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Series A: Writings and Addresses. 1947-1991

Box 5, Folder 22, Rabbinical Assembly tribute to Wolfe Kelman,
1990.



Rabbi Wolfe Kelman -10-
Rabbinical Assembly tribute, May 1990
by Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum (former director of International Relations
and Interreligious Affairs, American Jewish
Committee)

memory. It is a great pleasure for me to welcome and
to introduce Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum. (Applause).

→ NV: This is an important evening for me,
humanly, emotionally, psychologically. First of all, the
last time the Rabbinical Assembly did me the honor of
inviting me to address the Assembly was to engage in a
debate with the Reverend Jerry Falwell in Miami, Florida.
(Laughter). I may have ~~been~~ ^{prevented, survived,} but I came out of that
feeling like a Kapporah kindel (a sacrificial ~~beast~~ fowl.)
Being able to participate in this richly-deserved tribute to one of
the men in Jewish life whom I have come to love and
cherish as a brother, ~~he~~, has helped me sort out some
of the ^{ambiguities,} ~~wrinkles~~ from those last Rabbinical Assembly
conventions and give me a clearer sense of my own
identity. ¶ The relationship and friendship between
Wolfe and myself, I dare say, is probably among the longest
enduring friendships of colleagues at the seminary. ¶ We
were both in the same class and we shared the same suite
of rooms at the beginning. He had a habit of asking me
religious and theological questions in strange places.
~~that separated our rooms.~~ My first encounter with Wolfe
~~in I must say I think I told this to him so it's not~~
~~telling tales out of school~~ (was morally traumatic, and in
~~some ways I never recovered from that and don't ever wanna~~
~~reecover from that.~~ The first day that I met Wolfe at
the entrance of the Jewish Theological Seminary, he was
wearing the uniform of the Royal Canadian Air Force. He
was pure spit and polish. I've never seen him look so

spiffy ever since that time. (Laughter). But it was terribly intimidating and absolutely mindboggling and I began wondering; is this the new uniform of the conservative Rabbinate? I wondered first of all whether he was a machine gunner in the Royal Canadian Air Force, and what was he doing at the seminary in the Canadian Air Force uniform? ~~and~~ Before very long, we were sitting around the table, he in his ~~Royal Canadian Air Force uniform~~ and me in my shiny blue polyester suit looking like a pure heroic figure ~~and he begins talking~~ ^{and he begins talking} about the ~~Rizhiner, the Apter, the Bobover and~~ ^{Rizhiner, the Apter, the Bobover and} ~~Soon, Wolfe?~~ ^{other} ~~Rebbim and the~~ ^{fabulous, complex and rich,} ~~and the~~ ^{Rebbi and his whole Hasidic} background began to surface in a few moments. It was an ^{experience} ~~act~~ of sheer cognitive dissonance. (Laughter). And at that moment it was fixed in my head, Wolfe Kelman indeed is different by nature, but also incredibly fascinating and interesting by nature. And I've had those feelings of awe and pleasure and treasured friendship with him ~~we~~ ever since those first days at the seminary. I suppose if I had to engage in the somewhat spurious act of periodization of our history together, I would suggest that our lives ~~together~~ ^{at} from our days ~~of~~ the seminary in 1946 through our ordination in 1950 involved ~~the~~ categories such as BH, ~~you may think it's~~ ^{the period} DH, and AH. ^{"BH"} represents ^{before} the late and ^{Wolfe and I} blessed Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel when ~~we~~ were classmates together. "DH" was during the life of Rabbi Heschel when we had graduated from the seminary, were ordained ^{and} and I suppose ^{"AH"} ~~in that simplistic way, I suppose, our~~ ^{suggests}

lives ~~is~~ since Heschel, after Heschel. ^Q There was
richness in our relationship and fullness ^{as Seminary students,} but, as I
thought back about ^{it,} ~~our relationship,~~ Rabbi Abraham

Joshua Heschel was an overwhelming and powerful binding
force in ~~our~~ ^{the} lives and the careers of Wolfe and ~~my own~~ ^{myself.}
~~our youthful careers~~ ^{it,} ~~literally in very earliest days~~ revolved about the
life, the work, the teaching and the ~~message~~ ^{presence} of Rabbi

In differing ways,

Heschel. ^Q It began when Rabbi Heschel was preparing to
publish his first book, The Earth Is The Lord's. I was
working as ~~an~~ an editor and ~~an~~ a publicist for ^a publisher,
Henry Schuman. Dr. Heschel showed me the text of his
manuscript. I took it home and read it in one night and
was absolutely captivated by the beauty of that love
~~and hesped (eulogy)~~ ^{and} poem ~~for East European Jewry, East European Judaism.~~

^{The next day, I} ~~I came back and~~ talked to Wolfe about it and we decided
that we were going to do everything possible to see to it
that Dr. Heschel's first work would be published with ~~an~~
éclat and would receive the attention that it

the
painfully
lost world of

richly deserved. ^Q ~~And~~ Without going into too much detail,
we arranged with the publisher to publish that book in

an absolutely exquisite manner with Ilya Shor's ^{exquisite} memorable
Woodcuts as illustrations. We then spoke to the prominent Protestant scholars
~~and then got~~ Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr to do the first review

^(It appeared as Niebuhr) of Heschel's book, a full page review then in the ^{prestigious} Herald
Tribune, ^{Prof. Niebuhr wrote that} which ^{is} called "Dr. Heschel a spiritual treasure

plucked from the pyres of the Nazi Holocaust." ^{Thus} ~~That~~ began
the launching of the ^{public} career of Dr. Heschel, ~~and~~ Frankly, it

could not ^{have} ^{ed} happen without the personal engagement of Wolfe and, ^{to}
whatever degree I was able to be helpful in that launching

I wish to ^{more} process. I ~~wanna~~ spend ~~a little time~~, a few moments on this, because this is an aspect of the life, the commitment, the service of Wolfe through others which is virtually unknown in Jewish life, and even unknown in the Rabbinical Assembly and much of the Jewish Theological Seminary. ¶ In 1960, the White House Conference on

Children and Youth was held. At that time, ~~if you~~ ^{if you} ~~forgive the personal reference,~~ I ~~was~~ ^{served as a} conservative ^{representing the Jewish community,} parallel to Vice Chairman of that conference, ~~together with a~~ ^(Vice-Chairman) Catholic and a Protestant, I was asked to present ~~propose~~ the name of a Jewish speaker for the White House

Conference on Children and Youth. I talked to Wolfe and we agreed that Rabbi Heschel would ~~be an~~ ^{exemplary} ~~exemplar of~~ ^{be an ideal} the moral and spiritual values of Judaism ^{for} ~~to~~ ^{presentation} ~~to that~~ ^{major national} conference. ~~We first~~ ^{Wolfe and I} came to Dr. Heschel and I hope Sylvia ^(Ms Heschel) will forgive me, for this ^{actually} ~~actuality of~~ ^{in this way -} ~~what happened,~~ Dr. Heschel would not hear of accepting that invitation.

~~For whatever reasons, he declined~~ ^{(to deliver the principal Jewish paper before 4,000}

delegates ^{to} of the White House Conference on Children and Youth, ~~and~~ ^{Despairingly,} I turned to Wolfe, whom Dr. Heschel trusted and loved. He was ^{of the yotz la'melech} ^(counselor to the King?) ~~and~~ ^{and} ~~Over~~ a period of time, Dr. Heschel finally agreed to prepare a paper on the moral dilemmas of Children and Youth in America in 1960.

Apparently, Dr. Heschel felt insecure; he felt his English was not good enough. Wolfe, out of his friendship and his

understanding of the importance of that event, helped prevail on Rabbi Heschel to present that paper. Dr. Heschel was the sensation of the White House Conference.

on Children and Youth. He received standing ovations from that body of 4,000 people. ^{(Not incidentally,} ~~The~~ paper reads as if it were written yesterday.) ^{Heschel's} ~~and~~ It was the trust in Wolfe as a student, a disciple and a friend that led to that decision, ~~and it went on like that,~~ ^{is} It's a story that's virtually unknown. ↗

¶ In 1961, at the White House Conference on Aging, the same experience ^{occurred.} Dr. Heschel did not ^{want to} ~~wanna~~ write the paper. How could he do it, Yiddish accent, all of this? ^{Wolfe,} ~~He~~ prevailed on him and he wrote the paper, "To Grow in Wisdom." It was a knockout presentation of the Conference and it became ~~it became~~ a ~~kind of~~ classic

for people who were the backbone of the social welfare system of America. ^{They} ~~to hear~~ ^{of an authentic Jew, speak profoundly} ~~a Jew say something~~ (of the deepest moral ethical ^{and} ~~meaning,~~ ^{issues involved in} ~~to deal with~~ the problems of the aging in America. ¶ ~~well,~~ It happened again in 1963

with the National Conference on Race and Religion. Again, Dr. Heschel was reluctant and Wolfe participated ^{with me} in prevailing on him. ^{At that Chicago conference, Heschel stood} He ~~got up~~ ^{on which} next to Martin Luther King ^{Dr} (¶ ~~That was~~ the first platform that Martin Luther King had ever spoken ^{before the broad spectrum of America's religious leaders} at ~~in terms of the National Ecumenical Meeting~~

~~and I will never forget that opening~~ ^{after Wolfe had spoken with Rabbi Heschel and we had talked to him about the importance of that occasion.} ^{When} Dr. Heschel

declared in the presence of 1700 people, ^{"The} first National Conference on Race and Religion took place in the palace

^{of Egypt} of Pharaoh when Moses said to Pharaoh, "Let my people go!" ^{The conference delegates, especially} ~~and the House and the Blacks of the House~~ ^{exploded enthusiastically} ~~went wild~~ in their response to him. [¶] I want to condense much of this

even though I believe that some day
 because ~~uh~~ (it deserves a full treatment. Clearly the
 historic role that Wolfe played with Rabbi Heschel as
 well as with others in Jewish life, ~~an~~ ^{impacted /} impacting on
 central ~~events~~, ^{decisive /} historic events of Jewish life ~~but~~

¶ Perhaps the arena in which Wolfe made his consistently
 unknown and ^{unacknowledged} ~~unspoken~~ contribution ^{his} ~~was~~ in the role he
 played as ~~the~~ advisor to Rabbi Heschel in relation to
 the Vatican Council ^{II} ~~two~~ as well as to the American
 Jewish Committee at that time. The Vatican Council
 event was a ^{turning point} historic event, however much ^{some} people ^{continue to disparage}
 or trivialize it. ^{That Council} seeking to undo that event ~~it~~ was the first time in
 2000 years that the entire Catholic Church was prepared
 to face its ambivalent, ambiguous, ^{love-hate} attitudes towards Jews
 and Judaism. History was made at that ^{Council} conference and
 Wolfe, in the background, was one of the agents of that
 transforming history. ¶ We had arranged at ^a ~~the~~ critical
 moment ^{at that conference} of the Vatican Council for
 Rabbi Heschel to come to Rome ^{literally on the eve} of Yom Kippur, to
 meet with Pope Paul ^{VI} ~~the Sixth~~ because ~~a~~ resolution had
 been introduced into the Vatican Council ^{displace existing} speaking to
 display the ^{positive} resolution towards Jews and Judaism.
 Under the impact of the Arab world, ^{Egypt's} and Nassar and
 conservative theologians, they sought to insert ~~that~~ ^{the}
 official declaration of the Church, a ^{call} ~~campaign~~ for
 converting the Jews, ~~and~~ Heschel and Wolfe understood the
 significance of that. Dr. Heschel came to Rome and
 literally prevailed on Pope Paul ^{VI} ~~the Sixth~~ to scratch out
 the whole section dealing with ^{proselytization} ~~presterilization~~ and

evangelization of the Jews, ^{as well as} ~~and~~ ^{Constructive} preserving other sections of the resolution. ¶ Almost no one knew of the role of Wolfe Kelman in all of this. I doubt very much that we would ~~have been able to~~ have had the impact we had, had Wolfe not quietly, effectively, unselfishly, with no personal attention whatsoever, helped make possible the connections which brought about this event. ¶ I must say in passing, ~~in terms of~~ Wolfe's relationship with members of the Orthodox and ^{Reform} reformed communities, ^{was of strategic} ~~one~~ ^{importance} of the untold stories of what happened during the Vatican Council II, ^{in which} and Wolfe played a ^{key} ~~major~~ role, ~~if not a center~~ role, is that before Rabbi Heschel went to Rome and submitted a document ^{to} of the Vatican Council, we felt it was important for us to have the ^{the views of} ~~to talk to~~ the major Jewish religious leaders of the time. Among the Jewish religious leaders ^{with} ~~who~~ Dr. Heschel met ~~with~~ without any publicity to this day, ^{with} was with Rabbi Joseph B Soloveichik, ^{the dean of the Orthodox rabbinate.} ^{One} ~~you sit~~ ^{in dialogue with} "the Ruv" is ^{the Ruv} some Orthodox Rabbis today and they say ~~he's~~ against dialogue. Rabbi Soloveichik ^{participated} ~~participated~~ week after week and month after month in much of the preparation ^{with the Vatican.} ~~that~~ we engaged in, ~~and~~ Rabbi Heschel's relationship with him helped make possible that cooperation, ~~with him, and Rabbi Freehoff and with others.~~ ¶ There is this whole side of Wolfe's career which deserves to be recorded ~~in history~~ because Wolfe was a ^{vital} ~~major~~ agent in these major historic events which affected the relationship of Jews to the Christian world, ^{particularly with} ~~to~~ the Vatican, even to this day. ~~and~~

Beyond all else, ~~that~~ just extensive and often hectic activity of his career did not stand in the way of his being an ideal family man, paterfamilias ~~he has been~~ a devoted husband to his loving partner, Jackie - the unsung heroine of his life - and a caring father to his children, Levy, Naamah, and Abby, his six grand children, and to his brothers and sisters.

~~what~~ ^Q One was able to see in all ~~of~~ those relationships ~~as~~
~~as I sat with Wolfe~~ (at ~~a~~ meeting ^S) with ^{the} Vatican Secretary
of State, ~~and~~ Cardinals, Popes and others, ~~and~~ everything
that Judah Nadich said about ~~him~~ ^{Wolfe -} a proud, ~~self~~ affirming,
deeply-rooted Jew who spoke out of the mind of the Torah
and the ^{heart of the} Jewish people, ^{Wolfe spoke} not with hostility or contempt or
with arrogance, but in a straightforward ^(CIVIL) manner that
elicited the greatest respect from the Christian world.
Christians began to understand something of the depth and
richness of Yiddish ^{its living reality,} ~~cut~~ ^{its fullness,} when Wolfe
spoke to them out of ^{our} ~~that~~ tradition. There is no cause
in Jewish life which has been alien to Wolfe, ~~to know of~~
his work in relation to the defense of Israel, its welfare
and security; the interpretation of Israel's interests ~~to~~
government; ^{and} ~~the~~ World Jewish Congress, ^{his leadership with} ~~for~~ ^{to} the Christian
world; his seminal ^{of Jews everywhere} role in the cause of Soviet Jewry,
Ethiopian Jewry, There has not been a situation affecting
the life of Jewish communities anywhere in the world to
which he was not responsive and creatively productive.
¶ But above all, through all of these years of testing and
turmoil and difficulty, ^{with} ~~through~~ all of his qualities of
leadership, there were several qualities which to me
became an enduring blessing. His integrity, his gift of
friendship, the constancy of his friendship, his
determination in the midst of the most heated debates to
respect his opponents, Orthodox, Conservative, Reformed
and others ~~and always leave with a sense of~~
. Wolfe has been not only a colleague

and a friend, he has been ~~really~~ a genuine inspiration in my life, and I thank God for the privilege of the time we had together and hopefully which we will continue to have together for many years to come. Thank you. (Applause).

NV: Celebration. A celebration has music. The music is really the music of Wolfe's life which has a lot of different themes. Wolfe's roots are in Eastern European Hasidism so an underlying theme would be the notes that convey the aura of um Viennese, . And then there would be the notes that convey the aura of um Viennese, And then melodies that evoke the pluralistic spirit of Canada and the United States and then the rhythms that resonate with the rationalist outlook of modern culture. And I think of all these things because our next speaker knows about all these elements of music. He's a Vice President of the Jewish Theological, Vice Chancellor I believe, of the Jewish Theological Seminary, Dean of its music school. He and Wolfe were students together at the seminary; they were roommates for three years and have remained extremely close friends to this day. There are different worlds in Hebrew for friends reflecting different facets of this relationship. Friend can be called which means one who loves; , one who is attached and which in its Aramaic derivation is associated with pleasure and good will. A true friend enters the life of another, feels the pain of another, rejoices in the happiness of another, shares in the spirit