



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 3, Folder 23, "Moral and Spiritual Dimensions of the Food Crisis", September 1978.

Sept 1978

"MORAL AND SPIRITUAL DIMENSIONS OF THE FOOD CRISIS"

RABBI MARC TANNENBAUM, National Director Inter-Religious Affairs  
American Jewish Committee

Thank you Brother David, I am really very glad to have the opportunity to be with you here today. One of my main reasons for accepting Brother David's invitation to St. Joseph's Spiritual Life Center is because periodically, when you live in a great metropolis, it is important to breathe fresh air and to refresh oneself in a rural area.

I want to devote the few moments we have together in trying to examine the concerns that all of us share about the problems of hunger in this country as well as many parts of the world from a perspective that is frequently discussed, but in fact has become a kind of piety.

It is a perspective that has to be recovered if we are to sustain any moral will in the months and years ahead in coping with what is to be one of the fundamental moral, human and spiritual issues of our lifetime.

Let me begin by sharing with you a few modern parables. They grew out of recent experiences that make the subject of world hunger and food policy for me, and my colleague with whom I have been associated, more than another do good" cause - more than another "moral fad" which Americans are very capable of experiencing more than another "radical chic" and "moral spasm".

In a society governed by mass media there is a tendency for everything to become a twenty four hour sensation. This leads to a distortion about the complexity and the seriousness of the issue in which we are engaged.

Moral Parables - This past February I received a call one day from the chairman of the International Rescue Committee, Dr. Leo Cherne, asking if I would join him and fourteen other Americans to go on a fact finding trip to southeast Asia. He wanted us to undertake a study of the situation, indeed the plight, of tens of thousands of Vietnamese boat people, and Cambodian refugees.

Like everyone else I am busy with meetings and conferences, and initially I offered a conventional resistance, "Well some other time, we can do it later in the season".

Dr. Cherne began to describe the nature of the problem of the thousands of people who are leaving South Vietnam, seeking to flee for freedom as they were being forcibly collectivized. At that time, in February, 2500 a month was the average leaving the country on leaky boats. Whole families, sometimes twelve, fifteen people on a boat almost the size of a canoe - a boat that neither you or I would use to ride up the St. Lawrence River. They set out on two and three week journeys across the

tumultuous South China Sea, and I saw them in the harbor of Jakarta, Indonesia after their journey. Many of them had come with food supplies which had been exhausted by the second week and they ended up eating seaweed and algae from the sea and drinking brine, and it is a miracle of God that they lived at all to reach port.

Sixty percent of the Vietnamese boat people since 1975 have been sinking into the Indochina Sea and perishing. They have been turned away from the shores of those great advanced countries like Japan, which did not want to take on these problems and from Singapore which is the great economic cross center of the southeast. We met with a minister of immigration who stated it in one sentence, "We don't want refugee problems."

As a result of the message which has been given out by a number of these countries, all of the great cargoships, the majority of them from France, Germany and many other countries have stood by. After we left the Phillipines, I saw with my own eyes huge cargoships passing by a boat with Vietnamese people. Crews came up to watch them as if they were the afternoon entertainment or the late, late show -- and literally watched them sink.

Yesterday, in my office, a man by the name of Professor Zake, a former Minister of Education in Uganda, came in to see me. For the past months, I have been meeting with a group of Ugandan refugees headed by a man named Godfrey Binaisa, who is the former Attorney General of Uganda. He was the second most powerful man under the Government of President Abute who was set aside by Edi Amin. Edi Amin kept Dr. Binaisa on in the government because he was such a major influence.

One day Dr. Binaisa learned that President Edi Amin had brought 12 Anglican and Roman Catholic missionaries into his office. Uganda incidently is 5% Christian, half Anglican and roughly half Roman Catholic. Edi Amin had threatened to kill the missionaries. They were engaged in subversive activities - feeding the poor, taking care of the hungry, and preaching the gospel. They were guilty of dedicating themselves to human life.

Dr. Binaisa, as he told the story, came to a meeting and said, "If you as much as lift a finger against the head of one of these missionaries, I will organize a coup-d'etat against you".

Edi Amin told him that if you are not out of this country within twelve hours, you and your wife and your seven children will leave in boxes. And he left the country. He came to the United States penniless.

Three hundred thousand black Christians have been destroyed over the past four to five years in Uganda.

The silence of the world about the Vietnamese, about 2 to 3 million Cambodians who have been massacred -- not thirty years

ago, as six million Jews were massacred and 35 million other people were killed in World War II under the Nazi's -- two to three million Cambodians have been destroyed before the eyes of the world during the past 18 months.

Go to the United Nations and see if there is a single resolution saying, "NO, YOU CANNOT DESTROY HUMAN LIFE!"

In Lebanon last week thousands of Christians and Moslems have been wiped out. In Nicaragua today there are now thousands of people being destroyed and impoverished.

My point is there is a need for a great deal of generosity and good will and caring and compassion in which many of us are involved. But I tell you, relative to the magnitude of human suffering that is taking place throughout the world today in every continent of the earth, what we are engaged in is literally a drop in the ocean.

THERE IS AN EPIDEMIC OF DEHUMANIZATION IN THE WORLD TODAY. A CALLOUSNESS TO HUMAN SUFFERING, TO THE VALUE OF HUMAN LIFE, THAT UNLESS IT IS FACED IN THE MAGNITUDE OF ITS CHALLENGED TO EVERYTHING THAT JEWS AND CHRISTIANS AND DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY STAND FOR, UNLESS IT IS UNDERSTOOD AND RESPONDED TO -- THERE IS A VERY REAL QUESTION AS TO WHETHER WE WILL HAVE THE CAPACITY, MORALLY, TO SURVIVE THE 20th CENTURY. AND MORE SERIOUSLY WHETHER OR NOT WE DESERVE TO SURVIVE THE 20th CENTURY.

I say that as a Jew and as a Rabbi.

I say that because, and here I want to be very careful about this, not to exploit it, because I approach this issue as I approach the Holocaust, with awe and trembling.

I have lived through the trauma of the 1930's.

As great as was the human tragedy of the systematic murder of six million of my brothers and sisters, I believe far more traumatic for my people was the consciousness that we were abandoned. The feeling of being turned away from, by the rest of mankind, by government, by churches, by labor unions, by universities. The sudden awareness that your life is worthless, that you mean nothing to anybody!

I AM AFRAID THAT THAT IS THE DARK LEGACY THAT HAS SURVIVED THE NAZI EXPERIENCE TODAY AND HAS BECOME UNIVERSALIZED. THE ABILITY OF THE HUMAN FAMILY TO STAND BY SILENTLY IN THE FACE OF THE MAGNITUDE OF THE DESTRUCTION OF HUMAN LIFE IN THE WORLD TODAY IS A MORAL OBSCENITY THAT CRIES OUT AGAINST THE HEAVENS!

It throws us back to asking ourselves a question if we really are not engaged in a kind of self satisfying role play - "I am doing nice things therefore my conscience is clear".

WHO ARE WE! WHAT DO WE STAND FOR? WHAT DO WE REALLY STAND FOR? ON WHAT DO WE STAKE OUT EXISTENCE AS PEOPLE? AS JEWS? AS CHRISTIANS?

I would suggest to you as speaking from my own perspective as a moral theologian and historian that somewhere along this journey of self examination we have got to come back to certain fundamentals which are at the heart of our identity. They are symbolized in these metaphorical ways, Exodus, Sinai and Calvary.

I am not going to give a bible lecture. I believe that it is important for us to know where we stand in the moral universe of the Judeo-Christian tradition of Western Democratic society.

Exodus, Sinai, and Calvary were not bible stories. Unfortunately, that is the way frequently they are taught to us. When children come home from school with comic books, with pictures of the Exodus and the teacher says, paint the Red Sea red, put brown hair on the pharaoh.

A study by Professor Ephraim Spizer, one of the great biblical historian and archeologists of this generation, points out that Exodus was the transformation in the conscienciousness of human kind, as was Sinai, and Calvary.

If you look into the world of ideas in Egypt and Mesopotamia human life in that ancient world period was meaningless. Human beings were chattel.

The drama of the story of the children of Israel resides in the fact that they were the untouchables of ancient civilization. That they were people who could be enforced to make bricks without straw, to build those pyramids at the merciless cost of any number of human lives. Their first born children could be cast into the Nile--genocide of a whole generation without the flick of an eyelash. Because in ancient Egypt a pharaoh was the source of all law, never the serpent. And human life was expendable. And the power of that idea of that whole mythic sense of what that represented was that here was this people the lowliest of the low, the expendables in human history, suddenly undergoing this powerful experience of encountering the Holy One of Israel.

The intervention of the Divine in their lives -- experiencing something greater than they have ever experienced before in their normal ordinary experience. And in the process they are liberated from physical oppression, injustice, persecution, and from spiritual darkness.

These people were the lowliest of the low, the outcast of history, lower than the untouchables of India go through this transforming experience in the wilderness and are brought to the foot of Mt. Sinai standing before that old awe and grandeur in that desert wasteland. And they encounter something which they call the Divine One who manifests himself in their lives as moral will, moral responsibility.

The code of the ten commandments symbolized for them their responsibility to something mightier than themselves that must become manifest in that other tablet their responsibility for one another. And they say "yes" to that. They accept it.

They ratify that covenant in their flesh, and at that moment the bible declares, "Ye shall become unto me a kingdom of priests and a holy people".

It is an incredible Divine-human scenario. Yesterday they are slaves beneath human dignity, and by accepting this moral responsibility for the welfare of one another, for the welfare of society, for the events of history to lead this society until the coming of the kingdom they become conscious of the whole new vision of themselves. They are now all priestly people. A kingdom of priests, a holy nation. That is to say that all of them become conscious of the dignity of every human life that every human life is of infinite value created in the image of God, that no human being is expendable for anybody else's program or revolution or ideology. That every human being is an end in himself and herself, every life is of infinite value and preciousness.

That is the keystone. And that conception became the foundation around which the whole rest of that early society in Palestine was constructed.

It was not temporarily relevant, as it is for many of us, a kind of moral spasm, where you have a high, a peak experience for hours. Wow! he did something great today -- and then go on to life as usual and society goes on in its normal chaos and absurdity.

Because now from that experience, recognizing that they were transformed and made a fundamental commitment to try to create a society whose values will become real. They moved on as they came into Palestine to institutionalize that vision of moral obligation for one another into an incredible institution which probably would be voted down by congress today if it were put before it. It was called the Jubilee Year.

The Roman Catholic Church observed the Jubilee Year as Holy Year 1975. It is based on the biblical tradition in the book of Leviticus of Jubilee Year.

Jubilee Year has four fundamental approbations. Its basic program consisted of these commitments which were carried out not in pieties, not in liturgy alone on Saturdays or Sundays but in an actual social program for the transformation of the life of the entire people. And the first commitment in the Jubilee Year which took place on the 49th year, following a period of sabbatical years, was that all slaves in that society were let go free. No human being was allowed to be a slave for another human being because the bible declared that "you are slaves unto Me the Holy One, you are not slaves to one another". And the first action that took place in the creation of that biblical society was the manumission of slaves. All slaves were allowed to return to their homes so that they could reconstitute their human dignity as free people.

Secondly, there was an economic liberation that took place. All of the land was returned to its original owners so that there could not take place the disparity of wealth in which there would be an over abundance of property and land in the hands of a few and vast numbers of the population of Palestines would be rescued from indentured poverty and slavery. And so in Jubilee Year it was an automatic principal that land was returned to its original owners and there was an equalization process that took place to bring about an end to the cycle of poverty so that the next generation of young people would have an equal chance to live lives not only of spiritual, human dignity but of economic well being as well.

There was also an ecological liberation which the Jubilee Year mandated and that consisted of the fact that during the sabbatical year every seven years, and then at the peak of the Jubilee Year the land was allowed to lie fallow. You were not to exhaust creation. Creation was a gift of God. And you have responsibility for the ecology, for the creation which is given into your hands for service, not for raping and exploitation. And so in that 49th year coming after the seventh year, you did nothing with the land you let it grow fallow so that it could renew itself. Recreate itself. Come back to its original richness, creativity. And fascinating, the Rabbis mandated that in that fallow year, all of the fences in the land of Palestine were taken down and whatever grew by itself, whatever apples or pears or cereals that grew in the land was open for anyone who is hungry to come and take. And as the bible says "The stranger and the alien, have free access. For unto me is the land given. You are here, as settlers, not alternate owners of the land". And in that country, at the height of the observance of the Jubilee Year, no one every went hungry. The land was open to anyone who starved. No one was allowed to go hungry because that was an injustice against the dignity of every human being. And subsequent to the whole biblical period the Rabbis who came out of the people, they were not a class unto themselves, sitting behind walls of temples and synagogues They came out of the people, lived with the people, raised disciples among the people. The first institution they created in the villages and in the towns throughout the whole of Palestine, there was not a single village that was without a box that was set up to provide alms for hungry people, and in the marketplace

there was a bin set out with food so that anyone who passed through the village would have food to eat. Any sojourner was provided with two meals a day. No one was to go into the sabbath without having provision made for three meals. It was a living out of the notion, that a people, each of whom had dignity, a society of a priestly people, had to treat each other with a dignity of priests, care for one another, show compassion and justice.

I guess that must sound like a bible story to us today in the kind of world in which we live. I think often about whether it might be possible even to think of approximating the minimal objectives of that whole biblical tradition of Sinai and Exodus and Calvary, Calvary which I, if I may presume to say this as a Jew, represents a continuation of that biblical tradition in which Jesus of Nazareth was raised and which taught that humanity can be raised by divinity.

I wonder how much religious people who use these words week in and week out, are prepared to apply them to the reality of the kind of world in which we live today. Look at the incredible contradiction that takes place. We live in a world, if we look at the last report of the World Hunger Conference which took place in Mexico City on June 12 - 14 of this year. With some of the decent developments that have taken place since the beginning

of the World Food Conference - the worlds undernourished people according to the World Food Conference of this June, the worlds undernourished people increased in number from about 400 million at the beginning of this decade to about 455 million in mid decade.

Almost all of the new hunger was located in the food priority countries where the level of human nutrition has deteriorated. The general picture is pessimistic with the most vulnerable groups continuing to be preschool and school aged children and younger women. Up to one-third of the world's children die from malnutrition and disease before age five. Twenty five to fifty per cent of those who survive, experience severe or moderate protein energy malnutrition. Each year there are at least 100,000 new cases of blindness in children caused by vitamin A deficiency. About 200 million persons suffer from endemic goiter related to iodine deficiency, millions from nutritional anemia related to iron deficiency.

All of that is taking place at a time in which the nations in the world last year spent 400 billion dollars on nuclear armaments building bigger and better ICBM's. We already have the capacity the Soviet Union and the United States alone today to destroy each other 200 times over without adding another single ICBM or guided missile. At a time at which the arms race has virtually become insane, where nations are balancing their budgets -- France balances its economy on its sale of arms - it is now handling out nuclear stations as if they were lollypops or toys. The Pakistanian Ambassador came to my office two years ago to find out where he could get 250 million dollars in the United States to buy a nuclear breeder reactor because India had already blown up an atomic bomb and they wanted to show that they were also a great power. Pakistan could not find an

appropriate amount of money to build fertilizer stations, which were absolutely essential in meeting the needs of the poor and hungry. Libya is now purchasing a nuclear reactor from Pakistan. There will be, by the end of 1980, 336 nuclear reactors throughout the world. A group of disarmament specialists at Harvard a year ago November said, that if the present pattern of nuclear poliferation continues, it is inevitable that by the end of the century ther will be nuclear holocausts breaking out in many parts of the world.

The question is priorities. How does one bring some kind of rational, sane judgement to bear on these kind of mindless patterns. I am for defense but I have no illusions about what is required to stand up against the Soviet Union which is as imperial as any coloniest empire which it condemns. But having said that, there is somewhere a middle ground where a world which has billions and hundreds and billions of dollars for weapons of destruction and death somehow has got to find a way to provide billions of dollars even tens of billions of dollars, for food, for medicine, for clothes, for health care. Robert McNamara returned recently from a tour of the underdeveloped countries. He told a group of us that he sees whole generations of children in Asia, Africa and Latin America who will be born stunted, mal-nourished and brain damaged as a result of inadequate protein.

We had a meeting at the White House July 31 with the President of the United States. The Thursday before that meeting on Monday, I received a call from a member of the staff at the White House. A Foreign Aid bill for 8 billion dollars which provides the basis for Americas aid to developing countries, much of it economic aid, food, and developmental aid, agricultural development, rural development as well as military assistance. The \$8 billion Foreign Aid bill was in great trouble in congress. Congressmen were saying as they have been saying since the beginning of the foreign aid measure in the 1950's.

"We have no constituency for foreign aid."

"Nobody comes to us writing letters saying that we ought to support this "do good" measure - taking care of people out there when we have our own problems to take care of we have inflation and unemployment."

But we are still the wealthiest nation in the world. And we are still overeating. The hottest thing in town in New York today is the Scarsdale Diet. There is so much obesity in America it is probably ranking as one of the first ten problems of survival in America. I wish I had made an investment in grapefruit. The Scarsdale diet is selling grapefruit and everybody I know in New York City is eating grapefruit and protein bread - I lost 12 to 15 pounds myself in the first two weeks of July. It is an incredible diet. But with all of our problems we are still the wealthiest nation in the world, we are still consuming 40% of the earths raw materials in this country alone. We are 3% of the worlds population. And so when I was told by the White House persons, the Thursday before the action in the house on Monday, it was becoming pretty desperate.

they did not know whether the foreign aid bill would pass. And there were two amendments that would cut the foreign aid bill by 18%, which would have been horrendous. It would have destroyed the World Bank and the INF, the International Monetary Fund. But all the other plunging depended on the American contribution to the fund. I helped them bring together a group of religious leaders who might be able to try a last minute, last ditch effort to see if we could salvage the foreign aid bill and try to keep the 18% cut from taking place.

I was frankly troubled about the fact that I received a call at the eleventh hour, but I decided that if the White House called you don't exactly treat it as if it were the American Express Company. So I said, "Yes, Sure." Then they asked me who I know in the Christian community with whom we worked and our ecumenical Jewish-Christian dialogues around the country who are involved in overseas aid. And over the telephone they said they didn't have time for lists, and then I gave them a list of thirty Roman Catholic, mainline Protestants, Evangelical Christian, Black and Hispanic, Jewish, and Greek Orthodox Leaders. Incredible, they got on the telephone right after that and called thirty people. Monday at 1:00 P.M. in the White House, twenty-six of them turned up. Bishops, Archbishops, presidents of denominations, and executive secretaries. It was the nicest ecumenical Bar Mitzvah party I have seen in a long time. Everybody was hugging everybody else. It was like anticipating the Camp David spirit.

In any case we spent 2-1/2 hours with the President, and his advisors in order to get a deeper grasp of the content of the Foreign Aid Bill and then we sat down to do our work. We drafted a statement, a copy of which I have here signed by 26 leaders including Dr. Jimmy Allen, President of the Southern Baptist Convention, Archbishop Takavos of the Greek Orthodox Church, Bishop Broderick of Catholic Relief Services, and Bishop Kelly of the National Council of Churches. People of all denominations were involved - black Bishops and a few Rabbis.

We took that statement over to everyone in congress that night and then we sat down, delegations, Catholics, Protestants, Jews, all brands, all varieties, all colors and all creeds. They were there. We went around talking to congressmen and we said to them-

"Don't underestimate your constituency. Don't underestimate or sell short the generosity of the American people. The problem is the American people do not know the magnitude of the suffering of the world as a result of the deficiencies in food, clothing and medicine. If the American people have any sense that this aid is going to go through and reach people and help save human lives, the American people will not only give but they will sacrifice."

The foreign aid bill, my friends, the next Monday was passed by the largest vote that any foreign aid bill has ever been passed in the United States Congress. It is now coming up before the Senate and we are going to take that road show out again very shortly!

What I am trying to say is that, on every issue in which the American people understand that the value of human life is at stake, and where they know that their involvement and their response can make the difference in saving human lives, I have no question that the response will be as generous and as committed as it has been in the past.

We saved Europe with the Marshall Plan, which was a much greater investment than we are being asked for today.

The crucial difference is what you are about at this conference today.

The difference is leadership. A leadership that cares, that is committed, that is not simply a twenty four hour sensation, but is prepared to be there for the very long haul, to do its homework, and above all to act out its commitments to the value of every human being created in the sacred image of God, the responsibility for society, and our involvement in the events of history.

You can read in Leviticus - In our traditions we say.

"He who helps saves a single human life is regarded as if he had saved an entire world."

That much is at stake in a decent and humane food policy.

THANK YOU

