mean something about the value of human life, if the biblical tradition meant anything, God's revelation meant a revelation of moral will, a responsibility for the quality of society in which we live. That's what the Jubilee Year was all about: a society of equality, a society of justice, a society of caring for every member of society, and assuring the kinds of policies are adopted where there is no disproportion of overwhelming wealth on one side, where you have the president of General Motors, who makes \$980,000 a year, and you worry whether people on social welfare are cheating the government. What kind of moral integrity and balance at the center of which is a new appreciation of the value of human life, of the value of every religious and racial community as part of the diversity of God's human family, and an obligation [03:00] to see to that that in our daily lives, in our homes, our schools, our churches, our synagogues, that we live out a tradition that, in closing, is perhaps for me best summarized in the words of my late blessed

teacher, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who made the point in an essay called "The Sacred Image of Man."

When Heschel was asked what is the Jewish belief about the sacred image of man, Heschel said, "Judaism does not have an image of God. No synagogue or temple is an image of God. Neither is the sacred shofar, the ram's horn which is blown on the high holy days, an image of God. Nor is the candelabra, which dates back to the period of the Holy Temple, an image of God. When Moses asked God to tell him who he is before he went down to rescue the children of Israel out of Egypt, [04:00] God said to Moses, 'Turn your face away from me in the cleft of the mountain, for no man shall see me and live.' And then we read in the Bible how God reveals himself to Moses, his nature, his essence. *Adonai, Adonai, El rachum v'chanun, erech apayim v'rav chesed ve-emet, notzer chesed la-alafim, nosei avon va-feshah.* The Lord God is a compassionate God, a merciful God, slow to anger, swift to forgive, who renders compassion until the thousandth generation, forgiveness until 4,000 generations." And Heschel concludes that the way we really experience faith, the way we really experience the divine presence in our midst, [05:00] is only the degree to which we seek to imitate, to translate those attributes of God, which is the only way we know faith -- compassion, mercy, justice, forgiveness, caring -- in

our everyday lives. Heads of corporations, middle management, personnel, homes, fathers, mothers, parents, children: that's the real cutting edge of a morally responsible leadership, which is not a luxury but an urgent necessity to survive in the kind of world in which we live today. Thanks very much. (applause)

M:

[06:00] Let's take a couple of questions now, and then (inaudible).

Marc Tanenbaum:

Your turn. Yes, sir.

Earl:

(inaudible) great difficulty (inaudible) today being the leading person as I usually think am, and the committed person as I usually think I am, but I am not all the time.

F:

Louder, Earl.

Earl:

Sorry. One of the problems, it seems to me -- and as I listen to you I got very humbled, because it seems to me that there is a

conflict where there ought not be a conflict in the way that some believing people believe that they should function, which is a kind of [07:00] personal morality, a kind of easy "I love my neighbor, my family, and (inaudible)," that has no relationship to the evil of institutions around them. And a slight extension of that, and perhaps an unfair but for the sake of my question, an unfair criticism of you, and it's really a question to you as to whether or not we might be so rightly concerned about the evils and the non-affirmation of human life in other places that we get blind to our own imperfections as an individual, as a religion, as a nation. [08:00] And my question is really building on some of the questions of Monsignor Egan as to whether or not you and he might be sort of people affirming certain kinds of values, but really frightened, essentially, of a theology of liberation, that you really affirm values that are not willing to go all the way to developing an essential institutional theology of liberation that essentially not only concerned with boat people but with changing essentially not only oppressive values but the institution. And I could go on, but let me just stop.

Marc Tanenbaum:

When do we eat breakfast tomorrow? Well, at the outset, [09:00] I think it's clear that, certainly in the presentations thus far

of Monsignor Egan and myself, that we come out of a different tradition than the pious tradition that you're talking about. There is a pious tradition that concentrates on personal, private salvation, inwardness, and reads the Biblical prophetic tradition a very selective way, rejecting responsibility for the affairs of society, of the concerns of justice for the poor, the orphaned, the weak, from certainly our understanding of the Jewish community of what the [10:00] Biblical ethos -- everything in the tradition, exodus... Moses, who is the paradigmatic leader in Judaism, Moses was not an evangelical preacher who ran a revival camp. Moses emerges as a leader in history, first as a teacher. He's called Moshe Rabbeinu, Moses Our Teacher. His authority rests on his having mastered the law, the vehicle for the moral law. But it's also Moses, the lawgiver of justice, but beyond that, Moses the redeemer from oppression and slavery. It is the redemption from the physical oppression and the spiritual slavery in Egypt in which he emerges into history as the [11:00] paradigmatic Jewish religious political leader. Moses not only received the Ten Commandments, the moral code between God and man and between man and man, but the first obligation when he came into Palestine was to create the sabbatical year and the jubilee year. At the end of 49 years the land was allowed to lie fallow, and the first obligation of creating this people, this Messianic people with the task of

responsibility for redemption and history was that they were to free the slaves in the jubilee year. On the forty-ninth year, every slave was to go free. And Moses quotes God as saying, "For unto me are the children of Israel slaves; they are not slaves to any human masters." And then land was returned to its original owners, [12:00] so there would be no indentured poverty. The land was to lie fallow because of ecology. The land belonged to God. We had no right to rape it, to exploit it, to destroy the land. It had to be restored.

My point is that any fair, objective reading both of the theological tradition recognizes that pietism, personalism is a distortion of the central thrust of the Biblical tradition. You cannot be a faithful Jew and not have some sense of responsibility for the justice issues of the world, nor do I believe you can be a faithful Christian. In fact, today one of, I think, the issues we face is that far more it is almost a psychological issue than it is a theological issue, although it has theological consequences. [13:00] There is a sense, I think, for a great many people that the world has become too complicated. It's gotten out of control. There's almost a sense of paralysis. We can't do anything about it. In fact, many of the young people who came out of the '60s, after the highs of the Civil Rights Movement, the feeling that they were changing

society, felt almost burned out after that, and it was in response to that that you had the Jesus movements developing where people began turning in on themselves. You can't do anything about the world out there, then try to put yourself together intact. And so they developed this whole efflorescence of communes in America, Christian communes but also Jewish communes, where kids went off to the communes to do their own religious thing and make beads and handicrafts. It was an abandonment of the world. One can understand that psychologically, but from my perspective historically... [14:00]

In Germany in the Weimar period, in the 1930s, when the world became very complicated, as America became complicated, when there was great economic dislocation of Weimar Germany, unemployment, vast unemployment, the great inflation, there developed in Germany the same kind of response: a vast movement of pietism building on [Spene?] of the seventeenth century, extraordinary turn toward internal spiritual life, occultism, Satanic cults, but the consequence of millions of Germans turning in on themselves and saying the true religion is to be personally pious was that they abandoned the streets to the Nazis. And the storm troopers who began as a small group of 22 people little by little were able to move in and take over streets and society and government and structure, because no one

was prepared to stand against evil [15:00] at a time where they could've made a difference, where they could've closed off evil.

Any case, I mean, I think my point is that I believe that movements of personal salvation -- while I think every authentic faith must be in touch with constant personal spiritual renewal, family spiritual renewal, communal spiritual renewal, one of the structures we're creating for that in many of our young people is the young movement of the Jewish group called the chavurah movement, where young Jewish men and women come together, as there are many, I know, Christian movements like this who create their own societies in which they begin the day praying together, reading sacred texts together dealing with poverty and charity and obligations for the welfare of other [16:00] human beings, and then organized themselves as task forces, in a sense spiritually charged, spiritually formed by the tradition, feeling that they are acting out of not simply goodwill but out of the mandates of their faith, then go out into the world to deal with the poor and the elderly and the deprived. So there's a certain sense they put the whole thing together and have created their own way of constant spiritual renewal, as well as a sense of responsibility for the events of history.

On the matter of liberation theology, that is a very large subject. We'd have to spend a great deal of time talking about it. I would simply say that my difficulty, although I understand much of the motif and I understand the historical circumstance which led to that: if anyone lives in military oppressive societies, as Argentina had been, as Chile had been, with the incredible amount of political prisoners that were just ripped off the street, [17:00] and one looks about for some means to try to break the hold of that strangulation, that denial of human dignity, one becomes desperate. But I think there is a very strong motif in both the moral theology of both Christianity and Judaism, and I think all major traditions of Christianity, certainly in Judaism, that one resorts to violence as a last resort. One has an obligation to explore every conceivable constructive, peaceful alternative, which means negotiation, which means perhaps economic pressures, which means boycott, before one falls on violence. And I find some of the liberation theologians and the movements they create turning to violence as if it's some kind of high, almost instantly without [18:00] exploring alternatives. That's the last thing you do, not the first thing you do. And a number of societies have found that kind of thing happening in some countries, and that if one really cares about human life one has a responsibility not to elevate some kind of ultimacy that you have a right to destroy

human beings, one or many, for the sake of your program or ideology, and then feel somehow justified in doing that.

M:

(inaudible)

M:

Excuse me. This is because we're really pressured for time.

We'll pick this up later. I know it's a very important subject.

We'll take one more question.

Marc Tanenbaum:

Right, yes, sir.

M:

I guess this was in (inaudible) something Earl was asking, but I didn't really get the contrast of pietism and that sort of thing (inaudible) his question as [19:00] another part of it, which deals with -- we seem to besiege generation after generation by an urgency to respond to this threat of dehumanizing and so forth. Now, right here in America we have a lot of dehumanism going on. We perhaps do it (tape distorting; inaudible). Now, it seems like we always (inaudible) way out in the world scene, and we forget the home stuff, too. And it deemphasizes the

importance of what we're dealing with right at home. See, I really [feel with you?] in what you described today, and I think we ought to be doing something about that, but I guess I'm troubled sometimes when we all race off to do something [20:00] over there when we're still not doing it right here.

Marc Tanenbaum:

Right. That's... Right, that was part of the question you were asking. There is no question -- and, in fact, one of the... One of the really great pleasures for me to be here today is that if there was anybody who has (break in tape) helped me personally keep that perspective, it's been Jack Egan, because Jack and I had worked in the '60s on a group called Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization, which was committed to trying to develop community organization and economic development programs in every ghetto in the United States, as well as on Indian reservations. And I have no question that that must continue to be, and probably needs to be heightened in terms of the [21:00] responsibility of Americans not to use a concern for people in other parts of the world as an excuse for abandoning the local community. I must tell you, in all candor, one of my really heartbreaks these weeks over the Andy Young episode is that the business of Jesse Jackson making the PLO into a major preoccupation of the black community... I sat with

a group of black leaders last week who are trying to sort this out and put this together again -- Vernon Jordan, and Coretta Scott King, Bayard Rustin, and others, people from the black trade union movement. And one of the black trade union leaders got up furious. He said, "What the hell's going on with our leadership?" He said, "We got kids out there who haven't had [22:00] jobs in years. We've got 40, 50% unemployment. I haven't heard one black leader talk about jobs, houses for our kids in a month! What the hell's PLO got to do with us? We're not going to eat PLO. You're not going to earn a week's wages on that. It's becoming an evasion, a pretext for personal and other reasons to divert attention to something which will get a lot of news media coverage." I mean, Joe Lowry, who had never been on the front page of the *New York Times*, has been on the front page three days in a row, and has been on *60 Minutes*, and has been on... Because he sees the [hot issue?]. But the basic problems of a society turning away from blacks and Hispanics, and... Which is going to become more complicated, because as -- if the economic depression continues, [23:00] and we continue to bring in more refugees... In Denver two weeks ago a Hispanic shot a Vietnamese refugee because the refugee had been there for three weeks; he had a job and a house within three weeks' time. The church and synagogue got him that, and then he ended up with a car. And he was enraged. I mean, the man has been out of a job. He was

horrified. He shot the Vietnamese. In Texas now and in Florida you have competition between fishermen, American fishermen who were having difficulty surviving, Vietnamese who go in as a family unit, put together a whole package, and they see them as competition.

It's a real danger for America, and it was a whole discussion that... [Lipsit?] has a marvelous essay on what he calls class politics versus statist politics. Class politics develops in the society, one of the great formative influences, when you have economic depression, [24:00] high inflation, and groups begin competing over a buck, pocketbook issues, survival. And when you have that happen, the possibility of scapegoating, the possibility of group conflict, the possibility of undermining the pluralistic structure of America... And the social contract is very thin in this society. The layer of civility and civilization, (inaudible) the most advances, is very thin. You have to work to sustain that. And when groups begin competing with each other, almost a kind of savagery develops. "I'm going to get mine because I've got to survive, and I've got to feed my kids, and to hell with the next guy." You can tear the society apart. You can reduce it to a balkanization. And then you begin developing all kinds of racial justifications for it -- racism, anti-... It's no accident that in response to all these events

now in New York you have now a flare-up [25:00] of burning of black houses. Blacks have moved into Queens, have moved into Long Island. You know, and part of the rationale is developing the racism which is beneath the surface, and [they say?] no Jews have been involved in that, but ethnic groups.

IBM executive, black IBM executive moved into a house in Bayside Queens. They burned his house down. Broke his windows first, burned the house down. Put crosses on the lawn of a number of houses, and then some swastikas have been put up on some Jewish houses. That bigotry, that prejudice which is there and beneath the surface is kept under control in a society which is reasonably able to meet its basic economic, social, political needs. The point at which that begins to become challenged [26:00] that layer of civility begins to be torn off. We all become fair game. And now the whole business with the PLO and Jackson, all them going off, you know, create those kind of issues. If it's possible for them now to talk anti-Semitism, as Jesse Jackson, I regret to say, has been doing, talk about Jewish bankers, you know, so now the ethnics are now saying black criminals, black muggers, black rapists. If it's possible to say that... See, once you take the norms off, once you lift the lids, you take off the taboos, then everything becomes possible, and then you can start... Now, I got a call. I talked

to my office yesterday. I'm involved in organizing a group of Jewish leaders who'll meet with the pope when he comes. An Evangelical member called my office; at least, he presented himself that way. And my secretary said she went out of her mind. The anti-Catholic bigotry this guy laid out -- [27:00] "What the hell's this rabbi doing, justifying this pope's coming here? You know what he's coming here for. They're trying to take over America. It's Catholic power..." It's like being back in the '50s or '40s. So what I'm saying is that anyone who has any enlightened view about first of all the tentativeness, the precariousness of the social order in any case and the obligations to try to create some firm foundations for civility, for mutual respect, for living together in a spirit of mutual helpfulness, mutual reinforcement, which will lead to broader coalitions for justice for everyone...

The blacks are not going to get justice in America alone. I think the fantasy that is taking place is the notion that they're going to isolate the Jews from the rest of America on this PLO issue, is, in fact -- [28:00] is going to have a contrary. It's going to lead to a self-isolation of the blacks, because if the Jews are (inaudible), you know, white America is not going to fall all over itself to share its goodies with the rest of the black society. It's going to happen only because

people are conscious and all the communities are going to move their communities together to meet those obligations. So that's the danger of this moment, and that's why the responsible leadership in the black community and the Jewish community, and increasingly in the Protestant and Catholic community, is trying to try to isolate that as a peculiar political almost deviation used for certain kinds of political leverage purposes as well as some intimidation to isolate that, and to get back onto the main business, which is the fact that the highest rate of unemployment in America today, 40-50% around young black youth and young Hispanic youth. [29:00] And there are drugs in Harlem not because kids are born addicted in their DNA but because when you live week after week after week in impossible, intolerable conditions, and you have no prospect of hope, and nobody cares about you, and nobody's providing jobs, then anybody who comes along and pushes some kind of instant high will get a hearing. And that's impossible for this kind of society to allow that to become, to become normative and structured, built into the life of ghettos in the major cities of America. So in that sense, all of us have an obligation, I think, to see the issues clearly, and to really try to restore the kind of common welfare in which we all have a stake and must collaborate to achieve. Thank you very much. (applause)

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