

CD-1066 Transcription

Interview with Edward Kaplan; discusses early years and studying
with Abraham Joshua Heschel. 13 December 1989.

KAPLAN: Want to kind of focus on some, very few important people who met Heschel at decisive times of their lives, and of course, you were extremely helpful to Heschel as well as him having an influence on you. You know, that's why I'm interested in some of that background.

TANENBAUM: Well...

KAPLAN: When you came to JTS, is that the place that --

TANENBAUM: I came to JTS from Yeshiva University. I went to Yeshiva from 1941 to 1945. And I was very young when I started Yeshiva. I was 14 and a half. I started, my parents [01:00] brought me up in a pair of knickers. I went through all of the confusions of adolescence, post-adolescence, of the conflict. My father wanted me to be a physician because we had lived through the Depression, which was pretty frightening for us. We didn't know where the next day's food was going to come from, sometimes.

KAPLAN: You were living in New York, or your family was living in New York?

TANENBAUM: Baltimore.

KAPLAN: Oh, Baltimore, I see.

TANENBAUM: Baltimore, Maryland, yeah. And my father's favorite line was, "My son, I want you should be a doctor because there'll always be sick people and you'll always make a living." And my mother wanted me to become a rabbi. Part of that was that her father [02:00] never believed that she was Orthodox enough, or religious enough. She was going to prove to him that she not only was religious, but she was going to produce an Orthodox rabbi. But --

KAPLAN: Interesting. Where were they from?

TANENBAUM: They were from Ukraine, the Kiev Gubernia, the Province of Kiev. They came from two small Jewish villages. So, my point in describing that conflict was that when I went through Yeshiva, I went through all -- the whole series of conflicts, trying to resolve in my mind what I wanted to do with myself, aside from the whole question of adolescent identity, which is determined in time. [03:00] I developed a very strong interest in writing. While I was at Yeshiva, I became the editor of the school newspaper, worked on it for my first year till my last year. In fact, I started a campaign for the building of what then became the Albert Einstein Medical School.

KAPLAN: Really? Isn't that interesting.

TANENBAUM: And I had a self-interest in that because when I finished with my bachelor of science degree at Yeshiva --

sit down, here -- when I finished my bachelor of science degree, I wanted to go to medical school. In those days, they were numerous clauses, these discriminatory clauses, and I couldn't get into Johns Hopkins, University of Maryland, because they told us outright that the quota was filled. For Jews, blacks, Italians. And when [04:00] I was finally admitted for one day, I went to Rutgers Medical School, and I walked in the cadaver room, and I decided instantly that I'm not going to be a doctor. I simply -- I had very good biology in college, but the notion of cutting up people, somehow, became traumatic for me. After I walked out, it was the end of my medical education.

KAPLAN: Really? So, you didn't stay there for a few more days?

TANENBAUM: No. I was terrified. Seeing dead faces, grey and grim. I had no problem with animals when I was in the laboratory at Yeshiva. I was very good and good in anatomy and all that. Anyway, the point is, when I left the seminary, when I left Yeshiva, I was in a state of [05:00] considerable confusion. I was not sure that I wanted to be a rabbi. They had brought in the -- a European rabbi at Yeshiva. And it would kind of be like a religious KGB, I used to run over, and so did [he?]. It became oppressive for me.

KAPLAN: At Yeshiva University in the dormitory?

TANENBAUM: At Yeshiva University. Yeah. His name was Rabbi [Lezan?] and his colleague, [Mishka Baruchanav?], the spiritual advisor. But he had no sense of America for American kids. [06:00] Anyway, I had left Yeshiva, both for reasons of many unresolved religious problems and my own adolescent identity problem -- because I graduated Yeshiva when I was about 18, 18 and a half -- and so I had this bachelor of science degree. I knew I didn't want to go to medical school. So, I took off a year and I worked as a assistant editor to a quite extraordinary editor, [Maya Grossman?], who was a science revisionist. Put out a newsletter called [*Trend of Events?*]. And it really was wonderful, enjoying this work. I learned a great deal from editing, writing for that, and Jewish reality.

KAPLAN: Were you a Zionist, or was it just the -- [07:00] being in the world that was and just -- listening to you --

TANENBAUM: It was the fear -- I guess -- I mean, I never thought of Zionism and ideology. I never really studied it. It was being a religious Jew. Somehow, Israel or Jerusalem, my earliest experiences at home was that Friday afternoon, you would always put money in the blue and white *pushka*, or the JNF box, before *shabbos*. We did that since we were three years old or so, so that was our attachment to Israel, the blue and white box. So, I've spent a year with

Maya Grossman. I ended up looking at a room on 9th Avenue and 42nd Street. It turned out, was a German couple, and they terrified me. They guy was drunk, he used to beat his wife every night with crutches. Terrible. Couldn't wait to get out of there. One day, I was walking down Broadway and I ran into Harold Schulweis, [08:00] was a classmate at Yeshiva. And I say, "Where are you going?" He says, "I'm going to the seminary to take an exam." So, he had been a philosophy major at Yeshiva, and I majored in history and literature, in addition to my BS, those were my sub-majors. So, I said, "That sounds interesting." He also was a young guy who studied philosophy, and he couldn't get a job teaching philosophy anywhere. So, we both had the need to sort ourselves out, and in fact, it was a cultural phenomenon of our generation. The whole generation of boys who came out of Yeshiva had Orthodox backgrounds, who were rebelling against their orthodoxy, [09:00] who did not want to leave Jewish life, but wanted to find a conceptual way, an intellectual way, of remaining deeply Jewish but somehow could not accommodate the rigid, authoritarian, oppressive forms of religion.

KAPLAN: Yes. And that's the way it was at Yeshiva University?

TANENBAUM: Well, in my years, it was. There was always a lot of pressure coming from the right-wing Ultra-Orthodox to

make the place more traditional. The upshot of it was that Harold and I went into the seminary right off the street and we took the exams, we passed, and we went to school. And that's how we became Conservative rabbis.

KAPLAN: You went to the rabbinical school, is that what it was?

TANENBAUM: The Jewish Seminary, the Jewish Theological Seminary. Also, there was a great need to deepen our Jewish knowledge, Jewish education. [10:00] Because at Yeshiva, our preoccupation was with the Talmud. We were... quite proficient Talmudic studies, read a little Bible, almost no history. History was always incidental. So, we came to the seminary, and with these complex motivations. Certainly for myself, I think for Harold Schulweis, and a large number of other people. Harold Weisberg, who's just passed away, was a brilliant philosopher. Roy Tanenbaum, who became a Conservative rabbi and writer... The upshot of it was that... I spent -- I developed a very great interest in Jewish history under Professor Alexander Marx, [11:00] and I began working with some studies on the interaction of Judaism and Christianity in the intertestamental period. I got my first field paper out, Jewish-Christian relations. But I was quite in a state of turmoil because of my youth.

I was the youngest kid in my class. I was intellectually advanced and emotionally adolescent.

KAPLAN: May I just ask, this Alexander Marx had come recently from Europe?

TANENBAUM: Marx had been there for many years. He came from Germany. He was a great Jewish historian who was co-author, of a major history book called *History of the Jewish People*, by Marx and Margolis. It's a classic text, still [12:00] used in the study. Very methodical historian. I did my master's under him. In any case, though, I was in a state of considerable turmoil. I'd gone through my adolescence, trying to sort myself out as a Jew, reacting still against Yeshiva University's rigidity, for me, and still maintaining an interest in writing. While all of this was going on, I guess it was in my senior year, our father, who had been ill, had developed a series of heart attacks, coronary thrombosis. He had three [13:00] thrombosis attacks, one after the other. And my parents had a small general store in South Baltimore for all the ethnic neighborhood, and my mother, who was one of these characteristic European-Jewish women, Rock of Gibraltar types, who ran the store and took care of my father, raised the children, made sure she did our homework with us every night. Every morning, there was a glass of freshly-squeezed

orange juice at 6:00 and -- beside their bed. She was a Jewish mother, in the best sense of the term. And she really ran our lives around our [14:00] -- My mother was running the store at this time. My brother had left. He had been in the Army, and he came out, became a radio announcer in Virginia. Only my younger sister was left, [Sima?], to stay at home with my mother. And the illness of my father and his heart attacks created a tremendous emotional crisis for my mother. She'd been handling this sort of thing for years. She now was overwhelmed. And on this particular day, I'd been a student of Heschel's in my last year -- Heschel was not a very good teacher, and I think as I learned later on, the reason for it is that [15:00] he was brought over to the United States to the Reform Seminary in Cincinnati, where he was a fish out of water. He couldn't live in what was far too secular a world for him. I mean, after all, he was a pietist, he was a *Chasid*, and he needed an environment in which to function.

KAPLAN: Couldn't get kosher food.

TANENBAUM: Couldn't get kosher food, he was attacked by students... They saw him as an alien, he was a foreigner in their midst, and he was quite miserable. So, the seminary, Finkelstein invited him to come to the seminary. And I think I had him in the year which he was still going

through his transition, living HUC, coming to the Jewish Theological Seminary. And himself was in a state of, I think, [16:00] deep upset. He was just finding himself as a professor, and he was really quite insecure.

KAPLAN: How could you tell? Could you tell at the time, or at least retrospectively, the things that you remembered?

TANENBAUM: He told his lecture --

KAPLAN: How so?

TANENBAUM: Was very intense, and almost very nervous. He'd get very uncomfortable when questions were asked, very defensive. And I think that caused me to back off, I just had the feeling of inability to really communicate deeply with him.

KAPLAN: Do you remember what he was teaching?

TANENBAUM: Yeah, he was teaching Jewish philosophy and mysticism.

KAPLAN: Oh, really?

TANENBAUM: Yeah.

KAPLAN: So, this was what year? Forty --

TANENBAUM: This was 1949-1950.

KAPLAN: I see. Because he rarely had a chance [17:00] to teach philosophy at JTS, as far as I know.

TANENBAUM: Oh, it was one class.

KAPLAN: I see.

TANENBAUM: Any event, I know I felt some kind of attachment to him, which I -- a tiny bit mystical, almost like -- he was very fatherly about him. And he represented the Old World of my parents.

KAPLAN: Did he have a beard by them?

TANENBAUM: Yeah. A small beard.

KAPLAN: Yeah. Kind of black?

TANENBAUM: Yeah. He was quite young then, so in his forties. Well, this particular episode was that on the day after I'd come out of his class, I received a telephone call from my mother, and my father [18:00] had just had another heart attack. And she was beside herself. She was just falling apart, emotionally. And I was afflicted with terrible guilt that I was in New York. She and my younger sister were at home to take care of him and take care of the business. So, I got on an elevator at the Teachers Institute building, and it was a packed elevator. Heschel was standing right beside me, and he looked at me and he said, "Marc, is anything wrong?" I said, "Well, I've got some family problems." Said, "I can see that you're [19:00] troubled. I want you to come up to my office with me." So, we rode upstairs, the sixth floor, and came into his office, he asked me to sit down. And he asked me what was going on, so I told him. Well, we sat together for about two hours, and

I described in great detail -- I was (inaudible) my life, and what my anxieties were, and I felt that my father was going to die. I felt terribly guilty staying in New York. I felt my mother was falling apart. There was no one there really to take care of her, to help her through the transition. [20:00] Heschel picked up the phone and called my mother in Baltimore.

KAPLAN: Right in front of you?

TANENBAUM: Huh. And my mother knew of Heschel, she knew that he was a sage, a great teacher, and she had been aware of him because she used to read about him in the Yiddish press.

KAPLAN: Oh, really?

TANENBAUM: Yeah. When there was occasionally stories about him and his Hasidic dynasty, the Lubavitcher Rebbe. So, but she knew of him, and I used to talk about him when I came to Baltimore for family visits. And he called her to give her *nehama*, to give her consolation. And talked about -- he used the words that I was his student, that he was going to pray for my father's welfare and recovery, and [21:00] if there was anything that he could do, she should feel free to call him.

KAPLAN: Wonderful, that's wonderful.

TANENBAUM: Well, that's where the bonding began.

KAPLAN: Yes. What language did they speak in?

TANENBAUM: Yiddish.

KAPLAN: Really? And he spoke with you in English?

TANENBAUM: Yiddish and some English. But I spoke -- Well, yeah, he spoke to me almost entirely in English, but Yiddish was my mother tongue, from Baltimore. We spoke it at home often, I used to -- I can now read a Yiddish newspaper, to this day. That was overwhelming for me, that he would take the time off, two hours out of his kind of schedule, and then to just spontaneously call my mother to console her and give her support, that just -- I began developing this kind of awe of him, in reverence.

KAPLAN: Yes, yes. [22:00]

TANENBAUM: In any case --

KAPLAN: If you don't mind interrupting, just, had you heard Heschel speak Yiddish subsequently to that conversation with your mother? Just wondering if there was anything specific about the way he spoke.

TANENBAUM: No. No. Well, it was -- there was this kind of warmth, and kind of caring. Loving, caring. And, you know, this feeling as if the whole of Jewish life was embracing my mother. And, you know, he asked her in our traditional ways, "Be strong, be strong, be strong." So, when I -- my father passed away [23:00] five years later, I was ordained

in June 1950. Wolfe and I were classmates. That's where we developed our very close relationship. And also, Wolfe and I, he had also a Jewish mother, he had a powerful Jewish mother. So, when I left the seminary... I decided that I wanted to go back to Baltimore, be close to my mother. But I also had a real obsession to write a novel about my childhood experiences in Baltimore, of the whole culture of these poor [24:00] farm families from the South and southern Maryland, came into urban settings and were virtually destroyed by urbanization, by transaction. It was kind of a social protest novel. So, while I was in Baltimore that year, I taught Hebrew school at Temple Beth-El, run by Jacob Agus, who is a dear friend. And I spent that year writing a novel. Part of the time, I went off to the countryside in western Maryland, in a shack, where I spent three or four months inside, oh, working on the novel. But I completed the novel. I never published it.

KAPLAN: Really?

TANENBAUM: Because I somehow never felt it was good enough.

I would look on occasion --

KAPLAN: Yeah, I was going to say, what do you think of it now?

[25:00]

TANENBAUM: Not bad.

KAPLAN: Yeah, well, gee. (laughter)

TANENBAUM: Well, I'll get around to it. When I finish my next book, I'll get around to it. Because it really was very fresh.

KAPLAN: Very interesting.

TANENBAUM: Very fresh imagery of that life, and...

KAPLAN: Was it about Jewish life as well, or not?

TANENBAUM: No, it was -- interestingly, it had to do with the ethnic Christians who were --

KAPLAN: Interesting.

TANENBAUM: Poles, Italians, Germans, Irish. And my mother was a kind of a Jewish mother to those families. She has enormous caring about them, and we used to sustain them when they didn't have any money.

KAPLAN: So there wasn't any kind of ethnic hatred, or --

TANENBAUM: Yeah, there was anti-Semitism around.

KAPLAN: There was?

TANENBAUM: But it was part of --

KAPLAN: I believe the people would carry it.

TANENBAUM: Part of the ambiguity of living there was that we were both the best friend and there was some -- on Sukkot, who would throw [26:00] bags of mud into our sukkah.

KAPLAN: Really?

TANENBAUM: Cry out that my father's name was Abie, Abraham, Abie, Abie Jew, Abie... But that was --

KAPLAN: Just like the Old Country.

TANENBAUM: Yeah, yeah. But my closest friends were Irish and Italian kids. We played baseball with them, or picked the cherries, or pick apples in the orchard. My point, transition, though, is that I finished the novel. I did what I could to help my mother out. I helped buy a small house for her, give her some income, and when my father died, I moved her to that house. And she was able to sustain herself. [27:00] I came back to New York, and I did a brief stint with *Time* magazine. I had been a consultant to their religion department, the religion editor, sometimes. In fact, I was working with him at one point on a cover story on Heschel.

KAPLAN: Really, who was that?

TANENBAUM: [Alfred Klotz?], it was [Alfred Klotz?].

KAPLAN: Yeah, a famous name.

TANENBAUM: Yeah, it ended up there was a full page, page-and-a-half treatment of Heschel in *Time*. We just got beat out by some other news event. But it was supposed to be a cover story.

KAPLAN: What year was that, I'm just wondering.

TANENBAUM: It was about 1950... 1951.

KAPLAN: I see, right after *The Earth is the Lord's*, or *The Sabbath*.

TANENBAUM: Yeah, it was '51. Then I worked for a publisher, *Time* magazine became crazy for me. [28:00] Pressures and deadlines, business that I would have to work on *shabbos* and that --

KAPLAN: Did you go down there in their office? Is that where you worked?

TANENBAUM: No. I worked with Alfred Klotz.

KAPLAN: So, that was your job, it was a full-time job?

TANENBAUM: Yeah.

KAPLAN: I see. Rather than being a rabbi.

TANENBAUM: Yeah, I... I took a weekend, some weekend congregations on, but that was earlier. Now, let's see, that was still while I was at the seminary, before I was ordained. I helped organize weekend congregations in Mahopac, New York. And I used to go there for the Sabbath and holidays. Where was the education of children there, I was the first rabbi they had, and I helped put together a community. Also, I wanted the income so I'd be free [29:00] to write during the week. Most of my colleagues taught Hebrew school every afternoon to earn a living, and I wanted those afternoons free so I could do some writing. When I was working for Henry Schuman in '52, '51-'52, Heschel called me one day and said, "I'd like to talk to you. I have a project I'm working on; I need your advice."

So, I came up to his study and there, on his desk, was
spread out all these papers. And he had pages -- [30:00]

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