

TR-1555 Transcription

"Viewpoint" interview regarding Black/Jewish relations. undated.

BILL SHIPLEY: Your name, please.

MARC TANENBAUM: I am Marc Tanenbaum.

SHIPLEY: And your occupation and position in life.

TANENBAUM: I am National Director of the Interreligious Affairs Department of the American Jewish committee and President of the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization, IFCO.

SHIPLEY: Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum, what is causing the present tension between the Jewish community and the black community?

TANENBAUM: My viewpoint is that this is an extremely complex question, and cannot be dealt with simplistically. One can see here a reenactment of something of a history that every religious, racial, ethnic community has gone through, as it has emerged from its ghetto status and sought to enter the mainstream of American life. The conflict grows, essentially, it seems to me, out of the fact that the Jewish community has been among the most recent of ethnic communities, which left the poverty and ghetto status, and moved into the mainstream of society, that Jews stand very close to the middle of the ladder of social mobility in

America. And as the blacks are now moving up the rungs of the ladder, the first community in major urban centers in which they are encountering white society, essentially, is with the Jewish community. They are encountering it with Jewish teachers in New York. They're encountering it with social welfare workers, who have played an important role in the social welfare system of this country. And now it is a problem of economic justice for both sides.

SHIPLEY: This is Viewpoint, an unrehearsed and personal interview with Rabbi Marc Tanenebaum, who will reveal to you what he holds to be the responsibilities of his position in life. Produced by the Episcopal Church, and brought to you as a public service by this station. Mr. Kennedy's guest today is Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum, Director of Interreligious Affairs of the American Jewish Committee, and President of Interreligious Organization for Community Organization [*sic*]. And here, substituting for the Reverend Dana F. Kennedy, is today's moderator of the award-winning series, the Viewpoint, the Reverend Bob Libby. Mr. Libby.

BOB LIBBY: Welcome back to Viewpoint, Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum, and welcome to our studios here in New York. Rabbi Tanenbaum, recently I read a release from your office, which said that some of the tension between the black

community and the Jewish community is being caused by Arab agitation. Would you like to expand on that?

TANENBAUM: Well, we are examining very carefully the hard fact that is involved in this. We have reason to believe, based on some first-hand evidence, that, in a number of instances, where black extremists have written literature or made statements about the Jewish people, that much of the rhetoric is essentially the rhetoric of some Arab information centers in this country. For example, the document issued to the Ocean Hill Brownsville crisis by Ralph Pointer, who is a black teacher known to be a black extremist, in which, going out of his way, he referred to the Jews in New York City as being allied with the murderers of the Middle East colored people. And then went on to say that the Jews of Israel are going to have to run benefits in order to help save the lives of Jews in America. That language is not accidental. It is clear that Arab elements in this country, propagandists, are seeking to stir the muddy waters of every social political economic conflict in this country for their own purposes.

LIBBY: What is that purpose?

TANENBAUM: Well, I think it is to undermine the widespread sympathy that exists in American society, and especially in Christian circles, for the people and the State of Israel.

If, somehow, local domestic turmoil can be converted into anti-Jewish and anti-Semitic purposes, somehow these Arab propagandists believe that it will have some spillover in terms of a change in the attitude of American Christian society toward the people of Israel. It is clear that the new alliances, which have emerged in the new anti-Semitic front -- and this is a factor in why Jews are so disturbed over all of these phenomena -- is that the Soviet Union has clearly, in recent years, begun a systematic effort to exploit anti-Semitism, religious anti-Semitism, for its own political purposes. It is doing this in alliance with the Arab league governments, and we know for a fact, based on the studies of Simon Wiesenthal, who is responsible for helping track down Eichmann, and others, that, at the end of World War II, six to seven thousand Nazis and former SS people escaped to Egypt, Syria, and other Arab countries. A number of them are centrally involved in the Arab propaganda centers, in Cairo and in Damascus.

LIBBY: How has the white, Christian community reacted to this new form of anti-Semitism?

TANENBAUM: I think that's unclear, at this moment, Father Libby. Some of us in the Jewish community, who have been working very closely with Christian leaders on domestic problems in particular, and the race and poverty problem,

have been a little bit disturbed at the slowness with which the white Protestant and Catholic leadership have responded to this conflict between -- the emerging conflict between the black community and the Jewish community. And there are, I think we have to say in all frankness, a range of responses in the Jewish community, from that of persons who simply wonder at this moment when Christians are going to become involved in taking a position of reconciling and bridge-building to a view that exists in the Jewish community. And I must say it's becoming an increasingly widespread view that there is something almost conspiratorial, namely that the WASP establishment, as is popularly said, in fact celebrates the fact that the blacks and the Jews as minority communities are knocking each other off. This means that the black community is diverting energy from confronting the white system, the white power structure of America, which in the last analysis, holds the keys to any fundamental social change, and are turning on another vulnerable minority community. The Jews who have been deeply involved, and very often on the forefront of civil rights, and the present social change movement, I know of alone, what Jewish leadership had done in response to the Kerner Report -- literally turned itself inside out to implement the Kerner Report, in terms of facing racism

and providing job opportunities and opening up education and housing opportunities -- now finds itself withdrawing, because the black community extremist elements are using anti-Semitism in a way that is deeply upsetting to Jews, and the white Christian society seems to be sitting this one out, at least up to this moment.

LIBBY: A number of my friends, both black and white, have asked me to ask you this question. And that is, how prevalent is anti-negro feeling in the Jewish community, and what is the leadership of the Jewish community doing to combat this?

TANENBAUM: I think there is a growing feeling of -- I wouldn't call it racism -- but I think it is an anti-black-extremist feeling, at this point. There is a tendency, in parts of the Jewish community, to generalize. That is to say that, from certain expressions of some black extremists and others, there is a feeling that perhaps that represents more accurately a sentiment in the black community. Others who have been closer to this picture, and who have been working in the ghetto community have a feeling that, as of this moment, that is not the case. That is, large masses of black people have not taken up that banner of extreme forms of anti-Semitism. It is clear, however, that Jews are extremely anxious at this moment. Because, having gone

through Nazi experience, having gone through the recent experience with Arab countries using both anti-Zionism and anti-Semitic propaganda, it is now becoming a fad, it is becoming almost fashionable, it is lifting the taboo. For a period of 25 years, we had witnessed a serious decline in anti-Semitism. It has become almost vulgar to refer to Jews in any anti-Semitic fashion. Now that this taboo appears to be lifted in some calculated way by black extremists, Jews are moving defensively and as part of their response, are developing a strong anti-black feeling. We are doing everything possible, in terms of our national leadership to try to contain this from becoming a rampaging fire. Because in the last analysis, we know that the security of the Jewish community ultimately rests on the security of a tranquil and peaceful society at large. And if our society deteriorates into such violently conflicting blocs, then all of us will suffer. One brief point that has to be made, Father Libby, it seems to me, is the disappointment of many of us in national Jewish leadership, over the failure of black leaders -- responsible black leaders -- and I'm talking about responsible black militants, to speak out against anti-Semitism.

LIBBY: You spoke a few minutes ago about the reconciling role that the Christian community could play in this struggle

between black and Jewish communities. Can you expand on that a bit?

TANENBAUM: Well, it seems to me that a number of white Christian leaders -- I think this is especially true of the Episcopal Church. The leadership given by my good friend and revered religious leader, Bishop John Hines, and that of other Christian leaders in other denominations with whom I've been privileged to work, have developed some real credibility in both communities, in the black community and the Jewish community. They have credit cards with both of us. They have not, in the main, used those credit cards. I have spoken with a number of leaders in recent weeks about this question, and I think part of the problem has been that they have not recognized how deeply both Jews and blacks have felt about this question, and the impending collision course.

LIBBY: How could they use their credit cards?

TANENBAUM: Well, it seems to me that, if Bishop Hines -- and I use him only as an illustration -- were to call together a group of responsible black leadership, who have credibility in the black communities of the United States, and Jewish leaders, who have demonstrated their commitment to social justice for the blacks as well as for all Americans. And to lay this thing on the table, namely that

what all of us are committed to, in terms of long-range social change, to bring about social justice for all Americans, is being seriously undermined by this kind of mutual undermining that we ought to look toward how we can face the sources of the friction, address ourselves to them, and then move on to do the job, to keep our eye on the main ball. We are not doing that, in many cases now.

LIBBY: Tell me, are you being criticized in the Jewish community for your deep involvement with the black man and his struggle for equality and justice?

TANENBAUM: I'm an exposed person, at this point. I have thought, throughout my involvement, with IFCO, my going into Ocean Hill Brownsville to try to establish communication between the black leadership coalition and the Jewish community. I've tried to find a middle ground. And the middle ground today is like a kind of no-man's land. You get shot at from both sides. But I don't see what alternative anyone who believes that, in the last analysis, communication and developing a genuinely trusting relationship between both communities, who believes that those are the only modes for developing long-range responsible collective action in America. I don't know what alternative we have to taking that road. And one simply has

to expect, I suppose, with President Harry Truman, that if you cannot stand the heat, you don't go into the kitchen.

LIBBY: A year ago, when you were our guest on Viewpoint, you were just beginning your role as leader in a coalition, the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization. And now that a year has passed by and you've had a chance to do some work, what have you accomplished in this one year of operation?

TANENBAUM: Well, my own feeling is that IFCO has been almost a phenomenal success. When one takes into consideration all of the elements, which it has had to respond to --

LIBBY: What is IFCO's main purpose?

TANENBAUM: Its main purpose to build programs for community organization in the ghettos around America for black, Spanish-speaking people, Indians, emphasizing primarily economic self-determination; building social action projects on a mass community basis, in which there is broad representation from the indigenous membership in ghettos, who determine for themselves their own policies for political, economic, and social reconstruction of their lives, their institutions. It has emphasized the development of black training institutions, to help develop black leadership. I say that when one considers all of the elements in this country, the fact that IFCO came into

being at the initiative first of five major Protestant denominations, including the Episcopal Church, which played a central role in bringing it into existence, that its financial support up until this time, during its 18 months of existence has come primarily from its member denominations and primarily from the Protestant leadership. During that period of time, it has done some extraordinary things. One of them, for example, is that it has become the only instrument in American life which has brought together, on a regular basis, month after month after month, the key leadership, and a network of some 40 ghettos around the United States, who meet regularly with white religious leadership, black religious leadership from the major denominations -- Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish -- to plan together, to strategize together, with a view toward supporting the kind of realistic programs that ultimately will mean a more humane and civilized existence for the poor and the deprived in the ghettos of this country.

LIBBY: When the Jewish community puts money into organizing the black community, isn't it, in essence, increasing the tension between the two communities?

TANENBAUM: Well, if you formulate the relationship that way, I think you're right. But I don't believe that this is the

way it's conceived, in the main. Those of our leaders who have established communication with responsible black militant leadership in the ghettos -- and this has been happening in many communities around the country -- are responding in the way that your own enlightened Protestant leadership has been responding. It hasn't been a matter of paternalism, or imposing a Jewish design on the black community. It has been a matter of listening to what the black leadership itself sees as its needs, and seeking to respond to those needs. So, on that basis, I think that where relationships have been honest, have been adult, have been respectful, in terms of the manhood of both sides, the integrity of both sides' position, you have a genuinely open and cooperative relationship. My hope is that if we can see reason together and move away from some of this emotionalism and irrationality and outright bigotry that exists, that we can again return to keeping our eye on the main ball, which is cultivating further these healthy relationships, which have begun to develop in many parts of the country.

LIBBY: With society polarizing today, what's happened to the ideal of integration?

TANENBAUM: Well, it seems to me that ideal is one that both sides have to work at. We need to face the reality that

there has been an extraordinary amount of hypocrisy in the white community. We have held out, as a society, the ideal of integration to the black community, but when it began to manifest itself, in practical expression in the school systems, a great many of our people did not follow the trumpet blows of the leaders, and when they tried to integrate schools in my own community in Jackson Heights, Queens, there were very good Christians, and some very good Jews, who began parading in front of schools to keep integration from taking place. Well, you do that in enough communities around the United States, and the black community is not stupid, it got the message. You profess one thing, and you practice the opposite, as a society. Black leadership, black parents were prepared to give integration a try. They were prepared to bus their kids 20, 30 miles a day, in order to try integration. But white society undermined that prospect. So therefore, the black community has had to find for itself other alternatives for survival. And the blacks whom I know, who are talking about separatism, see this as instrumental. They say they realize that they've got to create their own substructure, their own subculture, parallel to that of the white society. And once they have a base of power, a base of strength, they are in a position to relate, to negotiate terms with the

white society, and perhaps only on that basis, will integration take place. But it will be a more realistic basis than as of now. It will not be the white man waving wands forward and then withdrawing them. They will simply have to relate on the basis of genuine interest and genuine power relationships.

SHIPLEY: Isn't there a danger here of getting frozen into a position of apartheid?

TANENBAUM: There is. There is no question that there is a move that I find in parts of the black community, which in its withdrawal from the integration ideal, and a movement toward a separationist ideal, is essentially looking toward a creation of a segregationist society. I've spoken to one prominent Negro, one black leader, who is moving toward a program of economic separatism in one of the major ghettos in America. And I think he simply has not faced the ultimate conclusion. The ultimate consequence of creating black ghettos is going to be, in the last analysis, an Apartheid society. And black ghettos are not self-sustaining, economically. Black ghettos and black economics in the ghetto, ultimately depend on the general Gross National Product of America. And this means participation in the economic system of America. You are not going to be creating a General Motors or an AT&T in the ghettos of

America, which means that segregating oneself into a black society, and seeking to create black economic self-dependency in the ghetto is, in the last analysis, an illusion. If we're talking about real economic wealth, real capitalism for the ghettos. So it seems to me that a lot of hard thinking still is required on both sides, as to what is the most viable economic formula for retaining blacks -- for helping to create a black society that has genuine integrity, genuine self-direction, and at the same time, is related to the economic and political realities of American society.

LIBBY: Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum, one final question. The new administration has taken as its theme "Forward together." What, in your viewpoint, will bring America together again?

TANENBAUM: In the first instance, I think some very clear and direct leadership from the administration itself. I have an intuition that much of our insecurity and floundering over the past few months grows out of the transitioning quality that American society has undergone necessarily because of the change of administration. Clear direction from the present administration, clear statement of goals, a clear commitment to continue to move America forward on the basis of social justice for all of its citizens. At the same time, a clear determination not to

indulge bigotry, or prejudice, or racism, or anti-Semitism of any kind, will establish a climate in this country that I think will make it possible for all of us to return to the main business of hand, namely that of moving forward together, to create a humane and civilized society for all of our citizens, black and white together.

LIBBY: Thank you, Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum, for being with us, and for giving us your viewpoint.

TANENBAUM: Thank you, Father Libby.

SHIPLEY: This has been Viewpoint, an unrehearsed and personal interview. Produced as a public service by the Division of Radio and Television of the Episcopal Church. Today's guest was Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum, Director of Interreligious Affairs of the American Jewish committee, and President of Interreligious Organization for Community Organization. If you wish a free transcript of this interview, please mail a postcard with your name and address and the person interviewed to: Viewpoint, Post Office Box 2222, Grand Central Station, New York. That's Post Office Box 2222, Grand Central Station, New York. Viewpoint has been selected by Armed Forces Radio and Radio for Europe will broadcast overseas. This is Bill Shipley speaking.

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