

CD-1067 Transcription

Interview with Edward Kaplan; discusses Abraham Joshua Heschel.

13 December 1989.

MARC TANENBAUM: [00:00] He would, you know, he would try out for all kinds of alliterative effect. Parallelism, reversing words, subjects, predicates, to get the greatest emotional impact. I'd never seen anybody write that way. But the product that came out was stunning.

ED KAPLAN: Yes, that's right.

TANENBAUM: In any event, he had put together a manuscript for *The Earth is the Lord's*. And that's more reliable than mine.

KAPLAN: It's OK. I have other batteries if we need them. The manuscript of *The Earth is the Lord's*.

TANENBAUM: So I took it home to my apartment, and I read it in one night. And [01:00] I was absolutely overwhelmed by it. I felt that he had captured the spiritual and cultural essence of European Jewry. I began to understand my parents. I also began to understand what it was that we lost, and the destruction. And that's why he wrote it. He really wrote that as a memorial to Polish Jewry, East European Jewry, and the loss we suffered as a result of the Nazi Holocaust. It was a love poem, East European Jewry.

And the writing was exquisite. So I took the manuscript in that week to the publisher who was also a close friend by that time, Henry Schuman, who was something of an esthete. [02:00] He loved to play the violin more than he loved to publish books. And I said, "Henry, I don't know what you're reading now. Whatever it is you're reading, better put it aside. And you've got to read this manuscript by Heschel, *The Earth is the Lord's*." I said, "There's nothing like it. I have not seen anything like this anywhere." So Schuman took the book up to the library. In a few days, he called me in. He said, "This is exquisite," had almost a kind of a British affect in his speech. He said, "This is absolutely exquisite. I would be honored to publish it." So I called Heschel, went to see him. I told him. And he almost didn't believe it. [03:00] But I said this was *Kiddush HaShem*. To read it is an act of sanctification. And Henry Schuman would be privileged to publish it. So then I arranged for them to meet, and they hit it off. They both had this deep esthetic almost mystical quality. And Schuman was a secularist in those days. But also a kind of wonderful seeker, and he was very open to --

KAPLAN: What kind of books did he publish?

TANENBAUM: Oh, he published some classics. Published Theodor Gaster's *Thespis*.

KAPLAN: Oh, really.

TANENBAUM: And I edited, but it was really his inspiration, a book called *The Life of Science* series, this was biographies of the greatest scientists in Western civilization, Galileo and Darwin.

KAPLAN: Which various people were commissioned to write or --

TANENBAUM: [04:00] Yeah. Because we would get the foremost authorities we could find in the field to do their biography.

KAPLAN: He was American-born, Schuman? OK. *The Earth is the Lord's*. Wonder how the connection. Was this illustrated with the Ilya Schor drawing?

TANENBAUM: That's an important part of the telling the story. Because Schuman developed such almost impassioned feeling about this manuscript, there was something going on in his own Jewish identity, because I think for a long period of time, he was a classic Jewish [05:00] intellectual secularist, leftist orientation. And this touched him very deeply in his own personal search for himself. He decided after he read the book a second time, he said, "Marc, I want to do this in a grand manner. I do not want conventional illustrations for this. I have seen some silver work by Ilya Schor which is just right for this book."

KAPLAN: Not at the Jewish Museum. That was too early for that.

TANENBAUM: Yeah. He'd seen it at some personal showing somewhere. Someone showed him a piece or in his house, somewhere, I don't remember exactly how he was exposed to it, but he just kept talking about Ilya Schor's work. And he said, [06:00] "I'd like to commission him to do the artwork for the book." So we went to Ilya Schor. I accompanied him at one of the meetings. And gave Schor the manuscript. Schor said that he would want to do the artwork for it, and he did these exquisite works.

KAPLAN: Beautiful. I love them. I love them.

TANENBAUM: So in Henry Schuman's mind, this was a matter now of making this a permanent contribution, permanent memorial, to the understanding of the East European Jewry, of the Holocaust tragedy, of the tragedy of what the Holocaust destroyed. And while it did that -- now, this will sound odd but it's exactly the way it happened. [07:00] One of my problems as an editor, I did public relations, it's a very small shop. So everybody did everything. So I did editing, and I did public relations as well. I searched out authors for -- one of the concerns I had about having Schuman publish Heschel's book was that Schuman was the complete esthete. He loved to publish

quality books, classic stuff. He had an aversion toward business. He hated the notion that you have to sell books, that you have to become a peddler, you have to go out there pushing, advertising, promoting. As a result of that, he did not sell a great many [08:00] even of his best books. And one author sued him because this was his classic work, and he almost did nothing to promote it.

KAPLAN: Horrible.

TANENBAUM: And the author's wife brought him to court. Any event, I was determined not to let that happen to Heschel's book. Part of it was my own feeling so love and friendship for him, and what happened on that day, a large part of it was that I thought this was really a very great book. I was deeply moved by it. I kept reading it over and again. And then I knew with Schor's woodcuts when they came in. I said this was exquisite.

KAPLAN: Yeah, very beautiful.

TANENBAUM: So I set about making sure the book would not get lost in the shuffle. And I wrote all the press releases of the book, trying to establish its qualities. The most important thing I did was to go up to see [09:00] Reinhold Niebuhr. And Niebuhr had begun developing a relationship with Heschel. Used to call him Father Abraham. And I asked Niebuhr to read the pages. And I said, "If you like

it, as I hope you will, because I think this is a very great book, you have such standing with the *New York Times*, the *Herald Tribune*," those days the *Herald Tribune* was a major paper, "that I hope you would offer to do a book review." He said, "Well, let's see." He said, "You know what I think of Father Abraham. Great respect for him and a great fondness for him." Niebuhr read the book and the following week he called me. He said, "This is spectacular. [10:00] I've never read anything like this. I was moved to tears by it." I said, "Well, do you think you would find it possible to do a review?" He said, "I certainly will." And I don't know what happened with the *Times*, but the *New York Herald Tribune* book review accepted immediately to take a review from Reinhold Niebuhr on Heschel's first book. They devoted a whole page to it, with at least a quarter of a page pictures of Heschel and the Schor woodcuts.

KAPLAN: Wonderful. I've love to see that.

TANENBAUM: It was a spectacular page. I'm sure they're in Heschel's files, and so Sylvia must have them. If not, I'll look around to see if --

KAPLAN: Yeah, because I haven't been able to find any independent record of that specific review.

TANENBAUM: Really?

KAPLAN: Only of the *Man is Not Alone* review, you see?

TANENBAUM: Well, this was, this was the [11:00] point at which Niebuhr spoke of Heschel of being a spiritual treasure, a brand plucked from the fires of the Nazi Holocaust. And in effect said something like we are certain to hearing more from him, he has a very rich contribution to make. That began to launch Heschel. Niebuhr's standing in those days. He was the dominant personality in the intellectual and certainly theological world, and there were no Catholics to compete with him in the 1950s. Catholics still were quiescent and withdrawn.

KAPLAN: That's interesting to be reminded of that, actually.

TANENBAUM: Yeah, this was still the Protestant era. It was still the Protestant era.

KAPLAN: So the '40s and the '50s.

TANENBAUM: And Niebuhr was the intellectual pope of the Protestant and much of the religious world. [12:00] This was a man who was talking social justice and human rights, who opposed the Nazis vigorously. Organized *Christianity and Crisis* mainly to attack the Nazis.

KAPLAN: I see. I didn't realize that.

TANENBAUM: In the '40s. He became something much else later on, but -- and also Niebuhr's personal experience in Detroit when he was a pastor. Has this famous line in his

book on secular America, *Pious and Secular America*, in which he said that in the '30s and '40s when he was working with labor unions, I guess late '30s, the only real Christians in Detroit were the Jews. The only people, in any numbers, who came to help this cause of social justice were the Jews. [13:00] And that affected his whole mentality toward Jews and Judaism, something is alive and redemptive in the Jewish soul. Any event, I am persuaded that Niebuhr's review launched Heschel's career. Like a shot around the world. First of all, for rabbis and Jews to see Reinhold Niebuhr speaking of a Jewish refugee scholar with these kind of superlative terms. It was like a knock, could almost hear it through the community. And I don't know if it ever happened before. I don't recall any Jewish scholar ever getting that kind of attention. It may well have been that Finkelstein did with Paul Foot Moore or people like that. But in any case, it was dynamite and I was --

KAPLAN: Stephen Wise?

TANENBAUM: In a wholly different way. He was seen as a [14:00] Zionist leader, Jewish leader, but essentially a leader for the great cause of building Palestine. He was seen in Reform Jews as a Reform Jewish leader, but his whole identity, as Abba Hillel Silver's, was shaped by the



effort. First of all, it was trying to save Jewish lives during the Nazi Holocaust, and then toward the end of the war working to try to establish the state of Israel. Both Wise and Abba Hillel Silver developed their public identity with those issues. They did not redevelop public identity as Jewish theologians, Jewish scholars, with a deep spiritual message. Heschel achieved that.

KAPLAN: Yeah, these are very important distinctions to make [15:00] with other prominent Jewish public figures, because --

TANENBAUM: I think that was Heschel --

KAPLAN: -- what Heschel suffered from from the Jewish community was the confusion about what he was actually representing for the Jews, what he was doing for the Jews and not doing for the Jews.

TANENBAUM: Well, I think that was very complicated. In the sense that because Jewish secularism, also that was still an early generation, Jews were embarrassed by all of it. That was still foreign, was East European alienation, and it touched on their own identity. He was unabashedly talking about God and Torah and *mitzvot*. And it was so alien. You have this generation affected by the whole Marxist movement of the '30s and '40s. [16:00] So that's why he had a very small following at the beginning. But the

Christians who began reading his work began to see him as a treasure, a spiritual treasure. His mysticism. And then when he became involved in social justice work with Martin Luther King and the Berrigan brothers and all of that, he became heroic, even a saint, for much of the Christian world. I think there was some feedback because there's a classic line of Heine's, *wie es christelt sich, so judelt es sich*, as the Christians go, so do the Jews go. Because he was accepted, was increasingly overwhelming by Christians, people began seeing him celebrated like at cathedrals. But actually that took some time before all that was established. The point is *Earth is the Lord's* [17:00] began to be the turning point in his public identity.

KAPLAN: What was it about that book that reminded you of your parents? Were your parents Hasidic?

TANENBAUM: No, they were Orthodox Jews. They were very pious Orthodox Jews, very poor Orthodox Jews. *Cheder* education, not terribly learned. They had this enormous reverence toward Torah and law and toward learning. My mother drove us unmercifully to study, and I really, oh, whatever. It was not unusual. Arthur Hertzberg came from Baltimore, same kind of family. Except that his father was a Hasidic rabbi. So he had role models. I didn't have

that kind of role model. But there was this reverence for learning. And Heschel became the epitome of that tradition and culture.

KAPLAN: [18:00] You don't remember what Heschel represented in the Yiddish press, but I guess you already said that there were articles about his Hasidic ancestry?

TANENBAUM: Some. I think the Yiddish press was essentially ambivalent toward him. Because he was at the Jewish Theological Seminary. But I think Heschel didn't worry terribly much about that. Later on it became a problem during the Vatican Council, but Heschel kept very close contact with his Hasidic dynasty. The Apter Rav. He used to go frequently. Wolfe knows more about that than I do. To Borough Park and Crown Heights, to renew his ties with the Hasidim, or they came to him. I remember once when he'd see a Hasid in *shtreimel* and *peyis* coming to his office.

KAPLAN: But it wasn't Zalman Schachter.

TANENBAUM: No, it wasn't Schachter, it wasn't Finkelstein, it wasn't Spiegel, it wasn't Lieberman.

KAPLAN: [19:00] You know the story about the first time Heschel delivered that talk at YIVO in Yiddish. I heard it from two different people that the audience got up and said Kaddish spontaneously that he delivered it in Yiddish.

TANENBAUM: Because it was a *hesped*. It was a eulogy. It was a eulogy. Unfortunately, I was not there, but I heard a great deal about it.

KAPLAN: What you say really confirms the effect of the text.

TANENBAUM: Well, *The Earth is the Lord's* was as close as one could come to a *hesped*, a eulogy, in English. And what saved it from becoming banal was the exquisite, precise use of the language to say what had not been said before in the same way.

KAPLAN: Yeah. But what is the genre of the *hesped*?

TANENBAUM: [20:00] *Hesped* is the Hebrew word for eulogy. It's to pay tribute to a dead person. And it was almost a cultural product, in the sense that a *hesped* usually got all the greatest rabbis of the town or the country would come to eulogize a great colleague, and it was an exercise in learning too. They would give a Torah lesson, a Talmudic lesson and then link that to the person who was passing away. It was also a display of scholarship. So it developed this kind of quality, people would come to hear a *hesped*, as if they were hearing a sermon.

KAPLAN: It was an event.

TANENBAUM: It was an event.

KAPLAN: A cultural event as well as the content of it. Yeah.

I think that's very important because the criticism of that

book is that it's an idealization. [21:00] But that criticism --

TANENBAUM: I think it was.

KAPLAN: -- essentially is irrelevant given the genre that he was --

TANENBAUM: No, I don't think it is irrelevant.

KAPLAN: No?

TANENBAUM: I think Heschel quite consciously and deliberately set out to try to capture the spiritual essence, the spiritual depth, because almost all of the writing was about massacres and destructions and tragedy. And somewhere, looking through all of that, no one had a sense of what one is mourning. And he provided the bodies over which everybody was mourning.

KAPLAN: See, that's what I've discovered in my research, that what's interesting about learning about Heschel before the Holocaust is not the Holocaust, it's what existed before, which is much more difficult to grasp because you have to study it and learn about it. [22:00] The Holocaust is something easy to focus on and to mobilize the American Jewish community around. But it doesn't have much content in relation to what we're trying to talk about now. And the other cultural creations of European Jewry as well,

secular and religious. So that's a very important way of looking at that.

TANENBAUM: Look. Polish Jewry was the largest Jewish community in the world.

KAPLAN: His first writings in this country were on prayer and piety. The first article he published in 1942, I believe it's "An Analysis of Piety," which became the final chapter of *Man is Not Alone*.

TANENBAUM: Yeah. It's also in *The Insecurity of Freedom* [23:00] as a lovely paper there, paper on prayer.

KAPLAN: So what you're saying actually is that Heschel understood the moment and that instead of writing about or speaking about destruction and horror he was trying to remind us and to recapture, revive, redress spirit of that civilization.

TANENBAUM: I think he was troubled that in all of the appropriate angst and trauma over the Holocaust, the reason for it was being lost. And the reason for it was the [24:00] incredible spiritual treasures that were destroyed and could not be restored in the same way. And he felt an obligation. It really was a great *mitzvah* for him to try to recapture as much of the spirit of that, so that would not be lost in all of the *hesped*s. It was really his *hesped* for East European Jewry. His eulogy. So I

understood why people got up to say Kaddish. I felt like saying Kaddish when I finished reading the book. It's the sense. One has a sense of what one was robbed of, was cheated of. Any event, in terms of his career, he began developing something of a reputation in the national community. Many Jews had trouble dealing [25:00] with his kind of themes. Piety, prayer, God, *mitzvot*. And also were worried whether that was a throwback to East European Judaism, that he was a kind of Orthodox Jew in disguise. Some seminary professors were worried about his emphasis on mysticism and *aggadah*. Well, let Wolfe tell you that, because it was not good. It was not good. Oh, and there's some professors who felt that the core of Judaism is its legalism. It's *halachah*. All the rest of it are *bubbe meises*, nice storytelling, narratives, but that's not the core. And he was charged almost with weakening, diverting attention from the core of Judaism. [26:00] He was a pious man who lived according to the law. He was as *frum* as anybody else on the faculty. So they couldn't dismiss him. So it was what he was writing that they were disturbed about, not his life, not his performance.

KAPLAN: How visible was Mordecai Kaplan's ideology when you were a rabbinical student at JTS?

TANENBAUM: Oh, he was riding high.

KAPLAN: I consider that a secularistic view of Judaism. Is that really very widespread at JTS in the late '40s?

TANENBAUM: Yeah. He was a dominant personality. He affected me very much. Probably an element in my response to Heschel.

KAPLAN: How did you experience that?

TANENBAUM: Kaplan himself was also a pious Jew, observant Jew. [27:00] But Kaplan was trying to respond to another challenge to Jewish life, namely the impact of John Dewey and Pierce and others, pragmatists, on the intellectual life of Americans. And certainly on American Jews. And in the process he emptied religion of its content, of its validity. Kaplan's intention was to take Dewey and his pragmatism and try to give it some Jewish connection, some Jewish content. In fact he performed an important service. Namely many Jewish intellectuals who had been totally alienated from Jewish life came back to Jewish life because of reconstructionism. And I think it was Kaplan's wish that once they returned to this highbrow Judaism they would in fact return [28:00] even further, seek out deeper roots in Jewish religion and culture. And he did attract a good number. Writers, artists, professors.



KAPLAN: Very interesting, because it's very important for me to understand what the cultural alternatives were at the time, and what Mordecai Kaplan was trying to -- [29:00]

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