



# THE JACOB RADER MARCUS CENTER OF THE AMERICAN JEWISH ARCHIVES

*Preserving American Jewish History*

MS-603: Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum Collection, 1945-1992.

Series E: General Alphabetical Files. 1960-1992

Box 78, Folder 18, Auster, Louis - interview with Marc H. Tanenbaum, Undated.

LOUIS AUSTER  
79-20 200th STREET  
FLORAL PARK, N. Y. 11004

A P R O P H E T F O R O U R T I M E.

A TALK WITH RABBI MARC H. TANENBAUM.



A PROPHET FOR OUR TIME: A TALK WITH RABBI MARC H.  
TANENBAUM.

by LOUIS AUSTER.

In a cover story entitled "The Ten Most Powerful Rabbis", New York magazine described him as "the foremost Jewish ecumenical leader in the world today".

A poll of America's religion newspaper editors, published in the Christian Century (January, 1978), voted him fourth of the ten most respected and influential religious leaders, after Jimmy Carter, Billy Graham, and the theologian-historian, Martin Marty.

Newsweek magazine called him "the American Jewish community's foremost apostle to the gentiles ... who has been able to elicit support from all factions of the Jewish community".

In awarding him an honorary doctorate, as fourteen other major Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical, and Jewish universities have done, Sacred Heart University in Bridgeport, Conn. characterized him as "the human rights rabbi of America".

Yet, Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum, the recipient of all these accolades, while naturally pleased with the recognition accorded him, smiles and responds to them with a wave of his cigar. "Let history decide how my work is rated. I view every day as a challenge and opportunity to improve the quality of life for all members of the human family".

In spite of his modesty, it may be said that an account of the activities of Rabbi Tanenbaum over the past thirty years constitutes a record of the progress made in ecumenical and humanitarian efforts during that period. His courageous participation in aid to refugees, human rights, world hunger and interfaith work have won him acclaim from all religious denominations. He combines the vision of a prophet and the compassion of a spiritual leader with the tough pragmatism

needed in a complex and rapidly changing world.

Seated in a modest office behind a desk piled with correspondence, numerous publications, and schedules of pending engagements, Rabbi Tanenbaum is surrounded by walls covered with autographed photos of distinguished leaders, --- Pope John Paul II, Cardinal Cooke, Archbishop Sheen, Elie Wiesel, Coretta Scott King, and many others. Around him are shelves filled with books among which are about six that he wrote.

These photos and books are mementoes of thirty years of an intense commitment to the dignity of human life, and to improving relations among all faiths, in his role as National Director of Interreligious Affairs of the American Jewish Committee--- an organization that has long been in the forefront of the ecumenical effort. While acknowledging that there are still real problems in anti-Semitism and other forms of prejudice, the Rabbi is convinced that " we have made more progress in better understanding between Christians and Jews in the past 20 years than had been made in the preceding 1900 years".

Reflecting on the role of religion in society, the Rabbi has no patience with clergy who would trivialize religion, of whatever denomination. " We have an important mission as ministers to restore an understanding to our people about the absolute value of human life over any other single value in our lives", declares this latter-day prophet.

It is a mission that took him to Southeast Asia three times during the past four years, as one of fourteen Americans invited by the International Rescue Committee to investigate the conditions of the Vietnamese boat people and Cambodian refugees in Thailand, Indonesia, Hong Kong, the Phillipines and Malaysia. In 1978, on the waters of the South China Sea, he saw Vietnamese refugees in a dingy starving and then drowning.

" To this day, I still have trouble sleeping some nights. I just keep seeing those people in the boat. One old Chimese woman reminded me of my mother. I have never felt more Jewish than when I literally helped pull people out of the water, side by side with Christians, witnessing to God's covenant.

" The 'great commission' for both faiths is to bring reconciliation and healing to human life everywhere and leave it to God to determine who has been His most faithful witness. Another such 'peak' in religious experience came when I prayed with Cesar Chavez in the Salinas Valley along with Hispanic Catholics in a common effort to bring about social justice. Praying, holding hands together with people of different faiths and praying to a common Creator God --- that's such an affirmation, and bound us together with such a sense of unity that I experienced God's presence there more than I have in synagogues", concluded the Rabbi, visibly moved by the recollection.

He noted that there is a growing resistance to bringing in more refugees when there ia a devastated South Bronx. To counter this trend, the United States must develop what he called 'bifocal vision'. " We must link together the sense of moral responsibility for our 'domestic refugees' (poor blacks, Hispanics, and the elderly poor) and for the overseas refugees. We must let the American public know what great human tragedy there exists both here and abroad".

It is the same prophetic vision that led him to join in organizing the American Jewish Relief Effort for victims of the Nigerian-Biafran conflict; to aid refugees from Uganda, Sierra Leone, Lebanon, and Bangladesh; to act as national co-chairman of the Interreligious Coalition on World Hunger; and in the same capacity on Soviet Jewry; and to serve on numerous White House and United Nations commissions on aging and children, race relations, and food and population problems.

These wide-ranging humanitarian efforts did not go unnoticed. In 1979, Rabbi Tanenbaum was one of ten national religious spokesmen invited by President Carter to discuss 'the state of the nation' at Camp David. The same year, he conferred with Chancellor Helmut Schmidt and German parliamentary officials on the abolition of the statute of limitations on Nazi war criminals.

This long journey that took him to every corner of the globe started on a small street in Baltimore where his parents, poor immigrants from the Ukraine, owned a modest general store, the only Jewish family in an Italian-Irish neighborhood. As a little boy during the depression, he remembers that he helped his Orthodox mother fill some baskets with cans and boxes of food, decorated for Christmas Eve with red and green ribbons. He walked through the neighborhood with his mother, herself poor, who could not bear the idea that her neighbors were without food on the table during a holiday and were depressed by the thought that no one cared.... His first lessons in the joy and duty of giving and sharing.

Another early memory of the Rabbi's childhood in Baltimore was walking to the synagogue every Saturday with his father, who crossed the street rather than pass a Christian church on the way. His father had good cause for bitterness. He was haunted by the memory of his brother who had been murdered in Czarist Russia by a mob of Orthodox Christians during an Easter holiday. They had ordered him drowned in the lake as a sacrificial atonement for the death of Jesus.

As he pursued his studies for the Conservative rabbinate, Tanenbaum became convinced that hatred among the faiths bred only more hatred and led to strife and confrontation. Only building bridges of understanding would reduce mistrust, and create mutual respect for one another. This effort required

personal contact and open dialogue. As the Rabbi put it, " History must not be allowed to become a hitching post to the past but a guiding post to the future".

As the only rabbi at the Second Vatican Council, Tanenbaum is especially proud of his participation in the deliberations of that body which resulted in the "Vatican Declaration on Non-Christian Religions", and included a Declaration on relations with Jews (Nostra Aetate). The Declaration was promulgated by Pope Paul VI on October 28, 1965.

To appreciate the dramatic reversal that the Declaration represented, we must recall that for 1900 years, relations between the Catholic Church and Jews had been marked by strife, suspicion and hostility. Each side harbored simmering grievances and pointed to persistent irritants that kept them apart. The Jews perceived the Catholic Church, in its theology and practice, as the source of their suffering over the centuries. They were haunted by painful memories of history.

They remembered the Crusades and the Inquisition as occasions for killing and plundering Jews. Pogroms, social and economic restrictions, segregation in ghettos, the wearing of special badges were a fact of life in the Catholic countries of Europe. These forms of degradation were decreed with the tacit, if not active approval of the Church. Finally, the Holocaust that decimated six million Jews could not have attained the heights of its unspeakable horrors, the Jews were convinced, were it not for the persistent tradition of anti-Semitism embedded in Christian theology and preaching. Centuries of degradation had provided Hitler fertile soil for implementing his plans for the destruction of the Jews.

For the Church, Jews bore collective responsibility for killing the Messiah. A long-standing theological tradition, accepted by St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, and many popes held that Jews were accursed and destined to be wanderers

among nations as punishment for allegedly having killed Jesus. In this view, Judaism had lost significance with the coming of Christ and all validity after the destruction of the temple. Jewish suffering was seen as proof that God had rejected them for their refusal to accept Jesus as the Messiah.

As a result of these views, the barriers to good relations were the more awesome because they were based on theological foundations that represented apparently irreconcilable differences. According to Rabbi Tanenbaum, the French-Jewish historian, Jules Isaac, played an important role in stimulating the decision to draft the Vatican Declaration on Relations with Jews. After he had lost his own family at a Nazi death camp, Professor Isaac wrote a classic work, Jesus and Israel, in which he sought to demonstrate that certain themes in Christian teaching created an attitude of contempt for Jews.

Through the efforts of Cardinal Augustin Bea, an advocate of reconciliation among faiths, a historic meeting was held in 1960 between Isaac and Pope John XXIII which "helped lead ultimately to the Declaration", according to Rabbi Tanenbaum.

"Professor Isaac and Pope John are among the spiritual fathers of the effort to confront and uproot anti-Semitism in Catholic and other Christian teaching today. In their dramatic meeting, they symbolized the promise and the possibility of Jewish and Christian friendship, solidarity and mutual caring."

Pope John felt that the Second Vatican Council, convened in 1962, should clarify the Church's attitude toward Judaism and repudiate traditions that had offered seemingly authoritative sanction for anti-Semitic feelings and acts of hostility. The Council was to be a modernization program for the Church, aggiornamento, a reappraisal of the role of the Church in the modern world.

At the request of Church authorities, Rabbi Tanenbaum recalls, the American Jewish Committee, after consultation

with leading Jewish scholars and rabbis, submitted detailed research data documenting the presence of anti-Jewish elements in Catholic teaching and liturgical writings, and suggested steps toward better understanding between the faiths. Nor would expressions of friendship have any validity if they were contingent upon hopes of conversion.

Thanks to the quiet diplomacy of Pope John, the tide continued to run strongly in favor of a clear decree on the Jews. But on June 4, 1963, Pope John died and was succeeded by Paul VI, who promised to continue the work of the Council. The Rabbi gratefully recalls the strong support from American bishops and cardinals for a favorable stand by the Church. The Declaration, as finally passed, asserted "the common religious patrimony of Christians and Jews", and while rejecting "the alleged collective guilt of the Jewish people for the death of Christ", stressed the urgency of condemning anti-Semitism ... Jews should not be represented as rejected or accursed. The Church deplores hatred and persecution of Jews and all displays of anti-Semitism".

Viewed from the long history of suspicion and confrontation, the Declaration has justly been described as a "miracle". While it would be unrealistic to expect the antagonisms of centuries to be swept away at once, the Declaration provided a starting point for people of good will on both sides to help fulfill the noble promises that it embodies. A Vatican Commission on Relations with Judaism was formed, and in 1975, guidelines were issued to implement the new relations.

Rabbi Tanenbaum and the American Jewish Committee working with other organizations pursued a wide range of program activities: scholarly exchanges among theologians and academics; training institutes for Catholic teachers to advance knowledge of Judaism; lecture series by Jewish and Catholic scholars in universities and seminaries; as well as numerous fraternal dialogues, including discussions on the parish level to help overcome stereotypes and mythologies that each group held of the other.

The Rabbi could not restrain his enthusiasm at this thought. " The fact that there are today networks of Jews and Christians in practically every major city who meet rather regularly, share common and respective concerns, is a development of unprecedented, even historic importance --- something that has not happened in any period during the past 1900 years. One major consequence of this development is that a great many Jews and Christians increasingly have come to know each other as persons --- with shared fears and hopes --- rather than as stereotypes and caricatures".

Rabbi Tanenbaum picked up a pamphlet from his desk. " To give you just one example of the relations prevailing now, I might mention that at a conference in Detroit, February, 1982, the Catholic Archbishop Most Reverend Edmund C. Szoka declared that Jews and Christians must work together not as a matter of social nicety but for the survival of civilization. To quote him, ' Any denial of basic human rights or any unjust curtailment of those rights of any group of people ... diminishes every one of us.... What binds us together is infinitely greater than what separates us. In the coming decades, the basic affirmation is that we are responsible for the events of history, and we must build a community of conscience centered upon our respective beliefs' "

Vatican II has also stimulated the revision of teaching materials to remove prejudicial references to Jews. " Not a single Catholic parochial school textbook produced since Vatican II contains a single anti-Semitic reference. I know that for a fact since our department serves as consultant to the major Catholic ( and to many Protestant) publishing houses who have asked us to read manuscripts of textbooks. When you compare present Catholic textbooks to the Baltimore Catechism of 1937, for example, which was a manual of hatred for Jews and Judaism, you could say justifiably that we

have moved light years in this area of Catholic-Jewish relations.

" One of the decisive achievements of our interreligious experience on the American scene is that we have learned how to make pluralism work. We have learned how to instruct a new generation of Catholics, Protestants, and Jews in how to be faithful to one's own doctrines and traditions and at the same time to develop authentic respect for the faith and religious commitment of others. That achievement, which is taken for granted by far too many, may well be the most valuable 'export' which we have to share with other nations and non-Western religious communities".

We asked Rabbi Tanenbaum to give us his views on a number of major issues in Jewish-Christian relations today.

QUESTION. What are your relations with the evangelicals ?

Rabbi T. Very good and getting better. Our first national conference was held in 1976, and the reaction on both sides was uniformly enthusiastic. Rev. Leighton Ford, of the Billy Graham organization ( Dr. Graham's brother-in-law) declared at its conclusion, " My mind has been stretched ...To participate in it has been a very real privilege... I'll be a different person because of this".

" Dr. William Buehler, director of the Division of Biblical Studies at Barrington College called it ' one of the most profound experiences of my life ...a success in every way. My life and teaching ministry will never be the same'.

" Dr. Vernon Grounds, president of the Conservative Baptist Theological Seminary, wrote, ' What a time of learning and sharing those days proved to be'.

" After our second conference ( December, 1980), Christianity Today , a leading evangelical journal printed a remarkable editorial condemning anti-Semitism and urging support for Jews. ' An attack on Jews is an attack on Evangelicals', the editorial declared, and went on to list 'six hard questions for

both Evangelicals and Jews, discussed at the conference. (1) Are Evangelicals anti-Semitic ? (2) Who killed Jesus ? (3) Is the New Testament anti-Semitic ? (4) Should Christians seek to evangelize Jews ? (5) Should Jews fear Evangelicals ? (6) How can Evangelicals and Jews work together ?

" That welcome statement speaks for itself. However, evangelism is a very sensitive issue to many of us in the Jewish community. While Christians have a right to evangelize openly, I strongly condemn the use of coercion and deception. On some college campuses, 'storefront synagogues' have been established by so-called ' Messianic Jews ', complete with Hebrew prayers to entice Jewish students into religious services that attempt to convert them. Such practices are not worthy of the high religion that is Christianity".

QUESTION. Have there been strains between evangelicals and Jews since Rev. Bailey Smith declared that ' God Almighty does not hear the prayer of a Jew ?

Rabbi T. " That statement ( recanted on several occasions) brought criticism not only from shocked American Jews but also from mainstream Southern Baptist pastors. Even the Rev. Jerry Falwell, founder of the Moral Majority, who visited me here, agreed to a statement defending American pluralism and said that ' God hears the cry of any sincere person who calls on Him ' ".

Rabbi Tanenbaum, who is as politically agile as theologically sophisticated, expressed satisfaction that while President Reagan welcomed the support of the Moral Majority, Christian Voice, and Religious Roundtable, he has not yielded to the claims and demands of those groups. " They had expected to be in control, but developments over time have been ~~a~~ a signal to Falwell's constituency that they do not have a monopoly over the 'White House' .

The Rabbi is strongly opposed to the belief by the liberal Protestant groups that the P. L. O. should be recognized as a negotiating partner in peace talks with Israel. " It would be legitimatizing terrorism, and such a view is a moral disaster", he declares.

QUESTION. Pope John XXIII is reported to have said that Vatican II was to open a window to let fresh air enter the Catholic Church. Do you believe that Pope John Paul II is closing the window ?

Rabbi T. "The answer has two aspects. Pope John is a brilliant intellectual and a man of deep spirituality. I met the Pope at an audience, March, 1980, and again when he was in New York. A man of great compassion, he is very progressive in social issues, particularly human rights. In the area of theology, he is a conservative and has opposed liberal trends. In general, his personal statements condemning anti-Semitism and expressing respect for Jews and Judaism have been excellent. In the face of this, his unfortunate meeting with Arafat was incomprehensible".

QUESTION. The late Christian theologian, Dr. James Parkes, was noted for combating anti-Semitism. When asked in 1934 how long it would take to root out this persistent virus, he said, about 300 years. What is your view today ?

Rabbi T. "I knew Parkes very well and we were good friends. One of the complicating factors today is the rise of new forms of anti-Semitism, with anti-Zionism serving as a mask for anti-Semitism. But today, we live in the electronic age, with television, satellite communication, cassettes, and other techniques. In addition, we have developed a whole network of contacts with all faiths that provide means for building understanding. I would conclude that all these factors can work to shorten the time considerably".

QUESTION. Workers in interfaith have complained that both synagogues and churches give a low priority to such efforts on the local level. Is this true ?

Rabbi T. " You must remember that the purpose of these institutions is to educate youth, serve spiritual and family and community needs, raise funds, and they have their hands full. We at the American Jewish Committee have the staff and resources to pursue efforts in this area with greater effectiveness, especially on the national level. However, more is going on than appears on the surface. Increasingly, clergy and lay leaders are becoming involved in local networks of contacts and other forms of dialogue."

QUESTION. What are your relations with other faiths ?

Rabbi T. " We have tried to establish contacts and dialogue with all faiths. In 1970, I participated in an international symposium in Jerusalem with Buddhists and Hindus. More recently, ( October, 1982) we held a conference with the Division of Theological Studies of the Lutheran Council, entitled " Lutherans and Jews --- A New Climate". Here are some topics that we discussed: " A Lutheran View of the Hebrew Scriptures and a Jewish view of the New Testament"; "Human Rights and Religious Pluralism; " Jerusalem in the Jewish and Lutheran Traditions". Not too many years ago, such a conference could not have been held--- the chasm between us was so wide. Today, we have significant programs and relationships with all faiths and denominations. In addition to those already mentioned, we have begun contacts with Muslims, Shintoists, and black, Hispanic, and ethnic churches. It is a wonderful mosaic of the 'family of God' "

QUESTION. How do you view the world situation today ?

Rabbi T. We have been doing our work against a bleak background of pervasive anxiety and downbeat mood that may

well be an accumulated response to the shocks of Vietnam, Watergate, and the assassinations of the Kennedys and Martin Luther King --- a gloom now deepened by the OPEC-induced oil problems. Overshadowing these domestic challenges, we have the insane proliferation of nuclear weaponry, with the Soviet Union and the United States bristling with the capacity to destroy the people of the earth twenty times over.

" The nations of the world spend more than \$400 billion a year to maintain armies but cannot find the means to save some 800 million human beings from hunger and starvation. Science and technology, long venerated as unambiguous sources of material blessing, fill the earth with toxic pollution and nuclear radiation. There is now the real possibility of a global Auschwitz. We are, in fact, the first generation to be told that we may be the last.

" We must join in opposing this outbreak of moral anarchy in this world, this epidemic of dehumanization. Both Jews and Christians must work for a revolution of the human conscience".

QUESTION. Do you believe that the Vatican should recognize Israel now ?

Rabbi T. " After the furor over the meeting between the Pope and Arafat, the Vatican issued a statement that the Pope spoke forcefully to Arafat about the need to renounce terrorism and to recognize Israel, along with the Arab nations. The usual answer to past appeals for recognition was that it is against Vatican policy to recognize any country in a state of belligerency, or whose borders have not been firmly established. However, there is a strong feeling in the Jewish community that as an act of atonement for past injustices, the Vatican should demonstrate the moral courage to recognize Israel now. Some of the Pope's pronouncements on Israel and Jerusalem have been troublesome, but the Pope is an intellectual who can be reached by arguments which must be advanced

to raise his consciousness about Jews".

QUESTION. What particular aspect of your work most fulfills the 'important mission' that we spoke about earlier?

Rabbi T. To answer the question, I want to cite a prayer recited on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the most solemn day in the Jewish year. In a day of fasting, repentance, and renewal, Jewish people articulate their deepest values and aspirations for the redemption of Israel and of the entire human family.

"And may all wickedness vanish as smoke and may evil rule be removed from the earth", the Jews pray.

"How is evil in the world to be overcome? The Jewish prayer book proposes an answer: 'May all Your (God's) children unite in one fellowship to do Your will with a perfect heart'. That prayer expresses very well the ideal that we are striving to attain".

QUESTION. For about 30 years, your work has made stringent demands of you and has taken you from your family for long periods of time. Do you look forward to the day when you can slow down and relax your efforts?

Rabbi T. "I can answer you by quoting the ancient Rabbi Tarfon, 'Yours is not to complete the task; but neither are you free to desist therefrom'.

"I was raised in the shadow of the Nazi Holocaust. Like other Jews, I was traumatized by the knowledge that six million Jews were massacred by the Nazis because they were abandoned by the world---by churches, by governments, by labor unions, intellectuals---no voice was raised. In reaction to that searing experience, I made the Biblical teaching my life's message, 'You shall not stand by idly while the blood of your brother cries out to you from the earth'. Far too much blood continues to be spilled today.

on every continent of the earth. We are not free to stand by as spectators if we are to try to prevent future genocides".

\*\*\*     \*\*\*     \*\*\*     \*\*\*     \*\*\*

The journey that started on a small street in Baltimore and took this visionary prophet, this crusader for better understanding among faiths and nations to every part of the world has continued with no final destination, but has turned into an enduring quest, a series of endless missions to persuade the entire human family ' to unite in one fellowship'. In a world seething with political and religious strife, the Rabbi boldly preaches healing and reconciliation.

The little boy who helped his mother has now grown into a giant in interfaith and humanitarian efforts. His early meager attempts to aid his Christian neighbors in a poor area of Baltimore have now grown in scope to encompass relief for millions of refugees and oppressed all over the globe.

Living in a generation that has been told that it may be the last, Rabbi Tanenbaum is imbued with a sense of urgency to alert all humanity that it is hurtling headlong into nuclear disaster. As Socrates did in ancient times, the Rabbi sees himself as the gadfly who must spur into activity a slow moving and resistant populace. He is the catalyst, the crusader with a mission to convince people of the ' appreciation of the absolute value of human life', and of the need to work for ' a revolution of the human conscience'.

As we concluded the talk, Rabbi Tanenbaum was already consulting his schedule and sorting documents to arrange conferences with the Vatican, the World Council of Churches, and with Asian and African religious leaders.

Time is pressing, and there is so much to be done. The enduring quest must go on.