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About the speaker

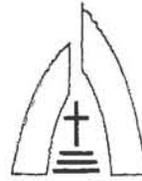
MARC H. TANENBAUM, Director of International Relations Department of the American Jewish Committee, New York City, has been a pioneering leader and thinker in inter-religious relations. In 1978 America's newspaper religion editors voted him one of the ten most respected and influential leaders in America. He was the only rabbi at Vatican Council II, and is founder and co-secretary of the Joint Vatican International Jewish Consultative Committee. Rabbi Tanenbaum has organized relief efforts for refugees, the starving, and for victims of war.

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"An Hour of Good News" is televised every Sunday from 5 to 6 PM on Channel 11 - WTTW, Chicago.

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CHICAGO
SUNDAY
EVENING CLUB

*An Hour of
Good News*



Marc H Tanenbaum

**MORAL
CHALLENGES
TO JEWS AND
CHRISTIANS
IN THE 1980's**

Our 77th
Season
1983/1984

MORAL CHALLENGES
TO JEWS AND CHRISTIANS
IN THE 1980'S

It is a rare and genuine privilege to be invited to speak on the Chicago Sunday Evening Club, but I'm sure if each of us is really honest with ourselves, we would ask, "What is a program that is committed to preaching the good news of the gospel doing with a rabbi as their principal speaker?"

Of course, there was a rabbi who had something to do with the first beginning Good News. But I regard it as a genuine privilege to be with you here this evening and to share with you in this discussion of Moral Challenges that face Jews and Christians, because for me it is more than a ritualistic, friendly ecumenical encounter.

It is clear that there are some very essential differences theologically between Jews and Christians, between Judaism and Christianity. But I want to share with you my own conviction that what Jews and Christians share together in terms of basic affirmations, in terms of basic values and ideals is so overwhelmingly great that in many ways it overwhelms the differences which we acknowledge. Jews and Christians clearly affirm a belief in a God who reveals himself as creator and redeemer, a God who reveals his will as moral will for the whole human family. Jews and Christians also share a conviction about the sanctity of human life, the belief in the Torah and the gospel that every human life is created in the secret image of God, a belief too that all of us as members of God's human family have a profound social responsibility for the welfare of society and of every member of that society. And then Jews and Christians share together a belief in the coming kingdom of God, which is the source of our hope even in the face of darkness and difficulty and challenge.

I think sometimes we tend to take for granted these common affirmations that bind Jews and Christians together as if they are of no consequence. I never fail to appreciate anew how powerful are the values and ideals that bind Christians and Jews together, the common moral values that we share - I never appreciate that as much as when I leave the borders of the United States of America and go to other parts of the world.

Several weeks ago I was invited to come to Central America, to Guatemala, to be a principal speaker at a conference of religious and civic leaders from every country in Central America and literally from every nation in Latin America. During the course of the time we had together, I also had the privilege of meeting with the American ambassador to Guatemala as well as the foreign minister of Guatemala, four Israeli ambassadors who were present, as well as religious and civic leaders from throughout the whole of the South American continent.

While in Guatemala, we had occasion to go up into the highlands, up into Antigua, where the Mayan Indians live, and I began to realize once again the moral bond in which these people tragically find themselves. A gentle, cultured, creative people, whose arts and handicrafts have become one of the great contributions to the richness of the cultural diversity of mankind. These people are caught in a tragic struggle between a government which has been a military junta, which has resorted to death squads, which has resorted to random violence and killing in order to maintain itself in power, a government now which under considerable pressure from the United States of America has begun to move to some democratic forms, calling for elections in July and opening up for a constitutional assembly.

On the one hand these poor Mayan Indians caught under the pressure of this military government which seeks to sustain itself on the principle of national security by seeing human life as expendable. Thousands upon thousands of human beings have been destroyed in the course of its obsession of preserving its own power and its own position.

At the same time in the highlands we began to see what was happening with the Marxists, Leninists, radicals, the subversives. They too were exploiting the Mayan Indians for their revolution. They were going to bring about the socialist utopia, and in the process of doing it, saw no problem in burning villages, killing thousands upon thousands of people, decimating human lives. As I walked through some of those burned fields and homes, and saw bodies in open graves, I felt the pain and the agony of what it meant to be a human being in the kind of world in which we live, how far the world has departed from the basic affirmations which Jews and Christians have affirmed over the past two thousand years, and in Judaism over the past four thousand years.

It is not only in Central America that human life has become increasingly expendable, I've seen it in many other parts of the world. Several years ago I went to Southeast Asia on a mission with a group of fourteen American religious and civic leaders, among them James Mitchener, the novelist, Bayard Rustin, William Casey, who is now head of the CIA - among others, and there we went to try to help relieve the plight of the Vietnamese boat people. And we found at the time when we first came there in 1978, that sixty to seventy thousand boat people were leaving the pressure of a totalitarian regime in Vietnam and were setting sail across the South

China Sea. And sixty percent of the Vietnamese boat people were sinking into the South China Sea before the eyes of the world, and no one, almost no one, raised a voice that it is morally intolerable for human beings and society to stand by idly while human life was destroyed before the eyes and the conscience of mankind.

So the fourteen of us came back to the President of the United States - President Jimmy Carter, with fourteen recommendations, twelve of which were accepted by the President and by the United States Congress.

And then the President issued an executive order. Out of his Christian humanism, and I don't say this in terms of political affirmations, but the President declared, through an executive order, that the people of the United States will not sit by idly and allow so many hundreds of thousands of human beings to drown in the South China Sea. The 7th Fleet was given instructions to come into the South China Sea, and that no person was allowed to drown in that Sea while boats and helicopters were sent out with instructions that food and water was to be given to them to make sure that human life would not be destroyed in such a callous way.

One of the greatest tragedies that we face today is this growing epidemic of de-humanization in the world. There is a great deal of generosity. People, in the United States especially, have given more food, clothing and shelter to more millions of human beings in the developing Third World nations than any other nation in human history. And that I believe is a reflection of the deepest values of respect for human life, of caring for other human beings which is the bedrock of our Judeo-Christian heritage in the United States as

well as our democratic values.

But this society, the human society, even in the face of all that generosity, still suffers from extraordinary pathology which can only be called the epidemic of dehumanization. There is not a continent on the earth today where human beings are not being destroyed, suffering torture, massacre, violation of their basic civil, political and human rights in Asia, in Africa, in Latin America, in the Soviet Union, in eastern European countries.

Human life has become increasingly expendable. And that represents for us as Jews and Christians, who stake our existence on the Torah and the gospel, that has become for us the most fundamental, moral, spiritual, human challenge that we face in the world today.

At Sinai God revealed himself to the Children of Israel. Yesterday they were slaves in the land of Egypt. They were the expendable people. They were the untouchables of ancient Egypt. But by virtue of God's manifesting himself in their lives, liberating them as slaves out of the land of Egypt, bringing them to the foot of Mount Sinai, and revealing to them the Ten Commandments, 120 words that literally transform the consciousness of mankind, the ancient Israelites committed themselves to that Ten Commandments at the heart of which is the affirmation "Thou shalt not kill," implying that every human life is sacred.

We think sometimes of Sinai, and Exodus, and Calvary almost as if they were Bible stories. You know, in Bible school they tell you, "Take the pictures of Moses and the Children of Israel and color them brown. Color the Red Sea red." And we reduce this powerful story to a coloring book

without recognizing that at the heart of Sinai and Exodus and Calvary was the most powerful transformation of the consciousness of mankind. In the ancient world, in ancient Mesopotamia, in ancient Egypt, human life was expendable, human life was worthless. Out of that transformation of the collective experience of ancient Israel, encountering God as the redeemer of his people, this ancient people became at the foot of Sinai, yesterday's slaves - today a kingdom of priests and a holy people.

Every one of them became aware as Ernest Hemingway was to write later on in his great novel, The Old Man and the Sea, "Tell me that I am greater than I am and I will be so."

The Biblical tradition made every human being aware of the infinite genius, the infinite preciousness of every human life. It also made us aware that no human life is expendable, that no human being can be used for anyone else's revolution, or violence, or terrorism, or program, or ideology - that every human being must be evaluated and appreciated as an end in himself or herself.

In the kind of world in which we live today, a world where not too long ago now forty years ago in the Nazi Holocaust, a world where in Uganda six - seven years ago - 500,000 black Christians were destroyed by President Idi Amin for life (as he called himself), the world stood by silently as if to suggest that 500,000 Christians (half of them Anglican, half of them Roman Catholic) could be wiped off from the face of the earth and who cast the flick of the eye in some confessional remembrance of them? Who tried to stop that from happening?

Look at what is happening in Afghanistan where the Soviet Union is destroying tens of thousands of human beings. Look at

what is happening in Poland where human rights are being trod underfoot. Look at what is happening throughout Central America today in Nicaragua, in El Salvador, in Honduras, elsewhere throughout Central and Latin America.

When the Jewish people went through the tragedy of the Nazi Holocaust, and they became aware of the price that could be paid when the lives of Jewish men, women, and children were destroyed as if they were not human beings. That a world would stand by as spectators and allow men, women, and children to be shoved into crematoria and burned alive. When Jews became aware of how cruel and barbaric a society as ancient Germany, which was a country of ancient Christian civilization, a society in which one million Jewish children were destroyed together with thirty-five million other human beings, they responded to that by turning to the sources of the Bible, the book of Leviticus. Jews began to engrave in their consciousness a paraphrase of the book of Leviticus, "Thou shalt not stand idly by while the blood of your brothers and sisters cries out to you from the earth."

That is one of the reasons why many Jews, certainly for myself - whenever I see anywhere in the world that any human being is being subjected to this kind of violence against the dignity of human life - literally I, and many of my colleagues, will go to the ends of the earth to affirm this basic Biblical value. We stake our existence on this belief. If we simply affirm this in our prayers, in our hymns - that every human being is created in the sacred image of God and allow all of this violence and terrorism to go on in the world and act as though it is not of our concern, we are in fact engaging in the highest form of moral hypocrisy. And ultimately it be-

comes an obscenity against the Lord God of history, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of Jesus of Nazareth. A God who called us, as he called the prophets of Israel, to be present to human beings not only in their celebration but in their suffering and in their pain. To stand against evil and violence and destruction, and then to affirm the beauty and the holiness of life.

It is a matter of concern not only in terms of what is happening in Asia, in Africa, in Latin America, it is a matter also of what is happening at our own doorsteps. How can we indulge ourselves in all of the richness of our private lives with homes and cars and swimming pools and vacations while in this society there are hundreds of thousands of human beings who go to bed hungry every night?

In New York City now I am engaged with Bishop Paul Moore, the Episcopal Bishop of New York, together with a Roman Catholic Bishop, James Sullivan, and others, in a program trying to do something about the homeless. It is simply morally incredible that in New York City, a city of incredible power, financial wealth, political strength, that it is possible to walk down the streets like Park Avenue before the buildings of glass and steel, suggesting the greatest civilization in terms of power and wealth, and there on the grates during these cold months to see men and women 60, 70, 75 years old lying on a grate all night - homeless people, street people. There are in New York City more than thirty thousand people - street people - who sleep in subways, who sleep on the street, who have nowhere to go. And to walk by that during the day to one's office, to walk by that on the way to church and synagogue and not to find that tearing at your soul, your convictions, everything you affirm about the

meaning of human existence, about the value of life and try to do something about that.

Well, the Jews and Christians in New York as well as Jews and Christians all over the country who are involved now in the fate of some two million homeless people in America who have taken their basic affirmations of the Torah and the gospel seriously have made a difference.

The Jews and Christians in New York, who have banded together, literally have brought the city of New York to provide shelter, food, and clothing for thousands of homeless people - most of whom would probably have died in the winter cold had Jews and Christians not affirmed these values and made a moral claim on the conscience of the society, brought the political leaders and the financial leaders to band together to recognize that they are there not only as servants of the state but they are there as servants of the people in need.

These are the moral challenges that Jews and Christians face in the kind of world in which we live today. It is at our doorstep. It is in our neighborhood. It is in the nation at large in terms of closing the disparity between great wealth and incredible poverty. It is above all as we look out in a world that is confronted by the threat and challenge of nuclear proliferation, a world which indeed can become anarchic unless we find ways to contain that destructive instrumentality.

This is a world that God created for our good, for on every day of creation God declared, "Behold, it is good." God declares in the book of Deuteronomy, "Behold I have set before thee life and death. Therefore choose life."

God wills for us that we live a life of richness, and wholeness, and meaning, and creativity, and achievement. God does not will death for any members of his human family. And we, as Jewish tradition declares, are partners with God in the work of creation. It is not for us to complete the job, as a learned Rabbi said, but neither are we free to desist therefrom.

If Jews and Christians are serious about their life, are serious about their basic affirmations of a God of compassion and caring, basic about their affirmations about the value of human life, recognize how powerful is the social responsibility of the prophets of Israel and of Jesus of Nazareth, recognize that the hope for the future - the Messianic hope - is to help bring about a time when there will be an end to warfare and hatred, and prejudice, and bloodshed, and to contribute to the building of a society bound together by universal love and caring and compassion. That's what Jewish tradition means by the Messianic age, and it is in our hands. It is not only our right, but our duty to participate in any way we can, however, small - however large, to the building of a world which is worthy of the sanctity of human life, a world in which we recognize our responsibility to one another.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the great Soviet writer, who lived through Gulag Archipelago, who knew the meaning of the destruction of life, who knew the importance of caring and compassion to sustain one in a time of stress, declared in words which may well be our emblem for the coming years, "Salvation of mankind will depend on everyone becoming concerned about the welfare of everybody, everywhere."

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This message was delivered 2.19.84.