



THE JACOB RADER MARCUS CENTER OF THE
AMERICAN JEWISH ARCHIVES

Preserving American Jewish History

MS-603: Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum Collection, 1945-1992.

Series A: Writings and Addresses. 1947-1991

Box 2, Folder 46, "Seeking a Just Society", 31 March 1975.



NATIONAL CATHOLIC EDUCATION ASSOCIATION
Atlantic City, N. J.
March 31, 1975

"SEEKING A JUST SOCIETY"

Address by Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum, National Interreligious
Affairs Director of the American Jewish Committee

OUTLINE

I - MAILLAGE OF CIVILIZATION (Robert Heilbroner, An Inquiry Into
the Human Prospect), There is a feeling that great troubles and
changes loom for the future of civilization as we know it. Our age
is one of profound turmoil, a time of deep change, and there is a
widespread feeling that the world is coming apart at the seams.
LESTER BROWN, In the Human Interest, writes, "We may be on the
verge of one of the great discontinuities of human history."

TIME Magazine: "Our nightmare fantasies have become tangible. An
undertow of hopellessness and helplessness tugs at every conversation.

We have gone through a "drubbing of history", and a barrage of
confidence-shaking events have filled us with a sense of unease
and foreboding during the past decade or so. No doubt foremost
among these has been the experience of the Vietnam war, an experience
that has undermined every aspect of American life -

our belief in our own invincible power, our trust in our government
(Watergate, CIA, FBI, IRS), our estimate of our private level
of morality (widespread corruption on many levels of government,
business, law, social services).

But the Vietnam war was only one among many such confidence-
shaking events. The explosion of violence in street crime, race
riots (South Boston), bombings (ATT) bizarre airplane hijackings,

shocking assassinations (CIA lists) have made a mockery of the TV image of middle class American gentility and brought home with terrible impact the recognition of a barbarism hidden behind the superficial amenities of life.

We switch on the evening TV and learn what's going to hit us next on the head - a hijacking, a murder, a rape, or some other daily terror. These things profoundly affect our outlook.

We also experience the failure of the present middle-aged generation to pass ~~and~~ ^{along} its values to its children -- the ubiquitous use of drugs, the extreme sexual relation, the defiantly unconventional modes of dress, the unprecedented phenomenon of "dropping out", especially among the children of the most successful classes.

All these developments have added to the feeling of disquiet and discontent, the characteristic mood of our times.

ATTITUDINALLY, there is a loss of assurance with respect to the course of social events. Security was founded on the Victorian belief in "progress" suffused for some with expectations of religious ~~and~~ or moral perfectibility. That sense of assurance and control has vanished in the face of inflation, racial hatred, world poverty, and the decline of the cities into wastelands. There is a gnawing suspicion that nobody is in charge, that nobody is equipped to deal with the problems that are rushing in on us, from inflation to the arms race and nuclear weapons proliferation. Bureaucracy appears to be "rule by nobody".

The "civilizational malaise" ~~and~~ is a reflection of a crisis in values. It reflects the inability of a civilization directed to material improvements - higher incomes, better diets,

Tanentam / 3

miracles of medicine, triumphs of applied physics and chemistry -
to SATISFY THE HUMAN SPIRIT...THE VALUES OF AN INDUSTRIAL CIVILIZATION
WHICH HAS FOR TWO CENTURIES GIVEN US NOT ONLY MATERIAL ADVANCE BUT
ALSO A SENSE OF ELAN AND PURPOSE, NOW SEEMS TO BE LOSING ITS
SELF-EVIDENT JUSTIFICATION. There are doubts and disillusion as
to that civilization.

Something about capitalism is proving to be a hollow victory.
And something about socialism is proving to be an empty ideal.
Socialists are disillusioned with the what they have got. Capitalists
are not nearly as sold on the whole business as they once were.

And both capitalism and socialism sit on the same base -
the industrial process. The MAGIC OF THIS PROCESS WHOSE END IS GOODS
HAS BEGUN, JUST BEGUN ~~WEXRNBKX~~ PALL. PEOPLE ARE WONDERING IF WE HAVE
SPENT THE PAST ~~XEM~~ TWO OR THREE GENERATIONS CHASING THE BLUEBIRD OF
CONSUMPTION.

A LOT OF PEOPLE HAVE SEEN THE BLUEBIRD UP CLOSE AND IT'S GREAT
TO HAVE TWO CARS AND A SWIMMING POOL. BUT THERE ARE DISAPPOINTMENTS.
After you have made some money and acquired somethings, and after the
initial excitement has passed, life goes on just as bewildering as
it always was, and the great problems of life and death once again
come to the fore. We reemerge from our love affair with goods and
know that consumption is not the answer, and we ask ourselves what is.

Tanenbaum/5

suffering torture and even death.

The situation in Asia has not been better. We know too little about events involving the Chinese people. The military activities of Communist China against the people of TIBET in the 1950s deprived them of life and land and drove their spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, from their midst. Not far away, about 200,000 East Pakistanis were massacred by their own Muslim brothers. As a result, the sufferings in Bangladesh continue unabated. Millions of lives were lost in Vietnam and in Cambodia, and the end of massacres is far from concluded. It is despairing to contemplate the fact that so much of the once productive lands and people of Southeast Asia have been destroyed by weapons produced in "friendly" United States, as well as in Communist countries who are ostensibly engaged in detente.

In Asia, the ordinary hazards of torture and massacre due to ethnic and religious differences and political conflicts tend to be overwhelmed by the severer pressures of poverty and overpopulation. As noted in the report of Amnesty International "in societies where the problems of malnutrition, disease and illiteracy have not yet been solved, torture and the denial of human rights may stand out with less clarity than in more economically developed areas; in most Asian countries, these problems are further compounded by population pressures, and in some by deep ideological division." (p.138)

In Indonesia "the situation is aggravated by a low popular level of legal awareness which means that many victims are deterred

from describing their treatment not only through fear, but also through ignorance of the fact that they have basic rights which are being violated. Conversely, in the case of Indochina, the availability of evidence is determined not only by the gravity of the situation but also by the 'international character of the conflict.' (p.139)

In India, along with keen sensitivity to human rights there has developed "an increasingly rigorous program of counter-insurgency" that has jailed many thousands of suspected Marxist-Leninists. This is in reaction to "selective assassinations of landlords, policemen and other agents of the state machinery" which began in the West Bengal countryside in 1967 and shifted to Calcutta in 1970." (p.143) Going beyond the Amnesty report, however, conditions in India appear almost beyond outside help so long as there is continuing growth of her population, and general backwardness in technology, agriculture, education, initiative for self-help, and poor use of the resources of the nation. The great wealth of the land is limited to an elitist fraction ~~of the population~~ whose concern for the nation as a whole appears to leave much to be desired. Although the caste system has been outlawed, its influence persists in the life of the people. Disease and malnutrition keep the life expectancy low, a condition that encourages bearing more children to assure care of the aged.

Moving into the European sphere, although conditions in Communist countries have improved substantially since the Stalin era, the use of torture and other modes of physical violence against the human person have been far from eliminated. In the Soviet Union in particular, the practice continues of forcibly committing to psychiatric hospitals individuals who are declared by government officials to be

Tanenbaum / 7

dissenters or who wish to exercise their UN-validated "right to leave". The reciprocal bombings of civilians by Catholic and Protestant extremists in Ireland depresses religious people everywhere.

Massacre and torture gripped innocent civilians of both the Greek and Turkish communities in Cyprus. The plight of hundreds of thousands of refugees on Cyprus cried out for some of the attention and amelioration that seemed to be reserved exclusively for Palestinian Arabs. Muslim Kurds also suffered at the hands of their Muslim co-religionists in Iraq and Turkey. The complex problems of the Middle East, compounded as they are with the problems of the legitimate right of self-determination for the Jewish people of Israel and for the Palestinian Arabs, are bedeviled by a repetitive cycle of PLO terrorism and the ensuing Israeli reprisals in self-defense to prevent further massacres of innocent children as in Masalot, Namaraiya, and elsewhere.

In the Americas, where with a few exceptions governments tend to be dictatorships, police brutality and harsh prison treatments remain a traditional and largely accepted part of the social structure. Torture continues to be used in Chile and is still widely used in Brazil despite pledges by the governments to halt the barbaric practice. According to a report compiled by Brazilian Roman Catholics and by victims and attorneys, over the past nine years thousands have been subjected to beatings, electric shocks and other torments, at the hands of the military security forces. The story as it applies to some of the Indian tribes of Brazil appears to add still larger dimensions to the tragedies and national problems.

The story varies only in degree in the other nations of South and Central America. In the United States, while the ~~xxxx~~ policies are certainly intended to promote civil liberties, peace and

Tanenbaum/8

prosperity in the world, the revelations of Watergate and the Senate hearings regarding the planned assassinations by the CIA and the invasion of privacy by the FBI and the Internal Revenue Service with their data banks and compilations of "enemy lists" left millions of Americans feeling increasingly insecure about the threats to their constitutional democracy.

The mood of pessimism, even despair, that has emerged over the human prospect in the face of these assaults against human life, is further compounded by several universal problems that show no signs of going away in the foreseeable future:

First, there is the world hunger and population problem. There are, despite the recent heroic efforts to provide massive food supplies, some 400 million people in Asia, Africa, and Latin America who are starving or suffering from severe malnutrition. Despite its great wealth, in the United States some 14 million people still are the victims of poverty and millions still go to bed every night hungry. It is estimated that several million people will die from hunger during the coming year.

The world's present economic condition, Robert Heilbroner writes, resembles an immense train, in which a few passengers, mainly in the advanced capitalist countries, ride in first-class coaches, in conditions of comfort unimaginable to the enormously greater number crammed into the cattle cars that make up the bulk of the train's carriages!

Second, there is the arms race and the nuclear weapons proliferation. In 1973, \$240 billion were spent to train, equip, and maintain armed forces. The international trade in non-nuclear arms

Tanenbaum / 9

now tops \$18 billion annually - up from a mere \$300 million in 1952, and a jump of 550% since 1950. Last year (1974), after processing nearly 14,000 export license applications from private firms, Washington's Office of Munitions Control approved sales to 136 countries totaling \$8.3 billion - representing 46% of total world sales.

The Soviet Union is second in international arms sales - \$9 billion since 1950, \$5.5 billion in 1974. The Middle East is the biggest customer of both the United States and Russia - first Iran, then Israel, ~~xxx~~ next Saudi Arabia (\$756 million). Russia's latest arms deal with Libya will further increase the USSR's stake in the Middle East arms game, which is characterized by cheap credit and cut rate prices. France is third with a sale of \$3 billion to 80 nations, and Britain follows with ~~\$1.5~~ \$1.5 billion.

In 1973, Third World nations imported \$7.7 billion, with Iran in the past two years spending \$7.6 billion in the U. S. alone. (Pentagon officials joke that the Persian Gulf will sink under all the arms that it is buying.)

Impoverished India has doled out \$3 billion to the Soviet Union for arms in the past three years. Pakistan, scrimping to find \$250 million for a new fertilizer factory, spends at least that much on weapons annually.

The arms trade can scarcely advance peace. In each of the 60 military conflicts since the end of the World War II, imported weapons were used almost exclusively, and those arms have brought not only violence and destruction but death to more than ten million people. (The MIT Center for International Studies).

Tannenbaum/11

Third, the advent of nuclear weapons with their potential for "irreparable" damage, as contrasted with the much more restricted and more easily repaired damage of most conventional wars, has created a whole new technology of war in the coming decades. Unleashing the warheads now possessed by the United States or by the Soviets could bring fatalities ranging from 50 to 135 million people for the U. S. alone. Beyond that, many small or relatively poor nations, even, even though they possess no fully developed industrial base or highly skilled labor force, can gain possession of nuclear weapons - witness China. Poor nations can be expected to obtain nuclear weapons as a by-product of the atomic power plants that many of them are now building or contemplating, and it is quite conceivable that some may use these as instruments of blackmail to force the developed world to undertake a massive transfer of wealth to the poverty-stricken world.

What relation do these developments have to the Nazi holocaust?

It is evident that we live in an Age of Terror. There is not a continent on the globe that is not despoiled by terror and violence, by barbarism, and by a growing callousness to human suffering and pain and threat to human existence. At the center of the human crisis today is the fundamental depreciation of the meaning and value of human life. In theological terms, the Biblical affirmation that each human life is created in the sacred image of God and is therefore of ultimate worth and preciousness is being battered from every side.

It is my conviction that this erosion in the belief of the sanctity of human life is one of the decisive black legacies bequeathed by Nazi Germany to mankind. By and large, with rare exception, the overwhelming majority of citizens of the Western world, in the first instance, and their dominant institutions have avoided ~~the~~ confronting the magnitude of evil incarnate in the Nazi holocaust, and have therefore failed to learn how to cope with forces and structures of dehumanization that are being ~~re~~ replicated in many parts of the globe.

The Nazi campaign of genocide against the Jewish people was unique and in many ways unprecedented. Yet the Nazi trauma must not be allowed to become "a Jewish obsession" for the fateful meaning of that holocaust is of ultimate importance to the future capacity of mankind to understand itself and to acquire the resources to cope with the challenges to its survival.

As Prof. Lucy Dawidowicz has written in her recent study, The War Against the Jews, 1933-1945 (Holt, Rinehart, and Winston 1975), the uniqueness of the Nazi holocaust against the Jewish people lay in the fact that "The final solution of the Jewish Question" was not just another anti-Semitic undertaking, but a metahistorical program devised with an eschatological perspective. It was part of a salvational ideology that envisaged the attainment of heaven by bringing hell on earth." Andre Malraux called it, "le retour de satan."

To attain the goal of a heavenly hell on earth, the Nazi war killed over 35 million people, more than half of them civilians. The ~~human~~ human cost of the 2,101 days of war surpassed the losses of any previous war in the world.

The slaughter of six million Jewish men, women, and children - two out of three European Jews - was the most massive destruction and disastrous catastrophe in Jewish history. Though one-third of the Jews survived, though Judaism and the Jewish people outlived the Third Reich, the Germans succeeded in destroying irrevocably the life and culture of East European Jewry. Even the destruction of the Second Temple, the greatest Jewish national trauma, did not ~~xxxxx~~ place the physical survival of Jews in such jeopardy as did the Nazi holocaust. (In 70 CE, only about one-quarter of the Jews lived in Palestine, the rest were scattered throughout the diaspora. In 1939, two-thirds of the Jews lived in Europe, three-quarters of them - one-half of world Jewry - were in Eastern Europe.)

Never before in modern history, Prof. Dawidowicz writes, has one people made the killing of another the fulfilment of an ideology, in whose pursuit the means were identical with the ends. The German state, deciding that the Jews should not live, arrogated to itself the judgment as to whether a whole people had the right to existence, a judgment that no person and no state have the right to make.

And in that reality lodges the universal implication for the whole of mankind. The German dictatorship involved and engaged the entire bureaucratic and functional apparatus of the German state and the Nazi movement and employed the best available technological means. The "final solution" destroyed East European Jews. In doing so, it subverted fundamental principles and every system of law that has governed, however imperfectly, human society for millennia.

A hitherto unbreachable moral and political barrier in the

Tanenbaum/14

history of Western civilization was successfully overcome by the Germans in World War II, and ~~that~~ henceforth the extermination of millions of citizens or subject peoples will forever be one of the capabilities and temptations of government. In a period in which a faltering economic system has condemned millions of able-bodied ^{workers} ~~men~~ to redundancy, in a time in which global overpopulation contends with scarcity of food supplies and other shrinking resources, the prospect of disposing of surplus population becomes a temptation more likely to be enhanced than diminished. Witness the calm, objective manner in which "triage" is discussed today in learned circles.

All this is to say that Auschwitz has enlarged our conception of the state's capacity to do violence. The Nazi period serves as a warning of what we may become if we are faced with a political crisis of overwhelming proportions.

Usually progress in death-dealing capacity in the 20th century has been reckoned in terms of technological advances in weaponry. Too little attention has been given to the "advances" in social organization that made it possible to cross residual moral barriers and massacre millions. To understand these advances it is necessary to consider the role of bureaucracy in modern political and social organization. Writing in 1916, the great German sociologist, Max Weber, said:

"When fully developed, bureaucracy stands under the principle of *sine ira et studio* (without scorn or bias). Its specific nature develops the more perfectly the more bureaucracy is dehumanized, the more completely it succeeds in eliminating from official business love, hatred, and all purely personal and irrational elements which escape calculation. This is the specific nature of bureaucracy, and it is appraised as its specific virtue."

Both the Nazi and the non-Nazi bureaucrats insisted that anti-Jewish measures were to be taken in a disciplined, systematic, and methodical manner - as in the manufacture of a Leica or a Mercedes.

Max Weber's writings on bureaucracy were part of a larger attempt to understand the social structure and value of modern civilization. According to Weber, modern bureaucracy can be understood as a structural and organizational expression of related processes of secularization, disenchantment of the world, and rationalization.

The secularization process involves the liberation of ever wider areas of human activity from religious domination. The disenchantment of the world occurs when "there are no mysterious forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, ^smaster all things by calculation. Rationalization involves "the methodical attainment of a definitely given and practical end by means of an increasingly precise calculation of adequate means."

In the disenchantment of the natural and political orders, the domain of the sacred was increasingly relegated to the heavenly sphere. A beginning was made toward that secularization of consciousness which finally culminates in the most extreme form of secular disenchantment - the dehumanized, rationalized forms of modern political and social organization, including bureaucratically administered death camps.

In the Biblical world all human activity stands under the judgment of a righteous deity. In the modern world, the supramundane deity has disappeared for all practical purposes: persons are alone in the world, free to pursue any end they choose, including mass murder, "by means of an increasingly precise calculation of

Tanenbaum/16

adequate means."

Nevertheless, before persons could acquire the "dehumanized" attitude of bureaucracy in which "love, hatred, and all purely personal, irrational and emotional elements" are eliminated in one's dealing with one's fellow persons, the disenchantment process had to become culturally predominant: God and the world had to be so radically disjoined that it became possible to treat both the political and natural orders with uncompromisingly dispassionate objectivity. This occurred with the triumph of certain traditions of Protestantism and its insistence upon the radical transcendence of God.

In so doing, the path was opened to the 20th century's radical secularization of consciousness in which the question of eliminating "surplus people" lost all religious and moral significance and became only a question of bureaucratic problem-solving.

Contrary to popular opinion, as Prof. Richard Rubenstein ~~has~~ ^{has} noted, the Nazi holocaust was not carried out by a group of irresponsible criminals on the fringes of society who somehow forced the German people to pursue a policy of ethnic hatred that was wholly at odds with the great traditions of Western civilization. Indeed, we are far more likely to understand the extermination of Europe's Jews if we regard it as the expression of some of the profound tendencies of 20th century Western civilization.

In an earlier age, most men and women genuinely stood in awe of the judgment of divinity, of a ~~max~~ natural and God-ordained law binding upon all persons and nations, but is this any longer true, especially for the decision-making elites? Does not the history of the Nazi holocaust and the fate of its perpetrators demonstrate

Tanenbaum/17

that there are absolutely no limits to the degradation and assault technicians of violence can inflict upon men and women who lack the power of effective resistance? (Reflect here on why Israelis - especially those who survived the holocaust - insist upon safe, genuinely secure borders, conditions of guaranteed non-belligerency, and will not, cannot afford to rely on rhetorical flourishes of Arab leaders about vague assurances of peace and co-existence, particularly when these are broadcast to the Western world but are withheld from domestic Arab populations. What trust can any open-eyed Israeli or anyone else put in such assurances of public relations while all the Arab actions move in the opposite direction of rendering Israel impotent by trying to reduce it to pariah status through elimination from UNESCO, the WHO, the ILO, and quite possibly from the UN itself?)

It is true that a few miserable SS camp guards were incarcerated after World War II, but the government and corporate bureaucrats who planned the entire operation and really made it possible returned very quickly to places of dignity and honor with German society. If there is a law that is devoid of all penalty when violated, does it have any functional significance in terms of human behavior? Is not a law that carries no penalty functionally equivalent to no law at all? Even if it can be demonstrated to "exist" can it not be safely ignored? We are sadly forced to conclude that we live in a world that is functionally godless and increasingly lawless?

The process of secularization thus ends where it began. In the beginning it involved the demystification and limitation of a sovereign's power. In the end the secular state has dethroned all mystifications of power save its own. The state thus becomes the only

Tanenbaum/18

true God on earth. It is possessed of the ultimate power of divinity, the power to decide who shall live and who shall die. No cold-blooded contemporary of David need worry about a modern Nathan the Prophet proclaiming the ultimacy of God's law. This does not mean that the sovereign is above limits; he or she can be limited but only by the laws of persons acting in concert, at best a tenuous guarantee of a humane society.

Blasphemous as are the prospects for countering these forces of dehumanization in the world, "we need not complete the task," as Rabbi Tarphon admonished, "but neither are we free to desist therefrom". In concert, if we are to learn from the Nazi holocaust and not be doomed to allow its repetition, we must attempt at the very least the following:

- 1) Work for the completion of the judicial instrumentalities called for by Article 6 of the Genocide convention, in the form of an international penal tribunal for trying those who are accused of genocide attempts.

- 2) Work toward ratification of the Genocide Convention by the United States Senate. There is hope that there will be favorable action in 1975.

- 3) Work toward educational development and communication among peoples to reduce the abrasive effects of "differences". This should involve us in a massive effort to establish a "new humanism" that seeks to restore the Biblical value of the infinite preciousness of each human life that must be appreciated as an end in itself and never as an object for somebody's project or program. It must also

engage us in an urgent and sustained intellectual and educational effort to elaborate a theology and ideology of pluralism which presupposes the right of each religious, racial, and ethnic group to define itself in its own terms and to be accepted unconditionally by its own self-definition. Here Christians and Jews have the decisive contribution to make to the building of the ideological foundations without which a stable world community cannot come into being.

4) Work toward making the economy of each nation as self-sufficient and stable as possible in the sense of not perpetually requiring relief support. Inextricably linked with such an effort is the control of the arms race on an international scale and the rational reordering of priorities so that billions wasted on arms can be profitably applied to the crying human needs of the hungry, the illiterate, the diseased, the homeless.

