

CD-1070 Transcription

Interview with Edward Kaplan; discusses AJC and the civil rights movement. 10 January 1990.

EDWARD KAPLAN: We're talking with Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum, January 10th, 1990. And I know that the AJC had a very important role in the Martin Luther King campaign. It actually occurred to me that... (break in tape) But that seemed to me the... We talked about the speech at the conference of religion and race in Chicago a bit last time, and I actually spoke with Taylor Branch, and he had a part in his book that was about that, but it was cut out of his book.

MARC TANENBAUM: Really?

KAPLAN: So that apparently was a very important time for Martin Luther King himself. His branch said that this was a preparation for the letter from the Birmingham Jail, [01:00] that he was trying out some ideas.

TANENBAUM: Birmingham Jail, and the march on Washington.

KAPLAN: That's right. So what kind of involvement did the AJC have in the Civil Rights movement? I mean, it had to be before 1963? But it's very curious. See, my father was involved in the NAACP, and from my perspective as a young man, from his NAACP, you know, official, the NAA was involved all this time, and then --

TANENBAUM: Sure.

KAPLAN: -- the younger organizations got on the bandwagon, or at least King built on that. But I wasn't aware that the AJC had some sort of systematic involvement with Civil Rights, which might've culminated in participation in the Selma Montgomery march, and other -- and the march on Washington.

KAPLAN: I think the most important contribution [02:00] that AJC made at the outset is that in the 1950s we began (clears throat) a series of studies. It was called Studies of Prejudice. It produced five volumes of fundamental social scientific, social psychological research on prejudice and bigotry. The core book, core study, was called *The Authoritarian Personality*, and Dr. John Slawson, who recently passed away, a social psychiatrist himself and the executive vice president of the committee -- he brought me to the committee in 1960 -- Slawson was deeply troubled by the fact that apparently everyone (clears throat) in the Civil Rights movement and the Jewish community were dealing with symptoms, [03:00] and he felt that there was a need to diagnose the nature of the disease itself. What are the psychodynamics? And so he started this with a German school of social psychologists, who were the leading people in the field, and Adorno and others who produced *The Authoritarian*

Personality and the F-scale. The impact of that was to set the intellectual reconceptualization of how to deal with prejudice.

KAPLAN: Very interesting.

TANENBAUM: Because, see, the fundamental thesis was that the source of the problem is a psychopathology of the victimizer, and the victim [04:00] cannot be held responsible for the disturbance of the victimizer, who had this obsessive need to work out hatred toward blacks and Jews and others. The authoritarian personality kicked off a tremendous storm, but it led to a basic reconceptualization of the entire approach, both toward Civil Rights as well as toward anti-Semitism.

KAPLAN: Very interesting.

TANENBAUM: It was a bedrock study.

KAPLAN: Now, was this connected with the New School, or...?

TANENBAUM: No. It was done... There was the Max Planck School of Social Psychology, Social Science in Germany, who had a brilliant team of people, investigators, and it was done in the mid 1950s. It also was fed for us, through John Slawson's [05:00] extraordinary mind, by the Nazi Holocaust. Slawson was haunted by the notion, how could this happen in a country of such great culture and intellectual achievement, etc. And it was trying to answer

the old Latin question "*Unde malum?*": what is the source of evil? If you really were going to try to maintain it in the future, you had to understand the elements and the dynamics that was contributing to it. So that was --

KAPLAN: Very, very (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

TANENBAUM: -- that was the major contribution. And it just transformed the whole field. It transformed the rhetoric of the NACP [*sic*] --

KAPLAN: Really?

TANENBAUM: -- as well as of all the Jewish groups after a while.

KAPLAN: How do you (inaudible) that?

TANENBAUM: Well, instead of asking for the government to help blacks, developed a whole assertive approach: go after the criminals. Go after the haters. Go after the... [06:00] They are responsible for it, and whatever is necessary in terms of Civil Rights to protect interests had to be much more aggressive than simple anti-discrimination laws.

KAPLAN: So this is mid-1950s, you say?

TANENBAUM: Yeah.

KAPLAN: What relation is this kind of development of social psychology to the 1954 Board of Education Supreme Court decision?

TANENBAUM: Well, it was critical.

KAPLAN: But so perhaps they were simultaneous but not related.

TANENBAUM: One of the people who was involved in the study was a black scholar, Clark.

KAPLAN: OK, Clark, yes.

TANENBAUM: Kenneth Clark. Kenneth Clark participated in some aspects of that study, and the committee provided him as a witness, in relation to the Supreme Court decision. [07:00] Clark's testimony was based in large part on the studies that he had done with us.

KAPLAN: With the AJC.

TANENBAUM: Yeah.

KAPLAN: On the effects of segregated education? I see. Could you clarify a little more what the AJC was doing that Clark used for his testimony? Because I know his testimony was absolutely crucial.

TANENBAUM: Yeah. Well, I wasn't personally active in that, because I was not at the committee that time, in the '50s, in the 1950s. I came in the '60s. But I had conversations with John Slawson, Kenneth Clark, and others. And Clark worked with us for many years in the '60s -- conferences, seminars, constantly pushing forward. But I can't go into too great detail [08:00] of it, but it's simply a matter one would just have to simply look at Clark's testimony.

KAPLAN: Very, very interesting.

TANENBAUM: Which he acknowledges the role of the American Jewish Committee. But his testimony was crucial. And he early on, until he became angry with the Jewish community, always acknowledged how critical that work was, and what strong support it had given him as a social scientist to make his case. But for the rest of that, I mean, there's a history of the American Jewish Committee, which has a whole chapter on that. Naomi Cullen's book --

KAPLAN: Yeah, I haven't studied that yet.

TANENBAUM: -- (inaudible) [*Free to Desist?*], but there is a chapter there dealing with the '50s and '60s.

KAPLAN: Yeah. And so you think that --

TANENBAUM: That's a good chapter, a good two sections to deal with the '50s and '60s, which would document the role of the Civil Rights movement, as well. I mean, that was [09:00], from my point of view, one of the most important contributions we made, and, first of all, to change the intellectual consciousness of the elite of America --

KAPLAN: Yes, that's very important.

TANENBAUM: -- brain trust of America, including the government, and the courts, and the lawyers and judges. Then, since the Committee saw itself as -- applied social science, so that it took whatever insights it gained from these programs and began applying it to meetings around the

country -- blacks and Jews, Civil Rights groups and Jews. We set up an ongoing relationship with the NACP and the Urban League. In fact, it was a very close relationship between Roy Wilkins, Whitney Young, and John Slawson. And [10:00] occasionally, when I came to the committee I would sit in on some follow-up seminar that took place. But Whitney Young (inaudible) [Wilkins?] were both extremely appreciative of the role of the Committee, (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) --

KAPLAN: Yes. John Marcel must've been involved --

TANENBAUM: Yeah, John Marcel was, yeah.

KAPLAN: -- with that, because he was Wilkins' [assistant?] and a trained sociologist.

TANENBAUM: That's right, yeah.

KAPLAN: Yeah.

TANENBAUM: Yeah, he played an important role in that. So while obviously and necessarily much of the political action and the marches and demonstrations have gotten most of the attention, this aspect of it is almost always overlooked. And if anyone has any [feeling?] of the history of ideas, this changes consciousness of the whole society.

KAPLAN: That's right. That's right.

TANENBAUM: That's what most (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

KAPLAN: I think that's tremendously important, because not only for [11:00] the fact of historical truth, but Heschel's approach, you know, is not a local one, as Martin Luther King's movement began as a local movement. Heschel's approach, the problem of civil rights through the pathology of racism, I believe, and his theological view --

TANENBAUM: Yeah, it was moral/ethical --

KAPLAN: -- that a human being -- that's right.

TANENBAUM: -- moral/ethical approach.

KAPLAN: Right.

TANENBAUM: And actually, he really was not that confident in social sciences. I mean, he had a kind of very intelligent understanding of social sciences, but his great power was his moral/ethical conscience, in which he talked about the horrors, the tragedies. I remember his once saying to me, [12:00] after we were talking something about the Civil Rights Movement and Martin King, etc., and bad episodes, blacks being beaten up in the South, voter rights discrimination, he said, "Marc, [*America stink?*]." He says, "This country stinks. How can we allow things like this to go on?" And he had that kind of rage. It really was prophetic rage.

KAPLAN: He said that to you in Yiddish?

TANENBAUM: Yeah. [*America stink?*]. And he felt that way

about many things in other parts of the world, as well -- the fact of anti-Semitism. You know, with all of the intellectual achievement in science and technology, the world was at a horse and buggy stage in terms of social attitudes and human relationships. Well, those were elements in it. After that, the Committee got involved in all the things that all the Jewish organizations got involved in. We helped organize. [13:00] We sent out message to all of our chapters around the country. I've seen some of those memoranda not too long ago. Morris Abram was president around that time, and [called him in?] all the right chapters to organize delegations, to go to Selma, to go to Birmingham. But other Jewish groups were all doing that, as well, and the Reform Rabbis went down to Birmingham and got requested, at Martin King's request.

KAPLAN: So do you know how that started, or is it just enough to say that at a certain point -- was it in the very early '60s, liberal Jewish groups did become involved? Would that be enough, you think? And synagogues and rabbis, mostly reform rabbis?

TANENBAUM: Performance and conservative, some conservative.

KAPLAN: Yes. Fewer conservative.

TANENBAUM: Yeah. The reform rabbis were much more active in social justice. I mean, you know, the whole theme of

[14:00] the prophets in social justice was a core idea in reform Judaism in a way that it was not yet in conservative Judaism. Conservative Judaism was still trying to work out its identity between reform and Orthodox, and it was sorting out how much ritual, and much greater preoccupation with the internal identity issues, with some concern for social justice issues, for individual rabbis who took part in some things. But the reform movement had it as a matter of policy to participate, and reform rabbis, to whom the issues of social justice, social ethics also had a substantial literature by our reform scholars -- [Kaplan Caller?], I remember, [Kornbach?].... I mean, Kornbach had a very strong left wing.

KAPLAN: Yes, yes. Arthur Lelyveld?

TANENBAUM: Arthur Lelyveld, sure, yes.

KAPLAN: What was Lelyveld doing [15:00] at that period? Do you know?

TANENBAUM: He went to Hattiesburg and got arrested. He was beaten up. His life was threatened.

KAPLAN: Was he a rabbi of a congregation?

TANENBAUM: Yeah, in Cleveland.

KAPLAN: In Cleveland. Is he in Washington now? Where is he?

TANENBAUM: He's still in Cleveland.

KAPLAN: Oh, he is.

TANENBAUM: I think he's retired. His son is Joe Lelyveld of the *New York Times*. But there were others. There was Perry Nussbaum in Jackson, Mississippi, whose life was made a hell by racists there. And he identified himself with the black community from the very beginning. Threatened to kill him. They used to put sand into his gas tank, threatened to blow his house... And his house was once blown up. The synagogue was once attacked. So, I mean, rabbis in the South that became involved -- rabbis in Atlanta, for example, Jack Rothschild, who was very close to Martin Luther King, one of the first supporters of Martin Luther King --

KAPLAN: Really?

TANENBAUM: -- in Atlanta.

KAPLAN: Is he still around?

TANENBAUM: No, he died. [16:00] But his successor has also been very good on these issues, Sugarman.

KAPLAN: I met him.

TANENBAUM: Yeah, nice person.

KAPLAN: He's a lovely guy.

TANENBAUM: Lovely guy.

KAPLAN: Yeah.

TANENBAUM: I keep in touch with him from time to time. See, the point -- I think the underlying issue was that almost

unlike some Christian groups, who had to develop a
rationale for helping blacks...

END OF AUDIO FILE