

MS-603, Box 112, Folder 15.01 Transcription

Funeral service, Park Avenue Synagogue [1]. 6 July 1992.

[00:00] (music) [Hebrew] [01:00] [02:00]

M1:

Our assistant cantor Ira Bigeleisen has composed a special setting of the 122nd psalm in honor of the memory of Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum.

(music) [03:00] [04:00] [05:00] [06:00]

M1:

We have come together, sharing our sorrow, to bid farewell to Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum. We recall the blessing of his life. We thank God for all that was good and true in his life and for the precious memories [07:00] which shall endure. Eternal God, creator, merciful father of all, be gracious to those who mourn, for they are in distress. Bless them with your compassion. Ease their burden of sorrow. Send them light and peace. For it is written, "Fear not, as I am with you. Be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you. I will help you. I will sustain you with my power." [Hebrew] "The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He has me lie down in green pastures. He leads me

beside the still waters. He guides me on paths [08:00] of righteousness. He revives my soul for the sake of his glory. Though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no harm, for you are with me. Your staff and your rod do comfort me. You set a table in sight of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows. Sure goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life. And I shall abide in the house of the Lord forever." As we come here today in sadness to mourn the passing of Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum, it's always so very difficult to find the appropriate words of comfort and consolation to offer to family and friends who are bereaved. [09:00] Because we always have the feeling that whatever words of eulogy or prayer we offer at this time, they cannot dispel that feeling of void that a wife has at the passing of her husband. Children, sister, brother-in-law, family and friends at the passing of a dear one. And I'm reminded of the verse in the prophet Jeremiah, who stated [Hebrew], "Weep not for one who is taken from us, one who has lived out their full span of life. But weep sorely for one who is still treading the path of life, for they will not return again." [10:00] We understand that we should not be excessively sad when somebody is taken in the full measure of their years. When one is still on their way through life as Marc Tanenbaum was, then no measure of sorrow is unjustified. We are indeed deeply saddened and we do shed a tear. Speaking for myself as

rabbi of this congregation, it's always a sense of pride to me to be the rabbi of Park Avenue Synagogue. But there are certain congregants who add a special measure of honor to me as their rabbi. And when I would look out on the congregation and see in the middle row [11:00] Marc Tanenbaum worshipping with us as a fully devoted member of our congregation, it brought me a great sense of pride that I could say, "I am Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum's rabbi." Somehow I could never have enough of him. Every time I listened to him, every time I learned from him, every writing of his taught me so much. And as I have said to Georgette, I feel a terrible sense of void now that he has been taken from us. I was so very moved that really in his last weeks in this world when this congregation honored me on behalf of the Jewish Theological Seminary and Marc was on his way to come to the dinner, and he was taken seriously ill and had to be rushed to the hospital, and he was [12:00] so upset that he couldn't be here. And he and Georgette decided that from the hospital Georgette would come back here and be with us in that celebration. That was the kind of person he was. That was what was on his mind in a very serious time in his life. And at the end of a life, the Talmud asks the question (Aramaic or Hebrew), "What kind of person is it that merits a place in the world to come and will be remembered in this world in the time to come?" The answer the rabbis give themselves is (Aramaic or Hebrew), "The kind of

person that other people like being in their company." The kind of person that finds grace in the eyes of their fellow human beings. [13:00] Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum found grace in the eyes of all who came into contact with him. He was adored by so many people. The nurses in the hospital adored him. He never complained about his serious illness. In all of his wonderful work on behalf of the Jewish people with regard to the dialogue of the Jewish people with Catholic and Protestant churches, he had a way somehow of defusing serious situations. He had that calmness. He had that charm, yes, that grace that enabled him to smooth over difficult situations. I know that his children Adena, Michael and Susan have their own memories at this time. And speaking to [14:00] Georgette over these past days has been so difficult, and yet so delightful, because there was that very special feeling of love and devotion between them. The marriage was all too short. Only ten short years almost to the day. And yet as Georgette looks forward to the birth of a son, their son, I know there is a feeling of exchanging one life for another. And in the midst of our deep sadness we know that there is a future for the traditions that Marc stood for. I know that Sima, his dear sister, has spoken to me and her husband Herb of the younger years. Sima has told me of the special *naches*. How does one translate *naches*? [15:00] That special feeling of pride that the family always had for their brother. Since he was I think

four years old when he enrolled in the Hebrew school, he was a brilliant student. The rabbi when he was a few years old, four or five, said to the family that he should become a rabbi. He graduated from high school at the age of 15. He was already a debater and writer in his younger years, and as the obituary pointed out, it was in his parents' grocery store in Baltimore that he learned the love and compassion for his fellow human beings. Everybody was poor at that time. And yet his parents, Sima's parents, managed to put together a few packages for Christmas for their [16:00] gentile neighbors. And that was where he learned to reach out to them. And finally his name. His Hebrew name Mordechai. Mordechai Chaim Ben Avraham. The son of Abraham. Shakespeare once asked, "What's in a name?" And the Jewish people answer there is very much in a name, because if we name an individual after a patriarch or matriarch of Judaism or after a grandparent or great-grandparent, we expect that individual to walk in the paths of that forebear. Mordechai of old from the book of Esther was known as Mordechai ha-Yehudi. Perhaps the only biblical character that was known as a Jew. Mordechai the Jew. [17:00] Certainly Marc Tanenbaum was very much Mordechai ha-Yehudi. He was a Jew, a proud Jew. Brought pride to his people. But he was also Ben Avraham. And that in our Jewish tradition indicates that he was a son of Abraham, which means he reached out to all humanity, because Abraham is

the spiritual father of all peoples. And he was a true Ben Avraham. He reached out to all the peoples and religions and faiths, creeds and colors. And there are so many rabbinic stories of Mordechai. The Talmud of Megillah tells us (Aramaic or Hebrew), "Mordechai was proud with grace." With a special charm that endeared him to all around him. [18:00] And then the book of Esther tells us [Hebrew], "His fame went throughout the world." His reputation was international. And the rabbis of the Midrash commenting on that say (Aramaic or Hebrew), "He had a special coin. On one side was sackcloth and ashes, mourning, difficulty, on the other side was (Aramaic or Hebrew), the crown of gold." That was how Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum saw his duty to the Christian and Jewish communities. On one side there was bitterness and sadness and difficulties throughout the age (Aramaic or Hebrew), there was sackcloth and ashes. [19:00] On the other side we hoped that there would come a crown of gold. And thank God that day has certainly come in these blessed United States of America. The presence of His Eminence John Cardinal O'Connor and so many gentile friends here today show us that we are in a time of (Aramaic or Hebrew). We are living in a time of a golden crown as far as our relationships are concerned. And through the efforts of Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum and his gentile friends, this is an international feeling which we hope will grow ever stronger with the years. As we offer

condolences to Georgette, to Adena, Susan and Michael, to Sima and Herb, to Adam and Abby and [Ernie?] and to Mrs. Sidonie Bennett, the nieces and nephews, the mother-in-law, [20:00] we know that the memory of Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum indeed will be a source of strength to us all in the years ahead. I'm now going to ask my dear colleague and dear friend of Marc Rabbi Arnold Turetsky to introduce the speakers.

Arnold Turetsky:

More than a quarter of a century ago, after the first Rosh Hashanah service in the Jewish Center of Jackson Heights, [21:00] where I then became Marc Tanenbaum's rabbi, Rabbi Tanenbaum came to me and complimented me. He told me I was impressive. So I ran home and told my wife. I said, "Noemie, you know who complimented me? Marc Tanenbaum. He said I'm impressive." Marc, in all these years, I have never known you to be in impressive. You are imposing, you are commanding, you are awesome. And your stage is equal to the world. And your personality is supreme. And your achievement unmeasured. [22:00] Today there are eulogies to praise you, Marc. How do you eulogize Marc Tanenbaum? Who should do it? Of those who would address the sanctity of this calling, first I would call upon Georgette, John Cardinal O'Connor, Senator Roy Goodman, Ari Goldman, and Roz Goldberg. [23:00]

Georgette Bennett:

Well, Marc was always able to draw a big crowd. The first time that I stood at this *bimah*, Marc and I were facing the other way, and we were being married by three rabbis and a Puerto Rican judge, just to make sure that it would stick. And it did. We've lost a great man. And a very powerful symbol of that appeared to me as I opened my door late in the day that Marc died, and saw that my neighbor [24:00] across the hall, an Israeli, had put an Israeli flag on her door with a long mourning ribbon draped on it. And my friends and I were speculating what does this mean. And what it meant is that the Jewish people and the state of Israel had lost a great friend. I think his greatness has certainly come through in the magnificent obituaries that we've seen in the various media outlets. And the tremendous outpouring of love from all of you. And it's wonderful. But the one thing that bothers me about it all is why couldn't he have died after his funeral. [25:00] And this issue of his greatness. It raised a couple of questions for me yesterday. Yesterday I was wondering. Is it easier to lose an unsatisfying imperfect love or a deeply fulfilling one? I don't know what's more painful. Is it easier to lose a great man or an ordinary one? So my friend Roz Goldberg who introduced Marc and I to each other. She was the *shadchan*, and you'll be hearing

from her later. She said, "That depends on whether you focus on your loss or on the time that you had together." So in this eulogy I want to focus on the time that we had together. We all kind of agreed we would keep our eulogies between five and seven minutes. And I just know I'm going to run over. But I figure I'm entitled. [26:00] Marc and I had promised each other over the years that we would do eulogies for each other. And that's because we were always quite realistic about the fact that death was a presence in our lives. There was a large age difference between us, and the odds were never good that we would grow old together, so we talked about things like funerals and eulogies. Marc and I met at Saint Peter's Lutheran Church. And that seemed to be an appropriately ecumenical circumstance. That was where our mutual friend Roz had dragged me kicking and screaming to see Marc in action conducting a symposium on the Moral Majority. [27:00] And I resisted it. I said, "What do I need with a rabbi? What do I need with a man so much older than I am? I don't want to meet him." Well, I always had lousy judgment when it came to men. And thank God that Roz was persistent. Because I came to realize very early on that if I could have just 10 good years with this man, it would be worth 40 years with any other man. And 10 good years of marriage plus one month is exactly what we had. When we announced our engagement, some of Marc's colleagues were a little bit distressed. He told me he had gotten comments

like "Georgette Bennett, Marc, Bennett, what kind of Jewish name is this? [28:00] Don't you think you're pushing this ecumenical stuff a little bit too far?" Well, there are lots of good Jews whose name is Bennett, including some of the founders of this particular synagogue. And when we got married what was confirmed for me was that I had married a man of extraordinary gentleness. The most wonderful humor. A kind of considerateness that you cannot imagine. An incredibly good-natured soul. Which I, by the way, am not. And he didn't seem to mind. He was my biggest fan. He supported all my strivings, whether it was the writing of my last book, or whether it was a career that I had started in banking, [29:00] or whether it was pursuing another graduate degree which I needed like a hole in the head. And he was such a great companion. I loved his companionship so much. I'm a very early riser. So 4:30 in the morning is not unusual. And we would have the most marvelous conversations at 4:30 in the morning. And I think the reason that we could have these marvelous conversations, at any time of the day or night, is that we were always so interesting to each other. Especially he to me. I definitely got the better of this deal. We each brought different things to the relationship. He brought the popes and the presidents and the pedagogues and I brought the cops and the criminals and the corporate executives. And Marc was steeped in the moral certainty that comes [30:00] with a doctor of divinity

degree, and I was steeped in the cultural relativism that's the hallmark of a PhD in social science. So there was always fresh input. Marc was always very concerned about how his rabbinic status might affect my career. Which at that time was in broadcasting and crime. I won't try to explain the relationship to you. He felt that most people felt uncomfortable in the presence of clergy. And that I being saddled with him for a husband -- saddled with him. Can you imagine this? -- might encumber me as I moved through my world. And I on the other hand was very concerned that my freewheeling maverick style might not be fully acceptable to my husband's more sedate cronies. But it's turned out that [31:00] the world is a lot more tolerant of both criminologists and clerics than either of us thought. So despite our disparate professional lives, we had opened rather than shut doors for each other. And then what can I say about the sharing? I've never experienced such sharing with another human being. And it didn't have to be fancy stuff. We got a great kick out of going to the supermarket and going shopping or sitting and eating in front of the table we had in front of the kitchen window with a great view. Or just taking a little bit of a walk. Everything was so deeply shared. And finally, the rediscovering of a religious heritage with a man who was neither narrow-minded nor doctrinaire became a great source of enrichment. [32:00] Because he guided me past the surface

rituals to the wisdom and the meaning that was buried within them. Now I wasn't prepared to be a rebbetzin. I was prepared to marry a doctor or a lawyer, maybe even a police chief. But what did I know from being a rebbetzin? So I made my mistakes. I remember that our first Hanukkah together Marc had to leave on one of his many trips on the fifth night. So I lit the candles by myself that night. And I lit them. And they went out after 10 minutes, because these candles are really not as hardy as the oil lamps of the First Temple, you see. They just don't last as long. And so I put in a whole second set and lit them again.

[33:00] And Marc called me from overseas. And I told him with great pride about what I had done to keep the flame going, and he just roared with laughter and said, "Well, that's a bit irregular, but I understand what the sentiment was." And then on the High Holy Days for the past ten years -- so many of you are here from the congregation where he conducted services, Sutton Place Synagogue. And I had such a great sense of the continuity of generations because Marc would always wear my father's tallis while he conducted those services. My father's tallis which had survived the Holocaust but had gone untouched in the 30 years after my father died. Problem was that my father's tallis was one of these great Eastern European tallises that you are supposed to drape [34:00] over the shoulders completely differently than the ones that most people wear. He never wore

that tallis right. And it was always crooked. So I'd be sitting there in the congregation signaling him like this to straighten it out. Did you know that, those of you from Sutton Place? I would always be going like this. So he'd straighten out the tallis. But above all, Marc became my greatest motivation. Because he was so responsive. There was nothing that he didn't appreciate. So I would do things just to look forward to his response. Going to the office every day after he retired so that I would be the one leaving for the office, he would be the one staying at home. He would always say to me, "You look so pretty. You look so pretty. You look like you just stepped out of a bandbox." [35:00] Or when I would find special sinless versions of the foods that he loved to eat but wasn't allowed to eat anymore. He would be so excited when we found a way -- with [Martha's?] help, who's here -- to do fat-free lasagna with ground turkey instead of the usual stuff. He was just so responsive. Or even when I wanted to -- when I started studying Talmud. And I would be so excited after my classes. And I'd want to come and discuss with him what I had done in class that day. There was nothing that he didn't appreciate. There was nothing that he wasn't responsive about. That doesn't mean we had a perfect marriage. We sure didn't. And the most toxic issue between us was his study. [36:00] Because what you had here was a person who was compulsively neat, namely me, and a person who

was a compulsive collector, namely Marc. He had this combination of a Depression era mentality where he couldn't throw anything out, and the life of ideas where he couldn't part with a single scrap of information. That's a fatal combination. And after he had become ill, I decided that I would give him an incentive to live. I said, "Marc, you better live, because the minute you die, I'm going to wrap you in the newspapers in that study like the Friday herring that your mother used to buy. And then I'm going to burn the study down." And apparently he took me very seriously, because [37:00] he willed his library to the Jewish Theological Seminary and his files to Hebrew Union College. Ergo I can't touch them. Then there came the time in 1988 when Marc suffered a cardiac arrest. And I'm told by his cardiologist, who is here with us, that only 25% of the people who experience a cardiac arrest survive. And an even smaller percentage survive a year after an arrest. So we had four years of found time, and in those four years Marc battled for his life and his health so valiantly. He was so patient. He was so uncomplaining. I could never understand that. Because I'm the opposite way. [38:00] I find complaining very therapeutic and I do it all the time. He never complained. And he went through so much. And he was so good-natured about his restricted diets. And even so good-natured about giving up his cigars, which he loved. And two years later in October of 1990, he said to me, "You know, I keep

thinking I'll get better so that I can have a Hebrew National hot dog." And later in that same conversation he said, "We'll beat this. I want to stay around for as long as you want me. And when you tell me you're finished, I'm going into my room with two Hebrew National hot dogs and a Cuban cigar, and that'll be the end of it. And I'll set my room on fire." You see, he was always so concerned that I was being cheated by his illness.

[39:00] But I wasn't being cheated. Not for a minute. And then the ultimate statement of optimism. We decided that we would have a child. Now we were both much too old to think of having children. So we kind of figured we'd just make our own grandchild instead. And that baby has been especially active since Marc's death. And I have a very empirical mindset. I was trained as a scientist. So I find it very hard to believe in comforting fantasies. But maybe this baby wants me to know that he's there. It's almost as if the father has come back to live through the son. I know that funerals are not a [40:00] place to name a baby. But years from now when our son listens to the tape of this funeral -- because the only way unfortunately that he is ever going to know his father is through videotapes and audiotapes and a stack of press clippings -- but I want him to know that here he was connected to his father, and that his father very carefully helped to choose his name long before he was born. I've made only one change in the name that Marc and I

chose together. And that's the middle name, because we were originally going to name our son -- his middle name [Akiva?] after Marc's late brother. But I'm going to have to leave the passing of his late brother's name on to [41:00] the other members of Marc's family, the younger generation. So I made only one change in the middle name. And our son's name is Joshua-Marc Bennett Tanenbaum. Yehoshua Mordechai Ben Mordechai. I don't want to end this eulogy on a tragic note. So I want to end it by reading to you from a column that I wrote in 1988 which I called "In Praise of Older Men" because I think it summarizes everything that I feel about Marc. And I think it summarizes our marriage. And I think it summarizes the themes that I've tried to convey in this eulogy. [42:00]

Before I met my mate, whom I cherish as one of the world's special people, I had vowed to avoid serious involvement with an older man. In my mid-thirties with my biological clock winding down, I wanted someone with whom I could raise a family. And to my mind an intramarital generation gap signaled decay, death, and ultimately aloneness. But the love I found with my older man was so special that whatever good years lay ahead seemed worth it. I would prefer for my husband to be young enough for us to grow old together. Yet the awareness of a foreshortened future adds a special intensity to the time we do have. When we build a

salad, take a walk, or plan a vacation, the mundane becomes precious. [43:00] Stored in my memory bank for later retrieval. When we argue, we feel hurt, frustration and bitterness. But we avoid indulging in the destructiveness that only relationships with time to waste can afford. Instead we put temporal boundaries around our difficult periods which we do not allow ourselves to cross. For the most part there's a great deal of silliness and giddiness in our time together. A delightful contrast to the sober public image that is so much a part of my husband's work. Bikini underwear, sleek swim trunks, and tapered Italian suits were never part of his self-concept. Yet he seems to have adjusted quite well. We each experienced some culture shock as his Depression era cautiousness merged with my '60s free-spiritedness. He had always been a family man and I had languished too long [44:00] between marriages in the social anarchy of the singles scene. Still, his maturity and my relative youth complement each other. He acts as a brake on my flamboyance and I act as a release on his restraint. While I learn to temper my language and mothball my jaunty red fez with the black feather hanging down, my husband works on his disco dancing. If I cow him with some of my fancier bumps and grinds, he good-naturedly taps out the rhythm and claps. When he's in his study and hears shrieks of delight from the bedroom where I'm watching a rebroadcast of an olden goldies or Elvis Presley

special, he gallantly gets into the spirit of the occasion, even though Bobby Rydell and the Beach Boys are no part of his nostalgia store. Our life together is chronicled in overflowing photo albums, taped international phone messages, and spontaneous love notes. [45:00] My favorite memento is a shopping list I once took to the supermarket. It wasn't until I wheeled my cart down the produce aisle that I noticed the "I love you" my husband had scribbled between the ginger ale and the skim milk. I save such things because it's likely that memories are all that will remain of him for a substantial part of my life. But there are compensations.

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