

MS-603, Box 112, Folder 2 Transcription

American Jewish Committee closing plenary. 1989.

Richard:

I would like to call on Leo Nevas. Leo?

Leo Nevas:

Thank you, Jack. Richard. I always keep making that mistake. This morning I have the privilege of joining with you in honoring one of our most distinguished professionals. For more than three decades, he's been one of the brightest stars in the AJC firmament. He came to us in 1960 from a position of Executive Vice President of the Synagogue Council of America to head our Interreligious Affairs Department. During the last five years he's headed AJC's work on the [01:00] world scene as Director of the International Affairs Department.

A list of his academic accomplishment and publications, as well as other activities, would take me far more than the time allotted for this purpose and for this presentation. Perhaps it's appropriate to describe him as others have described him and have referred to his accomplishments. *New York* magazine has described him as one of the foremost Jewish ecumenical leaders in the world today. *Newsweek* magazine has defined him as the

American Jewish community's foremost apostle to the gentiles. Sacred Heart University, in awarding him the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws, described him as the human rights rabbi of America. In a national poll among religious editors and religious writers [02:00], he was designated as one of the, quote, "most influential and respected religious leaders in America," naming him fourth after only Billy Graham, Dr. Martin Marty, and President Carter.

His work at the Vatican Council II as the only rabbi invited to participate as an observer as well known, I hope to all of us. He made a tremendous contribution to us and to our welfare, which will bear fruit for years to come in that effort and in that capacity. He worked closely there with Cardinal Bea both prior to and during that conference, and he helped clarify and drastically improve Catholic attitudes and positions towards the Jewish people. He was the first Jewish leader to be invited to address the 4,000 delegates gathered at the World Conference [03:00] of the World Council of Churches. He's been a major force in the promotion of social justice and human rights, helped organize the American Jewish Emergency Relief Effort for victims of the Nigerian-Biafran Conflict. He's aided refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, Uganda, Sierra Leone, Ireland, Bangladesh, and Cyprus. He is National Co-Chairman of the

Interreligious Task Force on Soviet Jewry, and National Co-Chairman of the Interreligious Coalition on World Hunger. He was a founder and program chairman of the historic National Conference on Religion and Race, which has been regarded as a turning point for the promotion of civil rights in the '60s. Served on various presidential, White House, UN, and other commissions on children and the aging, hunger, and population problems. I could go on at further length describing some of these activities.

I would've been saved a lot of [04:00] effort if I had had available to me the notes of Cardinal Law's, or a copy of his speech of last night, because he, in that speech, paid tribute to our honoree. He paid tribute to the tremendous contribution made to Catholic-Jewish relations, which speaks for itself, and it was a real tribute to our organization. After the meeting last night, in conversation with Monsignor Murphy, who was associated with the Vatican, and who's now an aide to the Cardinal, he elucidated further on Marc's work at the Vatican, and paid further tribute to that effort. You know, of course, who I've been talking about. I've mentioned his name inadvertently a couple of times, so it's no mystery.

It would be easy for me to spend another half hour talking about his efforts on the [05:00] international scene, as well as those that I've referred to largely in the interreligious efforts. I came to know Marc about five or six years ago, when he became Director of International Affairs Department, and I had been associated with that commission for about 15 years, and was chairman of it shortly after he took on that position. I grew to admire his intellect and character, his notions of social responsibility, and the depth of his knowledge of international affairs. I never cease to be astonished by his grasp of all the nuances of international relations, particularly as it impacted on the Jewish people. As we traveled, met with leaders of France and Germany and South Africa and other countries, Marc's depth of knowledge never ceased to amaze all of us. I recall specifically [06:00] our delegate visit with the officials of the Austrian government; it was the foreign minister, the chancellor, the minister of education, and leaders of political parties. And I recall his great knowledge of Austria and Austrian affairs, and history of anti-Semitism in Austria. In one encounter with the leader of the People's Party, now the foreign minister of Austria, we were discussing the history of anti-Semitism in Austria when we were challenged. Our group was challenged with some of the statements we had made. It was Marc who was able to pick up that challenge and go back over the

long, sad history of Austria's anti-Semitism, detailing it by date, by individuals, and by events. It's enough to say we were amazed, but the Austrians were nothing short of stunned by his litany of their [07:00] sad history.

I think it's hardly necessary to recount all of this, except that I believe that we too often take for granted the remarkable talent we have among our professionals, and, in Marc's case particularly, the saying that a prophet is not without honor save in his own country, has some applicability. What is appropriate at this time, I suggest, is for us to join in tribute to Marc as he is preparing to close one phase of his AJC chapter. His contribution to this organization and to the larger community, and particularly the Jewish community, has been monumental, and it's difficult to describe those in words. We look forward to his continuing relationship with AJC, and to serving us from time to time in many ways. His talents are needed, both by the organization, by the community, and by the Jewish community, and I hope they will not be wasted [08:00] in the time ahead. Marc, our gratitude may not always be visible to you, but it is there, and along with it go our heartfelt wishes for good health, continued success in all of your undertakings. We wish you and Georgette, your lovely wife, happiness in the years ahead, and we look forward to seeing you

and having you with us frequently. And on behalf of the American Jewish Committee, I would like to present to you...

M:

(inaudible) (laughter)

Leo Nevas:

It's not a [fine brooch?], and it isn't an American Committee yearbook, either. (laughter) To you -- it's addressed to you, Marc -- To Marc Tanenbaum for his exceptional contribution to enhancing the understanding of the Jewish people in the interreligious and international communities [09:00], presented by the American Jewish Committee, October 30th, 1988. (applause)

Marc Tanenbaum:

If you keep that up I'll begin bawling like a baby. (laughter) I won't be able to read my response! I began to worry a little bit last night [10:00] after that spontaneous and wholly unexpected personal expression of friendship, affection from Cardinal Law. I knew him when he was a [Galahal?], when he was a Monsignor and first began working as head of the Secretariat of Catholic Bishops on Interreligious Relations. And if it's not telling tales out of school, Bernie Law and I were drinking partners in Rome during Vatican Council II. (laughter) If you

want to know the secret solvent of Catholic-Jewish relations, it's a great bottle of Scotch after twelve o'clock. In St. Peter's Basilica, they had two bars, and as a sign of [11:00] the new era in Catholic-Jewish relations, one of the bars was called Bar Mitzvah, (laughter) and the other bar was called Bar [Yona?]. So we used to alternate between the two of them, and we had great times together. But what I really enjoyed about what Cardinal Law did last night was that he read that tribute just as I wrote it. (laughter)

Receiving this farewell citation, as I know you must understand, is a deeply moving occasion in my life. It's especially meaningful to accept this from Leo Nevas, who from his years of leadership as Chairman of the AJC's International Relations Commission has been a steadfast [12:00], trusted friend and mentor. In both of my incarnations, in interreligious affairs and then in international relations, the committee that I personally have also been blessed to have had the benefit of relationships with dedicated chairmen, who remain to this day very good friends, Norman [Rabb?], Bob Jacobs, Leonard [Gasin?], and now Richard Rice, and I owe them for their dedication and friendship my abiding gratitude.

This program that you have lists this moment as an occasion for, quote, "farewell citation," end quote. Well, "farewell" is an ambiguous term, and to play with it in the manner of William Sapphire's word game, "farewell" could mean finality, closure [13:00], the end, *finito*, but used in the Elizabethan sense "farewell" connotes fare-thee-well, and suggests good wishes, a blessing. And if, frankly, you stand the word on its head, it becomes welfare, (laughter) indicating on one level a concern for one's wellbeing. Obviously it has another meaning, and I'd rather not go into that at this moment. (laughter)

As many of you know, I've committed the last 27 years of my life to serving the American Jewish Committee, hopefully the American Jewish community and other world Jewish communities, and these have been the majority of the years of my professional career. And therefore, I find it incomprehensible that "farewell" could mean in any sense rupture or termination [14:00]. AJC has been too much a part of my identity to allow for that to happen. And on the contrary, I view this moment as a time of creative transition, for which I am grateful, to a future for which I am exceedingly hopeful.

There's a somewhat funky anecdote which catches something of my sense of self today. There are two older society women. I hope

the feminists in the audience will indulge me this. I recite this only for metaphoric purposes. (laughter) Two older society women, poor but snobbish, were talking about a matrimonial prospect. "He's got plenty of money," one said, "but he's too old to be termed eligible." And the other lady replied, "Darling, he's too eligible to be termed old." (laughter)

Last May, when [15:00] I was privileged to receive the International Interfaith Medallion from the International Council of Christians and Jews, headed by Sir Sigmund Sternberg, many of you present for that, I try to summarize my feelings about AJC in such words as these -- I think they're apt at this time, as well. As I thought about my past quarter century with the American Jewish Committee, I experienced feelings of gratitude for AJC's having made possible opportunities for living a life of 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 hope, of lasting, even transforming value. In retrospect, it is remarkable that AJC's lay and professional leadership supported activities in every decade during which I have been associated with AJC, and certainly much before then [16:00] -- from 1960, at least, until the present, during my time here -- that helped change the course of history for the better. And these are my sentiments

today. I have enormous pride in our collective achievements at Vatican Council II and in Catholic-Jewish relations since then. There are few greater personal satisfactions for me than that of being embraced by Jewish and Christian friends, as was the case unexpectedly last night by Cardinal Law, in virtually every major city in the United States, and in many other parts of the world. I know that something is happening in Catholic-Jewish relations when you can go to Paris and to Rome and Buenos Aires and Argentina and elsewhere and find people responding to me as a representative of AJC and the Jews [17:00] the way Cardinal Law responded last night. That has persuaded me that something permanent has happened in many parts of the world in Catholic-Jewish relationships. And I take pride, as well, in the fact that it was during my tour of office that we were able to carry out the pioneering relationships with Dr. Billy Graham, evangelical Christians and other Protestants, as well as people of the standing of Archbishop Iakovos in the Greek Orthodox Church.

And in many ways, uniquely, of greatest meaning to me, has been AJC's making it possible for me, together with our colleagues, to engage literally in life-saving work on behalf of suffering Jewish and non-Jewish refugees throughout Africa, Asia, Latin America, Jews in the Soviet Union, Christians in the Soviet

Union [18:00], preoccupation centrally with Israel, Jews in the Middle Eastern countries, and our programs in a number of European countries which we were able to inaugurate.

Ted Ellenoff, our distinguished president, and other AJC officers have asked me to continue to serve as international consultant to the American Jewish Committee, and to the degree that my accumulated experiences and extended networks of personal contacts and friendships in many parts of the world may continue to be helpful to my successor at AJC, I will do what is appropriate and possible to be of assistance. As of January the 1st, 1989, I will cross a threshold to another career, to which I look forward with genuine eagerness and enthusiasm. The fact that, thank God, I have been restored almost miraculously, and the natural miracle sitting over here, my wife Georgette [19:00], who made possible more than anyone else, except possibly for my extraordinary physician, my being restored literally to normal good health, reinforces these optimistic feelings.

With all the sense of achievement that has been possible through AJC in the past quarter century, it simply also must be said in truth that there has been a price to be paid. The unrelenting travels overseas and domestically take their toll in personal

health and family sacrifice, but also in sacrifice in personal fulfillment. I hope now to compensate for some of these imbalances by concentrating my energies on long delayed, intensive, systematic study, scholarship, and writing two books, for which I have recently committed myself to a major publisher, and to continue with a good deal of lecturing, and, [20:00] when my schedule is ready, to a university professorship that has been proposed to me. In that sense, "farewell" means to me not closure nor the end, but the fare-thee-well of blessing and fulfillment, and I will look forward to maintaining ties of warm friendship with many of you who have been my AJC family, as I speak around the country during the coming months and years.

I cannot conclude without two acknowledgements. One is the expression of my deepest gratitude and affection for my secretary of the past 14 years, Rita Resnick. Rita has been infinitely more than a secretary. She has been my consummate hostess in at least three languages, my confidant, and, above all, my friend, and I will always be in Rita's debt. I see her in the back of the room, and I hope Rita will stand. (applause) [21:00] And finally, recalling my words of last May, words which remain (pause) my deepest heartfelt feelings today, (pause) there's a Hebrew phrase, [Hebrew]: the last is the most beloved. My magnificent, beautiful, and truly brilliant wife

Georgette has saved my life in many ways. It's difficult to imagine [22:00] that any human being can give more to another than my wife has given to me, and during our years together, Georgette has made me possible. And so Ted, Leo, Ira, Bert, Selma, my colleagues, my professional colleagues, and my family of AJC friends, for this important turning point day in my life, I thank you from the bottom of my heart. (applause) [23:00]

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