

CD-1079 Transcription

Marc H. Tanenbaum and M.T. Mehdi discuss Israel/Palestine on  
"The Bob Grant Show" (WABC Radio). 24 February 1988.

ROGER SKIBENES: Now, more of the Bob Grant Show, and here again is Bob Fitzsimmons.

FITZSIMMONS: Thank you. Six minutes after four o'clock. Yesterday on this program, we just talked endlessly about the situation with the Palestinians and the Israeli army. And this morning, at the beginning of the program when I mentioned this, and I wanted to repeat it just a little bit -- it's a full-page ad taken out in the *Times* by B'nai B'rith International, Seymour Reich, the president. And it talks about the situation. And I was impressed by it for this particular reason. Whereas they make their statement and state their case about Israel, about its existence, about why it's necessary and how much good has been accomplished by its existence, but at the other thing says that yeah, we're not doing exactly the things we are most proud of. And we at the B'nai B'rith don't congratulate or compliment or accept the activities of the Israeli soldiers against the Palestinians. And it's really [01:00] sort of a note to our representatives. And they point out that although they dissent, it doesn't mean disaffection. And

although they disagree, it doesn't mean divorce. Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum, director of the international relations of the American Jewish Committee, is on the line with us. And also in the studio -- how do you pronounce your last name, Doctor? I'm sorry.

MEHDI: Mehdi.

FITZSIMMONS: Mehdi, who is president of the American Arab Relations Committee. You both gentlemen saw this piece of paper. Dr. Mehdi, I'd like to ask your response to this particular statement by the B'nai B'rith today.

MEHDI: Let me first say to Rabbi Tanenbaum *salaam alaikum*, *shalom aleichem*.

TANENBAUM: *Aleichem shalom*.

MEHDI: The response to the ad is that it touches on the issues, but wouldn't provide a meaningful solution. And the meaningful solution is this: that why are the Palestinians engaged in these [02:00] activities against the Israeli oppression? And the answer is that the Palestinians have had it with 20 years of foreign rule and they want to have their independence. Now the ad does not point out that it is time for Israel to recognize the human right of the Palestinians to have their own Palestinian state in their own land of Palestine. That if the Jews of Poland, Los Angeles, California, New York, have a right to Palestine

after 3,000 years, that for heaven's sake the Palestinians have even a greater right to their land after 40 years.

FITZSIMMONS: Is that your argument then against relocating to Jordan?

MEHDI: No, my argument is that the Palestinians want to stay in Palestine. They simply have the normal human longing to their land, even more than the Jews of Los Angeles, California have any right or any longing to [03:00] the land of Palestine.

FITZSIMMONS: Rabbi Tanenbaum?

TANENBAUM: Well, there's a very deep concern, not only among Jews in the United States, but among Jews in Israel. I was there this past week. I just came back Sunday night from spending a week in Israel, where I met with leadership in the government, both political parties, academics, and also with Palestinians. The issue can only be helped by serious analytic discussion of the facts of the situation, and not by overstatement or polemics. There is a very real tragedy. It's the tragedy of missed opportunities. There's no point reviewing that history, because there is enough tragedy and enough atrocities on all sides, which will paralyze us from dealing with the current situation.

FITZSIMMONS: Rabbi Tanenbaum, let's get to the present situation. Let's discuss the treatment that's being

administered by the [04:00] Israeli soldiers. What is your opinion about what's going on there?

TANENBAUM: Well, I think what is happening is unfortunate. There is no question that there is a spontaneous uprising, especially among young Palestinians.

FITZSIMMONS: May I just interrupt a moment. You use the word "spontaneous." You don't think of this as being a fairly organized exercise?

TANENBAUM: Oh, I think there's no question that the PLO has moved in and is running to try to catch up with the indignation. Among other things that have happened, which has not been reported in the press, is during the course of recent months, some 25,000 Palestinians have been returned from the Persian Gulf, where they were living and earning a living, and living quite well, and sending money back to their people. Because of the oil glut, and the problems of the Iran-Iraq War, they have come back from the Persian Gulf into Gaza, mainly to Gaza and the West Bank. And in their enormous frustration of coming back from a life of reasonably decent conditions, [05:00] to having to live in the refugee camps, part of their anger became the tinder that set this fire off. There are young Palestinians who are 14, 15 years old, 18 years old, who know nothing about the past, or very little about the past, and who have

simply been born in a situation where the Israelis have been administering their lives. They know nothing about the 1967 war. They know nothing about the fact that they have been exploited by Arab countries, who in their last summit meeting in November did not even put the issue of Palestinians on their agenda. Who even took the name of Yasser Arafat out of their press release. So I think they're reacting against the subtle things. One is the fact that they've come to terms with the reality that the Arab governments have given lip service to their condition, and simply have exploited them for their own purposes. Second, that Yasser Arafat, while he may be a symbol [06:00] of a nationalism, has been a total political and military failure for them.

FITZSIMMONS: Dr. Mehdi, has Yasser Arafat fallen from grace? Does he now not have the affection or the allegiance of the Palestinians?

MEHDI: I am really disappointed with the analysis of Rabbi Tanenbaum. Assuming that that is true, which it's not, so what? So what, Rabbi? The question really -- please permit me to remark this -- the Palestinians have been living under the rule of these guys from Russia, from Kiev, from Los Angeles, from Brooklyn. My good friend and your good friend Rabbi Kahane -- they don't like it. They want their

independence, freedom. And for you to refer to their tragedy as "unfortunate" is really unfortunate. It is a human tragedy, which deserves your full moral support, by calling upon the Israelis to recognize [07:00] the human right and the human need of the Palestinians. And you are a humanist, I know. I know you possibly more than you give me the credit for.

TANENBAUM: A number of Palestinians do. Right, and then other Arabs do. Look, my position has been very clear, and that of my organization, for many years. The crucial question, what I saw this past week, as I sat in the offices of Shamir and Peres, who are prepared to sit down tomorrow, is that there is no Palestinian delegation to sit down with.

MEHDI: That is not correct. There is Yasser Arafat. There is the PLO. They are the representative of the Palestinians. And for Mr. Shamir to try to have his own representatives with whom to talk is absurd.

TANENBAUM: Well that's, you see -- Dr. Mehdi, none of us have a monopoly on conscience or on human rights. It's a question of whether we're being realistic, and really [08:00] want to help these people who have been suffering. The fact remains that a week ago, when Arafat learned that King Hussein of Jordan was about to name a delegation of

Palestinians to sit down with Jordanians for negotiations that might develop after Secretary Shultz is in the Middle East, Arafat tried to preempt that by naming six Palestinians from the PLO who would be the delegation. Now, I'm hoping that out of the present uprising, that out of the networks that have been organized all over Gaza and the West Bank, that there will emerge leadership representing the indigenous people. Arafat represents the Arabs who are outside, the Palestinians essentially who are outside of Israel.

FITZSIMMONS: Rabbi Tanenbaum and Dr. Mehdi, I must ask you for a moment to hold back, because now we're going to go to what we all hope and pray is representative of a true example of international [09:00] cooperation, the Olympics.

(break in audio)

FITZSIMMONS: It's 19 after four o'clock. Abba Eban the op-ed page today of the *Times* talking about the situation in Israel. Gentlemen, I'd like you both to just address this question briefly, if you would. And then we have a lot of callers who would like to speak to you. So I'd like to do it that way, if I may. The question is, and Rabbi, I'll ask you first. If you were to recommend to the Israeli

government another way to handle what has been referred to as perhaps even a civil war, as opposed to the beatings and the atrocities that we have had, what would you say to the government?

TANENBAUM: Well I have in fact talked to Israeli authorities about introducing some of the modern state-of-art riot control methods. It is bizarre, even to me as a person who loves Israel, has loved Israeli since childhood, that the Israelis had organized a military force that was trained only for dealing with Arab armies that have threatened their existence, or with terrorists. They did not [10:00] devote any energy or military technology to riot control methods. And one of the reasons for this resort to lethal methods is that's what soldiers at the borders do. It's not mob control. I have talked in recent weeks to several Americans and Europeans who are experts in riot control. And they have said, yes, the Israelis are not using the latest methods that are available. And we are in fact trying to make some connection between some of these experts and the Israelis, in order to help them deal in a much more controlled way with riot control.

FITZSIMMONS: Dr. Mehdi, how would you answer that?

MEHDI: I think the rabbi is not going to the heart of the issue. It is not a riot control technique. The best of it



will fail. The best of riot control devices will not succeed, because the Palestinians really have nothing to lose [11:00] when the Israelis have denied them their humanity. The Palestinian is not afraid of any riot control techniques, the best or otherwise. The riots will continue. What the Israelis should do is to recognize the human needs of the Palestinians. Simple, period. And then have peace in the area.

FITZSIMMONS: All right, let's go our phones. Everyone is very anxious to speak with you. Matt, you're on WABC Talk Radio 77 with Rabbi Tanenbaum and Dr. Mehdi.

MATT: Well good afternoon. Good afternoon, my name is Matt. I'm a member of B'nai B'rith. I'm an old member of B'nai B'rith. I'm proud of the ad that was in today's paper. And I'd like to address a very practical question of who to deal with. Last summer, while visiting my Israeli son-in-law who runs a farm, *Mochav Cherut*. And he has an Arab who's working for him for God knows how many years, 20, 30 years, and I'm changing his name to protect him, his name is Ahmed. [12:00] We drove on his tractor into an Arab town on this side of the Green Line, in Israel. The town is called Tira. The purpose, we went in on a Friday afternoon, was to get tires. There's a magnificent Arab tire store there at the market --

FITZSIMMONS: Excuse me, Matt, could you get to it, please?

MATT: We get into town, and there was a demonstration. And the demonstration was a PLO speaker, and was being translated to me by my son-in-law. And the PLO speaker is haranguing the people in town, and at the end of it, all the people watching, standing around, and they're saying in Arabic, "Kill the Jews, Kill the Jews, Kill the Jews." And there is Ahmed standing there, the man who's worked for us. The following Sunday, Ahmed comes to work. And my son-in-law says to him, "My God, Ahmed, we grew up together. Why did you do something like that? You came to my *bar mitzvah*, I came to your children's parties. We know each other." He said, "Michael, if I did not do it, the PLO would kill me and my children."

FITZSIMMONS: All right, thank you for the statement.

Gentlemen, any comments?

MEHDI: My reaction is simple, [13:00] that the Palestinians naturally, all of them, do not like their land to be occupied by the Jews of Brooklyn, or Bronx, or Kiev, Ukraine, the Soviet Union. That's all. They don't like it. Now that they are under the rule of these foreigners, they try to attain a measure of their human rights, their dignity, and the sooner the Israelis recognize that human

right of the Palestinians in their land of Palestine, the sooner the problem will be over.

FITZSIMMONS: Rabbi Tanenbaum, does that story represent the situation as you perceive it?

TANENBAUM: Yeah, there is a reality. I think one of my problems with Dr. Mehdi's formula -- look, let's be clear. I support the cause of human rights for Palestinians. I support Secretary Shultz's efforts to create a beginning process of autonomy in Gaza, moving toward a resolution of territory for peace, in a form that preserves the security of Israel, and provides for autonomy on the part of the [14:00] Palestinians. But if you continue to justify the PLO's tactics, then in fact, to become an accessory, to encouragement to murder and terrorism. Look, I was in Israel again this past year. I always go to the West Bank. I met with the mayor of one of the major cities, an Arab mayor, one of the major cities. I won't go into all the details. He sent a message together with 148 other Palestinian notables, to King Hussein and Arafat one day were meeting, asking them to join together and created a joint delegation to negotiate peace and coexistence with Israel. The mayor told me there were three assassination attempts on his life by PLO terrorists because he signed that document.

FITZSIMMONS: Now I hear this all the time, Doctor. And I would like to ask you a little bit. The fact that someone hasn't emerged, that someone does come up and wants to get out, and need -- bango, they seem to disappear. Why is that? That is not correct.

FITZSIMMONS: It is not correct.

MEHDI: Of course not. Occasionally a person gets killed for hundreds of other [15:00] reasons, but to blame all these things as a Palestinian device to kill opposition is really absurd.

TANENBAUM: Well, Dr. Mehdi, we live in different worlds. If you go through the airport of Vienna, the airport of Rome, or Abu Nidal and other members of the [PLFT?] have massacred not only Israelis but hundreds of innocent civilians. If you close your eyes to that, you are in fact contributing to the impossibility of coming to terms with the situation.

MEHDI: Rabbi, I beg your pardon. You are really misrepresenting me, and I'm so glad we are for a change together on the same talk show. I have denounced all violence. I have even denounced the wars of national liberation. All my appeal is that in the name of humanity, let's recognize the human right of the Palestinians as independent. Not autonomy, this nonsense. And the

Palestinians have as much a right [16:00] in their land of Palestine than the Jews of Brooklyn. So why do we have two faces, two standards? And my appeal to you, Rabbi, and to the American Jews, is please, emancipate yourselves from this attitude toward whatever Israel says is correct. You will be their instrument to bring peace to the area, by simply telling the Israelis to cool it.

FITZSIMMONS: Joe, you're on WABC -- sorry, Rabbi, hold on --  
Joe, you're on Talk Radio 77. What did you want to say?

JOE: Yes, I would like to ask two questions. Yes, I would like to ask Dr. Mehdi something.

FITZSIMMONS: Yes, speak a lot louder please.

JOE: Yes, I would like to say that he contradicted his own words. Before, Rabbi Tanenbaum said that when 2,000 something left Persian Gulf back to the Arabs, and that's when the whole riots started. Dr. Mehdi?

MEHDI: Yes, yes.

JOE: (inaudible) You said that's not when the riots started.  
(inaudible) the [17:00] violence there. (inaudible) And now you said that in Vienna, I would denounce that violence. Not a contradiction that's what you said. So two things you said different. OK. (inaudible) Rabbi Tanenbaum.

FITZSIMMONS: OK, well thank you. Did anyone understand what he said?

MEHDI: I really didn't, regretfully.

FITZSIMMONS: Rabbi, did you?

TANENBAUM: Not really, no. It was dialectical.

FITZSIMMONS: It was a little vague. Are we ready for our traffic? Oh, we're going to take a break now. Then we'll be right back. We're talking with Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum and Dr. Mehdi. How am I doing?

MEHDI: You are doing all right.

FITZSIMMONS: Is that close enough?

MEHDI: Very good.

FITZSIMMONS: Here on WABC Talk Radio 77.

(break in audio)

FITZSIMMONS: It is 4:30 on WABC Talk Radio 77. Our guests this hour, on the phone, Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum, director of the international relations for the American Jewish Committee, and Dr. M. Mehdi, president of the American Arab Relations Committee, talking about the situation in Israel and the West Bank. David, you are on Talk Radio 77.

DAVID: Yeah, thanks very much. I saw the B'nai B'rith ad in the *New York Times* and it really speaks for me. I have [18:00] a concern to express, and also a question for your guests. What concerns me is the real long-term objectives

of the PLO. Do they really want peace? Do they have any interest truly in Palestinian welfare, when in reality their manifesto, the number one objective is not the welfare, but the destruction of Israel? Have they ever spoken of coexistence with Israel, as opposed to living in place of Israel? There was a Sheikh [Oden?] who was quoted. He was talking about Israel, in place of the destruction of Israel, the establishment of an Islamic state in its place. They always talk about in place of Israel, never any thought of coexistence.

FITZSIMMONS: All right, David. Thank you. That's a whole lot to chew on. Doctor?

MEHDI: David's assertion that the Palestinians' goal is not the welfare of the Palestinian people, but the destruction of Israel, is really a misreading of the Palestinian covenant. [19:00] What the covenant says is that they want to attain the right of the Palestinians in their land. Now if David reads into that the destruction of Israel, it is David's *meshugas* --

TANENBAUM: Dr. Mehdi, I suggest you read Article 21 of the Palestinian Covenant, which calls for the destruction by any means necessary of a Zionist entity. While I was there this past week, I saw leaflets that were handed out by the PLO and by Islamic fundamentalist groups, which are now

part of a network, calling not only for the destruction of Israel and killing Jews, but we want all of Palestine back. We want Jerusalem; we want Haifa; we want Tel Aviv. And that of course is what plays into the hand of right wing elements in Israel, who say that this is not simply a matter of justice for the Palestinians, it is a matter of suicide for Israel.

MEHDI: Rabbi, the justice for Palestinians will mean the right of the [20:00] Palestinians in Haifa, Jaffa, Safed, Bathsheba --

(overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

TANENBAUM: -- I'm not talking about the right, they're saying we want the whole of Palestine back.

(overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

MEHDI: Please, permit me a second.

(overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

TANENBAUM: -- give us back the United States.

MEHDI: Please, permit me a second. The Palestinians have the right to Haifa, Jaffa, Bathsheba. But also, the Jews who are there, to stay there forever with the Palestinians. So that it shall be for the human individual Jews, and the human individual Palestinians, to be ruled by a political majority, whether it's a majority to form the government. But it shall be, for all the Jews, and all the



Palestinians, and by all the Jews I mean also all the Jews of America, there's six million. I think American Jews should get out of here and go there. And the Soviet Jews should leave the Soviet Union, and actually we have called upon Gorbachev to let the Soviet Jews get out and go there.

FITZSIMMONS: But Doctor, as David pointed out [21:00] in the phone call, and Rabbi Tanenbaum documented, or certainly supported the fact, that you guys are on record as saying we have to, by whatever means, eliminate them.

MEHDI: What is stated is that the Palestinians have the right to Haifa. Now, if these guys consider it destruction of Israel, it is their own problem. I am suggesting that the place should be for all the Jews who are there, and all the Jews of America --

FITZSIMMONS: So then you reject what the Rabbi said, which regard to what the Covenant says?

MEHDI: Exactly. I think it is a misreading.

TANENBAUM: What do you mean, misreading? You either read plain English or you don't. If it says --

(overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

MEHDI: Rabbi, I read plain Arabic.

FITZSIMMONS: Hold on.

TANENBAUM: Dr. Mehdi, you know incidentally, you're a Diaspora Arab. You are not an indigenous Arab. And I talk

to indigenous Arabs, and indigenous Palestinian leadership. So I have a very clear sense of those who are moderate, and who want coexistence, and those who are terrorizing other Arabs who want to create a peaceful relationship with Israel.

FITZSIMMONS: Gentlemen, excuse me, forgive me, but we do have to get our listeners [22:00] home. So let's get a WABC Shadow Traffic report right now, brought to you by Ringling Brothers Circus.

(break in audio)

FITZSIMMONS: It's 22 minutes before five o'clock, the Bob Grant Program. With me in the studio is Dr. M. Mehdi, president of the American Arab Relations Committee, and on the line is Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum, director of international relations for the American Jewish Committee. We have a whole lot of callers lined up. Harold, you are on WABC Talk Radio 77. Harold?

HAROLD: Yes. Dr. Mehdi, I am a B'nai B'rith member and I'm proud of it today, because we put that ad in the paper, which quite clearly and distinctly states the issues and facts involved in the Middle East.

MEHDI: But Harold, doesn't solve the problem.

HAROLD: Excuse me, can I finish my question?

MEHDI: Sure.

HAROLD: What I'm hearing from you is a lot of rhetoric on one point, which is quite a sticking point, I think, in this whole issue. And that is the demand that the Israelis negotiate with the PLO. It is quite clear, from the Palestinian Manifesto, from the fact that Yasser Arafat, on November 10, '87, in a broadcast from Baghdad, called for the destruction of the State of Israel, that the PLO [23:00] stands for the destruction of the State of Israel. And I'm specifically asking you, would you negotiate with anybody who has demanded your destruction, yes or no?

MEHDI: The answer is yes. You remember, the US had to negotiate with the Viet Cong. If it is correct, did you hear Arafat speak at the United Nations?

FITZSIMMONS: Harold, let him answer your question, Harold.

MEHDI: Did you hear Arafat's speech at the United Nations in 1974? He says he recognizes the right of the Jews who are there to stay there, and he wants all the Jews, all the Christians, all the Muslims in Palestine to live together in the Holy Land. You see, we all pick up as selective perception, what appeals to our arguments. I am pleading with you, Harold, and the Rabbi, and the other listeners. Please, if we want peace, let's not try to make brownie

points in our discussion. Peace comes, or war comes when the human right of one [24:00] party is denied by the other party.

FITZSIMMONS: Gentlemen, Rabbi Tanenbaum and then Dr. Mehdi, I'd like you to answer this question. What are your thoughts on the proposed closings of the PLO offices here in New York, and in Washington? Rabbi Tanenbaum?

TANENBAUM: Well, our organization responded affirmatively to the State Department decision to close down the office in Washington. We are less enthusiastic about closing down the office in New York, mainly because of the treaty obligations within the United Nations, and its member groups. We have not advocated a closing of the PLO office in New York.

FITZSIMMONS: Dr. Mehdi?

MEHDI: I believe that the American citizens have the First Amendment right to hear the views of the PLO. And the closing of the offices, in Washington or New York, means abridging the right of the citizens to hear. This is a very unfortunate legal [25:00] Constitutional violation. But then on the international scene, it will make America ridiculous in the eyes of millions of people who recognize the PLO. In Western Europe, the Europeans say, what are these Americans afraid of? Are they so afraid and timid

that they are afraid of an office in New York? Very unfortunate.

FITZSIMMONS: Rabbi Tanenbaum, I tend to agree with Dr. Mehdi on that particular point, because regardless of the rights and wrongs of the dialogue, at least to have the dialogue is utterly of number one importance.

TANENBAUM: Well I've had occasion to be talking to people in our government who have been involved in counterterrorism. And they are very much aware of the symbolism of having a terrorist group being given legitimacy, as if they were the Kiwanis, or the Elks Club, in Washington. And given the kinds of organization they've been involved in, there are Arab-Americans in the United States. If they want to make the case [26:00] that Dr. Mehdi makes, or the PLO makes, as American citizens they have every right to advocate, and they do. There is an American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee. There is an Arab-American students' group. They have every freedom, as American citizens, to make their case. There's no reason why the United States should support a terrorist organization. Just as the United States has gone after Libya's Gaddafi in this country who sends hit squads here to kill other Libyans, or Iranians killing other Iranians for Khomeini, the American government has a

responsibility for law and order, and not supporting terrorism.

FITZSIMMONS: Dr. Mehdi?

MEHDI: Now of course, if the PLO office had engaged in any act of terrorism, they should be apprehended, presented to court, and imprisoned. But there is no evidence by the FBI that there is any such thing. Now, the Rabbi says that they are terrorist organizations. Well the greatest acts of terrorism today is conducted by the Israeli government, beating and breaking the hands of the people. [27:00] So we should close the Israeli mission to the United Nations by the same token.

TANENBAUM: You said the same thing about the American government going after Gaddafi. You called the American government a terrorist organization then too.

MEHDI: Exactly. That was an act of terrorism, when the US killed some 200 people in Tripoli --

(overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

TANENBAUM: Right, but when Gaddafi was killing Americans, and was taking hostages, and was sending hit squads all over the Europe and the United States, that's legitimate. You see, those are your double standards.

MEHDI: No, Rabbi, please. The US attacked Tripoli because supposedly, Gaddafi was involved in the disco in West

Berlin. Which proved later that Gaddafi was not involved, that other elements from the East, Syria, possibly Iran, were involved. So the attack on Gaddafi's capitol and Benghazi, killing some 200 persons, was an act of terrorism by America. We should condemn it. You should condemn it.

(overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

TANENBAUM: -- if you want to see the FBI report on Gaddafi's role, Gaddafi has been supporting almost every terrorist organization around the world. If you want to see the dossier [29:00] on it, I'll show it to you. What they've been doing with the IRA, what they have been doing with the Action Française, what they have been doing with the Red Guard. Gaddafi has been buying support with every murderous group around the world. And governments have been closing them down, one after another.

FITZSIMMONS: Gentlemen, they're saying let's take a break here on the Bob Grant Program. It's 14 before five o'clock, discussing the situation very heatedly, and in a very enlightening way too. Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum and Dr. M. Mehdi.

END OF AUDIO FILE