

VT-871 Transcription

Directline Israel/USA discussion regarding Israeli elections.

2 October 1988.

STACY KRONE: We're now back with Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum of the American Jewish Committee; Brooklyn District Attorney Elizabeth Holtzman; and Malcolm Hoenlein, executive director of the Conference of Presidents. Thank you all for joining us. I'd like to discuss, if possible, what your opinions are and thoughts on recent anti-Semitic incidents, both in the New York community and the country as a whole, especially regarding acts of vandalism in the synagogues.

MARC TANENBAUM: I would like to hear Elizabeth Holtzman, because she is at the center of that situation, certainly in Brooklyn. But I would just make the generalized comment that there is a concern about manifestations of anti-Semitism in various parts of the country. [01:00] I think in general there has developed a tendency towards inter-group hostility on university campuses, white/black racism, and a certain measure of strain between some fundamentalist Christians and Jews. And these episodes, hyped up by media coverage -- you take the display over the Last Temptation of Christ and what fundamentalist preachers were doing there, and it tended to create an impression that somehow

the whole evangelical community and the Jews were in collision. I don't think that is the case. So, I think it's important for us to separate appearances from reality. But whatever episodes occur, one must pay attention to them and deal with them in their concrete situations, but I think you're in a better situation to deal with concrete episodes here on the earth (inaudible).

ELIZABETH HOLTZMAN: Well, as you know, there was recently a very terrible incident that took place in Brooklyn in which there was a synagogue that was broken into. [02:00] Torahs were desecrated. Holy books were desecrated. Liquor was poured on them. They were set on fire. Swastikas were drawn. And this was on the eve of Yom Kippur. And it's something that kind of sent a shock wave type of dismay, to say the least, through the Jewish community, not only in Brooklyn but, I would say, in the United States. It had shades of Kristallnacht, and it reminded people of the desecrations that had taken place so many times in the past in Europe particularly. But I can't discuss the details of this because, as district attorney, it would be inappropriate at this point, but I think what we can say and to follow up on what Rabbi Tanenbaum was saying is that actually, if you look at bias incidents in the New York City area, they've increased. Between 1986 and 1987, they

more than doubled, and they've gone up again this year. And these are incidents of all kinds, [03:00] of course; racial incidents but also anti-Semitic incidents. We see it not only in terms of violence on the streets but I would say in terms of a lack of response in some cases on the part of government. We've argued in New York State for a new statute to up the penalties for crimes of bias, anti-Semitism and racism. Legislature hasn't acted. We worked very hard. The District Attorney Association has worked very hard on that. So, we're very concerned about that, but I just was discussing it with Rabbi Tanenbaum, and the fact that just in the situation in Yonkers inflammatory anti-Semitic literature has been put out. Somebody sent me a copy of it. We see this in various parts of the United States when there was a problem in the Midwest of farmers losing their farms and going bankrupt. There were people there who fanned the flames of anti-Semitism. We see the Aryan Brotherhood -- with these people, [04:00] some of them have been convicted of various kinds of conspiracies, including violence against -- the murder of a Jewish commentator in Denver. So, I don't think anybody can sit back and say, "Well, it's not a serious problem." We have serious acts of violence. We've had anti-Semitic murder in this country, but we also have institutions and people who

are in important organizations who can respond, and we have to be vigilant.

MALCOLM HOENLEIN: I think that the bulk of the incidents really go unreported. So, we really don't know how many incidents there are. I live in the community where the synagogue was destroyed, and I must tell you that after seeing it, it leaves a lasting impression. It's something that you can't get out of your mind to see the devastation that was wrought. And as the district attorney pointed out, the destruction of a synagogue is not just another incident. It really has ramifications that permeate a community and not just in an immediate area but certainly throughout the country. And I think there is a failure [05:00] on the part of government to seriously address the question of intergroup tensions that Marc pointed out. I think it's a failure on the part of the educational system; the fact that we really don't have courses within the public school system or within the parochial school systems that address the question of intergroup relations and bias and effectively try to address it with young people. The fact that those who are alleged to have perpetrated this crime are 12- and 15-year-olds doesn't give me any comfort. The fact is that it would point out that we have a generation that has been raised with such hatred that they could

commit this kind of a crime. We have organized efforts, and I think the government has been very effective. The FBI and other branches of government have been effective in trying to address the Aryan Nation. They've raided them. They've arrested them. They've confiscated huge amounts of material and armaments, which is a matter of some concern as well. But I think we have to look at what is being done in the communities, what is being done in the churches and the synagogues, what's being done in the schools, [06:00] what's being done by government in all aspects of society, because this is not something that is unique to the Jewish community or will affect just the Jewish community. And I must say I think media bears a great part of the responsibility. They tend to hype incidents, particularly, let's say, black/Jewish tensions, which are blown totally out of proportion and distorted way beyond the reality of the circumstances that exist. I think we all have a responsibility in terms of trying to address this and getting a hold on what is a growing tendency towards tensions and towards scapegoating others for the problems that our society has.

KRONE: Is there anything being done on a local level that you can point to as a good example of improving education

systems or educational outlets for these youngsters who are committing these crimes?

TANENBAUM: We have an institute on ethnic pluralism, and two of our people actually have a task force that has been working in high schools where there has been a rise not just of anti-Semitic episodes but [07:00] a rise of black/white, Italian/black kids, Irish/black kids who have been brutalizing each other in a number of high schools on Long Island. And we have been conducting courses on intergroup relations with a view toward trying to open up that festering boil. But I want to come back and make a point that both Elizabeth Holtzman and I might have made but reinforce it. I think there is a real vacuum of national leadership from the White House through ministries of government, Congressmen, etc. really taking a very clear-cut position on this. We have a case. I don't want to get involved in the politics of it, but we discover there is a group of Romanian/Hungarian or other fascists who are Nazis and in support of a Nazi movement in World War II ending up being on one of the national committees of one of our political parties. [08:00] And in the other political party, we've had someone who has been using certainly up until recent times vicious, anti-Jewish demagogic stereotypes. Now, in that vacuum of national leadership

which says that this is impermissible in this country, when you have those kinds of episodes which fill the air, I keep using the analogy of family therapy. You are pouring toxic language into the society, and it poisons the society. Nothing destroys relationships as much as that kind of toxic language. So, I think that's an issue that simply has got to be dealt with on the highest levels of the government. One thing that is different about the United States and Eastern European and Central and Western European governments -- this is the only country in the world that never allowed anti-Semitism to become part of the official government policy, but silence on these issues can be seen as assent and encouragement. And I think that's got to be paid attention to. [09:00]

KRONE: Do you have any comments regarding this issue?

HOENLEIN: I think we have to clarify, just so there should be no misunderstanding about that issue. And that is that [00:41:00] those who were responsible were removed and there was a very strong statement by the vice president in that case and by Governor Dukakis on the same day, in fact, in regard to the other case, both disassociating themselves, but I think putting forward very strong positions, and that has been traditionally the case in this country. I think you're right in the general thrust that

the very fact that we can't get the Genocide Convention approved in this country, which is a national shame for us, an international shame for us, I think is reflective of the lack of leadership.

KRONE: Malcolm, I'm going to have to stop you for a moment. We're going to take a commercial break and we'll be right back.

KRONE: We're back with our discussion. Elizabeth?

HOLTZMAN: Rabbi Tanenbaum and Malcolm Hoenlein were making some very important points about reactions to people who had ties with Nazis and with fascist organizations who were in political parties in this country. [10:00] One of the things that I've been concerned with for a long time was the presence of Nazi war criminals in the United States. Some of these people have been brought into this country by the US government. I think it's to the credit of the United States that this policy was turned around and that the Congress passed a law excluding these people from the United States, barring their entry. It was also important that we set up the special unit in the Department of Justice but not enough progress has been made. Just recently, for example, I've been deeply concerned that there is a person whom the United States Supreme Court

found to be deportable, a person accused of persecution, or burning down a village, of ordering mass arrests, and yet, the attorney general and the Department of Justice has not acted on this case for two years, in essence giving asylum to an alleged Nazi war criminal. Well, what kind of message is sent to this country when that kind of thing happens? And it's very disturbing, I think, and it follows the point that government at every level and on every issue can hold no quarter with racism, anti-Semitism, [11:00] Nazism, fascism. We just can't tolerate it.

KRONE: That whole issue of silence and also we were discussing in like conversation the political parties. I'm curious as to your thoughts on the ramifications of Jesse Jackson in the Dukakis campaign and how the Jewish vote will be affected by that. Malcolm Hoenlein?

HOENLEIN: Well, it's hard to tell what the net effect will be of any one of the many factors that influence the elections and how Jews vote. Jews vote like all Americans. They vote based upon their assessment of the individual candidate. It's been proven that they don't vote their pocketbooks. And they don't vote on a particular issue. They are concerned about the whole panoply of issues. And, of course, to them a priority is the survival of Israel and those who will support Israel's security and who will be

supportive of the (inaudible) and human rights concerns in general and the kind of character and positions that the candidates manifest. [12:00] The Reverend Jackson is a serious concern to many people and the question of how the Democratic Party has addressed both the presence, for instance, of three members of the DNC who had manifested hostile attitudes on the question of the PLO and on the question of anti-Semitism and issues of anti-Semitism. It's an issue that has yet to be resolved. I think people have concerns about the role that Reverend Jackson will play in a Democratic administration. I think Governor Dukakis has tried to address it and, I think, will continue to do so. And in the end people will make their judgment based upon the assessments of the kind of people the candidates have around them, the kind of people they're likely to appoint, and the kinds of positions they're likely to take.

KRONE: Jesse Jackson was invited by the Conference of Presidents, I understand. Is that the case? Was there any fallout effect from his decision not to make an appearance? How was the response regarding that?

HOENLEIN: Well, we think it would have been a good opportunity for him [13:00] to clarify the changes in his positions that he alleges have taken place over the years since some of his more infamous remarks, but frankly we have not seen

that change manifested in his statements, even during the New York Primary when he talked about the invasion of Angola being a joint South African/Israeli effort, which has no substance and no basis in fact. His charges against the Conference -- that this was only an opportunity to attack him, when, in fact, all of the other candidates have or will appear before the Conference. It's a group of the most responsible leadership in this country and offers a respectable hearing to all of the candidates. And we invited him at the same time as we invited all of the Democratic candidates and Republican candidates to appear, to offer them a platform to discuss the issues and their positions. And I think that he lost an opportunity to try and straighten out a lot of what he says are misunderstandings of his positions, and frankly we have not seen sufficient clarification to give us any confidence that there is a change [14:00] in the Reverend Jackson's positions.

TANENBAUM:        Could I join this? I've known Jesse Jackson for a very long time. Through the '60s, I was involved in the March on Washington. I knew Martin Luther King and Andy Young (inaudible), so I have a pretty good fix on Jesse. This is not a black/Jewish issue. This is to say I think the Jewish community is applying the same criteria of

judgment that Malcolm talked about toward him that would apply to any candidate, not only if the candidate was Christian or if it was a Jewish candidate. We would make the same judgments on the positions that he took. I debated Jesse last March at Queen's College, and he delivered a very good speech about black/Jewish relations in very vague, general terms. It was a large audience, and the first question out of the box was about his association with Minister Louis Farrakhan and what Farrakhan stood for. [15:00] And he avoided the question. And two or three times he just kept walking away from it, denying that it had any meaning. And I had to respond to him by quoting what Farrakhan was saying. Farrakhan's ideology -- it's not just the anti-Semitic of the most vulgar, Nazi-like language -- Judaism is a gutter religion, Israel is a counterfeit state -- I mean, he's fundamentally anti-white and anti-democratic. If you read this stuff, it's hair-raising. And he has refused to make a clear-cut rejection of that anti-American, anti-democratic ideology. You cannot walk away from that.

KRONE: I'd like you to also comment on this and also maybe make a point to discuss Ed Koch and how you think he'll be affected by votes next year from the fallout effect of the Jesse Jackson/Ed Koch interlude.

HOLTZMAN: Well, I think we had to put the presidential race in perspective. I mean, I think one of the disturbing things for the Jewish community [16:00] is that there are now prominent voices on both sides that have taken positions that the Jewish community has been very concerned about. We mentioned Jesse Jackson and obviously the position he's taken in respect to Israel and positions he's taken or failed to take or whatever he said and did not say about Farrakhan. But we have to look also at Patrick Buchanan. This is a man who was right next door to the president of the United States. This is a man who orchestrated a presidential trip to Bitburg where the president of the United States laid a wreath on the graves of Nazi soldiers and then turned around and said, rewriting history and in the style of the worst revisionist historians denying the Holocaust and, in essence, saying that the Nazi soldiers buried at Bitburg were victims of the Holocaust just as Jews were. And Patrick Buchanan also played a leading role in trying to stop the work against Nazi war criminals. So, I think the thing that we have to confront is why these forces [17:00] are still with us and what can be done about them. And it's not just an issue of Jesse Jackson. It's not just an issue of a Democratic Party. Now I think it's very important to put this in perspective and to make sure that

we understand the concern is something that's much broader than that. And I think we can't lose sight, too, of the fact that while people may want to fight Jesse Jackson, he is a spokesperson in the black community, and if we're concerned about the positions he has, we've got to be able to address those positions and rebut those positions, because it would be very harmful in the long run to the Jewish community if those positions --

TANENBAUM:       And to America.

HOLTZMAN: -- and to America obviously if those positions were broadly based. Now, I think right now, for example, Jackson's position on the PLO and Palestinian homeland does not have a strong base in the black community. They respect Jesse Jackson, but there is the opportunity for those issues to become [18:00] deeply based and much more rooted, and that is, I think, something that we really have to address if we're thinking in the long run about what impact these positions will have on changing deeply seated public attitudes in this country, which is what I think we have to be concerned about. One man -- will he go and come? These are broader issues that are around.

HOENLEIN: I think it's very important also to extend that, and that people understand that the opposition to Jesse Jackson has nothing to do with race or color. It's based purely

upon the positions and the things that he's advocated. Jews throughout this country have supported black candidates; in Philadelphia, the mayor of Washington, Mayor Bradley; David Dinkins. All of them enjoyed broad-based Jewish support, as have black supported Jewish candidates. And I think that, again, the media here has tried to paint this in an untrue light; that the differences have been made to appear racial or to appear geared to an individual. It's geared to his views and the positions and the things that he's advocated, not to his race and color. And we ought not to allow this to become a wedge [19:00] that drives apart the black and Jewish communities. There can be Jewish candidates that the black community doesn't want to support without having to turn this into a black/Jewish conflict, and in the same way, we cannot support white candidates or Irish candidates or Italian candidates.

KRONE: OK, thank you very much. We'll be right back.

KRONE: Hi. We're back. Elizabeth, I'd like you to now switch subjects or switch gears for a moment to a local level and address how Ed Koch has been affected recently and how you see things shaping up for him in the New York area.

HOLTZMAN: Well, there have been some recent polls taken, but the mayor elections are a year from now. And, of course, New

York is an unpredictable city. (laughter) And I certainly have no crystal ball that will tell me what's going to happen a year from now. But I think that this is a very resilient city and a very vital city and keep posted.

TANENBAUM: Now you know why she's such a terrific politician. (laughter)

KRONE: Do either of you have any comment regarding Ed Koch or any feelings from your various agencies [20:00] regarding the position of how people feel with Ed Koch?

TANENBAUM: No. My organization is nonpartisan. I just would make an appeal as I tried to do earlier. It's extremely important for all public officials be extremely circumspect about the language they use. And I think it's important for -- excuse me -- Mayor Koch and Jesse Jackson and any other public official not to resort to imagery or stereotypes that can lead to hostility and alienation. This city needs tremendous healing. It needs to bring people together, not provide a pretext for alienation. And I would hope that all candidates would understand the importance of those kinds of healing words rather than the contrary.

HOENLEIN: And the only way to really address the issues is to not allow rhetoric to obscure the substance. [21:00] And again, I think, here the media has played an exploitative role and an unhelpful role and that, I think, the efforts

to reach out and to meet with Reverend Jackson by Mayor Koch hopefully will ameliorate some of the tensions that exist and that will move things forward and the focus will be on issues and accomplishments and on the candidates.

HOLTZMAN: And the consequences of not bringing people together, the consequences of forming racial or religious hatred - we see them on the streets of this city. We see them in the burning of the synagogue and the desecration of the Torahs. We see it in Howard Beach. We see it in a case that took place -- a predecessor to Howard Beach in Brooklyn. These are horrible and terrible events, and Jews in particular have a memory of the devastation of anti-Semitism. And so, it's very important. We all have a stake in bringing people together to make people learn to respect each other and to understand differences and respect those differences.

HOENLEIN: And I think it's unfair to blame the mayor of the city as the source [22:00] of some of these ills.

KRONE: I'd like to thank our guests for joining us - Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum of the American Jewish Committee, Elizabeth Holtzman, Brooklyn district attorney, and Malcolm Hoenlein from the Conference of Presidents. For all of us here at Directline Israel/USA, have a good evening. We'll see you again this time next week.

END OF VIDEO FILE