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Committee hearings on world hunger, 18 December 1974.

TESTIMONY BEFORE THE AD HOC SENATE COMMITTEE HEARINGS
ON WORLD HUNGER

PRESENTED BY RABBI MARC H. TANENBAUM,
NATIONAL INTERRELIGIOUS AFFAIRS DIRECTOR
OF THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 18, 1974
U. S. SENATE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, D. C.



ANNOUNCEMENT

"REPORT ON ROME—THE CHALLENGE OF FOOD AND POPULATION"

In June 1974, at a hearing of the Nutrition Committee, Nobel Prize Laureate Dr. Norman Borlaug, warned that "... 50 million people, perhaps more, could perish from famine" and that "... it will probably take a disaster—perhaps the death of tens of millions—before we will come to grips with this..." We are sure that everyone hopes it will not take such a monstrous calamity to inspire action. We believe it is important that the attention be brought to the urgent nature of this problem now, prior to the Christmas adjournment.

Therefore, today, a month after the Rome Conference convened, we announce an ad hoc hearing into the urgent world hunger and population crisis... and America's role following the Conference.

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Mr. Chairman,

My name is Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum of New York City. I serve as National Interreligious Affairs Director of the American Jewish Committee, a major human rights and intergroup relations agency of the organized Jewish community in the United States. I appreciate your extending to me the invitation, together with my Catholic and Protestant associates, to present these views on the compelling problems of world hunger.

On May 18, 1974, the Board of Governors of the American Jewish Committee adopted a policy statement in which we called upon our entire membership and the Jewish community at large to take an active part in helping to mobilize maximum American relief support to meet the needs of the millions of impoverished, hungry, and starving peoples throughout the world, including those within our country. A copy of that statement, entitled "The Poorest Among Us," is attached to this testimony.

My purpose today is to elaborate on the rationale for a Jewish involvement in this urgent effort to save human lives, as well as to address several current problems.

As is well known, the Jewish community in the United States and throughout the world is anxiously beset, as seldom before, by massive problems of Jewish survival and security--the defense of the fundamental right of 3,000,000 of our brothers and sisters to national self-determination in their Biblical homeland, now the sovereign state of Israel; the safeguarding of the human rights of free emigration and religious-cultural freedom of our 3,000,000 oppressed kinsmen in the Soviet Union, and the surviving pitiful remnants in Arab countries; the combatting of a renascent anti-Semitism now being systematically refuelled by demonic forces in this country and in many other parts of the world; not to speak of the vital needs of responding more adequately to the Jewish religious, educational, cultural, and family needs of our people.

In the face of these challenges and burdens, which except for the inspired support of the United States Government the Jewish community has responded to virtually alone out of its own limited resources, the American Jewish Committee and I personally have been asked with increasing frequency by Jews and Christians alike, "How can you get involved in such massive problems of world hunger when the needs of the Jewish community are so great and pressing?"

The question is a legitimate one. The answer that I have tried to formulate in response to that question is in fact the basis of my reason for being here today. That reason is grounded in the very essence of the morality of Judaism; in the traumatic

lessons of Jewish history; and in the duties of being a responsible citizen in a democratic American society and in a growing interdependent world community.

If one takes seriously the moral, spiritual, and humanitarian values of Biblical, Prophetic, and Rabbinic Judaism, the inescapable issue of conscience that must be faced is: How can anyone justify not becoming involved in trying to help save the lives of starving millions of human beings throughout the world -- whose plight constitutes the most agonizing moral and humanitarian problem in the latter half of the 20th century?

THE MORAL DUTIES OF JUDAISM

Nothing is more fundamental in Biblical and Rabbinic ethics than the moral obligation of tzedakah, a Hebrew term which means both "charity" and "to do justice." The Rabbinic sages of the Talmud declared that "Almsgiving -- i.e., aiding the poor and feeding the hungry -- weighs as heavily as all the other commandments of the Torah." (Talmud Baba Batra 9a).

In proclaiming the Jubilee year, which like the Ten Commandments was ascribed to divinely-inspired legislation revealed on Mount Sinai, the Bible ordained, "And if your brother waxes poor, and his means fail with you, then you shall uphold him; as a stranger and a settler shall he live with you." (Leviticus 25:35). The Rabbis observe that the expression that "Your brother may live with you" means that it is our personal and communal duty to see to it that our fellow human beings do not die of starvation. Though the person be a "stranger" or "an alien settler," he (or she) is to be included in the term "your brother" and is to be treated in a brotherly and compassionate manner.

To underscore the supreme virtue of humanitarian aid to the needy in the hierarchy of Jewish moral and spiritual values, the Rabbinic sages regarded such compassionate care of man as an act worthy of association with Divinity itself:

"God says to Israel, 'My sons whenever you give sustenance to the poor, I impute it to you as though you gave sustenance to me, for it says, 'Command the children of Israel...my bread for my sacrifices...shall ye observe unto me. Does, then, God eat and drink? No, but whenever you give food to the poor, God accounts it to you as if you gave food to Him.'" (Numbers Rabbah XXVIII;2).

The virtue of such care for the poor and hungry is depicted in Jewish tradition as the salient attribute of the "founding father" of Judaism, the Patriarch Abraham, who is called the archetype of the "Pharisee of love." In a mid-rashic commentary that begins with the phrases, "Let your house be open; let the poor be members of your household. Let a man's house be open to the north and to the south, and to the east and to the west," the Rabbis describe the humanitarianism of Abraham:

"He went out and wandered about, and when he found wayfarers, he brought them to his house, and he gave wheaten bread to him whose wont it was not to eat wheaten bread, and so with meat and wine. And not only this, but he built large inns on the roads, and put food and drink within them, and all came and ate and drank and blessed God. Therefore, quiet of spirit was granted to him, and all that the mouth of man can ask for was found in his house." (Abot de Rabbi Nathan, VII:17a,b).

Elsewhere the Talmud admonishes, "He who has no pity upon his fellow creatures is assuredly not of the seed of Abraham our father." (Bezah 32b).

In Jewish communities from Biblical times through the present, there was much free and generous giving of alms to all who asked -- even to deceivers! -- and there was also much systematic and careful relief through established institutions. Each Jewish community boasted of a tamhui (public kitchen) from which the poor received two meals daily. There was also the kupah (alms box) for the disbursement of benevolent funds on Sabbath eve to provide three meals for the Sabbath. (Mishnah Peah VIII,7). Additional care was exercised in respect of the itinerant poor, who were provided with a loaf of bread which sufficed for two meals, and who were also entitled to the cost of lodging.

The Biblical laws of charity in Palestine relating to "gleaning," the "forgotten sheaf," and "the corner of the field," implied the underlying idea that national territory belongs to the public as a whole. In accordance with Jewish law, landowners used to lay open fences surrounding their fields and vineyards, and during certain hours of the day, the needy were allowed to eat from the produce of the harvest. There was also a three-yearly allocation of Maaser Ani (poor man's tithe) from the threshing floor.

Thus, there arose the charitable traditions and institutions of the Jewish people which have remained a religious-communal characteristic ever since. These customs of charity, which were foreign to the pagan frame of mind of the Greeks and Romans, also had an abiding impact on the nature of the Christian "caritas."

THE LESSONS OF JEWISH HISTORY

In addition to the impact of this long and engrained tradition of tzedakah on the moral sensibilities of Jews, the historic experience of the Jewish people, both past and recent, have predisposed the Jewish community to a particular empathetic understanding of the plight of the starving and suffering poor. During the late 1930s and early 1940s, the world community -- certainly leaders of major segments of the international community -- had knowledge of the fact that Hitler's Nazi Germany had embarked on a program of systematic extermination of the Jewish people through starvation, forced labor, and finally through the technological efficiencies of the crematoria and gas chambers. With rare exception, leaders of governments, churches, labor unions, and universities stood by indifferently or cynically turned their backs on the genocide of six million Jewish men, women, and children and millions of other human beings.

The failures of the world community to confront that evil incarnate and to seek to contain its murderous programs resulted, I believe, in a supreme crisis of conscience which has not yet been fully comprehended. Certainly one consequence of that indifference was that it led to a depreciation of the worth of the human personality as a creature fashioned in the image of God, and thereby added to an ecology of callousness, dehumanization, and barbarism in the family of mankind. The Jewish people were literally traumatized by that experience of abandonment by the human family. In our struggle to find some meaning out of that ultimately absurd chapter, the Jewish people relearned the command of the Book of Leviticus as a governing lesson of its existence and as a permanent and universal claim on its conscience, "You shall not stand idly by while the blood of your brothers and sisters cry out to you from the earth."

In the strict sense of the term, the deaths of hundreds of thousands resulting from the world famine is not genocide. But the fact that some 800 million people are at this moment suffering from debilitating malnutrition and starvation, that at least 10,000 people are dying each week from famine does mean in fact that there are human holocausts taking place before our very eyes. The facts of this vast human tragedy are inescapable --

we see on the evening television the corpses piled up in India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, the Sahel, Ethiopia; we read in minute detail about the magnitude of food and medicines that are desperately required in feature stories, editorials, columns in daily newspapers and news-magazines; our rabbis, ministers, and priests preach sermons about our moral obligations as Christians and Jews.

For a nation with our liberal, humanitarian ideals and for a people with our unambiguous Jewish and Christian ethical heritages to temporize in the face of the greatest moral challenge in the last decades of the 20th century is to risk the betrayal of everything morally meaningful that we profess to stand for. What is at stake in the way we respond during the coming months to this unparalleled world famine is our capacity to arrest the cycle of dehumanization and callousness to suffering that is abroad in the world, ultimately affecting all peoples, and to set into motion forces of caring and compassion that are the singular qualities without which an emergent interdependent world cannot be sustained.

SOME PRACTICAL RESPONSES TO WORLD FAMINE

While I have sought to keep myself informed about the complex nature of the world famine problems and the political and economic issues that necessarily affect our responses, I hardly qualify as a technical expert. For that reason, I have relied on such research studies as those of the Overseas Development Council, and have identified myself with the central features of the positions taken by my cherished, long-time friend, the Reverend Theodore M. Hesburgh, president of the University of Notre Dame, who also serves as chairman of the board of ODC.

As a personal stand, I associate myself with the views expressed by Father Hesburgh in a letter to President Ford dated November 22, 1974, which I joined in signing together with a group of other religious leaders. The key features of that position, which I reaffirm as my own at this testimony, are as follows:

- 1) I join in urging President Ford to lead the United States in initiating immediately the shipment of two million tons of U.S. food aid additional to the amount now programmed to alleviate present conditions of critical starvation. I also urge that another two million tons of increased food supplies be planned for next spring and summer shipment, contingent on matching commitments by other donor countries. Canada and the European community have already acted and we should likewise move now.

At the same time we should seek to persuade other industrial and OPEC countries -- which are wallowing in tens of billions of dollars -- to share a substantial part of their incredible newly-found wealth to help feed the starving millions in the third world nations. Failure on the part of the Arab nations to continue to demonstrate a significant measure of compassion for the hungry, while they are recipients of hundreds of thousands of tons of food supplies through our American Food for Peace program, cannot but lead to an erosion of the consensus and will of the American people who are determined to help, but who will not be taken as naive suckers.

We understand that the President can make these shipments of four million tons under his existing authority without need of further prior legislative action by Congress. We further understand that the Senate, in Resolution 329, sponsored by a bipartisan group of 38 Senators and passed in August, has also urged that the President increase food aid this year by this amount that we are recommending.

We recognize that it will not be easy to provide an additional four million tons of food relief in the current crop year, which represents a doubling of the present announced level of the Food for Peace program. But the alternative is not morally acceptable. The starvation of millions, while an even greater number are eating more than is healthy, will be worse than a moral travesty; the spread of famine and misery guarantee a degree of economic and political instability potentially disastrous for all in an interdependent world.

Moreover, the failure to muster up the political will to prevent a massive human catastrophe will further undermine the faith of citizens everywhere in the capacity of the world to cope with the problems it now faces. Such an indication that the world's problems had indeed become unmanageable would have dangerous psychological consequences everywhere.

Adding \$800 million to the federal budget also will obviously be difficult at a time when large budget cuts have already been initiated. There is no escaping the question of priorities. We must ask whether the threat to human security and well-being posed by the food crisis does not outweigh some of the more traditionally recognized security threats -- and whether a budgetary adjustment is not appropriate.

2) Negotiated delays in commercial export deliveries to Europe, Japan, Iran, and the U.S.S.R. are another possible source of additional grain. These countries are not facing starvation; indeed, the Soviet Union bought almost 30 million tons of United

States grain, in secrecy and at an unreasonably low price level supported by unwarranted Government subsidies, mainly to increase substantially its feeding of livestock.

3) A major, systematic national program is required to reduce food waste and reduce American consumer demands for grain. The average American consumes 1,850 pounds of grain per year, much of it in the form of meat. The average person in India consumes 400 pounds, most of it directly as grain. Our government, and especially our religious leadership, must help our people to reduce their enormous appetite for animal products which has forced the conversion of more and more grain, soybean, and fish meal into feed for cattle, hogs, and poultry, thus decreasing the amounts of food directly available for direct consumption by the poor.

It may be worthwhile to recall that in ancient Palestine, the staple food of the Jewish community consisted mainly of cereals, fruits, and other produce of the land. Meat was consumed solely in connection with the sacrificial obligations of every Jewish man and woman, of which the paschal lamb was an outstanding example. In more recent history, President Truman in 1947 called on Americans to conserve 2½ million tons of grain to stave off famine in Europe during the winter of 1947. President Truman then called on Americans to take many specific actions to save food, including meatless days, saving a slice of bread a day, and closing distilleries for 60 days. Today our total food supply is far greater and Americans consume far more than they did in 1947. The emergency relief now required could be made available without an inflationary impact through far less drastic measures today, if we have the necessary national political will and government leadership.

4) There are numerous other suggestions which experts propose which call for serious consideration and implementation as part of a national and global strategy to cope effectively with this vast human problem -- including those outlined in studies by James Grant, ODC President, and in Lester Brown's perceptive books, In the Human Interest, and By Bread Alone. There is an area in which I believe the religious community, in concert with other cultural forces in our society, can make a distinctive contribution; namely, the definition and articulation of a new "Ethic of Scarcity" for the American people. Our society has been blessed since its founding with what appeared to be almost limitless natural resources and raw materials. We seem to have been living on a set of unexamined assumptions that constitute an "Ethic of Abundance" which has rationalized and justified endless consumption, self-indulgence, and permissive hedonism. The waste at our business and social functions -- conferences, conventions, weddings, confirmations, bar mitzvahs, even funeral wakes -- have verged on the scandalous, especially

when seen against the background of the needs of the world's starving masses. We are entering a new experience of growing scarcity of resources and energy supplies as a permanent condition, and the nation requires a definition of values and human priorities that will result in greater self-discipline, restraint, and a genuine motivation to share out of a more limited supply of goods.

The American people are a generous people, and I feel confident that with vigorous governmental, religious, and other voluntary leadership they will respond as constructively and positively to this great human crisis as they have to other challenges in America's past.

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THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

STATEMENT ON THE POOREST AMONG US

The American Jewish Committee has long been concerned with the plight of 25 million poor Americans, those who subsist on incomes below federal minimum living standards. They include the 9 million people on public assistance (of whom only a small percentage are employable), the under-employed, and the fully employed who earn less than these federal standards. A majority of this group is white, but it includes a disproportionate number of Blacks and persons from other minority groups. Included also are poor Jews, particularly many elderly living on inadequate social security.

We believe that the existence of poverty in an affluent society is morally indefensible, breeds hostility and community tension, and alienates one group from another. The best bulwark against poverty, we contend, is a prosperous nation that provides work opportunity for all, and adequate financial aid to those who cannot work. Therefore, we call for a program of social insurance that will incorporate financial safeguards, health insurance for all, and a social security program that will ultimately make the existence of a public welfare system unnecessary. Until such time, the present welfare system must be revised and improved.

But our efforts to eliminate the blight of poverty and malnutrition in America must not lead us to neglect our obligations abroad. The spectre of starvation is haunting large parts of the world today. Hundreds of millions of the world's peoples are undernourished. India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and scores of other nations in South Asia, Africa and Latin America face widespread famine. Thousands have already died in drought-ridden sub-Saharan Africa. U.N. Secretary-General Waldheim has warned that "peoples and countries could disappear from the face of the map" in West Africa if the world does not help with immediate relief and long-range efforts to make the region self-supporting.

The high cost of oil, created by the oil-producing countries, is wrecking the economies of the poorest countries. And because petroleum or natural gas is needed for fertilizer production, oil and gas shortages in poor countries are spelling starvation. It has been estimated that if just one quarter of the natural gas that is now wasted in the Persian Gulf fields was diverted into a fertilizer industry on the spot, the world's entire current demand for nitrogen fertilizer could be met.

We must also recognize that, in our finite world where resources are limited, the family of man must bring birth rates into reasonable balance with the lowered death rates that have been achieved. Many governments see the need to guide national policy toward this objective. We urge that the United States, working in consort with other governments and international organizations, give family planning at home and abroad the highest priority and adequate funding.

The American Jewish Committee is strongly committed to the search for economic and social justice everywhere. It sees the need to reduce the widening gaps

between rich and poor states. This must be a concern of Jews, Christians, Moslems and Hindus, of blacks, browns and whites. As the world becomes smaller, and nations closer, we become increasingly aware of the interdependence of one with the other. The affluent and developed nations cannot remain untouched by the poverty and famine in the less advantaged nations. This means not only immediate famine aid, but development of productive economies in the poor states. The highest degree of charity, said Maimonides, is not only to give food but also to assist a poor person to find a job or business opportunity, in short, to put him "where he can dispense with other people's aid." That must be our goal.

Therefore, we urge our own members and Americans everywhere -- in unions, business, civic and religious groups -- to contribute to the famine relief efforts of the member agencies of the American Council of Voluntary Agencies for Foreign Service.

And, despite the unfortunate vote of the House of Representatives in January, we hope that Congress will ultimately support the Administration's recommendation for a \$1.5 billion U.S. contribution spread over four years to the International Development Association. We urge all affluent nations -- developed and developing alike -- to join in the United Nations for similar efforts to aid the poor. This is the least we can do to help meet the needs of 800 million people in the developing countries who are living on only 30 cents a day.

Adopted at the
68th Annual Meeting
May 18, 1974
74-900-50