

VT-874 Transcription

Eyewitness News discussion with Hazel Dukes regarding Black-
Jewish relations. 14 September 1988.

MARC TANENBAUM: Well, John, I obviously was not present, so I don't know exactly what went on in terms of substantive discussion. But even if it was a symbolic meeting, I don't underestimate the importance of symbols. You know, up until the time of this meeting, the symbols were one of pretty deep alienation and hostility. The very fact that they came together, I think, as Ms. Dukes says, in itself was a sign of an effort to reach out -- a reconciliation. This city and this country needs a lot of reconciliation, and the more symbols like that as gestures on the way toward overcoming misunderstanding and improving understanding, first between the leaders themselves and then between their followers, is not an unimportant contribution. [01:00]

JOHN JOHNSON: Well, as I understood it, and having worked on the story about this meeting, what I understood was that if it had not been for Governor Cuomo wanting this meeting, requesting the meeting, and Mayor Koch quickly calling Jesse Jackson, that basically the Reverend Jackson almost had no alternative but to say, "Sure, I have to meet." But he didn't really want to meet. Have you heard that, Hazel

Dukes?

HAZEL DUKES: Well, yes. I've read that in newspapers and heard that account. But I think that the mere fact that he did meet when the invitation was extended to him shows again his statesmanship. And again, I agree to his followers, who had not been in the process as long as other people have, to have them understand the democratic process and say to them, "There is no time to turn back now. That you must continue. You came into [02:00] this process voting for me. Now I'm no longer there, but the things that I said I hope will be continued by the administration that by party -- that has shown some concern that it would be there. So I think to his followers, to those who voted for the first time, for those persons who went out in record numbers to vote, that they will continue in the process that is known as participation in this country.

JOHNSON: OK, I understand that. What I'm asking, I guess -- let me put it another way, Hazel Dukes, and I want you to come in on this, Rabbi Tanenbaum, also. Do you think that the Reverend Jesse Jackson, his supporters, the black community, will forgive Mayor Koch for saying during the New York primary that Jews would be crazy to vote for the Reverend Jesse Jackson?

DUKES: Oh, absolutely not. Absolutely not. I appeared on WLIB

today on another matter, but before I got there, they were still calling in and saying that Reverend Jackson [03:00] should not meet with Mayor Koch. I mean, it is hard and fast out there that many of Reverend Jackson's followers and believers believe that Mayor Koch was the cause of him not winning the primary here in New York City and do not want to forgive. It just wasn't that incident that have the hard and fast rule; in some of the black community, I guess, Mayor Koch has been (inaudible) insults to them and towards them. And I think that was the thing that really put a hard-and-fast kind of no-move and no-win situation -- was the primary with Reverend Jackson.

JOHNSON: OK. Rabbi Tanenbaum, let me ask you this: has the Jewish community forgiven the Reverend Jesse Jackson for the "Hymietown" remark, for his in a way embracing Yasser Arafat, and for -- and during the primary, not going to any [04:00] (inaudible) the Jewish meeting with any of the Jewish groups, even though he had been asked.

TANENBAUM: Well, I think that's the problem. We have a cycle here that a psychoanalyst friend calls "reciprocal paranoia." That is to say that we began with one cycle of verbal abuse; the "Hymietown" thing was very upsetting. None of us want to become obsessed about that, but that began a pattern of real affront. And then some of the other

statements about the Nazi Holocaust -- Jews have no special claim on that and other things like that. I think the important thing to acknowledge is that that cycle then created an atmosphere in which Koch then felt justified in terms of what he thought was his Jewish following. You see, but I think that's what is very damaging in this society, and that's what all of us wanted to see contained by virtue of the beginning of this meeting. Namely, their -- you know, in marital therapy, there's a term -- "toxic language." [05:00] When a marriage begins going sour, people begin using toxic language. They enter poison into their life stream, and it makes it impossible for them to live together. We've had too much toxic language in this city and in the country at large. And our hope was that this meeting, for which a great deal of credit must be given to Governor Cuomo -- I mean, he's on the sidelines as people talk about this. Governor Cuomo understands America. He understands the importance of good relationships and what he calls the "New York family" of every religious, racial, ethnic group living together in mutual respect and learning to disagree agreeably. I think he helped bring that about. And to the degree that we can stop this toxic language, detoxify the language between blacks and Jews and whites and blacks generally -- to that degree we make an

important contribution to what Ms. Hazel Dukes has rightly called the democratic process. This democracy [06:00] will not survive if it continues to be battered by one group after another.

JOHNSON: Well, let's talk a little bit about forgiveness also, and about hard things that have been said. Hazel Dukes, do you believe that the Jewish community should forgive Jesse Jackson for what they view as past statements and insensitivities, that they say, "Look, any black wouldn't forgive George Wallace if he said similar things, so why should we forgive Jesse Jackson?"

DUKES: But they did forgive George Wallace. And George Wallace was a big enough man and a statesman to apologize. And before he went out of office, George Wallace's record, I'm told by history and those who were there, was one of greatness towards that community -- that he once stood in a door and shouted (inaudible). Let me (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) --

JOHNSON: Do you believe that blacks ever really trusted George Wallace, [07:00] or was that really --

DUKES: No, they didn't.

JOHNSON: -- what it -- (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) --

DUKES: No, they did not, but --

JOHNSON: -- really what they believed to be in George Wallace's

heart?

DUKES: Absolutely not, but it's not the matter for those of us who have studied and been involved in politics. There's no such thing as a [love-in?] in this kind of business. It's what you can do for me now, and what will you do for me? All of us fall out at some time with our political leaders, whether they be Republicans or Democrats. So that issue is one that we have to continue to educate our community about, about the political process. But let's go back to the race now -- the Jewish community and the black community. I think that there is a misnomer here, that this runs so deep that there is no respect in the black community or in the Jewish community -- or the Jewish [08:00] community was the black community and the black community was the Jewish community. Reverend Jackson did meet with Jewish leaders, by the way, during the primary. It was a political reason that they felt -- some groups -- that he should not meet with because they would further antagonize and further make a public statement about the black-Jewish relations here. Whether that was right or wrong I can't debate because that was a campaign --

JOHNSON: Were you aware of those meetings, Rabbi?

TANENBAUM: I know Jesse Jackson quite well. I've worked with him since the 1960s -- Conference on Religion and Race,

March on Washington. And I'm very close to the people who helped arrange these meetings with some Jewish leaders recently. See, I think the point that Ms. Duke [sic] is making, that -- I think there's been an overdramatization of the alienation between blacks and Jews. If you look around the country, Mayor Goode, the first black mayor of Philadelphia, [09:00] would never have been elected without an overwhelming Jewish vote there. Mayor Tom Bradley in Los Angeles would never have been elected without an overwhelming Jewish vote. Mayor Coleman Young in Detroit received a tremendous Jewish vote.

JOHNSON: But none of those cities are New York City. We're talking about the problem here in New York City.

TANENBAUM: Right. The question is --

JOHNSON: You agree...

TANENBAUM: -- the question is why is that not happening in New York City?

JOHNSON: Well, why isn't it happening in New York City?

DUKES: I think what we have allowed here, and I think Reverend Jackson said it -- I think that the worst thing that we have here is that our mayor sometimes forget that he is in the position that he is in and in a city that is so diverse for culture, for race, that so much of his statements, whether they're intentional or not, is not

always in the context of what he's talking about -- it's what he says and the way that he says. And I think that's been the alienation here. And then we have the other part of it that is played up, [10:00] so that some of it probably would have been forgotten, but because it continues to happen, it's built up.

JOHNSON: Well, let me ask you this, then. Is -- are you simply saying that it was Mayor Koch's fault, the tenor, the climate, discontent between the black and the Jewish community, was forced by Koch?

DUKES: No, not really. Not all of it. I think what Rabbi Tanenbaum was saying is, yes, you've got to know there's been a difference with the black and Jewish community and not blame it on Koch. He got a no on affirmative action. There's been a division between -- and I don't like to say "the Jewish community," because that includes -- you're seeing everyone as the black community, but there has been some disagreement on issues in the black and Jewish community.

TANENBAUM: On affirmative action, my own organization, the American Jewish Committee, has supported affirmative action --

DUKES: Absolutely. That's why I said --

TANENBAUM: -- from the beginning. All around.

DUKES: -- Reverend Tanenbaum, that I hate to say --

TANENBAUM: Right. A general (inaudible).

DUKES: [11:00] -- the black and the Jewish community --

TANENBAUM: Absolutely.

DUKES: -- because you generalize too much.

JOHNSON: Have you been embarrassed by some of the statements made by Mayor Koch? Do you believe that he has been the cause of the polarization between the black and the Jewish communities?

TANENBAUM: John, I think it's unfair to single out Mayor Koch as the sole source of the problem here. There really is a dynamic between what Jesse Jackson did at one time over a series of events with the "Hymietown" business, with going to Israel, embracing Arafat, talking about the Nazi Holocaust in ways that became obscene for the Jews. But when you have that mindset, that's what Mayor Koch was able to appeal to.

JOHNSON: So in other words, both men, you're saying, have had great impact on this polarization --

TANENBAUM: Both must accept responsibility.

JOHNSON: We're going to come back to this, but right now Eyewitness News conference, we'll take a short break -- we'll be back after these messages.

JOHNSON: We're back, and this is Eyewitness News Conference.

Our guests: [12:00] Hazel Dukes of the NAACP, and Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum of the American Jewish Committee. Let's go on with that. This is the twenty-fifth anniversary year of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech, the March on Washington, Jews, Gentiles, blacks, all stripe of Americans working together. What has happened? What has happened in that 25-year period that has so, at least in this city, apparently so splintered the black and Jewish community? And either one can begin with this.

DUKES: I think that you have to look at the country, if you will, and then bring it to New York. I think that we've lost a lot of grounds, John, there's no doubt about it. But it was not just that we lost it here in New York; we lost it nationwide. And some of the things that trickled down from the trickle-down theory of the Reagan administration [13:00] in the last eight years calls hardship on urban areas. And I think Reverend Jackson has talked about that very eloquently: in the urban areas where you have a concentration of blacks, Hispanics, and Asians in the poor, you've had a real decay in education, housing, employment. You've seen major corporations move from here because of the union rates or whatever people wanted to say to the (inaudible), so it left a certain class, a certain degree

of our people, out of work because they couldn't go into high tech. And so when you come to an urban area, we are hit harder, and you can look at the number of people that we have than other people.

JOHNSON: But has that been --

DUKES: Then when you have a mayor or your governor or whatever elected official is governing at that time, they must use all of the sensitivity, [14:00] all of the public relations gimmicks that they can to make it easier for everyone.

JOHNSON: OK. (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) that then, therefore, from the poor communities, they blame, to a certain extent, the Jewish community for not helping stop the demise in some of the black and Hispanic communities. Is that what you're saying?

DUKES: Well, you know -- well, in some instance, that's been true. When you document the horror stories in some of the apartment buildings that's been owned in the Brooklyn and in the Bed-Stuy area in the Bronx: when you read the names of persons who violated housing codes and not kept up their property, they (inaudible) tenant group, they've said that the Jewish community own those buildings, do not live in the city, and run to the suburbs. That's been --

JOHNSON: How do you feel about that, Rabbi Tanenbaum?

TANENBAUM: I don't own any of those buildings.

DUKES: I don't -- not you, Rabbi, of course not.

TANENBAUM: [15:00] See, I think there's something dangerous about getting in that kind of generalization which begins having scapegoating. Howard Beach is not a Jewish community.

DUKES: Absolutely not.

TANENBAUM: Yonkers is not a Jewish community.

DUKES: Absolutely.

JOHNSON: The truth of the matter is, looking at the record, look: the issue has not to do with Jews or Italians or Irish. It has to do with people who are greedy and exploiters. One has to deal with whatever community they come from in terms of the kind of exploitation that takes place. See, I think the thing that bothers me is that there's a certain kind of -- it's like looking at health in terms of abnormal psychology. We've got to look at some of the health of the relationship between blacks and Jews. I was very close to Martin Luther King. In 1963 I helped organize the first Conference on Race and Religion that provided the first national platform, ecumenical platform, for him with my teacher, Rabbi Heschel, and others. It became the turning point. [16:00] Because that conference at the March on Washington was agreed upon with Andy Young

and with Bayard Rustin. Well, that's what I mean. And there was such a good working relationship between the two of us.

TANENBAUM: (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

JOHNSON: What's happened?

TANENBAUM: (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) John, yeah. The point is that what happened with Martin Luther King is that he was a man of such integrity, he understood the needs not only of his own people: he understood the needs of Jews and poor people and migrant workers.

JOHNSON: And Jesse Jackson does not, is what you're saying.

TANENBAUM: Well, but the point is, Martin King developed such trust in the Jewish community that when he was put in jail in Birmingham and sent a telegram to a group of rabbis who were meeting in New York, they packed up 16 of them and came own to the jail and got arrested with him.

JOHNSON: What I'm hearing here --

TANENBAUM: Because there was that kind of trust in there.

JOHNSON: Right. Now, what I'm hearing here almost from both of you is the mistrust that is out there between blacks and Jews. A lack of understanding. Let me ask you this, then: what would you have said had you been in the meeting with Mayor Koch and Jesse Jackson to both of them? [17:00] First Hazel, and then Rabbi.

DUKES: I would have said to them that I wanted to

congratulate both of them for being in attendance at that meeting. And I would say to them that I hope both of them in their capacity as leaders would find ways not just from this meeting but find ways to try to continue and bridge the gap of whatever misunderstanding is out there. And both of them in their leadership roles should be cautious at all times of their statements and their gestures and their standard-bearers of Mayor Koch from the Jewish community and Reverend Jackson from the black community. I think that when Reverend Jackson talk about more leadership, that is lacking that we find in that -- let's go back to where Rabbi Tanenbaum was. And I want to come in on that to say that I believe, too, Rabbi Tanenbaum, [18:00] what you said about '63, but we do not see it there. (inaudible) --

TANENBAUM: But that's the challenge.

DUKES: -- the community there: what, then, from the Jewish community? Because they've always risen to the height in the past to these kind of occasions. They said none.

TANENBAUM: But what if you're a Jew living in that community?

DUKES: Well, those who were there -- the rabbi who was there, our attorney representing the NAACP happened to be Jewish. Mike [Christophsmen?]. And Mike was that -- he was almost ashamed because the rabbi was there carrying the banner

with the other part of the community and the four councilmen. Now, that did not happen where I live in (inaudible) County, when we had the same kind of housing. We had the Jewish community to come and join with the communities that were fighting for housing. And I think what John is saying, and what we've seen in the last several years, even from the NAACP perspective [19:00], you do not see the support from the Jewish community that we've seen before. Two weeks ago I did a television show for the American Jewish Community --

JOHNSON: Well, Ms. Dukes, maybe -- I think that, in Rabbi Tanenbaum's defense, I think that what he was implying and indicating here is perhaps that support is not there because the man who is out there in -- sort of leading the black movement, the Reverend Jesse Jackson, has done things that has offended the Jewish community.

TANENBAUM: Well, I think the issue, as Ms. Dukes points out is, in terms of her perception of what another -- (inaudible) greater Jewish involvement: (inaudible) a two-way street. Look, one of the realities that we have not dealt with is that in the United States Congress, the two blocs which have supported each other most consistently have been the congressmen who are Jews supporting the Black Congressional Caucus, [20:00] and the Black Congressional

Caucus, which has supported, in a sense, the Jewish agenda -- congressmen who are Jews have had the highest voting rate, 98, 99%, in support of aid to Africa, in (inaudible) apartheid in South Africa, and supporting aid to dependent children: single-family care, Head Start. Black congressional leaders know that the first people they turn to in Congress are Jewish leaders. And the two-way street is that on issues, for example, apart from domestic justice, issues of Israel, Soviet Jewry, combating anti-Semitism, hate crimes, among the first people who have responded have been black Congressional leaders. Now, that's the role of leadership. People who recognize that they have their own communities' interest at heart, which they must defend, but at the same time there's a larger communal interest with other groups, and that they've got to be there to support each other. That's how you build trust.

JOHNSON: Right. And that --

TANENBAUM: We need that in New York City.

JOHNSON: OK, Rabbi Tanenbaum. [21:00] And also, just one point too is that disturbs some blacks is the fact that Israel has such a close relationship with South Africa. I think that this has been one of the rubs in some of the black community and (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) --

TANENBAUM: (overlapping dialogue; inaudible), John. I mean, that has to do with this toxic language. I debated Jesse Jackson a year ago in March in Queens College, and Jesse started off with -- at that time there was a congressional hearing into countries that were providing military aid to South Africa. And Jesse said Israel is supporting South Africa. And he said that study proved it. So I pulled out a report of the study from Congress, and the report showed that there were seven other governments that were providing the overwhelming majority of aid to South Africa. Israel was about seventh or eighth on the list. In addition to that, Saudi Arabia is providing 75% of the oil to South Africa, and Jesse has never said a word about Saudi Arabia or Arab countries supporting South Africa. So it has to do with a sense of balance and this kind of language you're talking about. [22:00]

JOHNSON: Well, let me ask you both: what can be done to bring us back to the time here in New York when black and Jew could work together? What has to be done?

DUKES: Well, I think that some things are on the move now. Groups meeting together, American Jews Committee, American Jewish Congress planning a retreat in the next several weeks with black and Jewish leadership. A conference is being proposed to be held here in New York City. I think

again, you must sit down and find a common ground or a common goal that --

TANENBAUM: And recognize we have more in common --

DUKES: Common --

TANENBAUM: -- than is suggested by this division.

DUKES: Absolutely, but I think that it just has -- it must translate past you and I, if you wield the so-called leadership and get some meaningful things that go down to the constituency of each group.

JOHNSON: Well, let me ask you both this: would there be any common ground [23:00] in terms of the two groups in who should be mayor? I mean, Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum, do you want to see Mayor Koch reelected? Hazel Dukes, do you want to see Mayor Koch reelected?

TANENBAUM: John, do you want me to retire prematurely? I think the question is -- let's wait and see who the candidates are and which candidate can make the greatest contribution to the unifying of the city, can make the most important contribution toward healing -- providing therapy -- between all the groups of the city. I think it's on that basis that all of us will be making decisions.

JOHNSON: (inaudible)

DUKES: I agree that I think after the November election, I think there will be people of common interests for the good

of this city coming together, sitting down, reasoning together, and looking at the growth and the healing of this city. I believe very strongly that we need that kind of leadership to heal this city. We can't go on in New York City [24:00] as well as not in this country the way that we are going now.

JOHNSON: So you'd like to see a new mayor of the city of New York, Ms. Dukes.

DUKES: I think we have to have a new mayor of the city.

JOHNSON: And you don't want to comment on it as yet, Rabbi Tanenbaum.

TANENBAUM: Not as yet.

JOHNSON: OK. One last question before we leave. I mean, all of this -- the meeting with Reverend Jesse Jackson and Mayor Ed Koch, Governor Cuomo, it was supposed to help Michael Dukakis. Did it? And we have to get that out very briefly. Did it?

DUKES: I think it will.

TANENBAUM: Yeah, I think in some indirect ways it probably will.

JOHNSON: Mm-hmm. But he was almost a forgotten man in all of this (inaudible).

TANENBAUM: That's a different issue. That's a different issue.

JOHNSON: Oh. Our time is up. Thanks to our guests, Hazel Dukes
of the NAACP and Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum of the American
Jewish Conference. I'm John Johnson. Have a good morning.

[music]

M: Eyewitness News Conference was [25:00] prerecorded on
August 31st for broadcast at this time.

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