

CD-1068 Transcription

Interview with Edward Kaplan; discusses JTS and Abraham Joshua

Heschel. 13 December 1989.

EDWARD KAPLAN: [00:00] In the sense of secularizing Judaism but  
he was at least trying to save the Jewish content --

MARC TANENBAUM: I think he tried.

KAPLAN: -- of a moral life or a cultural life.

TANENBAUM: Yeah. I think it would be more appropriate to say  
that he tried to intellectualize Judaism. I'm sure his  
intention was not to secularize, although I think that was  
one of the consequences for some people. That is his  
redefinition of God as process, etc. And --

KAPLAN: But people --

TANENBAUM: His book on Judaism as a civilization was a  
phenomenal book. I mean that developed this, had great  
conceptual power, in terms of the unity and the pluralism  
of the Jewish people, democratic pluralism. And that was  
his reaction to Horace Kallen's democratic pluralism.  
Kallen and John Dewey, who were dominant figures [01:00] in  
terms of philosophical pragmatism and social.

KAPLAN: Kallen was a complete secularist as far as I  
understand.

TANENBAUM: Complete secularist.

KAPLAN: -- what I understand, yeah.

TANENBAUM: In fact, he wrote a book called *Secularism is the Will of God*.

KAPLAN: Oh, really? I didn't know that. All I knew was his little book on Job as a tragedy, as would be appropriate. And my father knew Horace Kallen. He admired him tremendously.

TANENBAUM: Yeah, he made a very important contribution. Sometimes more is caught than is taught. And there's something about personal commitment sometimes that comes through. Really the essence of a person. And the other intellectual superstructure, God knows what some of the motivations are for superstructures. Sometimes position, power, authority. I learned a long time ago [02:00] to really see beneath appearances in order to make judgments. What people do, what they do in difficult times, what they do in celebration moments, etc.

KAPLAN: So would it be fair to say that JTS was really predominantly Kaplanian in the 1940s and early '50s? And then there's a kind of Talmudic Lithuanian --

TANENBAUM: Level.

KAPLAN: -- subculture?

TANENBAUM: That was Lieberman. Lieberman and H.L. Ginsberg, who was then retiring. There was a dialectic going on.

KAPLAN: Yeah. So that was the main --

TANENBAUM: It was the main --

KAPLAN: -- ethos of the institution in those years.

TANENBAUM: And that's very good. I think it's that dialectic which dominated the culture of the seminary, and Heschel had to try to find his way [03:00] in between that.

KAPLAN: Yeah, it's so important for me to realize, because JTS represents much more of a traditional institution, religious institution, to me, as I see it. But people who would go to JTS would still want to become rabbis rather than social workers or communal leaders, is that so?

TANENBAUM: Well, I think this needs to be understood. Seminaries, certainly my class, and actually a good number of classes, consisted of yeshiva dropouts. My class was probably 85% yeshiva *bochurim*.

KAPLAN: Oh, that's the main difference between that and HUC.

TANENBAUM: In those days.

KAPLAN: Yeah, in those days.

TANENBAUM: There's been a change since that time. Let me make a point first. Yeshiva *bochurim* who went through all of these very deep intellectual and spiritual conflicts [04:00] at Yeshiva University or some other university came to the seminary to sort themselves out, sort out their conflicts. And in the process, there was an extraordinary

amount of rebellion against the tradition, which they found oppressive in yeshiva. When the tradition began to appear to be some imitation of yeshiva, or repetition of yeshiva, there was rebellion against that. It's why Heschel had difficulty at the beginning, because he represented a kind of clone of yeshiva traditionalism.

KAPLAN: Really? How so?

TANENBAUM: Well, he was an Orthodox Jew. A very observant Jew. While he taught in intellectual terms, philosophy, mysticism, ethics, there still was the feeling that he was connected with East European yeshiva life. The academic life in Berlin, [05:00] but also East European yeshiva life. I think in that transition generation --

KAPLAN: Yeah, rote learning?

TANENBAUM: No, it wasn't rote learning as much as a preoccupation with the classic Jewish ideas. God, *mitzvot*, covenant, God's pathos, all the themes of his book. As he was elaborating at that time, there was always some hesitation in committing oneself, because one felt I've been through that. It was part of my problem, too. I had been through that at yeshiva. In fact, our class, we were very tough Talmudic students, because most of our students were very good in Talmud. They thought they knew it all.

And that's why Lieberman, who was such a tough son of a bitch --

KAPLAN: Yeah, he was, yeah.

TANENBAUM: He was brutal with me. He almost destroyed me because he would walk into the class [06:00] like some commando, and he would walk in the class. Before you sat down, he would say, "Tanenbaum, read. Just open up the book and read. Read the text and explain the text." Whether you'd prepared or hadn't prepared. And he would go around the class like that. And he was a tough disciplinarian and was brutal with the students. And I was young and sensitive, and I could not understand a professor like that.

KAPLAN: What do you think he was trying to accomplish with that type of demeanor?

TANENBAUM: Probably was to establish the toughness and the discipline of the *halachah*, that this is not just another course. This is the course. And if you don't learn this in the seminary, you learn nothing of any value. So he was that kind of a sergeant major.

KAPLAN: [07:00] Yeah. Did he walk that way, too, or what?

TANENBAUM: He was vigorous, very energetic. Very energetic. Privately, he was more friendly, but I felt brutalized by him the first day he walked in the class, and I began

trembling, coming into his class. Even when I prepared. And the funny thing was I was a good Talmudic student in yeshiva and even when I went to *cheder* in Baltimore. I had people tell me. I had a rebbe in Baltimore said I was the best Talmudic student in the class. I couldn't remember that anymore because of Lieberman. Lieberman made everybody feel inadequate.

KAPLAN: Yeah? You didn't study with Soloveitchik.

TANENBAUM: I took some classes with Soloveitchik.

KAPLAN: Really? What was he like?

TANENBAUM: Soloveitchik was like an old-time European *maggid*. Just got up, gave a lecture for two, three, four hours, and people sat and took notes and felt privileged to sit at the dust of his feet. [08:00] Occasionally, somebody would ask a question, but it was like listening to a lecture both on the Talmud, Maimonides and Aristotle. He was a great Aristotelian. So it was a very interesting class. I used to ask myself, "So what does all this mean?"

KAPLAN: So you weren't reading books for Soloveitchik?

TANENBAUM: No.

KAPLAN: You were just listening?

TANENBAUM: Yeah. Well, no, we would sit with a Talmudic text.

KAPLAN: Oh, I see, yes.

TANENBAUM: But I only studied with Soloveitchik during the course of some summer months, because that was the period of transition, when I began making a decision that I wanted to leave yeshiva, try for medical school.

KAPLAN: But he was charismatic at that time, wasn't he? And he had become a great leader.

TANENBAUM: Yeah, everyone. There was awe, reverence for him.

KAPLAN: If you were susceptible to his type of example or authority, you might have gone to him.

TANENBAUM: [09:00] I maintained a friendship with Rabbi Soloveitchik through the 1960s. In fact, during the Vatican Council, I became very close to him. And I brought Heschel and him together, Wolfe brought Heschel and Soloveitchik together. It's one of the untold stories of Jewish involvement in Vatican Council II. I wanted to make sure that we had the approval, at least the understanding, of the best and the brightest in Jewish religious intellectual life. And so it's another chapter. Every document that we prepared for the Vatican, Cardinal Bea's secretariat, I showed to Heschel, Soloveitchik, Freehof in Pittsburgh, Nelson Glueck looked at some of them, Dr. Belkin at Yeshiva.

KAPLAN: [10:00] It's hard to believe that you could get any document through all those people.

TANENBAUM: One on one. Never as a committee. One on one, and always asking for their opinion.

KAPLAN: Very interesting. And then you just --

TANENBAUM: And when they had something to say that was relevant, we incorporated that.

KAPLAN: Very interesting, yeah, yeah.

TANENBAUM: Anyway, the upshot, to get back on the track. So Heschel's book began to be the takeoff point. It took until he published some of his subsequent works, but the '50s. I think what really launched him onto the national scene as a unique Jewish spokesman, scholar of status, was the 1960 [11:00] White House Conference on Children and Youth. And the 1961 White House Conference on Aging. In those days, I was the executive vice president of the Synagogue Council of America, which represents all the major religious bodies, Orthodox --

KAPLAN: Is Henry Siegman --

TANENBAUM: Henry was. He succeeded me. Once removed, he succeeded me.

KAPLAN: Does he still --

TANENBAUM: No, he's with the American Jewish Congress now.

KAPLAN: Oh, I see, I see. Right, because I met him, I guess, when he was the Synagogue Council. That was 20 years ago, yeah, at least.

TANENBAUM: I was succeeded by a fellow named Hiat. He didn't stay very long, and Henry Siegman came in. Siegman was good. He was very shrewd. Very shrewd guy. In any case, by virtue of being the director of, in effect, all of the religious movements, [12:00] I was invited as a counterpart to the Catholic Bishops' Conference and the National Council of Churches to serve as the vice chairman of the White House Conference on Children and Youth. Catholic, Protestant, Jew, that's the holy trinity. So we met at the White House, given the charge. We made plans for the conference, and we had meetings regularly, planned the program for the White House conference. And there was a desire to really make this a major event because the feeling was the problems of children and youth had been neglected. There was great need for studies and legislation, etc. At one of the program meetings, I served on the committee with my Catholic and Protestant counterpart. [13:00] Monsignor Sullivan was asked to recommend a Catholic speaker. Reverend Villaume, the Lutheran, was asked to recommend a Protestant speaker. And I was asked to recommend the Jewish speaker for the major plenary session. Well, after my experiences with Heschel on *The Earth is the Lord's and Man is Not Alone, God in Search of Man*, because I had contact with him, even though it went

to Farrar, Straus and Giroux afterward, Farrar, Straus in those days, Farrar Straus and Young, I developed a friendship with Roger Straus. He had asked me to help out with Heschel's other books.

KAPLAN: When was that approximately?

TANENBAUM: In the '50s. You'd have to look up the dates.

There is a chronology. [14:00] Wolfe will know the chronology.

KAPLAN: Yeah, we can clean that up, yeah.

TANENBAUM: So I came to Heschel in '59, again, the year of preparation for the White House conference. And I told him about the conference, and I said there would probably be an audience of a minimum of about 4,000, 5,000 people here. A chance to perform a very great *mitzvah*. To make an impact in terms of Jewish values that Jews have to contribute to the healing of the nation and children and youth, etc.

Heschel said, "It sounds very important. But I don't think I can do it. I'm not sure that this is my cup of tea."

[15:00] So I said, "You began saying that about *The Earth is the Lord's* at one point, and your other books. You're not doing yourself justice."

KAPLAN: In what respect do you mean that he was reluctant to -

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TANENBAUM: Oh, he was anxious about *The Earth is the Lord's*.

He knew it was going to stimulate controversy. He was scared about having battles over it. Being attacked, as happened later on.

KAPLAN: Because he didn't want to be humiliated?

TANENBAUM: He didn't want to be controversial. Also he was really still quite insecure. He was not established. Saw himself as a small refugee scholar, who was here by the grace of a few people who were nice to him. His sense of self-worth had been battered a great deal.

KAPLAN: [16:00] Yeah, that's very important to know. Yeah.

TANENBAUM: And at least that's how I read him.

KAPLAN: I think so, I think so. Even from his early youth.

TANENBAUM: Yeah, well, that much I didn't know about, but --

KAPLAN: Yeah, but certainly the process of emigration is just devastating, absolutely devastating, even under the best conditions.

TANENBAUM: When I had to move from Eighth Street up to here it was complicated. The upshot of it was when I saw he was resisting it, he really was frightened, the big mistake I made was you'll have an audience of 4,000, 5,000 people. And part of it, frankly, I think, he also felt because he spoke with a Yiddish accent, he spoke as if he were davening --

KAPLAN: Yeah, his singsong tone, yeah.

TANENBAUM: -- that he would not be understood and possibly ridiculed.

KAPLAN: So he was aware that many people had difficulty [17:00] understanding him when he spoke English? Is that what you're saying? Because I do ask that question because I had trouble understanding him often.

TANENBAUM: I think he was aware there was some limitation there. And I think often that's why he relied on written texts, to make sure he had his ideas together and could communicate them, and of course then would not have to reach for a phrase. Although when he did that he could be magnificent. The upshot of it was, to make a very long story short, when I saw he was resisting it, I was persuaded that he was the Jew for that occasion, that his feeling for moral and spiritual values, his understanding of cultural phenomena, so penetrating. [18:00] So I went to Wolfe Kelman, I said, "Wolfe, this is an extraordinary opportunity, and he's resisting it, and I need your help." So we both went in together to see him. We literally twisted his arm. We persuaded him. He said, "Well, let me try it out." And the next time I came up, couple weeks later on, he had on his table all these sheets of paper and little phrases, children, youth, morality, this, that.

Barbershop. Rock music. And he was moving stuff around. He came to the Conference on Children and Youth. The place was in plenary session.

KAPLAN: Where was this held?

TANENBAUM: In Washington.

KAPLAN: In what kind of building?

TANENBAUM: In a hotel, a convention hotel. The president had been there at that time. He made a speech and left.

KAPLAN: Eisenhower?

TANENBAUM: Eisenhower and then Nixon after that. [19:00] Not at that session. Nixon had received the whole delegation of speakers. I've got a picture of that somewhere around here. Heschel is not in that photograph. So, Heschel got up and in his singsong way began reading his paper on children and youth. He was the hit of the conference, had a standing ovation, 4,000, 5,000 people. He absolutely blew their mind. And you read that paper, it's as if he's talking about today. All the moral crises of young people, the challenges, the corrosive effects of aspects of American culture, the hedonism, search for values and meaning, the absence of resources to deal with that. [20:00] A standing ovation. And that launched Heschel. He was covered in papers all over the country. His paper was handed out.

People began screaming for his paper. They announced it was

going to be published as it was in a volume of papers on the conference. And then he had an enormous sense of relief, and then was pleased with himself. And then said to me, "You did it. I didn't want to do it, but you made me do it. I did it. And I think it was important. Don't you think so?"

KAPLAN: Wonderful. Because he often needed to get support and people to tell him that it was successful. What he wrote or what he spoke about. He needed that.

TANENBAUM: [21:00] Wolfe and I actually became I guess among his closest, some of his disciples. Because we both understood his predicament in seminary. He was living in a hostile environment. And there were a lot of efforts to contain him, mainly because people -- some people -- recognized what an extraordinary talent he was, and that he had a gift of communication they didn't have. Gift of writing and even in speaking. And as in university worlds often, with all the prima donnas, he began to climb up that ladder of acknowledgment that some of them who had been there 25 years never achieved.

KAPLAN: How would they try to inhibit him or keep him down?

TANENBAUM: Well, first of all, it often was done in a very intellectual way. Well, *aggadah*, mysticism. [22:00] That's not really mainline Judaism. It's like a boutique. That's

not the department store. We're the department store. It's a nicety. But it was like the old Hasidic-Misnagdic struggle in Europe, a version of that. But part of it was very personal. Who's this upstart? Comes here as a refugee, and he comes here from a Reform seminary. Instead he's becoming a spokesman of Conservative Judaism.

KAPLAN: So they reproached him for being at HUC for a few years?

TANENBAUM: Well, all kinds of scuttlebutt.

KAPLAN: Just for the sake of rhetoric, not really substance.

TANENBAUM: It was simply to undermine his credibility.

Undermine his acceptance and credibility. It was not vicious. It was often, as academic exchanges are, elegant, which made the [23:00] thrusts all the more cutting. Also he expected more and better from people who are preaching morality and ethics and codes of law and honor. You see when their personal ambitions, egos are tread on, behave like any other animals. At one point his secretary was taken away from him. Later years.

KAPLAN: Who was that? Was it a specific person?

TANENBAUM: He had a secretary, the seminary provided a secretary for him.

KAPLAN: Do you know who that was?

TANENBAUM: No, Wolfe does know.

KAPLAN: Rabinowitz?

TANENBAUM: I don't know. Wolfe knows that. There was an effort to contain him at one point in the '60s when we were working on the Vatican Council. I sent up my personal secretary to take his notes.

KAPLAN: You don't remember when his secretary was taken away.

TANENBAUM: It must have been in the '60s, could have been around '64, '65, '66. Wolfe knows all of that. [24:00] He lived through all of that. The experience was repeated in '61. White House Conference on Aging. Went through the same rite of passage. He resisted wanting to do it. I said, "Dr. Heschel, you've now had the experience of the White House Council on Children and Youth. You saw what a *mitzvah gedolah* that was, a great great *mitzvah* you performed. You brought honor to the Jewish people and to Jewish tradition. Here is another opportunity to do that, and it's another national platform on the other great problem of America. The graying of America."

KAPLAN: What kind of excuses did he give?

TANENBAUM: Well, he doesn't know the problem, he would have to study it, he's not sure whether he has anything to say about it. I said, "Jewish tradition doesn't have anything to say about honor for the elderly? [25:00] *Sevah takum*. Before the elderly you shall rise up in reverence and awe."

And again though I went to Wolfe, because I wanted to make sure that when I would leave there -- because I had to go back to my office downtown -- Wolfe was there on the spot every day and saw him every day. There'd be continuous feeding of that decision to say yes. So I went to see Wolfe, and we came in together again, and became like the Smith brothers, and we plied our medicine. He accepted. And he wrote a paper.

KAPLAN: Wonderful paper.

TANENBAUM: Absolute gem. Gem.

KAPLAN: He was writing *The Prophets* during the same period.

Did you have any awareness of that?

TANENBAUM: Yeah, I knew he was writing it. Occasionally would give me a chapter to read. He asked me to read a chapter on pathos and that sort of thing. But I felt very strongly [26:00] that given his potential -- it was not only a personal thing. I felt the Jews needed a Heschel.

KAPLAN: Yes, that's true.

TANENBAUM: Because nobody else was surfacing. My reading in the work in the religious community. Something which the Jews to this day have never understood, especially --

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