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Box 5, Folder 3, "The Issues as I See Them" - Symposium on
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November 16, 1986

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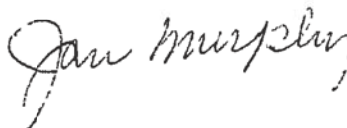
Dear Rabbi Tannebaum,

We are preparing to send the manuscripts of the September 17, 1986 Symposium on "Respect and Reconciliation Among the Abrahamic Religions" to the printer.

I have transcribed your addresses from a videotape of the program. It would be appreciated if you would look them over and if you have any additions or corrections please feel free to mark them on the manuscripts and return them to me. I will be going to the printer on November 25, 1986. If I don't hear from you, I will assume the manuscripts can be used as they stand.

I would like to add that I found your words to be powerful. Your vision and faith touched me and provided a challenge and hope for my prayers and thoughts.

Sincerely yours,



Jan Murphy
Managing Editor

The Issues As I See Them

Rabbi Marc Tannenbaum

I want to talk about five themes which are both integral and somewhat disparate at the same time. They are themes which impress me after not only the presentations this morning but listening to what I thought was coming back to us from the discussion groups as we heard them today.

If one is serious about about wanting to make a commitment, to really developing genuine community between Jewish, Christian, and Muslim brothers and sisters, it is essential that we be radically honest with one another. It is important not to play ecumenical word games or ecumenical smiles with one another. I have been involved in ecumenical relations and Jewish, Christian, Muslim dialogue in many parts of the world for the past thirty years. From my experience I would suggest to you that the core foundational issue is the incredible ignorance and illiteracy that we have about one another. In an age of mass media communication, the fact is that Jews, Christians and Muslims live next door to one another year after year and have only caricature understanding of each other. We don't know our neighbors most precious values, ideals, and self-concepts. If one really cares about this issue of relationships, it is mind boggling that people feel comfortable about making judgements from caricature understandings and living off that ignorance. In Jewish tradition, one of the cardinal teachings in the ethics of the synagogue fathers and mothers declares an ignorant person cannot be a pious person. An authentically religious, pious person is incompatible with illiteracy. God revealed himself in the word. At the outset, the crucial question to face is mutual, systemic illiteracy. In the absence of genuine knowledge we content ourselves with cardboard caricatures, stereotypes, usually negatively edged.

We have tried to do something about this. In the 1950's we began a process of cooperative examination of textbooks used in religious school systems. Social science, religious, and literature books were all looked at in our work. We worked with three Roman Catholic nuns from St. Louis University, a Jesuit school. These nuns did a series of systematic examinations of Catholic textbooks. They examined these books in terms of what Catholics teach about Jews, Protestants, Greek Orthodox, Muslims and others. The findings were shocking, especially in relationship to Jews and Judaism. Page after page of negative pharisaical, Christ killer language was used in the religious teaching system. At one point, one of the Catholic nuns said to me, " You know, it was really a crisis of conscience for me. I have defined myself as a Roman Catholic who believes that the gospel is a gospel of love. As I began to examine the textbooks and the Baltimore Catechism, I found we were teaching a gospel of hatred to our children." It simply became morally unacceptable to continue that type of teaching. So the Roman Catholic sisters at St. Louis University began a process that anticipated Vatican Council II. Their textbook study was published in a book called Faith Without Prejudice-Catechetics and Prejudice. This work led to a project here in Detroit with the Pope Pius XXII Religious Education Center. The Detroit project produced a whole new series of textbooks which taught authentically about Jesus as a first century Palestinian Jew. In fact, the textbooks became

so historically authentic that Jesus was shown wearing a skullcap in a synagogue, standing behind a menorah, and the captions were in Hebrew. The Roman Catholic nuns were determined to illustrate the Jewishness of Jesus to Catholic children.

The effect was profound. When Vatican Council II came into being, the Church asked for a series of studies on what was a source of tensions between Catholics and Jews. The only place it had to go to for documentation of the nature and extent of the problem, were the studies prepared by these Roman Catholic nuns at St. Louis University and the two nuns who worked here in Detroit, Michigan. Those texts became the basis of the Vatican declaration which has revolutionized Catholic-Jewish relations.

The same thing has been done in the Protestant community with the textbook study at Yale Divinity School. We, in the Jewish community, undertook a study of our teaching materials. We looked at what we were teaching about Muslims and Christians. To insure we were telling the truth about Christian and Muslim belief and were not substituting one set of delusions for another, we sent the textbook materials to Christian and Muslim theologians to assure the text was acceptable to them. The textbook called Your Neighbor Celebrates was produced by the Union of American Hebrew congregations. This book has had a profound effect on the younger generation of Jewish people as they are introduced to their Christian and Muslim neighbors.

It is not only a question of ignorance. We all believe in the ten commandments. We believe they are the inspired word of God. We stake our existence on their spiritual, moral truth for us. A critical commandment is "Thou shall not bear false witness." I wonder how many of us could give an account of ourselves, our sermons, our teaching, our textbooks, our training of our teachers, in terms of how and what we actually teach about one another. This is almost painful for a religious person to have to say, but how much false witness do we bear to each other and how much love, empathy, sympathy do we declare?

If you want to see the effect of bearing false witness, of telling lies and the worse kind of lie is a religious lie, then you should have come with us to South Africa. Last October, we brought a delegation to that tragic, blood-stained country. We went through Soweto, and through the black-homelands. We sat with Africaners and watched armoured personal carriers coming into the black homelands. They were filled with young Africaners, 18, 19, 20 years old. These young men were fresh off the farms. The Dutch Reform Sunday School was their major source of religious education. They believed, as the word of God, in the curse of Ham- that all black people are cursed by God. Therefore it is a religious injunction to keep black people as an inferior people. It is God's will. At the slightest rumble in the streets, the soldiers came into Soweto and immediately began shooting. The first response was to shoot to kill. Why not? There was no religious inhibition for that. God wills it. He cursed them himself. There was no attempt to contain what was happening in the streets nor was any attempt to try to understand the situation.

There have been, at least, two great religious lies. One is apartheid and apartheid will continue until religious people dismantle this religious lie. This lie which became the basis for that political, social, cultural, separatist

society.

Deicide was the other religious lie. The Jews were collectively responsible for the death of Jesus. Therefore, Jews are under God's judgement. They are the wandering people. They will wander until the end of time. They deserve all their persecution. In fact, one German fundamentalist pastor said the Jews brought the Holocaust upon themselves. It is God's judgement because of deicide.

There are other lies in the making now. We talked about them this morning. But we religious people have an obligation under God not to allow a third religious lie to be born in our midst. However painful, we feel this lie making process is going on now.

That notion is that all Muslims are savages. All Muslims are barbarians. All Muslims are terrorists. That could become a religious lie. We live in an age where apocalyptic language is used. It is an age in which the children of light, namely us, are against the children of darkness. Reciprocally, those Muslims who believe they are the children of light and we are the children of darkness. We must dismantle those religious lies before they become joined with political and military power that can bring about the destruction of the universe.

Thirdly, I want to talk about what I believe is one of the great intellectual, theological tasks before us. As I travel through Africa, Asia and other parts of the world, I see religious, ethnic, and racial conflicts. It is becoming clear to me that we take for granted one of the great achievements of the American system. This achievement is part of the genius of democratic systems. It is at the heart of the co-existence of this society. It is the heart of the spirit of respect, of live and let live, of mutual helpfulness. We have defined and more importantly, internalized a fundamental theological and ideological conviction of pluralism in the midst of the unity of the human family. Pluralism may well be the will of God. Co-existence is absolutely fundamental for the social compact to be sustained.

In America, it has taken us two hundred years to carve out this dialectic of unity and pluralism. I think the person who defined this with greatest clarity and precision, is Dr. Martin Marty in his book, The Protestant Empire. He speaks of the American genius resting with a dialectic. There is a dialectical tension between what he calls identity and exposure. He says that at the heart of the American enterprise, there is a compelling need for every religious, racial, and ethnic group to achieve its own identity in its own terms. There is a need for its own self definition in accordance with its own tradition, self understanding, values and ideals. But if that is all that it does, if it is only preoccupied with its own identity and is not engaged in relationship with the rest of society, then that identity can lead to the Balkanization of America. If that identity is hinged dialectically with exposure to the common welfare...that is to say, preoccupation with the common welfare after one knows who one is, where one comes from, one's purpose in life and then shares it with the common welfare, that dialectical tension is what sustains America. It has not only led to the tradition of live and let live but live and help live.

Those persons who are concerned only about the common welfare and don't allow for the possibility of deep, rich, commitment to ones own identity, create a

sort of ersatz community which has no roots or foundation. This can only lead to the alienation of its members.

Let me say two things and then I'll conclude. As one looks at the future of Muslim, Christian, Jewish dialogue in realistic and not delusional terms, one must look at an issue which the late Dr. Eric Fromm addressed in his last work, Anatomy of Human Destructiveness. Dr. Fromm, author of The Art of Loving and The Sane Society, was a great psychoanalyst. In his later years, as Dr. Fromm traveled in many parts of the world, he became deeply disturbed by the growth of violence, terrorism, and destruction. In one of the chapters of his last work, Dr. Fromm describes the findings of clinical team who examined a conflict in India. The team was an interdisciplinary group of social scientists. The conflict, in which thousands of people were killed, was between Muslims and Hindus. This was not the first time the world has seen religious conflict. There are ongoing religious conflicts throughout the world.

At the heart of what was going on in that religious conflict was what Fromm called group narcissism. A narcissistic person is obsessed with oneself. This type of person attributes all value, all virtue, all ideals to oneself. Everything contrary to that is attributed to the person outside of oneself. All lack of worth, lack of honor, lack of dignity is outside of oneself. The construct is "I am superior. You are inferior." A narcissistic person requires that inferiority to save one's inflated sense of self. A narcissistic person cannot identify empathically with a person outside of oneself. Other people are used and exploited for one's constant need to feed one's ego.

Fromm says this conflict in India grew out of group narcissism. The Muslims believed they had a monopoly of all truth and salvation. The Hindus were infidels outside of God's salvation. The Hindus returned the belief and felt they were in the right. If you go to the Sikhs, you will find the same issue. If you go to the Tamils, you find the same issue. This same issue is at root in conflicts around the world.

Seven years ago in the Sudan, nearly a million human beings were destroyed in a conflict between north and south Sudan. This was a religious and racial conflict. Economics played a role. But the fighting was along racial, religious lines. At some point, one must begin to acknowledge that group narcissism is a flagrant sin against the will of God. Fromm declares it is psychopathological. If one's sense of self worth depends upon making someone else inferior then that is psychopathological. It is a distorted sense of one's own ego. A healthy, normal ego is when one sustains oneself on the basis of one's own virtue and how one lives one's life.. This issue of group narcissism needs to be examined in the Muslim, Christian, Jewish dialogue. This must be done, not only for our own sakes but for the future sake of the well being of mankind.

I want to conclude with what I alluded to earlier today. I think all of this basic cognitive, intellectual work must go on. It is basic to dismantling the lies, the falsehoods, the stereotypes. It is necessary for entering into the mind of the other and to understand the other as the other sees himself. But beyond that there is the task of truly being God's people. God reveals himself as moral will. God is a healing, redeeming God. We are here in the world to help repair and heal a broken, fragmented, suffering human society. Christians, Muslims, and Jews must turn to the task of trying to relieve the

pain, the suffering, the hatred, and the prejudice

With all the food we have amassed, with all our technology, with our brilliant transportation systems, U.N.I.C.E.F. still tells us that 25,000-30,000 children die everyday from hunger. We don't experience that in America. Thank God. But you will see it in Africa and Asia.

There are 12,000,000 refugees in the world today. They are without homeland, food, livelihoods. Their families are broken. I have never felt so deeply Jewish in my own being, in terms of living out the values of Jewish life, as when I reached down to the Vietnamese boat people and helped pull them out of the water of the South China Sea. A quarter of a million people drowned before the eyes of the world. Almost no one said anything until we organized a massive effort of Jews, Christians, Muslims, and others to save them. We brought a half million refugees to this country and restored to them their human dignity. All of us understood with a clarity and a power we've never understood before what it means to be a religious person, of upholding human life and human dignity, in the world.

I close with a phrase from our ethical literature. "The work is long and heavy. The day is very short. The workers are few." Rabbi Hillel said, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?"



OUR COMMON HERITAGE

TANNENBAUM

I greatly welcome this opportunity to open a dialogue with representatives of Islam, as well as of Christianity, in this country. There has been far too much hostility and suffering between members of our three monotheistic communities and hopefully, this dialogue between the three branches of the one Covenant is a "sign of the times" marking the beginning of a more constructive and humane relationship between our three faiths.

Let me reflect on what is far less known about the relationship between Judaism and Islam than is known about the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. From the researches and studies of such eminent scholars as Professor S.D. Goitein, Professor Bernard Lewis, the great Islamologist, and many others, we know how great and lasting a reciprocal influence Judaism and Islam have had on each other from the seventh century down to recent times. Nearly 1400 years ago Judaism and a segment of the Jewish people then living in Arabia, stood beside the cradle of the Muslim religion and Arab statehood. Judaism, according to Goitein and Muslim scholars, played a decisive role in the development of the religious, moral, and legal conceptions in the Koran in early Islam and in the formulation of the young Muslim community and state.

Indeed prominent scholars have stressed that Islam was far more akin to Judaism in its basic ideas, as well as in the details regulating the lives of its believers, than to Christianity- despite the closer "family relationship" between Christianity and Judaism.

Reciprocally, Jewish thought and philosophy, even Jewish law and religious practices, were systematically and finally formulated under Islamic influences. The Hebrew language developed its grammar and vocabulary on the model of the Arab language, and the revival of Hebrew today is unthinkable without the influence of the Arab world some 1000 years ago. To phrase the relationship more directly, the Muslim religion and Arab nationhood took form under Jewish impact, while traditional Judaism received its final shape under Muslim-Arab influences. When the Arabs retreated from world history (roughly from 1300 to 1900) the Oriental Jews, who were part and parcel of the Muslim-Arabic world, also virtually disappeared from Jewish history, thus demonstrating their interdependence.

To gain a truer perspective today of relationships between Judaism and Islam, it would be helpful to remind ourselves that Judaism and Islam, in distinction from the great civilizations that surrounded them, shared very definite common ideals, and common traits in social traditions and moral attitudes.

It is clear that the uncompromising attitude on monotheism by the Prophet Mohammad is strongly influenced by Jewish monotheists. One finds in much of the teachings of Mohammad, analogies to the fables and legends that the Jewish tribes carried with them into Arabia at the time of the life of Mohammad. Mohammad declared in the Koran (Sura No. 7, 59), after proclaiming himself Prophet of the Gentiles, "Among the

the belief in one God, the creator of the world and the designer of human destiny, the god of justice and mercy Before Him everyone, high and low, bears personal responsibility.

As there is a very close connection between the Koran and the religion of Israel, there is an even more striking affinity between the fully developed systems of the two religions:

- A. Both possess a tradition of revealed law - Halachah in Judaism and Shar'ih in Islam - which regulate worship, ethics, and social etiquette, and all aspects of life.
- B. Both have oral tradition- in Judaism, Torah She'beal Peh and in Islam, Hadith- which authoritatively interpret and supplement the written law.
- C. Both rely on a completely free and unorganized republic of scholars rather than on a hierarchy of religious dignitaries who made decisions for the people.
- D. The study even of purely legal matters is regarded in both religions as worship. The holy men of Islam and Judaism are not priests or monks, but students of the divinely revealed law.

In addition, both Judaism and Islam shared such common social traditions and moral attitudes as the following - they were both "essential democracies" characterized by the absence of privileged castes and classes, the absence of forced obedience to a strong authority; a high respect of freedom of speech, for human life, dignity and freedom.

Overriding these common features is the extraordinary unique fact that both Judaism and Islam are basically national religions which are essentially universal in character, in contrast to Christianity which proclaims to find itself as a universal religion but which is humanly experienced in national cultural forms. That is to say one experiences universal Christianity essentially as Latin Christianity, Byzantine Christianity, Slovak Christianity, or North European Christianity. It is a definition of universality manifested regional national forms in contrast to national religions manifesting themselves with universal ideals for mankind.

Much more could be said about the historical aspect of the Jewish people under Islam. Suffice it to say that there has been periods of enormously creative Islamic- Jewish symbiosis. One needs only to go through Spain to see the impact of the golden age of the Jews of Spain under Moorish domination. There have also been periods of mutual intolerance and oppression. The moral and spiritual challenge posed to Muslims, Christians, and Jews today is essentially that of George Santanyana, "Those who will not learn from history are doomed to repeat it."

I hope that we will find more opportunity for dialogue as we clarify and sort out these essential values and ideals that we proclaim as Muslims, Christians, and Jews. I reflect on what has happened in the application of these ideals in the human experience in so many parts of the world today. Are we really faithful to these ideals and values? Do we give more than lip service to them?

Are we really engaged in the systematic hypocrisy of proclaiming one vision of humankind and living out a world of fundamentalism and fanaticism and hostilities and fratricide and religious lies and prejudices against one another? How long do we think the heart of God can sustain this blasphemy against his will? That is the challenge in all honesty and humility for all of us. In the kind of world in which we live, what we are gathered and doing here today and too infrequently in other parts of the world, is not an idle exercise. It is not a luxury that an elite group of people are indulging in because they have nothing else to do. To go through the airports of the world, to go to Rome Airport or Athens Airport, to see the world becoming a garrison place, a fortress, and our accepting that as normal, is a sign of how pathological the human condition is becoming because of the hatred and violence.

Our task is to return to our roots. Our task is to face the contradiction of what we proclaim and what we indulge and allow to happen. If God is good to us, if we can understand and love one another through Abraham our common, compassionate father, we may have enough time to reconcile those contradictions. I worry in a nuclear missile age, in a world in which there is such destructive human capacity, how much time we have to close the gap between that which we say we believe in and that which we really live as children of Abraham.

