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POPE JOHN PAUL II'S VISIT - A JEWISH PERSPECTIVE

by Marc H Tanenbaum

(Rabbi Tanenbaum, national interreligious affairs director of the American Jewish Committee, is a pioneering leader in the promotion of understanding between Christians and Jews. He met with Pope John Paul II in March 1979 in Vatican City.)

There is more than a surface symbolism in the fact that Pope John Paul II arrives in the United States on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the most solemn day in the Jewish year. For on Yom Kippur, a day of fasting, repentance, and renewal of hope, the Jewish people throughout the world articulate their deepest values and aspirations for the redemption of the Jewish people, of Israel, and of the entire human family

"And may all wickedness be consumed as a flame," Jews pray on this day, "and may evil rule be removed from the earth." How is evil in the world to be overcome? The Jewish prayer book proposes as an answer, "May all Your (God's) children unite in one fellowship to do Your will with a perfect heart."

Pope John Paul II comes to these shores at a time when the American people, and particularly the Jewish people, feel deeply troubled about "the wickedness and evil rule" in the world. At Camp David on July 10th I joined a group of ten religious leaders in discussing with President Jimmy Carter and his top aides "the Malaise of America" and "the crisis of confidence." For Americans, this pervasive anxiety and downbeat mood may well be an accumulated response to the shocks of Vietnam, Watergate, the assassinations of the Kennedys and Martin Luther King - a gloom now deepened by the economic decline and the OPEC-induced oil crisis.

For American Jews who, as Dorothy Parker said, are like everybody else but more so, there is the additional emotional burden these days of watching incredulously as elements in our Government and some public personalities fall all over themselves to embrace and legitimize the PLO assassins, people who daily murder, bomb and terrorize innocent civilians, men, women, and children

Add to that dispiriting mood the Passion Play of Andrew Young - the first black Ambassador to the United Nations who is perceived as martyred, and the fact that some demagogic leaders resort to raw, blatant, racist anti-Semitism

trotting out the ancient and discredited canard of collective Jewish guilt - "the Jews crucified him." And the President of the United States finally tells the truth, namely, that "the Jews" did not crucify Andy Young who foreordained his resignation by his own conscious actions. Meanwhile, the collective Jewish guilt charge has become established as a dogmatic verity in much of the black consciousness and will be as difficult to overcome as the original "Christ-killer" canard.

Overarching these domestic troubles, Pope John Paul II comes to the United Nations at a time when the entire human family feels in its bones a universal malaise. The insane proliferation of nuclear weaponry finds the United States and the Soviet Union bristling with the capacity to destroy the four billion people of the earth 20 times over. There is now the real possibility of igniting a global Auschwitz. We are, in fact, the first generation to be told that we may be the last.

The nations of the earth spend more than \$400 billion a year to maintain armies but cannot find the means nor the wisdom nor the compassion to save some 800 million human beings from starvation and hunger. Science and technology, long venerated as unambiguous sources of material blessing, also fill the earth with toxic pollution and nuclear radiation, unguided Skylabs and crashing DC 10s career dangerously around us. The implements of advanced technology are daily employed by a growing band of military dictatorships to enforce their totalitarian rule through systematic torture and massacre of millions of human beings - Cambodia, Uganda, Vietnam, Ireland, Argentina, the Soviet Union. It is as if the world has gotten out of control.

Against that bleak cosmic background, it is little wonder that there is such widespread expectation associated with the Pope's visit. Pope John Paul II experienced in his personal life the barbarism, the suffering, and dehumanization of Nazi racism and anti-Semitism. He responded to that evil rule by helping to save Jewish lives in Poland during World War II. He stood courageously against the Polish Communists who destroyed Jewish homes and cemeteries in their orgy of anti-Jewish hatred, and he fought effectively for human rights - for religious liberty, the right to educate children religiously, the right to emigrate and reunite families.

When I first met Pope John Paul II on March 12th in Vatican City, together with other Jewish leaders I was deeply impressed by his intellectual acuity,

his deep spirituality, his sensitive respect for Judaism and the Jewish people, his abhorrence of racial and religious hatred, his grasp of the real world, his respect for the human dignity of all people, above all, his hope. Such a commanding personality has the capacity to call the world to its senses - to turn away from nuclear disaster and moral anarchy and to turn toward human unity. All of us have a stake in that urgent message being heard and acted upon, while there is still time to avert global catastrophe

In his first official statement of his personal attitudes on the relation of the Catholic Church to the Jewish people, Pope John Paul II told us

"I believe that both sides (Christians and Jews) must continue their strong efforts to overcome difficulties of the past, so as to fulfill God's commandments of love, and to sustain a truly fruitful and fraternal dialogue that contributes to the good of each of the partners involved and to our better service of humanity "

And the Pope concluded, "As a sign of understanding and fraternal love already achieved (between Christians and Jews), let me express again my cordial welcome and greetings to you all with that word so rich in meaning, taken from the Hebrew language, which we Christians also use in our Liturgy Peace be with you. Shalom, Shalom!"

That message of Shalom - of peace, of mutual respect, of love, of human solidarity - uttered by this charismatic Pope in a troubled, even threatened world - could not come at a more opportune time not only for America but for the world at large.

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