

CD-1107 Transcription

Address, "The Jewish-Christian Encounter: Disputation and Dialogue" at the University of Judaism [1]. 8 May 1978.

M1:

Starting on my left, and your right, the first seat is Jean Powell, co-chairman of Temple Sinai Adult Education Committee. Next to Mrs. Powell is Dr. Victor Goodhill, who's chairman of the Board of Overseers of the University of Judaism. Next to Dr. Goodhill is Rabbi Joel Rembaum, who I will introduce shortly. On my right in the first seat, Dr. David Lieber, who is president of the University of Judaism. Next to him is Rabbi Hillel Silverman, rabbi of Temple Sinai. Next to Rabbi Silverman is our guest speaker, who will be introduced shortly. And right behind me is Rabbi Schechter, who's dean of the University of Judaism, and in charge of the whole Adult Education Program at the University. Our procedure tonight will be that we will first have the lecture. We will then follow with questions and answers. As you came in, you were given a card. If you would write any questions on that card, [01:00] at the end of the lecture we will collect the cards and turn them over to the speaker. At the end of the question and answer period, you are all invited to the Ziegler Hall, right behind the sanctuary, for refreshments and socializing. We also will have there a book

fair, with dozens of books on Judaica available for purchase, for gifts, for your personal library, for mementos of the lecture, and in particular we have a set of books, copies of a book recently written by Mrs. Ruth Goodhill, entitled *The Wisdom of Heschel*, which I have read and I recommend to any of you who has not obtained it to do so. It's well edited, easily readable, and very thought-provoking, and it's available in both paperback and hardcover. Also for your information there will be a cassette tape [02:00] made of tonight's lecture, and if you want the cassette tape, you can purchase it after the lecture tonight.

Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan once stated that the ancient Romans regarded bridge building as a sacred pursuit. That is evident from the name they gave to the priest, whom they called "pontiflex," which means "bridge builder." A bridge unites those whom nature divides. Can there be a more sacred function in life? This is the subject that will be addressed tonight. And I ask Joel Rembaum, who is a registrar and assistant professor of Jewish history at the University of Judaism, is a product of the University of Judaism, Camp Ramah, and UCLA, as well as having been ordained at the seminary, to introduce our speaker for this evening. Rabbi Rembaum. [03:00]

Joel Rembaum:

Thank you. Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum is the National Interreligious Affairs Director for the American Jewish Committee. And he has been a pioneering leader and thinker in interreligious relations, social justice, and human rights movements during the past 25 years. He has been --

(break in audio)

-- he's foremost apostle to the Gentiles. Rabbi Tanenbaum was the key Rabbinic consultant during the Second Vatican Council, which led to the Church's historic declaration on the Jews. He has organized numerous pioneering institutes and seminars with every major branch of Christendom. And he has directed landmark studies of religious textbooks. He has written extensively in his field, and he has testified frequently before various Congressional [04:00] and Senate committees. He is a lecturer of international renown, and most recently served as the Jewish consultant for the *Holocaust* television program. I am proud to say that he is a fellow alumnus of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. I am also proud to say that I have gotten to know him over the past weekend that we shared at Camp Ramah in California, where I learned from him, and where I also learned that we share the common concern of continuing to

develop mutual respect and mutual cooperation between the Jewish and Christian communities. It is therefore my great pleasure to introduce to you Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum, who will speak on the subject, "The Jewish-Christian Encounter: Disputation and Dialogue." [05:00]

Marc Tanenbaum:

During the course of the past two or three months, I've had this kind of itinerary. I spent the first week of April in Spain, attending a conference of an international Jewish committee with representatives of the Vatican Commission on Catholic-Jewish Relationships. The week before that, I spend two days at an evangelical college, addressing 1,500 Evangelical Christian students and their faculty [06:00] of Southern Baptists. Prior to that, in the month of February, as I shall allude to later on, I had the privilege of taking part -- well, privilege may not be the right word -- but in any case, had the responsibility of taking part in a fact-finding mission with a group of prominent American citizens, among them James Michener, two Undersecretaries of State, an American ambassador to Ceylon and Sri Lanka, Bayard Rustin, a Catholic Monsignor representing Cardinal Cooke of New York, and a Protestant scholar, on a fact-finding mission to South Vietnam and to Indochinese refugees in that troubled part of the world. And prior to that, I had a

meeting at the [07:00] National Council of Churches, with representatives of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and the National Council of Churches to discuss the NBC-TV program *The Holocaust*. All of that is by way of saying that I have a number of reasons for wanting to be grateful to Dr. David Lieber, Rabbi Schechter, my good friend and colleague, and at times classmate, Rabbi Hillel Silverman, as well as to my other friends here on the platform, but I'm especially grateful to the University of Judaism for making it possible for me to meet with Jews once in a while.

But I told some of my friends this weekend, in particular Dr. Victor [Goodhog?], that if this meeting tonight goes well, we may organize a special Los Angeles branch [08:00] of the National Conference of Jews and Jews. (laughter)

It's really a great privilege for me to be here this evening, especially to renew friendships with so many of my colleagues and friends. And to greet once again Dick Volpert, and my associates of the American Jewish Committee who are here this evening, as well as our Christian friends who have done us the honor of being with us tonight. I have been asked, as you have heard from Professor Rembaum, to talk about the subject of the relationship of Judaism and Christianity, Jews and Christians,

in the world today. There is a conventional way of dealing with [09:00] that material, conventional even in academic terms. That is to say, I have had occasion, as others on this platform have had, to write systematic treatments of the historic encounter between Jews and Christians across the last 1,900 years. The love-hate relationship that existed, and perhaps was inevitable, in a family relationship out of which both contemporary Rabbinic Judaism and contemporary Christianity have derived. And then one can treat the basic religious questions, what Jews and Christians have in common, in terms of their attitudes toward God, [10:00] toward man, toward society, toward history, toward such central religious themes as sin, atonement, redemption, Messiah, conversion, Kingdom of God. It would be a temptation to try to treat those themes. But very frankly, I would be less than candid with you if I did not tell you that from my own perspective, and out of my own recent experiences traveling in various parts of the world today, that those issues in a certain sense are permanent and universal issues that we can examine and explore and discuss, hopefully with increased irenicism and mutual respect, in a way that has not [11:00] been the case frequently in the past.

But the truth of the matter, I do not regard that as being as of vital and as central a concern as to what, to me at least, is a

far more urgent and compelling question that I think many of us must at one time or another ask ourselves. And if we do not ask these questions of ourselves, I can assure you that our children, especially those on college and university campuses, or those in the streets, who are trying to make their way through the kind of world in which we live today, that for many of them, to the degree that they want to think at all [12:00] about religion or religious questions, to them, it is the supreme issue. And to put it directly, and quite simply, it is the question, "What difference does it make?" To be a committed Jew, or a committed Christian, in the kind of world in which we live today, does it really make any difference at all? Or are we, especially those above the age of 30, engaged almost in unconscious ways of simply repeating habitual patterns of the past inherited from parents, from grandparents? Do we repeat [13:00] ritualistic ways of our group, simply because it's the appropriate social thing to do? Or do some of us continue with our commitments of going to temple and synagogue and churches out of perhaps some reasons of guilt, not wanting to abandon the group, especially in the case of the Jewish community at times, when Jews feel that they're living in a world besieged by problems and Skokies and neo-Nazis? Decent people don't abandon their brothers and sisters when they're under fire. If those are the elements which contribute to the dynamic of our continued

involvement and commitment and identification with either Judaism or Christianity, then I'm afraid [14:00] they're not very optimistic reasons for looking toward the future. And it seems to me that one really has to penetrate beneath the forms and the languages and the symbolic systems in which we engage to try to find what is really vital, what is really relevant in these traditions, that deserve to have a compelling claim on our conscience, and a sufficient commitment to want to seek to perpetuate the central values and ideals, both of Judaism and Christianity, in the world of 1978, in a world of nuclear proliferation, in a world of increased terrorism [15:00] and violence. In a world in which there is an epidemic of religious, ideological, political conflict on every continent of the Earth. I'd like to give, if I may, from my own personal perspective, some indication as to how, for myself, I approach the issue of what difference it makes, for me at least, to regard a vital linkage, a commitment to the traditions of Judaism and as I believe, the many thousands of friends who are Christians, here and other parts of the world, who are alive and vital to the real issues [16:00] of this moment in the world. But I think maybe as I perceive it, they're understanding of the relevance of their own commitments. I think as many of us know, both in Judaism and certainly in the New Testament tradition, the vehicle by which great insights and truths have been

communicated across millennia has been through the instrumentality of the parable. In Judaism, through the *midrashic* tradition, the telling of a tale, an account, of a story of a life, of an event which illuminates a great truth or an ideal or a value. I want to share with you [17:00], as a way of my trying to respond to the question, of what difference does it make to be a Jew and a Christian in this world, at this moment in human history, several modern parables, as I have seen them and experienced them.

The first began in mid-February for me. I was asked by the International Rescue Committee to join this group of 14 American leaders, to go on a fact-finding mission, to study the problem of Vietnamese boat people in Southeast Asia, as well as the plight of some 100,000 Indochinese refugees, most of them located in Thailand. We were on a two-week investigation, [18:00] and we went to Hong Kong, to the Philippines, from there to Singapore. We were to go to Malaysia. There was no room in the inn at Malaysia because I was a Jew. And at that predominantly Muslim country, even a Jew on a humanitarian mission had no place to stay, apparently. And so the Christians on our delegation decided unanimously without my presence, that they would not contribute to an American citizen being reduced to a second-class citizen, and so they refused to go to

Malaysia, and then told me of their decision. And so we rerouted our trip, and went to Indonesia, another Muslim country, with a large refugee population. And from Indonesia [19:00] we went to Thailand, where the largest number of refugees live.

In Jakarta, Indonesia, we clambered aboard a number of leaky boats; one of them contained 18 Vietnamese refugees. Twelve of them were children, most of them beneath the age of 15. They had sailed for four weeks across the tumultuous waters of the South China Sea, in search of haven. They left Vietnam because they refused to become collectivized. They were free people [20:00] seeking to preserve their democratic rights, their freedom of expression, their freedom to be themselves, their freedom of religious expression. And they left everything behind, went on these boats, boats that you would not use during the summertime to go up a lake here in California. And they patched it together, and for those four weeks they sailed across the South China Sea, and by the fourth week, they had no food left. They ate seaweed and drank from the brine of the ocean. And all of them became almost deathly ill. And everywhere they went, they were turned back. Japan turned them away from the shores. [21:00] They were turned back from Singapore, that wanted to refugee problem. They were even turned back from Malaysia, although Malaysia has taken in a number of refugees. And as we

sat and talked with the head of the family, who guided this ship with a ten-cent compass through the sea, they were preparing to go to Australia, if need be. And as we talked with the head of that family, he said something that touched an incredible Jewish resonance for me. I would hope a Christian resonance as well. He spoke English, and said as terrible as it was, having to live off seaweed, water, watching your children vomit up every day, [22:00] sick, worse than that, the greatest trauma of all was the fact that as they sailed across the South China Sea, more than 20 maritime ships, large tankers, loaded with cargo, passed them by, made detours away from them, in order not to have to be bothered with that cargo of human beings on that ship. And it was only because of the change of heart of some Minister of Immigration in Jakarta that they were allowed to land in the port of Jakarta, and finally get medical care and some food and clothing for the children. I went on this tour, I don't want to presume to make any impression on you [23:00]. It's not a matter of being some kind of *tzaddik*. I have a busy schedule, as almost every one of you here has. Certainly as my colleagues in the rabbinate have. When the head of the International Rescue Committee came to me, Leo Cherne, and said this is what is happening to the boat people. Every month, 2,000 of them are leaving South Vietnam in search of freedom and haven, a place to live in plain, simple, human dignity. And 40-60% of them are

drowning in the ocean, in the sea. And this is what is happening with the maritime companies turning away from them, and their countries, these great countries of national liberation movements, that are creating new societies and new people, are allowing them to die, as if they were vermin. [24:00] Not human beings.

And I was overwhelmed by another image that made the decision for me; I did not make the decision myself. All of a sudden, 1939 just flooded my consciousness. There was a ship called *St. Louis*; I was a child. It left an indelible impression on me. 1939, a ship, *St. Louis*, 950 people who happened to have been Jewish men, women, and children, escaped by the grace or the mystery of God from Nazi Germany, visas in their hands to enter Cuba. They sailed not across the South China Sea, but across the torturous North Atlantic Ocean, in an unseaworthy ship. They came to Cuba after incredible heroism [25:00]. There was no room in Cuba. And so they went to Brazil, and Brazil turned them away. And they came to the great United States of America, to Miami. "The quota for Germans is filled. Turn them away." They went back to Hamburg, Germany. Within a month, most of the Jews on the *St. Louis*, the leaky tub *St. Louis*, were taken to Hamburg, and within a month, the majority of them were burned to death in Auschwitz.

While we were in Jakarta, there was another ship, a larger ship. Ambassador [Susselein?] and I [26:00] climbed aboard the Jacob's Ladder and talked to the captain of the ship, who spoke French. He was from Cambodia. And we spoke together, "Why did you leave?" "*Pour la liberté.*" And then he began to tell us what we had known as an abstraction, and began to tell us in detail and chapter and verse. Last year, two to three million Cambodians were massacred, systematic destruction of a people. It may well qualify, in the technical sense, as genocide. The Khmer Rouge set about to destroy the old order and to create the new man, perhaps the new Aryan-type man. And in the process, two to three million people were absolutely exterminated, [27:00] actually exterminated, before the eyes of the world. You will search the pages of every debate of the United Nations over the past 18 months, and you will not find a single line of protest or condemnation of the wholesale massacre of two to three million human beings, that took place not in silence and not in ignorance, but before the consciousness of the entire human family.

One more parable. Three months ago, a man came into my office, literally broke into my office, without making an appointment. A black man, short, squat, [28:00] a very large head, magnificent

blazing eyes. His intelligence radiated out of his face. He came over to me and said, "My name is Godfrey Binaisa. I was the former Attorney General of Uganda." As it turned out, Godfrey Binaisa was the second most powerful man in the government of Uganda, under President Obote. He had linkages throughout that entire country, lawyers, police. Binaisa said, "I had to see you, Rabbi, because you are a Jew, because you are a member of an American Jewish Committee that is concerned about human relations and human rights and civil rights. [29:00] And because I believe that you as a Jew, and the Jewish people at large, will understand better than anyone else, what is happening to my people in Uganda now at this moment." And he sat down and began to tell me two stories. When Idi Amin had come to power, he brought in 12 missionaries into his office, Anglicans and Roman Catholics. "You see, my friend, Uganda is overwhelmingly a Christian country. It is 85% Christian. Roughly half of them are Anglican Episcopalian; the other half are Roman Catholics. There are a number of Presbyterians and Baptists. Idi Amin is a Nubian tribesman, brought in with a group of Muslim Nubian tribes from the Sudan, who have taken control of Uganda, and control that predominantly Christian society by terror and police tactics." And on this day, as Binaisa unfolded [30:00] the story, 12 missionaries were brought in to the President for Life's office. And Idi Amin was preparing to liquidate them. One of the reasons

that was given for his plan to liquidate them is that these missionaries read from the Psalms and the Lectionary on the Sundays before, in which they read from the Psalm of David, Psalm 89, in which God speaks of making a covenant with David and the children of Israel. It is an everlasting covenant, as permanent as the rising of the sun and the setting of the moon. It is a covenant with Israel forever. And the KGB of Idi Amin, who were present in their churches, said that was Zionist imperialist propaganda. And unless they stopped, they would be subjected to discipline. And Binaisa said he turned over to Idi Amin [31:00] and said --- Binaisa, who happens to be the son of an Anglican pastor, who was 85 years old in Kampala -- said to Idi Amin, "If you as much as lift a finger against the hair of the head of one these Christian missionaries, I will organize a *coup d'état* against you." And as Binaisa told me this story, Idi Amin took out a gun, put it at his head, and said, "Mr. Binaisa, you, your wife, and your seven children had better be out of Uganda within the next 12 hours, or I will send you out of here in boxes." They left, they fled to Kenya, then went to London. His wife and children were put on welfare in London. He came to the United States, where he came desperately asking for help. He was about to be thrown out of his apartment because he was penniless, and we tried to help him, and succeeded in getting some money for him, so that he could pay rent, and buy some

food. [32:00] Binaisa said, "You know, it is just like what happened to the Jewish people in the late 1930s and early 1940s. The whole world knows what is going on in my country; it is in magazine stories, photographs, radio, television. Within the past three to four years, 300,000 black Christians have been systematically murdered and mutilated. In stories as savage as anything one heard out of the Nazi period. I wouldn't want to tell you some of the episodes that I have been told by Ugandan refugees. And," he said, "as the case with the Jews [33:00] in the '30s and '40s, it is the silence of a cemetery. And the most tragic thing of all," he said, "the deaths are terrible, and the dead will not be brought to life, at least not in our lifetime. But the worst thing of all, Rabbi," Godfrey Binaisa said, "is the awareness that you have been abandoned; you and your people have been abandoned by the entire world. That your life means nothing to all the nations of the earth, to the churches of the earth, to the labor unions, to the universities." Look again at the United Nations for who has spoken for the black Christians of Uganda. Look at the record of the American government, with all of the human rights discussion, finally two weeks ago, President Carter, [34:00] under enormous prodding, said something about, something should be done. I have a letter in my bag, which I brought with me from Senator Mark Hatfield, an Evangelical Christian, who almost in the language of Binaisa,

asks if we will help them organize a boycott against Ugandan coffee, to try to bring an end to the massacre, which goes on at this very moment.

My friends, I was not interested in telling you horror stories. But I think the time is very late in the day. As one looks around the world, indeed one can see signs of great compassion and caring in the world. And I would be the last among any of us to ignore the fact that especially the United States of America and its people and its government [35:00] has been among the most generous of the nations, literally in human history, in providing food and clothing and shelter for the suffering, starving people of the earth. And indeed, to the degree that one can be, I am proud of the role that the Jewish community has played side by side with Catholic relief service and church world service. First of all, in helping hundreds of thousands of people in Nigeria Biafra, whose lives we saved, by providing food, and as recently as two years ago, we, a group of Catholic, Protestants, and Jews, changed the foreign policy of the United States, in making available four and a half million tons of food that the United States Congress voted down, because members of Congress said the American people are not interested in giving away food to the starving, hungry people in the Sahelian zone of West Africa, or in India and Pakistan and Bangladesh. Father

Hesburgh and [36:00] Cardinal Cooke and Pat Young of the National Council of Churches and myself went up as a delegation and said to them, you underestimate the generosity of the American people. And we set out to organize our constituency to tell them that the Congress of the United States was prepared to sit by, because they had no constituency. While our silos were groaning with grain that time. And they changed their policy. And four and a half million tons of food went through the silos out to these people; there are now hundreds of thousands of people living today in those countries because a group of Christians and Jews cared. So I don't ignore for a moment that generosity and compassion which is very deep in the ethos of American democracy and in the conscience of American Christians and Jews.

But my friends, just as one must be concerned about health when one finds pathology in a person, [37:00] dysfunction in a person's life system, a person is threatened not by good mental health or good physical health. It is when there is dysfunction and pathology that one has to become concerned. And there is deep social pathology in the world community today that has to be acknowledged at the very outset, and connection needs to be made between that and what we profess to stand for as Jews and Christians, and as Americans committed to a democratic ethos.

Especially after a bicentennial year that we talk about. There is, in the world today, if you will read Nathan Glazer's essay in *Encounter* magazine, as he did a study of community conflict in Asia and Africa and Latin America and the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries, on the European continent and even in the United States. [38:00] American Indians, Chicanos, illegal aliens. There is a growing wave, with all the generosity, a growing wave too of callousness to the value of human life, to human pain and suffering. There is in fact a movement of dehumanization in the world, which I believe represents the central moral, human, and spiritual challenge to the central affirmations of Judaism and Christianity. The story of the Exodus of the children of Israel from Egypt -- their wandering through the wilderness and coming to Mount Sinai to receive the Decalogue [39:00] is not a Bible story. Nor is Calvary, for Christians, just a dramatic Bible episode. I am afraid we have made Exodus, Sinai for Jews, Calvary for Christians, have become trivialized. Even with the lovely institution of the Passover Seder, when families come together, the chicken soup and the matzoh balls, and the matzoh and the *chadein*, and the family togetherness. There is such *Gemütlichkeit*. But that is not what Exodus, nor Sinai, or actually historically, existentially. If you will read Professor Ephraim Speiser's essay, "Between Mesopotamia and Egypt," you

will become aware [40:00] of what the power of that tradition was all about. Speiser writes that in ancient Egypt, human life was worthless. The Pharaoh was a divine king. He was the source of all law, never its servant. If you look at the statues of the Pharaoh in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, you will see him portrayed with rays of light emanating from his head, portrayed almost as a sphinx, with Egyptians coming to bring sacrifices to this divine emperor. It was this divine emperor who determined that the first generation of newborn Israelites, male Israelites, were to be cast into the Nile. Genocide, wipe them out. The emperor's policy. Wipe them out. in that world of ancient Egypt, [41:00] the children of Israel were the outcasts; they were the untouchables in that society. The taskmasters could flog them without any accountability. They had to make bricks without straw. They were expendable people. Surplus people. And somehow, as one penetrates beneath the language of that account of *Yetziat Mitzrayim*, that extraordinary scenario of how these slave people, these outcasts of history, suddenly encounter something greater than themselves that they had ever experienced, that in their liberation from physical oppression and persecution, and from the spiritual darkness of animal worship and idol worship in ancient Egypt, they encountered the Holy One of Israel, who was experienced in that liberation. From slavery and actual oppression. And they go [42:00] through the

wilderness, form transformed, and at Sinai, suddenly we hear as they stand before Sinai, as one writer declares, in that incredible scene, where that old awe and majesty of something greater than they had ever experienced before in their lives, they encounter God, who is revealed to them as moral will, ratified in the Decalogue. They say, "*na'a'seh v'nishma.*" They accept the moral code. It is ingrained in their flesh. And after they agree, after they develop a consciousness of who they are and what their messianic mission is in the world, the Bible declares, clarifies, that self-understanding that transformed them, "*V'atem t'hu-li mamlechet kohanim v'goy kadosh.* You shall be [43:00] unto me a kingdom of priests and a holy people." That's an incredible divine-human scenario. Yesterday, they were slaves, the lowliest of the low, the untouchables, lower than the untouchable castes in India. And suddenly, by this kind of transformation, this recognition that something encountered them, to which they responded, and that at the heart of that was a Decalogue of moral will and moral obligations and duties. They became aware of a new dignity. And all of them were lifted up to become a kingdom of priests, a holy people, each of them standing in equal dignity before the eyes of God. If I may presume to say this, I understand that for Christians, Calvary is a suggestion in that modality, that humanity was the potential of being graced [44:00] by divinity. By a sense of

being greater than their own human condition alone. It was at that moment that the conception transformed the consciousness of mankind; Exodus and Sinai became a revolution in human consciousness that changed decisively the course of human history. It was in fact a breakthrough in the history of ideas, of the perception of the value of human life. Thereafter it became inexorable, irreversible, that human life was created in the sacred image of God, that every human being is of infinite worth and infinite dignity. That every human life was precious.

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