

CD-1069 Transcription

Interview with Edward Kaplan; discusses JTS, Abraham Joshua Heschel, and the civil rights movement. 10 January 1990.

MARC TANENBAUM: -- before the *Yiddisher Kempfer*, *The Jewish Fighter*, which was really kind of secular. It's the Yiddish newspaper.

EDWARD KAPLAN: [A lot of them had?] --

TANENBAUM: A lot of secular Yiddishists.

KAPLAN: Yes.

TANENBAUM: He spoke to them quite frequently. I was always amazed by that.

KAPLAN: Where were his people located, and what was the (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)?

TANENBAUM: Well, they were Yiddish writers on the newspapers. They worked for the *Forverts*. They worked for the *Tog*, which was then the Orthodox major Yiddish newspaper.

KAPLAN: It was Orthodox?

TANENBAUM: It's since become -- Gershon Jacobson is now the editor of the successor, the *Algemeiner Journal*, and that's now very Orthodox, very Lubavitch.

KAPLAN: I see.

TANENBAUM: Very Lubavitch. But he spoke in a number of

places. I think part of the issue was he really was not yet established nationally as a figure. And so that -- while I think he [01:00] personally had impact on a lot of them, he was a virtually unknown rebbe and he spoke beautifully and movingly, it was after he became established with his books and his lectures at the White House conferences -- then he was listened to.

KAPLAN: Right. But then from his point of view, he did try to do something in the '40s before he came to New York. And so do you remember other organizations that he might've been speaking to?

TANENBAUM: No. One really has to look that record up. I think [Wolf?] will probably know more about that than I, because that's kind of... It's not [on top of that?]

KAPLAN: It's hard to find.

TANENBAUM: Yeah.

KAPLAN: It's very hard to find.

TANENBAUM: Yeah. Yeah, we weren't keeping records of all that was going on, and...

KAPLAN: Can you say something about the awareness of what was going on in Europe in '41, '42, '43, and '44? [02:00] In this country? I mean, I've looked at the -- I think it's called the *American Jewish Record*, that starts, I believe, in... Gee, I don't know if it starts in '39, but it gives

everything -- a day by day account of what was going on in every European country. OK? Now, I think this was a summary of Jewish news releases that were published in various publications around the country.

TANENBAUM: Lot of JTA reports.

KAPLAN: Yes. Now, I can look those up in the library and say, "Well, we knew everything," because everything is there.

TANENBAUM: You know, it's interesting: the Jewish Telegraphic Agency is now publishing excerpts almost every day from that record.

KAPLAN: Yes.

TANENBAUM: When you read it, they're very scary.

KAPLAN: Absolutely.

TANENBAUM: Scary.

KAPLAN: Yeah.

TANENBAUM: Poland, in this city, they rounded up 200,000 Jews.

KAPLAN: That's right. They know every --

TANENBAUM: They sent them off, [03:00] and...

KAPLAN: But what --

TANENBAUM: I couldn't understand that. I mean, I don't know -- there just was such disbelief.

KAPLAN: Yes.

TANENBAUM: I mean, no one could believe Germany, you know,

which was a country of highest European culture, science, technology. I mean, that's the place where the best Jews went to, to get their educations. Jews became doctors there, and became psychiatrists there.

KAPLAN: Where did they go from? Other European countries?

TANENBAUM: Eastern European countries.

KAPLAN: Yes.

TANENBAUM: Poland.

KAPLAN: Yeah.

TANENBAUM: Poland. Austria. Czechoslovakia. I mean, wherever there were sizable Jewish communities. Look at Heschel himself: from Warsaw to Berlin. Because Germany had a reputation then as the Jerusalem of academia. I mean, it was... It was [04:00] the Parthenon. And if you got a degree from Germany, a doctor's degree from Germany, then you were a real scholar. And a lot of that still remains, part... One of the factors is that in Christian circles, among Christian theologians, the highest form of being a Christian theologian was being a German theologian.

KAPLAN: I see. From that period, or even now?

TANENBAUM: Well, it's less so today.

KAPLAN: Yeah, until they were...

TANENBAUM: But there's still a lot of that today. The number has grown, and [Ronner?] -- I mean, the people were the

most distinct -- Tillich.

KAPLAN: Yes.

TANENBAUM: Any event... So I have the view of the fact -- I was very young at that time. I was... I started college, I was 14 and a half. [05:00] So by '42, '43 -- I was 15, 16 - - I mean, I had that kind of adolescent sense it was both real and unreal. I couldn't believe a lot of it. And I used to go to these rallies often to persuade myself that something was going on.

KAPLAN: What kind of rallies were there?

TANENBAUM: Well, Madison Square Garden. There were often rallies in Madison Square Park, Manhattan Center, Stephen Wise Carnegie -- Stephen Wise spoke at most of them.

KAPLAN: In the early '40s.

TANENBAUM: Forties, yeah.

KAPLAN: And about what?

TANENBAUM: [Of course?] about the Nazi holocaust, the suffering, calling on the government to allow Jews to come in. This was in '42, '43, '44. [06:00] Big mass protest rallies. And then after '45, '46, when the movement began to build Jewish faith, (inaudible). Then the rallies began to move in that direction, support the [race?] (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

KAPLAN: Well, you know, at HUC, Sam Dresner and Heschel and

Mrs. Atlas spoke, too, Mrs. Samuel Atlas, said that people didn't talk about what was going on in Europe. Stephen Wise was one of the great leaders in New York. What the hell is going on? But the other parts of the country, you know...

TANENBAUM: [I don't know?].

KAPLAN: Maybe these rallies did not touch a lot of people.

Maybe the --

TANENBAUM: It was essentially, I think, mainly New York and maybe Chicago. Wherever Stephen Wise went, he spoke and [07:00] made a point. But it was a very complicated and, in many ways, ugly period. I mean, (inaudible) when one thinks about it. Of course, you know, this is eisegesis becoming exegesis; we're reading back into that time our consciousness today. In those days, Jews were not really organized politically, so we had a couple few ambassadors to the Gentile world, and that was Rabbi Silver, Stephen Wise. Nahum Goldman was our foreign minister.

KAPLAN: Yes. (laughter)

TANENBAUM: And then later there was the opposition to them. There also was the feeling of disbelief. When the early information came in, it was not distributed, even by Stephen Wise and his people. Especially they didn't believe it. They didn't believe that hundreds of thousands of Jews were being killed. [08:00] And I remember -- I mean, one of

my colleagues in recent years was Gerhart Riegner, World Jewish Congress, who was in Switzerland at that time. He is supposed to have sent the first cable to Stephen Wise and to the British government reporting on reports he'd received in Switzerland of Jews being rounded up and killed and massacred. And according to the record, Wise wrote back, "Please seek confirmation." (laughter) Sumner Wells knew at that time.

KAPLAN: Yeah, Secretary --

TANENBAUM: The State Department.

KAPLAN: The State Department, yeah.

TANENBAUM: But what I mean by the differences in the period -- Jews had no serious political organization, or knew how to use political power, or afraid to use political power. I mean, anti-Semitism was quite [heavy?] (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

KAPLAN: Yeah, yeah.

TANENBAUM: So that there was fear, [09:00] and I think Stephen Wise was seized with that, that you make too big a ruckus over it and you will stir the Father Coughlins and other anti-Semites.

KAPLAN: So he kind of internalized the denial because of the -

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TANENBAUM: Did as much as he could.

KAPLAN: -- various precarious social and precarious political situation of the Jews --

TANENBAUM: For the record, though --

KAPLAN: -- that time, yeah.

TANENBAUM: -- when he finally realized that this was a major catastrophe, then he went to Franklin Roosevelt and told Roosevelt of how great a tragedy it was, and Roosevelt said he would do what he could to help. I mean, Roosevelt conned the Jews in unforgivable ways. He would say one thing to Stephen Wise or Father [Helsouer?], and the next day he would go off on a ship with the king of Saudi Arabia, telling him, "Don't worry, we're not going to allow immigration to Palestine," when the day before he had promised Stephen Wise and others that we will see the gates are opened.

KAPLAN: [10:00] See, I'm trying to explain Heschel's isolation in Cincinnati, and maybe, I guess, by the time he arrived in New York the facts were known. His mother and sister -- he had already received the news of their death in 1942, I think it must've been, and he was in a different phase, and the country was in a different phase by 1945, by the time he arrived in New York, where one could no longer deny the realities of Europe. But in Cincinnati, perhaps they could. And I just, I'm reluctant to blame the Reform movement for

that, (laughter) if it's a kind of a regional --

TANENBAUM: (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

KAPLAN: -- you know what I mean?

TANENBAUM: Yeah, it was also an American Jewish phenomenon.

KAPLAN: Yeah, yeah, because I hadn't been aware [11:00] that in the conservative movement, as well, there was a lot of reservations about Zionism, as I thought it was mostly a kind of, you know, American Reform.

TANENBAUM: (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) was really mainly [in its?] leadership.

KAPLAN: Yeah, (inaudible).

TANENBAUM: Finkelstein really set the pattern for that. Therefore, faculty members became very careful and circumspect. There were some faculty members who were more forthright about it. Saul Lieberman I think was. I think Spiegel was. Certainly Hillel Bavli, Alexander Marx, (inaudible). Anyway, it --

KAPLAN: And Heschel -- you don't remember if he participated in these, expressed opinions?

TANENBAUM: No. Well, I came to the Seminary in '46, and I had very little contact with Heschel at the very beginning. My large interest then was Jewish history then. [12:00] That's my first couple years. And Jewish literature. I won a prize in Hillel Bavli, (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

KAPLAN: That's a friend of Heschel's, Hillel Bavli, I understand.

TANENBAUM: Yeah. Oh, yeah. They really understood each other. I mean, they thought they were landsmann in that sense.

KAPLAN: Could you tell me a little about Hillel Bavli, then?

TANENBAUM: Bavli's a littérateur.

KAPLAN: Yes. Taught at the Teachers Institute, didn't he?

TANENBAUM: Yeah, but he also taught at rabbinical school.

KAPLAN: I see, yes.

TANENBAUM: Taught a course in modern Hebrew literature. Very elegant man, very cultured. And he taught courses in Hebrew, responded in Hebrew as well as we could. (laughter) Because we didn't learn to speak Hebrew (inaudible) at Yeshiva University. We didn't learn Bible. We didn't learn history. We didn't learn --

KAPLAN: Isn't that something.

TANENBAUM: It was mainly gemara.

KAPLAN: Yeah.

TANENBAUM: Bavli was -- I think clearly he was Zionist to his core, and much of the literature dealt with Zionist writers, [13:00] and writers who contributed to developing the whole Zionist mentality. But I didn't -- I mean, I knew they were friendly. I would see the walking occasionally,

and talking to each other, mostly in Hebrew, but I didn't know much more about that than that.

KAPLAN: Yeah. But he still was somebody that Heschel really was close to.

TANENBAUM: (overlapping dialogue; inaudible). Yeah, (inaudible).

KAPLAN: Yeah. Don't have much about him. Let's see if we can return to Martin Luther King, Jr. I think that you said the contact, or maybe Wolf said that the contact between Heschel and Martin Luther King's movement was made by Everett Gendler, or was the AJC already in touch with Martin Luther King, and one of you or both of you had the idea to get Heschel involved.

TANENBAUM: Well, [14:00] AJC was by then - very much involved. We had to be careful because our AJC leadership in the major Southern cities became frightened.

KAPLAN: Must have been terrible.

TANENBAUM: Well, I remember I was president once when a leader in Birmingham called and warned John Slawson not to get involved, because he said, "First they'll go after the blacks, then they'll come after us, and we'll be made the scapegoats." So we went ahead, and we took position on civil rights in support of Martin Luther King, but we made sure not to do it in a flamboyant way, which would expose

them to reprisals. And generally, I think we handled that very well, in a very skillful way. But when... [15:00] Look, the point of connection was with Morris Abram. When Martin Luther King just started out they tried to kill the movement -- that is, the officials in Atlanta, and the police -- by arresting him.

KAPLAN: By arresting King.

TANENBAUM: By arresting King on some trumped-up charge. Morris Abram, who was then a very young lawyer from Fitzgerald, Georgia, came to Atlanta, and he offered to defend King.

KAPLAN: Oh, I didn't know that.

TANENBAUM: And he got King out of prison. I think that's where Martin King began to feel some natural (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

KAPLAN: Very interesting.

TANENBAUM: The other thing that... I mean, these were the foundation stones that little by little were being put together. The other practical thing that happened -- [16:00] and I didn't find this out until much later on -- we had a reception, I don't know, I guess about five years ago in honor of Martin King's birthday in Atlanta. I organized a large meeting with Coretta Scott King, and it was at the time of the killing of the 12 black youths, the

memorial service for them. And we invited Daddy King,
Martin Luther King's father, whom I loved. He just was such
a --

KAPLAN: [Such a?] great guy.

TANENBAUM: And bear hugs.

KAPLAN: Yeah. (laughter)

TANENBAUM: I'll never forget that. And he got up in a
meeting, and he said, "[I appreciate this memorial?]
meeting." I want you to know that Martin felt that the
Jewish people were the best friends of the movement, and of
all the people in America, the people you could really
count on were the Jews.

KAPLAN: [17:00] Wonderful.

TANENBAUM: So you don't know this, but I'll tell you this:
when Martin got the movement started here in Atlanta,
somebody in the government put the Internal Revenue Service
on us, and they began to ask for an accounting of all my
books, because they used that to suffocate us. And the
first person who volunteered to read the books and defend
their position was a Jewish accountant. And he went over
the records, and he literally drove the IRS away, saved the
movement. So we could've been suffocated.

KAPLAN: Very interesting.

TANENBAUM: That man, that accountant was present at that

meeting of Daddy King. I don't remember his name. Coretta King [does?]. It was a very moving (break in tape) and the other thing (break in tape) Martin started out -- [18:00] we wanted to call our first meeting in Atlanta in a hotel. No hotel would give us a room, would rent us a room. The one person who finally rented a room to us was a Jewish man who owned a hotel, and that was our first meeting place. And Martin (inaudible) and he never forgot the Jewish people, that whenever he needed something at a critical time, the Jews were always there, and no ands, ifs, or buts. And said, "So over the years, we've never forgotten that, and you stayed at our side throughout the whole experience."

KAPLAN: Terrific.

TANENBAUM: So the Jews who knew that -- I mean, that's one of the reasons why Jews became so outraged by Jesse Jackson -- Jackson, who was a second, third-rate lieutenant with Martin Luther King. But the master himself had these feelings. But he also had these deeply biblical feelings.

KAPLAN: That's right. That's right.

TANENBAUM: The exodus, and Moses -- [19:00] the Exodus, liberation from slavery, that was a dominant theme. He spoke more about Moses and the Exodus than he ever did about Jesus.

KAPLAN: Yeah, I wonder if this is in Taylor Branch's book.

TANENBAUM: I don't know.

KAPLAN: [I'm going to?] find out, yeah.

TANENBAUM: I --

KAPLAN: Give him this material.

TANENBAUM: There's a black theologian at [Union?]

Theological Seminary, James Cohn --

KAPLAN: Oh, yes.

TANENBAUM: -- who once wrote about the Exodus theme in the Civil Rights movement. I remember hearing from him -- it really struck me, [my Christian?], that Moses and the Exodus was more important to the blacks than Jesus.

KAPLAN: Mm-hmm. [That was their thing?]. Well, so that the preparation is completely natural, and I suppose the actual physical taking of Heschel at the Selma, you know, as [Wolf?] had explained it -- and I guess Andy Young, Everett Gendler --

TANENBAUM: Everett -- I mean, Everett --

KAPLAN: -- told Andy Young or something like that, and Andy Young [20:00] called up Wolf or something like that. Do you remember what Everett was doing in that period? Was he a congregational rabbi? Was he still at the Seminary?

TANENBAUM: I think he was still at the Seminary.

KAPLAN: Yeah. (break in tape) Next week, anyway.

TANENBAUM: Yeah, an interesting guy. [I always liked?] he was a vegetarian.

KAPLAN: Yeah, he's a vegetarian.

TANENBAUM: Pacifist and stuff. He was an interesting guy, I always found. We really appreciated each other. We had a very good friendship. I mean, it was limited, but... In fact, I think about it now, I was one of the first people he came to talk to before he made a decision to become a rabbi.

KAPLAN: Oh, really?

TANENBAUM: Yeah, I'd forgotten about that completely. He came. We had a very good, long talk. And he said that kind of made some difference to him in terms of (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

KAPLAN: What was he doing before that?

TANENBAUM: [21:00] I don't know. (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) --

KAPLAN: I'll have to ask him about that.

TANENBAUM: Yeah, I don't remember.

KAPLAN: That's very interesting.

TANENBAUM: Well, just now I just had this connection, or an image, deeply suppressed or forgotten image of Everett coming, and I found him a very attractive young guy.

KAPLAN: Very interesting guy. Haven't seem him in a few years.

TANENBAUM: And I didn't know it was going to be a good thing
for him, but --

KAPLAN: Well, think so. (laughter)

TANENBAUM: -- he ought to know what the... Yeah, well...
Yeah, he's been very gifted, very constructive.

KAPLAN: Who were the people at SCLC that you were working
with? Andy Young and King?

TANENBAUM: Andy and I were quite close.

KAPLAN: Yeah. He's such an articulate, intelligent man.

TANENBAUM: And he had a sense of balance. He also was
honest. You know, if he felt that the Jews were doing
something that was troublesome for him, he would tell me,
and he would say, "Look, help us out. You know, we need
your help with something. We're going to need Jewish help
on a march on Washington." He said, "We're going to need
your help. We've really got to turn out people here." And
so we got buses of Jews [22:00] and trainloads of Jews and
carloads. I think Jews were a very large number of people
who went.

KAPLAN: Heschel wasn't involved in that.

TANENBAUM: No, there Joachim Prinz --

KAPLAN: That's right.

TANENBAUM: -- was the spokesman, and that had to do with
Jewish institutional politics [and rivalries?].

KAPLAN: Yeah. I remember that speech, actually.

TANENBAUM: He was very good.

KAPLAN: Yeah.

TANENBAUM: He was very good. And there was something quite appropriate, because of his own experience with Nazism.

KAPLAN: That's right.

TANENBAUM: He had this kind of personal -- and he used it very well. And look, he was a very well-spoken man with a wonderful voice. So he did very well. Probably did better than Heschel might've done in that situation, because that was a big... I mean, I was there on the steps, and you really had to have a powerful voice to get across.

KAPLAN: Yeah, that's right. You had to be on the stage.

TANENBAUM: Eugene Carson Blake had a powerful voice, and Martin King, clearly. So... [23:00]

KAPLAN: You know, 1963 was an incredible year for Heschel.

There's the Religion and Race, the White House conference -

TANENBAUM: The White House conference was before that.

KAPLAN: Was that '60?

TANENBAUM: Sixty-one, or '60 and '61.

KAPLAN: Sixty, '61. He gave a series of lectures at Stanford University on who is man, which apparently inspired some people to go to Selma Montgomery. That's what Taylor Branch tells me. And I guess it's in the summer he spoke on Soviet

Jewry. Were you involved in that?

TANENBAUM: No, just he had talked to us about it, and -- I mean, he talked to Wolf --

KAPLAN: Yeah, so it was really the Rabbinical Assembly.

TANENBAUM: Rabbinical Assembly, yeah. I have to be very careful. First of all, I was just overwhelmed with work and duties, and I was building that whole new career at AJC, and building programs. [24:00] So I just worked on those things where I knew I had a very real need for Heschel, real need for connection. And I knew that Wolf was one of the (inaudible). There's a prophet for the Hebrews and there's a prophet for the Gentiles, and we divided up the turf, and almost unconsciously he began to prophet for the Hebrews and I began to prophet for the Gentiles.

KAPLAN: I see. I hadn't heard that. That's -- yeah.

TANENBAUM: The one thing I did do... Let's see... Well, several times I set up meetings with Christians and asked Heschel to address them.

KAPLAN: So these are meetings that probably I don't know about.

TANENBAUM: Yeah, they were in New York. One was at a hotel, one was on Israel, the Middle East. It was '67, '67. It was a disaster. Reaction of the Christian world toward Israel was --

KAPLAN: We have to talk about that. I really want to talk about that.

TANENBAUM: Well, I wrote a paper [25:00] about in *Conservative Judaism* around that time.

KAPLAN: Oh, I didn't know that.

TANENBAUM: Yeah, in '67, I guess, 1967, '68.

KAPLAN: OK. So that should...

TANENBAUM: Someday I'll put together a collection of papers, and then I've got a folder of stuff like this.

KAPLAN: I think it would be wonderful.

TANENBAUM: (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

KAPLAN: So tell me, what... You were the prophet to the Gentiles, and Wolf was the prophet to the Jews. What --

TANENBAUM: Hebrews.

KAPLAN: The Hebrews. What qualities of Heschel, then, would be different in those two contexts?

TANENBAUM: Well --

KAPLAN: Or what --

TANENBAUM: -- Heschel's *yidische neshomah*, his Jewish soul came out when he spoke to Jewish audiences, when he spoke about the Soviet Jewry, or Israel, or religious observance. [26:00] This was his Hasidic soul. When he spoke to Christians, he thought first... He always thought it was a very great mitzvah, a very great commandment to try to do

something to help overcome Christian resistance or hostility. Also, to help them understand Jews and Judaism. And he was masterful at that, because many saw him as Abraham the Prophet. And the one thing all Christians understood about Jews were the prophets, because Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, terrific quotations for sermons, and [27:00] powerful commitment to social justice and universal values. This is what Christians saw as their thing. So Heschel was able to communicate very powerfully on those kind of things with Christians and to sort of use that as a bridge, then, to talk about specific Jewish issues. I remember (inaudible) in 1967, after the war, there was first amazement and then hostility toward Israel. A lot of anger in the Christian world. And... And (inaudible) reach him (inaudible). I remember that's when Henry Pitt Van Dusen [28:00] wrote an article, or a letter to the editor of the *New York Times*, and said that Israel's attack in 1967 was like the Nazi blitzkrieg.

KAPLAN: (inaudible)

TANENBAUM: Yeah. And that stuff got (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

KAPLAN: Who was he?

TANENBAUM: He was then president -- he was retired by that time. He had been president of Union Theological Seminary.

KAPLAN: Oh, really?

TANENBAUM: He was a very distinguished Protestant leader.

KAPLAN: (inaudible), yeah.

TANENBAUM: And he generally was, as many Presbyterians were then, hostile to Israel's growth and development. In any case, we put together, I don't know, 75, 85 top Christian leaders. That was a conference I organized. And I asked Heschel to address them. And he was very effective with them. But the tension in the room was electric.

KAPLAN: Where did this meeting take place? Do you know?

[29:00] Do you remember?

TANENBAUM: The hotel. Hotel, somewhere. [I know Wolf would remember it?], but I have to look it up.

KAPLAN: Isn't that something?

TANENBAUM: Yeah.

KAPLAN: Well, he tried to get his friends to sign an advertisement in the *New York Times* after the Munich Massacre. [You were with?] Marshall Mayer's -- the brother was donating the money, is that...?

TANENBAUM: I don't remember. There was an ad on Jerusalem. I wrote the ad. The first person I got involved was W.D. Davies, Professor W.D. Davies.

KAPLAN: Yeah. He's a friend of Heschel's.

TANENBAUM: Union Theology.

KAPLAN: Yeah.

TANENBAUM: Well, he had an enormous awe of Heschel, although I think that Heschel did not given enough credit to Christians, credibility to Christians, or... But that has to do with his kind of strange [30:00] Welsh --

KAPLAN: What kind of credibility? What do you mean?

TANENBAUM: Well, it meant accepting... (break in tape)

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