



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 5, Folder 16, "French Bicentennial - Mixed Blessing for Jews", 4 July 1989.



July 4, 1989

FRENCH BICENTENNIAL - MIXED BLESSING FOR JEWS

by Marc H. Tanenbaum

The bicentennial of the French Revolution, climaxed by the observance of Bastille Day on July 14, will be widely commemorated in France and in other parts of the world. As we know from the torrent of stories in the popular media, there is extensive controversy among historians - was it a blessing that resulted in the Declaration of the Rights of Man, or was it the inauguration of the use of terror to establish authoritarian governments in later centuries?

Clearly for Jews, the French Revolution was a mixed blessing. On the affirmative side of the ledger, the French Revolution brought to an end the "ancien regime" whose feudal monarchism had denied Jews elementary rights as citizen. When Napoleon summoned the French "Sanhedrin" of Rabbis, he assured Jews as individuals equal rights with all other liberated Frenchmen, but denied them corporate rights as a group.

For most Jews in France and in other European countries, the Revolution was the magnet of messianic liberation after so many centuries of oppression.

Theodor Herzl was seized by those flaming hopes for a liberated future for Jews. In his earlier years in Vienna, he dreamt of the total assimilation of Jews in the new societies as the means of finally solving the Jewish question.

Then Herzl went to Paris as correspondent for the Vienna Neue Freie Presse. His encounter with the bitter anti-Semitism in the Dreyfus Trial of 1894, and other manifestations ~~xxxxx~~ of anti-Jewish hatred in the French Republic - 100 years after the Revolution - were traumatic for him.

That encounter with the failing side of the French Revolution, together with other moving influences, started Herzl on his journey to create a Jewish State ~~xxxxx~~ where Jews would be genuinely free as citizens and as equals.

nt
Rabbi Tanenbaum, international relations consultant for the American Jewish Committee, is immediate past chairman of the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations.