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Box 5, Folder 8, Response upon Receiving Interfaith Award of
International Council of Christians and Jews, 11 May 1988.

RESPONSE OF RABBI MARC H. TANENBAUM, DIRECTOR OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
OF THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE, ON RECEIVING "INTERFAITH AWARD" OF THE
INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL OF CHRISTIANS AND JEWS, WEDNESDAY, MAY 11, 1988
AT THE GRAND HYATT HOTEL, NEW YORK CITY

This would be a meaningful and moving moment in my life under normal circumstances. Given my recent hospitalization, this event -- the receiving of the prestigious "Interfaith Award" of the International Council of Christians and Jews in the midst of your presence -- assumes a very special, even a rare quality of grace.

I must confess that an element of its specialness derives from the fact that this is one of the few events in my life that I did not have to arrange myself. That adds to why I am so touched and grateful for today. Sir Sigmund Sternberg, one of the most distinguished leaders of British Jewry and a statesman of the Jewish People, and the International Council of Christians and Jews, perhaps the most representative body devoted to the improvement of relationships between Christians and Jews internationally, quite spontaneously informed me several months ago that I had been selected for this distinction in recognition of my more than 25 years of service in the advancement of Jewish-Christian understanding. That spontaneity lends the luster of authenticity to this tribute.

With your permission, I should like to take just a few moments to reflect on some of the meaning of this occasion and award to me. It is most effectively synthesized for me in the writings of Dr. Ernest Becker, a brilliant but neglected cultural anthropologist. In his book, The Denial of Death, Dr. Becker states that human beings do not in fact fear death. What people fear is dying in insignificance. That is the real terror of death. He proposes that all of us -- at least most of us -- have a need to live our lives in a way that makes a difference, significant lives that give meaning to human existence. That is our immortality, Becker writes.

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All our art, literature, music, culture, even religion are ways of making a statement, leaving a landmark that we have not simply endured as animal life endures, but that we have lived lives of purpose and meaning. In short, Becker asserts, each of us has a powerful need to make a difference through our living, to help ennoble the human condition. That, he says, is true immortality.

As I have thought about my past 27 years with the American Jewish Committee, I experience feelings of deepest gratitude for AJC's having made possible opportunities for living a life of such high meaning, enabling contributions to be made in many areas of importance to the Jewish People and to society at large -- in some cases contributions, I trust, of lasting, even transforming value.

In retrospect, it is remarkable that AJC's lay leaders and professional leadership supported activities literally in every decade during which I have been associated with AJC, that helped change the course of history for the better.

In the 1960s, AJC made possible the participation of my beloved colleague and mentor, Zachariah Shuster, and my precious teacher, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, both of blessed memory, and myself, in Vatican Council II. The Council was a transforming event which has radically changed the course of 1900 years of Catholic-Jewish relations, much of it now for the better. In the 1970s, we were able to pioneer with Dr. Billy Graham and the Southern Baptist Convention in opening a new world of Evangelical-Jewish relations which continues to this day.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, AJC enabled my taking part in four separate International Rescue Committee missions to Southeast Asia that literally resulted in the saving of thousands of lives of Vietnamese Boat People and Cambodians, and led to the resettlement of a half-million hapless refugees in the United States. Earlier in the mid-1960s, we were able to engage in similar life-saving roles in the Nigerian-Biafran conflict, and then in Ethiopia, and in the drought-ridden Sahelian zone of West Africa.

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In the 1980s, we were able to make significant gains with major European countries -- both West and East -- particularly in West Germany through the excellent work of William Trosten and his predecessors, as well as in Latin America, led by Jacobo Kovadloff and Sergio Nudelstejer, that require further serious, responsible cultivation. And now in 1988, we are beginning to explore the possible importance to Jews and Israel of Japan and the Pacific Rim in light of their powerful geo-political and economic presence in America and in the world.

While these were the dramatic and historic highlights, we conjured with those challenges while concentrating much of our energies on the priorities of Israel, Soviet Jewry, endangered Jewish communities in Ethiopia, Iran, Syria, Yemen, Central America and elsewhere. We visited Oberammergau several times to bring about changes in their Passion Play. We implemented religious textbook studies, and we sought to combat teaching of contempt against Jews and Judaism in cooperation with friends such as Mme. Claire Huchet-Bishop, a great Christian lady who graces us with her presence.

I will never be able to thank adequately, Dr. John Slawson and Bert Gold, who put up with my idiosyncracies and *mushigas*, my specialized *shtuks*, but also gave me the freedom and support to do what I thought had to be done in our common interest. They instilled in me one crucial motto -- which is the motto of AJC at its best -- be effective, know the facts and do it right.

Ted Ellenoff, Leo Nevas, our AJC officers, our eminent former presidents, our professional colleagues -- for me especially those in interreligious affairs and international relations -- our chapter leaders, our area directors -- that is the moral and human framework without which none of this history could have been made, decade after decade. And I am confident that under Ira Silverman's leadership as Executive Vice President that tradition of significant accomplishment will continue and expand.

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In truth, I feel deeply that this award is to be shared with the American Jewish Committee, the ICCJ, and those thousands of extraordinary Christian and Jewish leaders who collaborated with us throughout the United States and in other parts of the world to bring about this "revolution of mutual esteem." There are few greater personal satisfactions for me today than that of being embraced as friend and colleague by these Christian and Jewish leaders in virtually every major city in the United States and in many parts of the world.

There is a Hebrew phrase *acharon, acharon chaviv* -- "the last is the most beloved." My magnificent, beautiful, and brilliant wife, Georgette, has saved my life in many ways. It is difficult to imagine that any human being can give more to another than my wife has given to me. During our years together, Georgette has made me possible.

Sir Sigmund, ICCJ, AJC, and my family of friends, for this memorable day, I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

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