

VT-888 Transcription

*Eyewitness News Conference. 22 August 1989.*

ANNOUNCER: [00:10] This is *Eyewitness News Conference*. Our guest this week, Rabbi Mark Tanenbaum of the American Jewish Committee. Rabbi Tanenbaum will be questioned by Bob Liff of *Newsday* and *Eyewitness News* anchorwoman Roz Abrams.

ROZ ABRAMS: Good morning, everybody. Thank you so much for joining us and thank you, Rabbi, for joining us. Bob, why don't you take the first question.

BOB LIFF: Thank you. Rabbi, this week New York is caught in another one of those racial dramas. Last Wednesday four black youths were walking on a street in Bensonhurst. One of them was shot to death by a group of 10 white youths. The suggestion from the police is that one of the white youths thought that one of the black youths had been the girlfriend of a white girl in the neighborhood. What does this tell us about the state of ethnic peace in the city?

[01:00]

MARC TANENBAUM: Well, it's a tragedy and it is a major social cultural problem, not only for the city of New York, but throughout the country. I mean, all the surveys one looks at sees that there has been a rise of ethnic and intergroup hostility. College campuses, high schools across

the country. A number of us have been running programs in high schools and colleges to try to get people to understand each other as persons and not as monsters. I think the climate in New York has deteriorated terribly.

LIFF: Is New York essentially becoming a more tribal city, for want of a better term?

TANENBAUM: Well, I'm not sure how helpful the term is. I think the problem is the city needs a series of very powerful messages from its leadership which says that that kind of hatred is unacceptable and that this is a city in which all of the elements of the city must respect each other and work together for the common welfare. [02:00] And in the absence of that, well, I guess the city could become tribal warfare.

ABRAMS: Are you saying that there is an absence of leadership doing those kinds of things at this point?

TANENBAUM: Well, I think there has been. I don't want to name names or get involved in any more controversies but --

ABRAMS: Well, I think it's important to name names. If we're going to remedy a situation, then leaders like yourself have to be able to stand up and say, you know, what needs to be done. And if names have to be named.

TANENBAUM: Well, I prefer to do the kind of thing that Bishop Paul Moore, William Sloane Coffin, Carl

Flemister?]], Bishop John Sullivan and I did in relationship to the homeless, which was not to call names and not to confront people but to deal with the issue, to say, "This is the need of the city and this is how we're going to work together to try to resolve the issues." Now, I have raised this question in both -- with the governor and with some people in the city government, about the need of bringing groups of people together. [03:00] A lot of things are happening, incidentally. The problem is that, in part, that it is the ambassadors of the black and the white ethnic and the Jewish communities who are coming together that has not seeped down yet to the middle levels of the society.

ABRAMS: Will it ever? Knowing what we know about the middle levels of the society and the mistrust and the misunderstanding that exists there.

TANENBAUM: Yeah, it can. It really can. If people know how to work neighborhoods and put communities together... In the '60s I did that in some 14 ghettos around the country, working with Paul Moore and late Bob Potter, trying to bring together the mainstream of the city with people in the ghettos living in destitute conditions. And we managed to create real networks of communication and eventually mutual respect and cooperation around real projects that

can be done, but it really takes a leadership that is consistent about that [04:00] and really believes in respect for all human persons and doesn't just talk about it but acts on it.

LIFF: Despite your reluctance to name names, Rabbi, let me press you a little bit. This does come at a very intense political time in the city. I want to ask you kind of a two part question. Should this kind of an issue play a part in the mayoral race? And I guess the second part is even if it shouldn't, will it play a part in the mayoral race and how will it play out?

TANENBAUM: Well, I think it has already. If one listens to the messages that are coming out from almost all of the mayoral candidates, they're not talking about the unity of the city and bringing groups together and respect for one another. The question is whether one will develop concrete programs to make that real.

LIFF: Let me ask you one... It seems to me... I cover a lot of ethnic disputes, especially in Brooklyn, and I have a strong sense that leaders in community groups and people on the streets tend to keep score of ethnic slights. Instead of reaching out, people tend to [05:00] keep score, saying, "You've done this to me, you've done this to me, you've done this to me." Is that a cycle we have to break out of?

TANENBAUM: There's a very important paper by the late psychoanalyst Erich Fromm. He was talking about international conflicts and tribal conflicts and he saw what he called the cycle of reciprocal hostility, reciprocal paranoia. That is to say that if one group begins with paranoid notions that it is seen as the enemy and sees the other group as the threat to itself and then responds with the same kind of hostility, they get caught, involved in a kind of death dance in which they can't become unlocked. Someone has got to break that cycle of hostility, bring together leadership, and people on middle levels of the society. There are neighborhoods that are doing this. There are neighborhoods that are working together [06:00] to fight crime, to fight drugs. And when people really pull together, you see that as an important factor.

ABRAMS: Any of the mayoral candidates -- do you feel any of the candidates are able to break that cycle that you just spoke of?

TANENBAUM: I expect that anyone who becomes mayor of New York, if he wants to govern a civilized society, is going to have to engage in that activity.

ABRAMS: Do you think Ed Koch has devoted enough of his time, with all of his years in office, toward doing just that?

TANENBAUM: Well, I'd rather not get into that question.

LIFF: I'll ask it again if -- we would like to press on --

ABRAMS: Why are you reluctant to get into -- we know that there have been some problems between you and the mayor. But the question that I'm asking you, has Ed Koch, in your opinion, devoted enough time to easing racial tensions, ethnic tensions in general?

TANENBAUM: I think a great deal more needs to be done.

ABRAMS: Do you think David Dinkins could more aptly handle the various crises that arise racially and ethnically?

TANENBAUM: I don't think it's a matter of whether one is black or white. [07:00] It's a matter of ones skills, interpersonal skills, and ones credibility and I think that's what we have to rely on in any person who becomes the candidate for mayor. The reason I don't want to get involved in a personal conflict, because I got involved in the problem of the homeless about five years ago with Bishop Paul Moore and William Sloane Coffin, Carl Flemister, and Bishop John Sullivan, and the mayor got very angry with us for raising questions about the homeless. Then we got involved in the problem with Greeks, in which he said Greece was anti-Semitic. Then we got involved in some other issues and he began attacking me personally. I don't like being in that position. I'm trying to deal with

substantive issues, not personality conflicts or name calling or defamation. I don't think that helps resolve the problems of the city.

LIFF: Let me ask you one other question relating to the race for mayor and that is the question of Mr. Burger, the Auschwitz survivor [08:00] who was brought into the US Attorneys Office, whether it was by city agents, federal agents, and *Arbeit macht frei*, work will make you free, the words that were over the gate at Auschwitz --

TANENBAUM: Auschwitz.

LIFF: -- were seen on the blackboard. What's your sense of what this whole situation is? Does this situation hurt Rudy? Does it hurt Rudy Guiliani?

TANENBAUM: Well, I think there's no question that the way it has been treated in some newspapers has been harmful. It seems to have imposed on Rudy Guiliani somehow the stigma that he is related into a kind of Nazi-like activity. And I think that's absolutely unfair. I knew Rudy Guiliani. I'm not getting involved in the politics of New York but we've been friends, he, his wife and my wife and myself, for a number of years. I know no one, literally no one, who is more free of bias, who is more opposed to anti-Semitism [09:00] and Nazism than he is. Look at his record and what he has done to chase down Nazis and deport them from the

country. Somebody who engages in that activity does not go around writing *Arbeit macht frei* on blackboards.

ABRAMS: OK.

TANENBAUM: It contradicts everything that he has stood for.

LIFF: Let me ask one last thing in the question of ethnic tensions. Part of the way you do politics in this city is to appeal for Jewish votes, to appeal for Dominican votes, to appeal for Columbian votes, to appeal for black votes, to appeal for Irish votes, Italian votes, etc., etc. etc. That kind of appeal, is that kind of appeal by its very essence contributing to divisions within the city?

TANENBAUM: Depends on how it's done, I think. If one plays the game of divide and conquer, of appealing to one group at the expense of another, that contributes to the Balkanization of New York. But if one makes appeals to such groups on the basis of our common concern for the welfare [10:00] of the City of New York and the common issues of fighting crack, crime, drugs, violence, we all have a stake in that. And we've got to work together in mutual respect in order to maximize our impact on these issues. That's a campaign which is possible. It hasn't been tried very much. I hope it will be tried.

ABRAMS: Rabbi, I would be remiss, this program would be remiss, if we let you get away without spending a little

time talking about Israel. First issue I'd like to deal with is the support of American Jews for Israel. As I sit here just thinking about a few things... There has been a lot of criticism recently regarding the kidnapping of Sheik Obeid and whether or not enough thought went into it. American Jews going to Israel. Tourism is down. Those are just two of the things that pop into my mind. Oh, the question of the Palestinian uprising and how the Palestinians themselves are being treated. I think it legitimizes asking the question is there enough American Jewish support for Israel right now?

TANENBAUM: Very legitimate question. [11:00] There's no question in my mind that the overwhelming majority of American Jews love Israel for historic, and religious, and moral reasons, especially after the Nazi Holocaust. It's the one place in the world that continues to be a haven for Ethiopian Jews and Russian Jews and other Jews who have not, in many places, been welcome. I think there are differences of opinion. Look, American Jews, like other Americans, have a broad range of opinions with regard to American democratic policy, the American government's policy. The whole spectrum from conservative to liberal, progressive. And the same thing exists in the American Jewish community with regard to Israel. There are many Jews

who feel that the status quo policy which had been followed is really unacceptable and could be a disaster. There are currently many Jews, including myself, [12:00] who feel that the Palestinians are a people and require justice and human rights. The issue of how that is to be resolved must be done on a political basis, negotiated around a table, where legitimate elections are held, where Palestinians are given equal rights with Israelis. The question of the form that is to take is still to be resolved in terms of negotiation.

ABRAMS: The kidnapping of Sheik Obeid, your personal opinion on whether or not that was the best way to get those Israeli soldiers released. Was there enough thought given to the international repercussions, the safety of Americans? What do you feel about the kidnapping?

TANENBAUM: I think it's too early to tell whether all the repercussions have been thought through. But I have a feeling the answer to that question is going to depend on how the negotiations turn out. If the kidnapping of Sheikh Obeid, who is the most important religious leader of the Shiite fanatics, who captured the American hostages, as well as the Israelis, leads to a situation in which all of the hostages are released, [13:00] the Israelis will be

heroes. Because United States has not been able to do anything.

ABRAMS: You're saying that, yes, you feel that at this point the taking, the kidnapping of Obeid was OK?

TANENBAUM: I think that the Shiite Muslims have to know that they are not invulnerable, that they cannot go around kidnapping people from all over the world, blowing up embassies, killing American Marines, and that nothing will happen to them. That the American government can send over its fleet into the Mediterranean. The French sends over its fleet and nothing happens to them. I mean, there is a kind of a fantasy that has developed, a narcissism, that they can do anything they want to the western world, the great Satan, and get away with it. The Israelis have been the first to capture somebody who provides leverage for forcing them to consider giving up hostages. It will depend on how they behave. Look, this is a very wild and violent culture. One has to know the Middle East. I mean, Arabs have been killing Arabs before the Jews came there. [14:00] If you know something about the history since the seventh century. [Razias?] raids against one another was commonplace. And look what's going on between Iran, Iraq, Syria. I mean, they've been destroyed each other. The issue for us now is what works and I think if Sheik Obeid provides the first

major piece of leverage to try to get the American hostages out, the French hostages out, as well as the Israeli soldiers, and I hope that happens. It may teach them a lesson.

ABRAMS: All right. We have to take a short break but we shall return and we hope you stay with us.

(break in audio)

ABRAMS: We are back with *Eyewitness News* Conference. Our guest today is Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum. Bob?

LIFF: Rabbi, you were talking about what the outcome of the Sheik Obeid situation would be if it works. What if it doesn't work? What if it doesn't work? What if the hostages are not released and Israel is stuck holding Sheik Obeid?

TANENBAUM: Well, if we're lucky in that situation, they will not be killed and will continue to be kept as hostages. I mean, lucky in relative terms. The danger, I fear, is that the unpredictable Shiite Muslims may well try to kill others as they have killed Higgins. If that happens, then I think the tension can rise measurably and we have to hope [16:00] and pray that that does not happen, simply because the lives ought to be saved.

LIFF: Senator Dole was critical of the Israelis immediately after the taking of Sheik Obeid and the subsequent tape of the killing of Higgins. Does this concern you that there's some crack in support for Israel, that this kind of independent action on the part of Israel can sever or at least weaken the ties?

TANENBAUM: Well, I don't think that Senator Dole has suddenly become somebody who's turned his back on Israel. He has been one of the most staunch supporters of Israel in the United States Congress. I think this was an emotional response to this, I guess, kidnapping or hostage-taking, whatever one wants to call it. And I think there was a sense of offense of not knowing anything about it. But subsequently he changed his mind. [17:00] That is to say he reformulated the way in which he dealt with that. And I think the relationship has settled down, although there's no question there's strain and tension there. Part of that grows out of the fact that the American government is enormously frustrated. With all of our power and all of our might we can't get a single hostage out of those people.

LIFF: Is part of that frustration because of the *intifada*? Because there is a sense, even within -- even within the American Jewish community, that there is some justice on the side of the Palestinian cause and there's a

frustration, there's a political gridlock in Israel, that there seems to be an unwillingness or an inability to actually move that ahead?

TANENBAUM: You know, I think there's frustration everywhere. You know, there are Israelis who march in the streets urging the government, first of all, to provide for elections, to enter into peaceful negotiations with the Palestinians.

LIFF: When you say with the Palestinians, does that mean with the PLO?

TANENBAUM: Well, that's in the process of being worked out. [18:00] I mean, there are all kinds of devices which are being worked on to allow Palestinians to come to the table, even though they belong to the Palestinian National Council. Some formula, I think, is going to happen. And I think Bob Dole's reaction was in part also a sense of frustration, that he felt the peace process was not moving forward. We hope that that peace process will begin to move.

ABRAMS: One thing I want to get in and this is -- it's not an unrelated question but it doesn't follow the flow that we've been following thus far. But since I have you here I'd like to ask it. You used the phrase the Great Satan and that reminded me of *The Satanic Verses* and Salman Rushdie

came back to me, and here is a man who is in hiding because a religious leader issued a death threat. And even though that religious leader is now dead, Mr. Rushdie still must live in fear of his life. Originally when it was issued the majority of the hue and cry came from writers, politicians, heads of state in order to, you know, don't do this. How come other religious leaders [19:00] did not rally more behind Mr. Rushdie? Or maybe I should ask it this way: rather than forget about him, should religious leaders step forward now and try and work with the Muslim community to get this death threat lifted?

TANENBAUM: Well, first of all, there were a number of reactions. Pope John Paul the II reacted to it and asked Khomeini to relieve him of the death threat. Leaders in parts of the Protestant community did that and many Jewish leaders did that. Many sermons were preached about it. I just --

ABRAMS: Is it time to do something else among the religious communities?

TANENBAUM: Well --

ABRAMS: I don't know what that would be. That's why I ask the question. I don't know what the answer is.

TANENBAUM: Well, we've been trying to reach out to the Muslim community in this country and elsewhere. I've been

involved in ecumenical activities now for more than 30 years. We have 62 dialogues going in the United States between Jews, Christians, Arab Muslims, many Arab Christians. We have, in fact, the national association of them. Nobody talks about it. [20:00] Somehow doesn't get headlines. The last time I spoke was in Dearborn for a group of Shiite Muslims. The three imams attended. No one ever expected them to come. So there's a lot of that going on. The real question is whether you can deal effectively with a government which has religious and political fanaticism at the core of its ideology. Shia Khomeini made it impossible as the imam to really discuss rationally negotiating any kind of result. Look what happened in the Persian Gulf. Look, one of the major problems we face in the United States is no longer the spread of communist totalitarianism. That's collapsing from internally. One of the major problems we face in the world today is the spread of fanaticism -- Islamic fanaticism but also Christian fanaticism. We've had a good bit of that in this country with the moral majority and other elements like that, and Jewish fanaticism. We have fanaticism in the Jewish community in Israel as well as in this country. [21:00] And we need to recognize that fanaticism is a pathological condition.

ABRAMS: But can it be dealt with? Is there a way to develop a dialogue to get through to the fanatics? Have you found that way at this point?

TANENBAUM: Well, it ain't easy.

ABRAMS: But there is a way?

TANENBAUM: Well, one must begin a dialogue. One must begin developing ways... Look, the core of fanaticism is that you make the monster of your enemy. So the beginning process is to demonsterize the enemy.

ABRAMS: Have you been the least bit successful on the levels where you have been working in this area?

TANENBAUM: Oh, yeah. I think we've... Arab Christians and Arab Muslims in this country, they're a whole new different sets of relationship. That does not mean the Arab Muslim problem has been dealt with adequately in this country. It's become much more politicized since the Intifada. But there are many Arab Christians and Muslims with whom we really are able to talk and work out common problems.

LIFF: In the absence of an ability to, in some way, rationally deal with religious fanatics, be they Christian, Muslim, or Jewish, [22:00] is there an option other than force or does force become the only response?

TANENBAUM: Well, you know, in our moral theology, Jewish moral theology, and I think Christian moral theology, you

begin trying to work rationally through mediation, negotiation, compromise. Force is the last option you use. And the question is whether you can get a dialogue going that will take a long, painful process, but that certainly is more humane than, "Shoot them up, fellas."

LIFF: This kind of a question was at the center of the who was a Jew debate in Israel. The question to what degree Israel is a secular state, to which degree Orthodox movements in Israel would control religious questions, and in a sense define those religious questions as civil questions.

TANENBAUM: Sure. That's a very difficult and complicated issue. [23:00] It's as complicated as 4,000 years of Jewish history. It really is the issue of an old tradition encountering modernity, the modern world, and pluralism. And many ultra-Orthodox simply have no experience with democratic pluralism and seek to impose the old traditions of middle Europe on a modern state of Israel. But I can tell you, and I don't want to be Pollyanna-ish about this, but here in the United States, which has had the best experiences of democratic pluralism, we have experienced dialogues, the American Jewish Committee and other groups, with Orthodox, conservative, and reform rabbis, and laypeople, and they meet regularly now to try to understand

each other and work out common solutions. They issue common statements on some of these issues. They are trying to deescalate the struggle at Israel. And I think that's a role that American Jews are going to have to play increasingly in Israel, which has not had that kind of experience and those elements.

LIFF: One of the most immediate flashpoints is a [24:00] group of Jewish women insisting on praying at the Wailing Wall, which I understand happened within the last ten days. Do you think that they ought to be allowed to pray at the Wailing Wall?

TANENBAUM: I have no question about that.

LIFF: Do you think they will be allowed to pray at the Wailing Wall?

TANENBAUM: It will take time. It may take a whole new generation to receive that. In the eyes of God, women are as sacred as men are and all the verses and scriptures in Rabbinic tradition speak of women with the same kind of respect. It really is man's arrogance that seek to exploit positions of power and superiority at their expense. There are women in Jewish tradition who were great scholars, great teachers, great women, who really ran Jewish life in Eastern Europe. And the plain reality is that that world has come into contact with [25:00]... Is that in the United

States alone, women are more than 50% of the population. You have women now who are CEOs, managers of corporations, heads of banks. My wife's a senior vice president of a bank. You try to tell those women that they're inferior people or incompetent.

ABRAMS: And they'll take your head off. We only have three minutes and I've got to get in another question. You've spent a good deal of your professional career studying the relationships between Christians and Jews. What are the things right now that continue to still divide them? The things that still continue to foster mistrust? Things that people still need to work on?

TANENBAUM: Well, I think the largest people is the incredible mutual ignorance which still exists. In a world of such mass communication, what many Jews know about Christians are really slogans or reflections of old history in Europe which are imposed on today's scene and it is equally true of Christians, if not more so, that they know only caricatures, old testament figures, [26:00] but know very little about modern Judaism in all of its varieties, orthodox, conservative, reform. Now, a great deal has been done to overcome that, with study sessions, people visiting each others houses of prayer, visiting each others homes. I think that's the great success of the past 30 years.

LIFF: (inaudible).

TANENBAUM: Mainly, there is a network of Catholics, Protestants, Evangelical Christians, Jews, Greek Orthodox, blacks, Hispanics, who now have come to know each other as persons in every major city in the United States. That has never existed before in human history and that's the promise for the future.

LIFF: I hate to do this, but I guess this is TV land. You only have about a minute. The most immediate flashpoint is the question of the Carmelite nuns at Auschwitz. Are you confident that... First of all, why shouldn't they be there? second of all, do you feel that both -- that both the Pope and here in New York Cardinal Connor have expressed themselves properly on the issue as far as you're concerned? [27:00]

TANENBAUM: I'd be --

ABRAMS: And you really do have only about a minute.

TANENBAUM: I'd be an idiot to try to answer that in a minute. Look, it is a problem that has become a tragedy. I'm in the middle of working on that now. I've been talking to Cardinal Macharski in Poland, Bishop [Muchinski?] and other European Jewish leaders and cardinals. There is a willingness on the part of most of that leadership to resolve the problem. Essentially it's the question that

Auschwitz was the incarnation of a campaign to exterminate the whole of the Jewish people. It cannot be appropriated solely [28:00] as a Christian holy place and that -- the nuns have every right to pray and we honor their prayer for the Polish martyrs but not on the grounds of Auschwitz.

ABRAMS: And that's a perfect point for us to break. Rabbi Tanenbaum, as always it's been a pleasure. Thanks so much for joining us. Bob, thank you.

LIFF: (inaudible).

ABRAMS: I hope you will come back soon. I'm Roz Abrams. Thank you for joining us on this Sunday morning. We will see you next week on *Eyewitness News Conference*. [28:00]

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