

CD-1071 Transcription

Interview with Edward Kaplan; discusses Abraham Joshua Heschel
and the civil rights movement. 10 January 1990.

MARC TANENBAUM: -- legitimate than Judaism was. I hear from him from time to time (inaudible). But he was regarded as one of the leading New Testament scholars (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

EDWARD KAPLAN: Where does Davies live? I would like to talk to him.

TANENBAUM: He's now at Duke University.

KAPLAN: Oh, really?

TANENBAUM: North Carolina. He had great affection (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

KAPLAN: Yes.

TANENBAUM: And, in fact, he just completed a book on Cambridge history with Finkelstein --

KAPLAN: Really?

TANENBAUM: -- on Judaism, yeah. I have wonderful letters from him recently that -- they had to do with his feeling of appreciation, how I helped sustain him when people were being very indifferent (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

KAPLAN: That's wonderful. I'd love to talk to him. So this ad is very important. You don't remember the approximate date?

Or if you could dig it up for me, because that would really be wonderful.

TANENBAUM: It...

KAPLAN: Yeah.

TANENBAUM: It's probably in the files in '67, '68.

KAPLAN: OK.

TANENBAUM: But W.D. Davies [01:00] became very agitated over the attacks on the Christian world, especially (inaudible) attack, and he went around talking to some of his friends about signing, and joining him in signing it. He was among the first to sign it.

KAPLAN: I didn't realize that.

TANENBAUM: I felt very honored to sign it. He was doing something real for the Jews.

KAPLAN: That's for sure. He is.

TANENBAUM: Now, he spent some time with Heschel, and they liked each other. Heschel -- I wouldn't want this repeated, but it's a matter of how one treats the... Heschel felt that Davies was sort of going over the line on some of his interpretations on Paul and rabbinic Judaism. He wrote a very good book on that, and also felt that he did not understand core issues in Judaism. But they had a very affectionate relationship.

KAPLAN: (inaudible), yeah.

TANENBAUM: Yeah, It was a respectful relationship.

KAPLAN: Haven't really [02:00] looked at that yet. So what happened to the ad?

TANENBAUM: It was published. It was a very powerful ad, signed by some of the most prominent names in the Christian world.

KAPLAN: Yes. So who were the people trying to get the Christians to sign it? You?

TANENBAUM: I did.

KAPLAN: Davies?

TANENBAUM: And W.D. Davies. I don't remember... Well, I talked to Wolf about it. I think he may have done some things with some Union Theological people -- although W. Davies had made this a cause. I remember he was calling [every?] (inaudible) --

KAPLAN: (inaudible)

TANENBAUM: He was going around to...

KAPLAN: Because the story is that Heschel asked some of his people and clergy and laymen concerned, and they turned him down, and he was crushed.

TANENBAUM: Well, I talked to --

KAPLAN: Was it that period in '67, or was it later?

TANENBAUM: It was in '67, '68.

KAPLAN: Yeah, yeah.

TANENBAUM: It might've happened more later. There were other efforts like that. There was always efforts at ads -- Christian ads, joint ads. So there were a number of occasions [03:00] where Heschel could've sought that out. My concern about Christians... I first joined at the beginning, and when I saw the line of essential radical Christian Marxists, Christian Socialists who wanted liberation for everybody in the world but not for Israel, I had a feeling that was a trap. Heschel, out of principal -- because his sense of outrage about the Vietnam War, [concern?] for peace, disarmament -- stayed with it, and (inaudible) said to him, "I think they're exploiting you," because the Berrigans, especially Daniel Berrigan always used to refer to Heschel "my father Abraham who supports our movement." But then he would go off and write an article and would say that the Christians are the new Jews. "We're the real Jews. [04:00] We really preserve the prophetic essence." And Heschel was always indulgent, and I felt --

KAPLAN: Heschel knew this?

TANENBAUM: Yeah, but he felt that the movement was more important than his idiosyncrasies. And I thought there were other ways of making a point, and other institutions to make the point. (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) --

KAPLAN: For example, what other organization could he have elided himself with?

TANENBAUM: Oh, there were Carnegie movement on international peace, there were the meetings we were having with the National Council of Churches by that time with Catholic bishops on peace issues. And I used to invite him occasionally to some of those meetings. Those --

KAPLAN: And he would attend?

TANENBAUM: He attended a few of them.

KAPLAN: Yes.

TANENBAUM: Attended a few of them. And, [05:00] I mean, I thought there were certain situations where we had some measure of influence to direct what the message is and also the language, the rhetoric, the metaphors. And clergy and laymen, they would listen to Heschel and they would all applaud. And then Berrigan (inaudible), few others, people to the left of -- would write the speeches, then ask you to sign it. If you didn't want to sign it, they left your name out. So I pulled out. After my second meeting I pulled out, but (inaudible) [Brichner?] stuck with it, because he's been taking this left-wing line all along. But I thought it was not in the Jewish interested to be allied with people who were so anti-Israel.

KAPLAN: So that was really the issue that many Jew criticized

Heschel for, that the people --

TANENBAUM: Some did. [06:00] Certainly some did.

KAPLAN: Yeah. Well, certainly the people at the Seminary.

TANENBAUM: Yeah.

KAPLAN: Wolf, you know, was against it. Seymour Siegel was against it pretty strongly.

TANENBAUM: Well, Seymour -- you know, Seymour became a Reagan Republican before Reagan became a Republican.

KAPLAN: Yeah. (laughter)

TANENBAUM: I loved Seymour. I mean, I had enormous respect for [my students'?] work. But for some reason he took this very right-wing turn, and he became ideologically obsessed --

KAPLAN: I see.

TANENBAUM: -- with combating left-wing groups, especially Christian left-wing groups. And he actually worked for Reagan for a while. He worked for the White House for a while.

KAPLAN: How did Heschel respond to your criticism and you pulling out of the clergy [and laymen?]?

TANENBAUM: It was not a major issue. I just told him how I felt about it. See, there were certain kinds of issues that I determined for myself [07:00] Wolf is much more effective, because, first of all, he sees him every day. I

made my position clear, and I wasn't going to hound him. And I knew how Wolf felt about it, and how Seymour felt about it. There were others. I felt that others could work (inaudible) for that, but he was determined, and was determined not to give it up, mainly because of his outrage over the Vietnam War. And some of us feel that he killed himself for the Berrigans.

KAPLAN: Yes. (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) --

TANENBAUM: Because when they were let out of Harrisburg Prison -- a terribly stormy day. Heschel had influenza, and he was warned not to go out in that weather. He was determined to go there to welcome them, receive them, and he became very ill after that.

KAPLAN: Died the next day. [08:00] What explains his tremendous carelessness in doing that? I mean, it wasn't to seek publicity. That explanation is completely irrelevant since no one was there to take photographs, I assume. It's a completely private act. What was it about the Berrigans, or was it the symbolic significance of the event?

TANENBAUM: Well, I think this was Heschel's conscience. There are certain kinds of principles that he articulated in his most extreme form that he felt was really of ultimate importance. He felt the issues of war and peace were of ultimate importance, and that was having a

disastrous effect on America -- American youth, older people, everything. I mean, he used to [09:00] repeat that phrase about *America stink*, this feeling that so much was getting out of control, was becoming so destructive and antihuman. And he felt the Vietnam War was doing that to a whole generation.

KAPLAN: How did the Vietnam War affect the young people in the United States, from his point of view?

TANENBAUM: Well, a good part of that is in his essay on children and youth. The basic feeling about what was happening to American society -- the militarization and --

KAPLAN: I think lying, too.

TANENBAUM: Huh?

KAPLAN: The lying of the government.

TANENBAUM: Yeah, the deception, the deception of the people. I mean, also the construct of values that emerges out of that. Militarism is important. Business corruption is important. But more personal, social, communal values -- compassion and caring -- all that was being erased. [10:00] So I think -- I mean, I think he felt that this was the one group that gave him a platform actively to declare his opposition to the war. If he'd gotten involved with a more bureaucratic institution it might've been safer, but he wouldn't have been able to move as freely. I mean, here, if

they decided to call a press conference the next day or to run an ad in a week, they could do it. They had no bureaucracies to account for. They had no big lay body to account for. It was a striking force.

KAPLAN: It was also a religious movement, wouldn't you say?

TANENBAUM: Yeah.

KAPLAN: They had religious idiom. The protest took place in churches -- vigils, fasts.

TANENBAUM: Well, yeah, but the question is what kind of religious thing. I mean, I think that was the issue.

KAPLAN: Well, what do you think?

TANENBAUM: Look, I got involved in many religious movements. I've been involved with a movement to get Cesar Chavez out of prison. And there was a lot of [11:00] kind of left-wing things going on there. But the core issue was so clear, and the partners for that were mainstream Christians, mainstream Catholics, mainstream Protestants, who were as impassioned about this as the left wings were, except the left-wing people [were not there?]. We went out to Salinas Valley, and we got Chavez out of prison, and we made a very powerful protest to the growers. They were exploiting the workers. We had a prayer meeting with the workers. I mean, it was a very moving experience. There are ways of moving. I mean, I found there's ways of putting together forces

that were symbolically and practically powerful forces that had troops, and if we had to do something on disarmament, and we got the National Council of Churches and 32 church bodies to send around messages... [12:00] I mean, I put together several meetings of the White House on foreign aid and trade and on peace issues, on consumerism. I mean, often within a matter of three or four weeks we would send out [night?] letters. We ended up with 35, 36 of the top legislators in America were there, and boy, when Jimmy Carter walked in and saw these people with staves (laughter) and vestments and cardinals (inaudible) -- it was heavy stuff.

KAPLAN: Yeah, yeah. (laughter)

TANENBAUM: And the others did not have the same effect. And I couldn't persuade Heschel of that.

KAPLAN: Do you think Heschel was, you know, politically blind?

TANENBAUM: I think he was more --

KAPLAN: He was (inaudible) --

TANENBAUM: -- sometimes innocent.

KAPLAN: Innocent.

TANENBAUM: Innocent, naïve, and --

KAPLAN: Yeah.

TANENBAUM: -- had this kind of purist notion of principle, that the issue was so great that the means for getting

there were less important.

KAPLAN: [13:00] Yeah. He was willing to compromise to be with some kind of people that he wouldn't agree with politically --

TANENBAUM: He just didn't think it was so terrible.

KAPLAN: -- and it might be...

TANENBAUM: He said if they could help him get done what he wants to get done -- he thought the issue was overwhelming, overpowering.

KAPLAN: Right. Well, see, I think what you reminded me of is the fact that Heschel saw the Vietnam War as affecting the entire society in a fundamental way. I think he was right.

TANENBAUM: Oh, no question.

KAPLAN: You know.

TANENBAUM: No question.

KAPLAN: So that --

TANENBAUM: No question.

KAPLAN: -- this is what... I think he really felt that there was a moral collapse in America.

TANENBAUM: You know, my approach has been that if you really want to bring about change then you've got to get to the National [Conference?] of Catholic Bishops. And what I thought was interesting about what Heschel was doing is Daniel Berrigan and Philip Berrigan were anathema to the

Catholic Bishops. So he had the advantage of a quick strike, but the loss was [14:00] that you lost the whole Catholic hierarchy. You lost the possibility of reaching the largest majority of 50 million Catholics in America at that time. And I just thought that was nice.

KAPLAN: That's very important. So what organization worked with the Catholic Bishops, if any?

TANENBAUM: Well, when I was with the Synagogue Council of America, I took those days the Catholics who weren't doing any really ecumenical work before the Vatican Council -- they just never took part in anything across faith lines. But after '65 they became a powerhouse.

KAPLAN: Oh, so they weren't reachable at the beginning, you know, in sixty-... When did Heschel start with the Vietnam --

TANENBAUM: Yeah, well, the Protestants were reaching (inaudible).

KAPLAN: -- Vietnam War protests? Probably '65, '66, right?

TANENBAUM: Yeah, that's true.

KAPLAN: It was after the Vatican Council.

TANENBAUM: Yeah.

KAPLAN: So he did have access to the Catholic hierarchy.

TANENBAUM: Would've -- yeah.

KAPLAN: Or at least he would've realized that this was a very

serious [15:00] political choice. So he would've known. He would've understood exactly what you were saying.

TANENBAUM: Yeah, well, he was terribly impatient about it. I mean, yeah, look, he was agitated. I used to feel guilty after talking to him about it, because I thought he really took this more seriously than I had.

KAPLAN: Now, he was emotionally agitated, physically and emotionally agitated --

TANENBAUM: Seized.

KAPLAN: -- obsessed, right?

TANENBAUM: Seized by the issue.

KAPLAN: Right. How do you explain that? Because I used to walk with him and Chavez from '65, '66, and that's all he would talk about, most of what he talk about.

TANENBAUM: I think he understood something that we didn't understand, as it was often the case.

KAPLAN: Which was what?

TANENBAUM: He understood that this was major miscalculation of judgment on the part of the American government, that it was leading to a war without victory, [16:00] that it was destroying the lives of thousands of young Americans. It was eating up billions of dollars of resources that America needed to do other things, for young people, for old people, for social concerns. I mean, I think he really

understood it. All the things we're saying now today, he was saying then.

KAPLAN: The war had destroyed Johnson's Great Society.

TANENBAUM: Sure. Already [in anti-poverty programs?].

KAPLAN: Yeah, exactly.

TANENBAUM: Yeah. And I think he understood that. I don't think I understood it at that time the way he understood it. I would listen to him, and I almost had a feeling there was a kind of excess involved, but he had a powerful intuition about the moral tragedy that this war represented, and I think he already had a sense of what it might do to society.

KAPLAN: [17:00] Very interesting.

TANENBAUM: He was right.

KAPLAN: Why do you think he was capable of this type of intuition? Because he was intellectually a brilliant man?

TANENBAUM: Well, no. I think his moral conscience was quite advanced. I mean, he had antennae on ethical issues few other people had, real antennae. But I also think his experience in Europe with governments -- governments that lie to their people, governments that manipulate, governments that destroyed their people, governments that created war for the part of (inaudible) -- there was a certain kind of realism or cynicism and distrust. And I

think he really was very Jewish in that sense, (inaudible) sense that (inaudible) princes (inaudible) [son of man?] (inaudible) [18:00] then there's no salvation. I think he saw through the lies that the presidents and the secretaries of state were feeding, and he saw the horrors, and he saw the killing, the killings and destruction that... So, I mean, he understood. As we understand it now, he understood it then. I mean, now, in retrospect, it's something he deserved much more credit than he got. He was maligned. People felt that he was naïve and completely innocent and was taken over.

KAPLAN: Egotistical?

TANENBAUM: Well, yeah, those people who didn't understand him thought it was a publicity rap, that he would do anything to get attention. But look, Heschel was egotistical. But there are constructive uses for ego. [19:00] First of all, I don't know of any Jewish leader who's not egotistical. It's a question --

KAPLAN: As opposed to the -- go ahead. (laughter)

TANENBAUM: No. No. No. Even -- I mean, the Christians... I mean, that's our human condition. I mean, it's personal gratification, and it's the distinction between -- I've always (inaudible) myself the extension between egoism and narcissism. Egoism is a desire to fulfill oneself and get

gratifications, and one's sense of self worth is confirmed by doing certain things, grandiose things. Narcissism is a self-preoccupation, where you want publicity for publicity's sake --

KAPLAN: That's right, yeah.

TANENBAUM: -- and you need a daily fix. I mean, I see people who if they don't get their name in the paper day after day after day become shattered, that I'm not worth anything. That's sick. [20:00] That's pathological. Heschel didn't have that kind of narcissism. I think he was egotistical. He had a right to be, because I think of the contribution he made. I think he also understood that unless you get publicity for certain things you simply will be ignored.

KAPLAN: That's right, that's right.

TANENBAUM: But there was a whole faculty at the Seminary. Nobody knew who they were. Therefore, their message never came across.

KAPLAN: That's right.

TANENBAUM: They still don't know who they are.

KAPLAN: Yeah, yeah. Yeah. To see him in the 1941, '42, '43, trying to affect the Jewish organizations before he became famous, or was even known, and then how he took off, well, at least in the '50s as a theologian and then in the '60s as an activist, [21:00] it's the same person, the same

person, you know, trying to be active.

TANENBAUM: See, but if he had only written his books and did not become a public figure, he would not have had the impact.

KAPLAN: No, he wouldn't --

TANENBAUM: We had a lot of scholars who wrote [very great?] books. Saul Lieberman wrote very great books. Spiegel wrote some very good things. Alexander Marx wrote the classic history textbook. You ask around America and ask them who these people were, and then you ask who Heschel was.

KAPLAN: Well, you know, I think people need to see scholarship applied. They don't believe that it has any value unless it's applied. And with religious scholarship, maybe that's a correct demand.

TANENBAUM: No, I think for our young people it's absolutely critical. They've got to know that being Jewish and studying Jewish things means something in the real world. It makes a difference.

KAPLAN: [Transform?] your life, yes.

TANENBAUM: It makes a difference. Being Jewish makes a difference. [22:00] And that's why the American Jewish World Service thing's become so important to the young kids, and working, you know, in the underdeveloped countries. We've got 27 projects going in third-world

countries.

KAPLAN: Really? Who administers that?

TANENBAUM: (inaudible) Philips helped organize it. I helped him organize it with another fellow (inaudible). But we have a new director now. And we're working in Mozambique and the Philippines and India. The Dalai Lama developed his whole attitude about Jews because of the work we did in South India.

KAPLAN: Really? Interesting. So the business of the Berrigans -- Heschel sacrificing himself -- see, in some ways Heschel's rhetoric is an extremist rhetoric, just as he describes the Prophet's rhetoric.

TANENBAUM: I'd call it apocalyptic (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

KAPLAN: Apocalyptic, yeah.

TANENBAUM: Prophetic. Prophetic and apocalyptic.

KAPLAN: So this is both an element of his personality [23:00], of a very intense personality, and an intuition of the significance of the event. We're talking about Vietnam affecting the entire American society, and America as the model, the moral model of the free world.

TANENBAUM: Right.

KAPLAN: And the civil rights movement as being representative of racism in the twentieth century that he experienced

himself. And Israel, in 1967, I think he really came to grips with the full significance of Israel --

TANENBAUM: Yeah, and (inaudible) Holocaust. Heschel --

KAPLAN: -- (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) -- and the Holocaust, right.

TANENBAUM: Heschel understood the connections.

KAPLAN: Yes. Yeah, that's why, you know, I -- I mean... This feeling of loss is a bit enormous. There's been no one around to succeed him [24:00] (inaudible). No one. (inaudible) a lot of lieutenants around, always doing bits and pieces of (inaudible) themselves. But he was unique. He was so generous, mainly because of his scholarship and his history. He represented three continents of Jewish organizations.

KAPLAN: That's right.

TANENBAUM: So... And I used to identify with him. I mean, I see the pain he went through, the suffering, humiliations he went through as people [couldn't stand?] the attention [they got?].

KAPLAN: Yes.

TANENBAUM: Well...

KAPLAN: But I just reread his biography of Maimonides, and yeah, it's almost a map of his own life. It's amazing to read it.

TANENBAUM: I don't know whether they burned his books,
burned Heschel's books. I'm not sure. They burned
Maimonides' books in Southern France.

KAPLAN: Yeah. [25:00] It's a very important book.

TANENBAUM: That's why I think what you're working on is
extremely important.

KAPLAN: I think it is.

TANENBAUM: Because it's a man. It's also a period of
history. And I think (inaudible) in many ways, except for
some conservative rabbis, mainly, and Christians -- [there
are?] more Christians that understood and appreciate
Heschel than Jews. Christian nuns are still reading his
books for meditative reading, still writing PhD theses
about him. There's probably a whole Christian library now
on Heschel.

KAPLAN: Yes. Well, there's a new book out. It came out last
year, and...

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