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ADDRESS

ON THE 75th ANNIVERSARY OF THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

by Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum

Washington Hebrew Congregation
May 15, 1981

It is a very great privilege to be invited to speak from this august pulpit and to be invited by the distinguished rabbi of this congregation, Rabbi Joshua Haberman, who is not only one of the foremost rabbis in this country, and who not only has made, in his own person, some of the historic contributions to the advancement of understanding between Christians and Jews as well as between Christians, Jews and Muslims. It is particularly gratifying to be here and to share in his friendship, which is symbolized in a very special way this evening by the fact that this is the first time in my life in thirty years of public service that I have come to a synagogue where a rabbi has bestowed upon me a tallis that is absolutely color-matched to my tie. You think of everything here! I am happy to renew my acquaintanceship with Rabbi Joshua Weinberg and the Cantor and other friends in this congregation.

There is something deeply symbolic and profoundly important that the American Jewish Committee comes together at the gracious invitation of this synagogue and this congregation, to mark in a spirit of awe and reverence and gratitude the observance, in this way, around this theme this evening, of the 75th anniversary of the founding of this great American and great Jewish organization.

The symbolism rests in part in the fact that we cannot begin to comprehend the

historic power of what we have heard not just from the lips but from the heart of Father Edward Flannery, one of the great pioneers in advancing understanding between the Catholic community and the Jewish people who, thank God, increasingly finds larger and larger numbers of Catholic priests and nuns and Protestant ministers and Evangelical Christians sharing the views that he has set forth with such clarity and feeling this evening.

We cannot begin to comprehend the significance of this moment--indeed, we dare not risk the sin of taking it for granted--unless we locate what is happening here this evening and what has been happening increasingly in every city in the United States, especially since the end of Vatican Council II in 1965, against the background of the founding of the American Jewish Committee.

As many of you know, the American Jewish Committee came into being in 1906, in response to a pogrom that began in Kishinev, Bessarabia and spread throughout Russian and Eastern Europe. The Kishinev pogrom was inconceivable and could not have taken place without decades and centuries of Russian Orthodox Christian teaching about Jews and Judaism that made the pogrom almost inevitable. What preceded the Kishinev pogrom was a Count Pobyedonstzer. What preceded that pogrom was a Russian Orthodox monk named Rasputin. What preceded that pogrom the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, all of which taught, century after century, all of the classic themes of contempt of the Jewish people: They are a deicide people. The Jews murdered God. They are the enemies of God and humanity. They are a wandering people because God has repudiated them for not accepting Jesus as the Messiah. They hold to a religion which has become moribund, which has been superseded by the emergence of Christianity.

All those centuries of teaching about Jews and Judaism, denying its legitimacy and its

validity, began a process of dehumanization that made it possible for Russian Cossacks to tear through a village and rip Jews up as if they were tree saplings because they were not human beings. Jews had become in the eyes of too many of their fellow citizens some kind of inorganic matter without purpose, without dignity and without honor.

I will never forget coming into a session of the Second Vatican Council in 1965 with my beloved colleague and friend, Zachariah Shuster, who is here with us this evening, and watching Cardinal Bea rising in the aisle of St. Peter's Basilica, reading one of the early drafts of the Declaration on Non-Christian Religions. "This sacred Synod searches into its mystery, finds itself rooted in the spiritual patrimony of the Jewish people and the Synagogue." The draft went on to declare that "the Catholic Church repudiates anti-Semitism by anyone, at any time, at any place." It called for biblical studies and theological dialogue between Jews and the Catholic people in order "that it may lead to fraternal dialogue and mutual respect."

The Council brought together 2500 Cardinals, Archbishops and Bishops, with Catholic theological experts from the entire inhabited world, from all of the continents of the earth. In addition to the other major issues they dealt with, the assembly concentrated on facing, for the first time in 2000 years, the sources of anti-Semitism in certain traditions of Christian teaching, and made a decision once and for always to uproot the sources of anti-Semitism in Christian teaching. That was the greatest seminar in Christian-Jewish relations in 2000 years.

How its fruits are all about us. Father Flannery has referred to the fact that there have been a number of significant events since that time -- official implementation of guidelines coming from the Catholic Bishops of the U. S., France, Holland, Belgium, and Germany; an

array of books and new catechisms; and new teachings about the Holocaust and Israel all over the Catholic world. One evidence of the power of what has been happening is that this Easter past a Roman Catholic priest in Cincinnati picked up a document issued by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops through its Secretariat for Catholic-Jewish Relations on the eve of Holy Week and sent it to every Catholic priest in his Diocese and to every Catholic parish. The document establishes guidelines for preachers on how to proclaim the Passion and death of Jesus without prejudice. It was a document written by Dr. Eugene Fisher, now the inheritor of the mantle of Father Flannery as Director of that Secretariat, and in this document listens to what this priest on his own initiative spontaneously wrote to all of the priests in his Diocese. "Often in the past, Lent and especially Holy Week, have been times of fear for Jews living in Christian societies. In Eastern Europe this was the season for pogroms--anti-Jewish riots and massacres. Almost anywhere Jews and Jewish children might be subjected to insults and the spiteful cruelty of Christians. What can we as Christians, and especially of proclaimers of the Gospel, do to insure that never again will the proclamation of the Lord's Passion become a message of hate rather than redeeming love, that at the very least we can purge our preaching and prayer of every way of speaking and every idea which might nurture the false notion that the Jews are in some particular way responsible for the death of Jesus?"

That is an omen for the future and there are now, thank God, thousands of omens like that all over the United States -- in Germany, in Italy, in France, in Belgium, and even beginning in Latin America.

It is not only a matter of the Roman Catholic community. This past December we held our second national American Jewish Committee conference with Evangelical

Christians--all of those people who are involved in the discussion of the Moral Majority today. There are the Fundamentalists like Bailey Smith who, in their incredible cultural and spiritual illiteracy about Jews and Judaism, these people who know nothing about Judaism have the arrogance to declare God does not hear the prayers of the Jews. If one showed Bailey Smith a Bible written in Hebrew, very possibly he could not read a word of the sacred text on the raising of Jesus, and yet he has the incrediblechutzpah to tell us Jews what God's mind is all about. They are involved in the mainstream Evangelical movement and include among them Southern Baptists, Presbyterians, Methodists, and others. In our conference in Deerfield, Illinois this past December we discussed everything--anti-Semitism, conversion, proselytization, Jews for Jesus, Messianism, covenant theories, and Israel. At the final session the editor of a leading Evangelical journal in America, Christianity Today, got up and read what he called "the Evangelical Manifesto on Jews and Judaism." When he came away from that meeting he decided to devote the major part of the issue of the magazine to be published on Yom Hashoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day, as an act of identification with the Jewish people. In his editorial, which occupied four pages of the Journal and which was read by almost every Evangelical pastor in America, he wrote the following: "As Evangelicals demonstrate in tangible ways, there are parts of the Evangelical community that will have nothing to do with anti-Semitic actions. They will declare a crucial truth to the Gentile world at large: To attack Jews is to attack Evangelicals, and such attacks will be resisted by Evangelicals as attacks against themselves."

Can you imagine such words as these? Can you imagine what would have happened in Germany had there been Father Flannerys and Vatican Council Declarations and statements on Passion Plays saying that it is impermissible to teach the deicide charge

-- the dehumanization of Jesus that has been part of the teaching of contempt. What might have happened, what might have been the course of history in Germany had this gone on -- 300, 400, or 500 years ago?

It is not inconceivable that many if not most of the six million Jewish men, women and children might be with us tonight. We have hardly begun to comprehend the extraordinary developments of recent decades because they are such a reversal from our past experience with Christians. In the minds of a great many Jews today, especially those of us who are sons and daughters of Eastern European immigrant parents -- my parents came from the Ukraine, came here after a pogrom in which my uncle was destroyed before the eyes of an entire Jewish village -- in the minds of most Jews out of that historic experience, Christians and the Catholic Church have been the enemy. For 2000 years pogroms, Inquisitions and Crusades have made that our dominant perception of the Christian world. You may find the contemporary reversal difficult to believe but listen to it, because the case is unfolding before our eyes.

In this world in which there is so much violence; in which Jews are so vulnerable; and in which even Israel is so vulnerable -- an Israel which was to bring about the end of the exile existence of the Jews; and which is so isolated in the United Nations, as if it is now to become the corporate ghetto of the Jews -- in this world the greatest allies of the Jewish people today in combatting anti-Semitism are the Roman Catholic Church and Christian people of good will in every city and state of the United States and most of Western European civilization.

It will take time for that new image to set in for us. But I can tell you today, my colleagues in the American Jewish Committee and every city of the United States, that for

the first time in 1900 years we are engaged in dialogue, not only in formal relationships but in deep friendship and collaboration and mutual respect, with Catholics and Protestants and Evangelicals and Greek Orthodox. It's a whole new reality in our experience. Part of our difficulty in sorting out the imagery is that for a great many Jews the past is present. This may be especially true of those who have lived through the 1930s and 1940s periods and were themselves caught up in the fever of Marxist, Messianic and Utopian apocalypse. Given the history of the past, the hoped-for Marxist future was to represent the redemption of the Jews. Marxism would save us in that future Utopian classless society and in that society prejudice and anti-Semitism were to disappear.

But everything today has turned upside down. Today the greatest sources of anti-Semitism, not only in the formulation of anti-Semitic ideological doctrines, but as the greatest distributors and purveyors of anti-Jewish hatred in the world, are the Marxist Utopia of the Soviet Union, its allies in Eastern European countries, the PLO and the Third World nations of the Arab League.

See how dramatic the shift has become in our lifetime. Sheik Yamani made a speech two weeks ago in New York City before 800 oil executives, bankers and captains of industry. Look at the speech carefully. He literally took the pattern, the scenario of the Christian Passion Play, and secularized it. And in that Passion Play he describes how there could be a millennium of peace between Saudi Arabia and the United States. All that stands in the way of that redemption is the State of Israel. If Israel can be isolated from the mainstream of human society somehow, peace will prevail and all that stands in the way in terms of the United States and Saudi Arabia having the optimum relationship is the Zionist lobby and Jewish power in America. That is to say that Jews are collectively responsible for

the absence of peace in the Middle East and the rest of the world. These people, the Jews, Yam ami declared, crucified peace and stand in the way of universal redemption.

We have come far. We have still farther to go. I simply want to conclude by saying that what I perceive in terms of the future unfolding of the relationship between Jews and Christians was symbolized for many of us last night at the banquet of the American Jewish Committee in that extraordinary dais consisting of ambassadors and government officials and people from the White House and the State Department. There were on our dais last night several people of extraordinary symbolic importance. One was a black man who was introduced--Dr. Godfrey Binaisa, the former president of Uganda; and the other was that beautiful woman, Miss Liv Ullmann, who would make a fantastic Rebbetzin. Incidentally, the former president of Uganda was driven out of Uganda by Idi Amin, President for Life, whose hero was Adolf Hitler; Amin, who built a park in honor of Adolf Hitler in Kampala and whose guards surrounding him at the time of Entebbe were PLO members. Godfrey Binaisa came to office of the American Jewish Committee four years ago declaring: "In my country Idi Amin has massacred from 400,000 to 500,000 Black Christians. What is happening to my people is not unlike what happened to the Jews in Nazi Germany in 1938. Nobody wants to listen; nobody wants to pay attention."

And he came to us for certain kinds of assistance which we were able to render to him. He has become a very great friend of ours. He was in fact an honorary counsel of Israel in Uganda and brought Israeli technical development programs into Uganda.

What is of significance is that Idi Amin, the butcher of 400,000 to 500,000 Christians, was able to bring that off without a single word of reprimand at the United Nations. Indeed, he was invited to come to the United Nations to sit in a chair of honor, and to get a

standing ovation from the representatives of 157 nations of the earth, which is to say that this man who is engaged systematically in violence and the terroristic destruction of human life, became legitimized as a hero. Do you think it is an accident that in this city in March a president of the United States can be shot down in an assassination attempt, and now this past week the Pope, the sacred symbol of the conscience of Christendom, can be felled by a terrorist bullet?

There is a major challenge facing Jews and Christians beyond the issues that we have talked about tonight: the central moral and spiritual challenge that faces Jews and Christians today is the growing epidemic of dehumanization in the world; the growing sense that human life has become increasingly worthless; that human beings are expendable; that violence and terrorism can be normalized, can be legitimized, can be turned away from, as if it is part of the convention of our times -- routine. At their deepest level, as we attack the problems associated with attitudes towards one another, the sources of anti-Semitism, and the prejudices toward Christians which have emerged in response to our tragic history; as we begin to understand those essential differences which in fact make us distinctively Jews and Christians, we will need at the same time to acknowledge that there are ideals and values which bind us together in ways which cannot be compared to relationships between Jews, Christians, and any other people in the world. Jews and Christians, by virtue of their adherence to the Torah which Rabbi Haberman held before us tonight, affirm the dignity of every human life as an essential affirmation of the biblical tradition. Together we affirm that every human life is sacred; is of infinite preciousness; that no human being can be used for anyone else's program, or violence, or ideology, or for terrorism. Jews and Christians affirm, based on the biblical tradition, a sense of profound responsibility for the quality of life for

society for the events of history for which we have responsibility to bring about justice and equality and liberty. Together we anticipate a kingdom at the end of time where there will be a universal peace and fraternity and justice.

Liv Ullmann and I walked together in February of last year in a refugee camp in Thailand. It was filled with some 300,000 Cambodian refugees. We walked into a camp and there we understood the meaning of Jewish and Christian solidarity and cooperation in the kind of world in which we live today. In one corner of their camp there was a Catholic intensive feeding center with Catholic nuns bringing back from the brink of death infant children by intensive feeding. Next to that camp there was a group of Israeli doctors and nurses, the fourth medical team of Israelis who had come to Southeast Asia. They were seasoned physicians and nurses who came from Sinai and who had engaged in Bedouin medicine of an emergency kind. These Israeli doctors and nurses put an end to an epidemic of cholera and typhus within a matter of three to four weeks. They became heroes all over the country. Liv Ullmann and I looked at each other and we said, "That is what Jewish-Christian relations and its ultimate meaning is all about."

This recalls the words of Emerson: "What you are speaks out so loud I cannot hear what you say." Jews faithful to the Torah, Christians faithful to the Gospel, both of them affirming that at the heart of the covenant is a conviction about the sanctity of every human life; that together we have a task in the world of standing against dehumanization to help bring about the rehumanization of the human family.

Jews and Christians are the frontiers, at their best, of a community of conscience which can yet help make the world sane and civil and humane for all the members of God's human family.