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MS-603: Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum Collection, 1945-1992.

Series E: General Alphabetical Files. 1960-1992

Box 85, Folder 6, "Masada" - ABC, 1981.

CULTURAL INFORMATION SERVICE

15 W. 24th Street — 10th Floor, N.Y., N.Y. 10010

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January 30, 1981

Rabbi Marc Tannenbaum
American Jewish Committee
165 East 56th Street
New York, New York 10022

Dear Rabbi Tannenbaum:

Here are our "Masada" resources and our rejoicings that you have agreed to join and enhance our newspaper supplement and series on the ABC miniseries.

The resources enclosed are the following:

1. Our outline draft for the full newspaper supplement (see Fourth Night #3);
2. The Louis Finkelstein article from the 1969 Masada exhibit;
3. Our Viewer's Guide which will be sent to our regular subscribers;
4. The full script of "Masada."

Please let us know if we can provide any more data or definition on the project.

As for your key contribution, we ask you to do - as you have done so well before - the needed drawing together of personal presence and universal perspective, to both be at Masada and to see its implications and impact on us all.

If you can, we hope you will begin on Masada ("Standing on Masada I could see and feel...") and then take that experience/inheritance/legacy and move us to what you so perceptively noted on the phone - "there are Masadas happening all around the world today." Please be as specific as you choose to and can be about those places and their lessons and implications and challenges to us. Along with noting the Masadas and Romes of our day, you might be able to state the imperative that we not force individuals, groups or nations into such extreme choices as Masadas (death or bondage). In the face of awesome conflict of forces and values, what do you give - what must you hold? What difference could and can an individual make at Masada? Today? As people of faith called to justice and compassion, what higher good, hope can and does survive the end of Masada?

Of course, neither you nor we can draw the universal and transcendent meaning of Masada in 1,000 words or a lifetime. Yet it lives. In a real place. On the screen. And in our time and lives. Help us see how and why.

As you review the script, muse and write, please feel free to call us anytime with questions to raise or ideas to test. We trust your judgment and your vision. We look forward with you to a newspaper supplement that will look not only at a significant media event but also at its deep meanings in our own and common lives.

Not having mentioned our limited budget for producing this important package, we do hope that our modest offering of a \$250 honorarium is acceptable to you.

In anticipation and appreciation,



Thomas Bentz
Masada Project Editor

P.S. We would of course welcome your article before February 13.

ABC-TV "MASADA"
Prepared for The Cultural
Information Service

MASADA - ITS MODERN MEANING

by Mare H. Tanenbaum

(Rabbi Tanenbaum is national interreligious affairs director of the American Jewish Committee and has been active in the world hunger and world refugee problems.)

Standing on Masada, that forbidding mountain-fortress in the Judean desert hovering over the Dead Sea, I could see and feel the horrors and hope of the human condition, then and now.

All around me in that lunar-like landscape were scattered the vestiges of the last stand of the Jewish refugees from Jerusalem in 73 CE (AD) who determined to die by their own hands rather than submit to totalitarian subjugation under the Roman Legions. They desperately chose death over a life of physical and moral serfdom.

Millions of human beings throughout the world today - in Asia, Africa, Latin America, Eastern and Western Europe - appear to be struggling with some of the same anguished, fateful choices that confronted the Jewish rebel commander, Eleazar ben Jair, and his 960 fellow-refugees atop Masada some 1900 years ago in ancient Palestine.

During the past two years, I went on three missions to Southeast Asia as a member of an International Rescue Committee delegation that sought to help save the lives and bring relief

to hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese boat people, Cambodians, ethnic Chinese, and Laotians. We visited every major refugee camp in Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, Singapore and Hong Kong. In every camp, we found Asian refugees traumatized by the same dilemmas that confronted those suffering Jews of Masada two millennia ago.

In Djakarta, Indonesia, Nguyen Than, a Roman Catholic high school teacher from South Vietnam, stood on the bow of his exhausted boat and told me of the horrendous choice he had to make four weeks before. North Vietnamese soldiers had stormed into his house in Saigon one afternoon and ordered him and his wife and children to be ready to leave the next day for "a collective rural reeducation" program. Nguyen Than, an urban dweller all his life, was to be remade foreseeably by the Communist government into "a new man" in "the new society".

He felt his dignity as a human being - the freedom of his person - being taken from him. That night, he and his family packed their modest belongings, escaped through the forest, and purchased with their life savings a battered skiff. They set sail in the pre-dawn hours across the South China Sea, knowing full well that they faced the risk of death by drowning. At that time, sixty percent of the Vietnamese boat people were drowning in the South China Sea, yet they clearly chose the risk of death with its slim possibility of survival in freedom over the dehumanizing prospect of unfreedom under the ~~Viet~~ North Vietnamese Communists.

Nguyen Than and his family were among the fortunate few whose gamble for survival and freedom paid off.

I have seen the anguish of the Masade dilemma in the eyes and faces of countless refugees whom I have met from Cambodia, Uganda, Somalia, Biafra-Nigeria, Lebanon, Ireland, El Salvador, the Soviet Union, Poland, ~~South Africa,~~ South Africa, ~~and Cuba,~~ and Haiti.

As one scans the world scene today, there is a growing sense that an epidemic of dehumanization has broken out in the human family. There are ^{today} an estimated 16 million refugees in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, most of them victims of power struggles between religious, racial, tribal, and ethnic groups. Much like the ideology of the Roman Empire, many of the leaders of these warring groups have no conception of religious or ethnic pluralism, of the democratic doctrine of live and let live - much less, live and help live.

Religious and racial fanaticisms, fueled by ancient hatreds and ethnocentric ~~superiorities~~ ^{fantasies of group} superiority, are resulting in the horrendous loss of millions of lives, or in refugees populations whose lives are blasted by hunger, starvation, and destitution. How long can the human family continue and allow such vast destruction of human lives go on and still consider itself ~~civilized~~ civilized?

As we think about Masada and its meaning for today, it is vital that we realize that the Jewish conscience is divided and tormented over the message of that tragic event. Some Jewish leaders and thinkers, both in the United States and Israel, perceive Masada as a sublime symbol of courage, of brave and determined people who chose self-slaughter in preference to surrender to oppression.

Many other Jews, and hopefully many non-Jews, will derive a different, more relevant lesson/ for our times. And that is--

We, all of us together, ~~skrisksksks~~ all members of God's human family, must do everything in our power to assure that human beings on this shrunken planet are never to be confronted again with Masada's terrible choice of death or submission to dehumanizing forces.

To avert future Masada's, we need to mobilize the moral will of people everywhere to bring about universal, simultaneous disarmament, and arms control before the world becomes a global Auschwitz. We must stand resolutely against all forms of violence, terrorism, torture, and massacres of innocent human lives. We must ~~sk~~ condemn all forms of verbal violence, religious and racial bigotry, which create the moral atmospheres for Masadas. We must not stand idly by while millions ~~sk~~ of fellow human beings starve to death before the eyes of the world - a scandal especially when so many Americans are obsessed over how to lose excess weight from overeating.

Above all, we need to affirm the power and relevance of the central affirmation on which committed Christians and Jews, and people of conscience everywhere, stake their existence; namely, that every human being is created in the sacred image of God, that every life is of infinite preciousness, that no human being is expendable, either at Masada or anywhere else on ~~thx~~ our global neighborhood.

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