

VT-854 Transcription

Unedited interview regarding world refugees, world hunger and
other international topics. 29 August 1984.

MARC TANENBAUM: -- [00:00] for a strong defense. We've reached the point now where we literally can commit nuclear suicide. And I think the Holy Father has made extraordinary contribution by constantly raising that issue, of the need of trying to bring about some sanity and control of that. There are vast problems of world refugees, 12 million refugees in the world, problems with world hunger. There's an enormous amount of work to do. And I believe that Catholics and Jews, by virtue of their faith as well as their traditions, their feeling of community, has especial leadership roles to play in helping the human family reduce human suffering and uphold the dignity of life in very real ways.

Q: You've brought up a lot of issues there. One is what is the church-state [01:00] relationship? You know, the Holy Father has spoken up recently against priests, per se, being in political offices and having political influence. How do you see religious people influencing public policy or not influencing public policy?

TANENBAUM: Well, that's a complicated issue. And clearly I'm not going to get into a conflict that is internal to the Catholic community. I've got enough problem with Jews, without getting involved in internal Catholic problems. But I understand some of the moral ambiguities that Catholic friends raise in this country. And I think it is for Catholics themselves to sort these out. There is the sense, and I thank God for that, that Pope John Paul II, whom I had the privilege to meet two years ago -- is an extraordinary giant of a man intellectually, morally, spiritually, deeply concerned about Poland. And I think, in some ways, many priests around the world saw that as a model of becoming [02:00] involved in the political life of a country. However you define a moral ambience of impact, his consequence is political. And I understand many Catholics feel that taking similar moral positions can have those kinds of practical consequences for them -- Latin America and elsewhere. But I am concerned about religious groups, including the Jewish community, constituting itself religiously as a power block. There's a very big price paid for a religious community to become simply another power block. Power corrupts. "Power poisons the world," William James wrote. I believe the role of religious leadership, at its best, essentially is the model of what Cardinal

Bernadin and the Catholic bishops have done on the nuclear freeze issue, nuclear disarmament. They have not organized themselves as a political block and gone out, as the Moral Majority has, with a scorecard, [03:00] saying that, "We will knock out of -- out of office if you don't do it our way." But rather they have raised the moral issues for a very great national debate. Understand what are the facts, first of all, about the present state of nuclear confrontation. What are the alternative options in trying to contain that, to try to move back from the possibility of a nuclear holocaust, nuclear winter? And by raising that debate, they have served as a judge of the conscience of the nation. And they have pressed moral issues in ways that are altogether appropriate for religious leaders to press. The political consequences of that can be even more decisive than if they organize themselves as a political block pressing for legislation of a specific kind. And my own sense is that religious leadership being clear about its role on issues of morality and conscience and [04:00] mobilizing the moral will of a society can be far more effective than if they provide an economic blueprint on how to organize a society.

Q: OK. You're speaking today to one of the largest Jewish women's organization.

TANENBAUM: They're dynamite! Hadassah's a dynamite organization!

Q: Well, I want to ask you. Ho--?

TANENBAUM: The best compliment I could pay is I wish there were a Catholic Hadassah movement. You'd be terrific.

Q: (laughs) I wanted to ask you what influence has this organization -- or has women made in the Jewish faith and affected Jewish religion, the direction of Jewish priorities?

TANENBAUM: Well, the Hadassah women are one of the most extraordinary examples of what it means to really serve, to love and care, have compassion for [05:00] people who are suffering, in need, hurting, without preaching about it. Their motto for their present convention is a very profound biblical motto. When the Lord gave the Ten Commandments through Moses to Israel, the response of the Jewish people was, "[*Masev anishma?*] -- we will do and then we will listen," as the first sense of obligation is to do something real, to carry out righteous deeds in this world, to help relieve suffering, to help restore life, or dignity to life, preserve life, to help people in need everywhere. I've just read, for example, while Hadassah was organized to deal mainly with helping the suffering Jews of the world who came to Israel, from Russia, from -- the Falashas, the

black Jews of Ethiopia, Jews from many parts of the world, fleeing persecution, [06:00] that they have been undertaking all kinds of healing, in the most advanced technological ways, for people who are not Christians, Muslims, from Arab countries, people from Asia, from Africa. I've even heard rumors that kings from Arab countries, quietly, have gotten Hadassah medical care, wouldn't dare tell their people about it. But Hadassah has become a very powerful symbol for the Jewish people of the prophetic presence in the world, to help the widow, as Isaiah said, to care for the orphan, the naked, the hungry, to heal the afflicted. And they're an inspiration for the whole Jewish people. I think they're an inspiration for women everywhere who would want to take the time to study how women, in a volunteer way, give of themselves, endlessly, constantly renew themselves, empty themselves out in service to these great human causes.

Q: [07:00] I'd like to get to the problem of world hunger, from your many travels. Do you think world hunger can be eliminated? And if it can, why hasn't it?

TANENBAUM: Good question, and vital question, which ought not to let anybody of conscience sleep at night. If one reads the studies of the Overseas Development Council or UNICEF or the Food and Agriculture Administration, the

technology is there, literally, to feed every human being on the earth today. There's enough technological capacity, in terms of agricultural know-how, to produce enough food - - fish protein -- to remove the scourge of protein malnutrition and other forms of hunger. What is really scandalous is that the nations of the world, its so-called civilized leaders, last year, 1983, alone spent \$600 billion on nuclear arms and an arms transfer, arms weaponry and somehow couldn't find the money to help meet the human needs of suffering, starving people. There are an estimated 400 million people who go to bed starving every night. I had lunch not too long ago with Dr. James Grant, president of UNICEF, which was set up by the UN to meet the needs of children around the world. He had just come back from a mission to 60 of the least developed countries around the world and flat out, in his survey, told me that literally every day, every single day, including this day, 25,000 to 35,000 children die because of hunger. So there's something insane happening in the world. We find it possible to raise money to increase military budgets for \$600 billion for weapons of death [09:00] and destruction and somehow we can't find the resources to help stave off this incredible destruction of human life. And somewhere, the leadership has got to come. Thank God, religious groups increasingly

have helping to raise those issues and themselves are doing many things to help save lives. But it's going to take a far more dramatic response to these needs, if talking about the dignity of life is not simply a piety. If you really care about life, something must be done to put an end to this incredible human disaster that goes on day in and day out. The human family cannot call itself sane, rational, civilized as long as that kind of contradiction persists.

Q: OK. Now we're going to get into some touchy areas here, linking the hung--

TANENBAUM: These were safe.

Q: (laughs) Well, not safe but... But you link the hunger problem [10:00] with the nuclear armaments and the build-up.

TANENBAUM: Armaments generally, I think the arms build-up generally, throughout the world.

Q: The United States is a vast producer of nuclear arms and military arms. Israel is a great buyer of arms. As a religious leader in Jewish faith, where's your stand with this kind of situation? How are you exerting moral influence in this area?

TANENBAUM: Well, I really have no problem with one aspect of this. From a moral, theological point of view, a nation not only has a right, it has a duty to defend itself. The

question then has to do with the definition of terms of what constitutes defense. I believe that the United States has not only a right but a moral duty to be strong [11:00] in terms of its national defense. I have been involved in problems of world refugees. I've traveled to Southeast Asia. I have been to the borders of Kampuchea. I've been to the borders of Vietnam. I have seen what Soviet communist totalitarianism has done to the dignity of human life. And I tell you that, if the Western constitutional democracies, of whom there are no more than 19... Out of a map of the world of 160-some countries, there are only 19 countries left that uphold human rights and civil and political liberties. There's an obligation to strengthen constitutional democracies in many parts of the world. So there's need for a strong defense. The issue is when that strong defense becomes so obsessive that people begin making decisions about producing armaments that may not be necessary. We have got a Pentagon that [12:00] begins creating programs simply out of sustaining its fiscal power, rather than meeting its basic defense needs. You have incredible wastefulness that goes on. And you read now, in revelations, of purchasing policies in the Defense Department where, to buy a screw or a lock that normally would cost, in a hardware store, \$9, they'll spend \$4,000.

There's something obscene about that. And that's just -- is a minor revelation what is happening. There are probably billions of dollars wasted by the Defense Department for that kind of absurd failure in management, not to speak of other weaponry, which it needs for the sake of all kinds of macho, showcase needs. We have now the capacity, by all nuclear experts... I had a conference several years ago in Harvard -- [13:00] even several years ago. The United States and the Soviet Union alone now have the capacity, if they do not add another singular missile to their silos, to destroy the world 15 times over. How much more overkill does one need? So the emphasis must be, from my point of view, on a double-level strategy, namely, on the one hand, maintain strength to deter Soviet aggression and other revolutionary forms of aggression, where human liberties are absolutely wiped out -- I've seen enough of that to know that it's real and no-- and not simply right-wing rhetoric -- while doing that, to press the governments of the world, including the Soviet Union and East European nations, to begin to carry out disarmament, universal simultaneous disarmament, while there's still time. And hopefully... I recently was in Hungary and met with some people. There are some people now, in Romania and East European bloc countries, they're beginning to realize,

including Christian leaders, that they think that we're at the 11th hour [14:00] and that something's got to be done. The difficulty in the Soviet Union is there's a peace movement. And every time they raise their head, they're thrown into jail and psychiatric hospitals. Nevertheless, one must continue to press to bring about that kind of -- that kind of dialog and movement, so that crazy things don't happen.

Q: What is your...?

TANENBAUM: Well, you asked me about Israel too. So I don't want to walk away from that. Israel is, in an analogous sense, the same situation as the United States. If you go into the Middle East, if you will sit with Arab leaders... And I've sat with PLO leaders, in London, several years ago, who came, ostensibly as Arab Christian theologians, to a meeting of the World Council of Churches. We sat up all night talking, talking about peace, what they were prepared to do to sit at the table, to recognize Israel's legitimacy and to move toward negotiated settlement. They gave nothing. They came instructed two days before. [15:00] They met with Arafat. Nothing. Their policy was, as in their Palestinian constitution, the destruction of the state of Israel. Well, when you have people who not only talk that way, put it in their official constitution but train

thousands of people to use hand grenades, bombs to blow up stores, hospitals, buses, to kill children, to kill tourists, then you're dealing with a real threat to your survival. Israel has not only a right but a moral duty to defend itself. There is no moral success, no moral glory in committing suicide! And people who ask Israel to disarm alone, in the face of what is happening in the Middle East... We've just completed a study of what is happening with arms transfers in the Middle East. Israel now, for the first time since its founding, is on the lower receiving edge of armaments than all of the other Arab countries. It is now the mass of armaments that are coming into Saudi [16:00] Arabia, Kuwait, Jordan, Syria, Iraq, from the Soviet Union and from Libya. The balance has begun to tip. And that's my concern, not that Israel has too many arms but that Israel's... And all that Israel has to do once is lose one war because of a lack of arms and, God forbid, it's *finito*. You know, we'll have big memorial meetings, "Poor, poor Israel." Israel can't afford that kind of sentiment. It must be strong and defend itself -- while it reaches out for peaceful negotiations with the Arabs and for the Palestinians. I'm going to Israel shortly and I hope, with whatever government that emerges, we will

continue talks to try to encourage those kinds of negotiations and dialogs leading to a peaceful settlement.

Q: So there are these kinds of dialogs going on.

TANENBAUM: There is a great deal of conversation going on, much of it beneath the surface of headlines. But there are people now in both communities, Arab communities, Palestinian communities, who know that -- who know that this present [17:00] path is a disaster for all of them. Egypt has incredible problems. Why has Egypt retained peace now for 11 years? Egypt has one of the largest population problems in the world. They have a deficit, annual deficit of \$7 billion. They can't feed their own people. If the United S--

(break in video)

__: OK.

TANENBAUM: I was wondering how Catholic friends reacted to it.

Q: Just--

TANENBAUM: I served as a consultant for CBS, when... I thought it was a terrific film. But Catholic friends, for some reason, had reactions against...

__: I thought it was...

TANENBAUM: Icky?

___: Yeah. I mean, what I saw. And again, I walked out on it, because I wasn't that...

TANENBAUM: I thought Albert Finney was, you know, reason-- But I understand a lot of people were unhappy that Finney...

___: It wasn't him, was just the whole storyline. But again, I didn't see the whole thing.

Q: OK. We were talking about the groups --

TANENBAUM: And tal--

Q: -- that are talking dialog over in Israel. [18:00] OK. Is there anything more you want to say on that or...?

TANENBAUM: Well, my hope is that, as a new government is established in Israel, which I would hope would be a unity government of the major political parties, which would give them the strength to deal with their economic problems -- but also would give them the strength to negotiate with other countries. And hopefully Jordan will come to the peace table and begin negotiation. I think that's one of the real options that are open. And I know that every Israeli, from every political spectrum I've talked to, is eager for peace and eager to negotiate. The problem is there haven't been any Arabs who have had the courage, as Sadat had, to sit down at the table to negotiate. We can

only hope and pray that that will be next stage in the unfolding Middle East conflict.

Q: In your travels, you've just come back from South America. And what's your feelings about what's happening in South American and Central [19:00] America?

TANENBAUM: Well, it's a very large subject. And the important thing, for me, is that... I regret, and this is a personal impression, that Americans hardly begin to know what Central America is really about and what Latin America is really about. Our em-- And I must say, this is my own confession of failure. Before I went to Latin America -- this was my first trip to Latin America -- my images of Brazil, for example, were the Amazon jungle, riotous *carnaval* in Rio, coffee beans, sambas, and favelas. And you come to a country and it's mind-boggling to check out the reality of a country. First of all, Brazil alone is half the size of the continent. It's a country which is exploding with economic, [20:00] industrial development. It's a country filled with opportunities, of new frontiers, Wild West for resettlement and growth and development. It's a country with a city like San Paolo, which has 11 million people, which is as powerful in its industrial concentration as New York or any other major cities. And the same thing happens in Buenos Aires. You walk through

Bue-- I could not believe I was in South America. I felt I was in Paris or Madrid or Rome. It is it that European a city. So that, first of all, to close the gap between these images, these stereotypes and the complex, diverse reality that's going on -- and then the real needs that are taking place -- and the difference in every country. Every country has a different set of problems, a different set of needs. So one cannot generalize, without doing violence to truth, about Latin America, or Central America. One must really enter into every one of those situations. Having said that, I will now proceed to violate my caution, which is to say that it is clear to me that the greatest needs in Central America and Latin America generally are the profound economic needs of those societies, profound economic injustices of those societies, as well as the political, ideological problems, which differ from country to country. And if the United States and the Western world and other concerned countries that care about constitutional democracy continue to neglect the economic needs in those societies, they will allow the vacuums to be created which the Sandinistas and the Marxist-Leninists will continue to exploit. In a certain sense, they are our creation. If we go into countries simply for the sake of our own economic benefit and don't pay attention to the problems of

unemployment, housing, disease, [22:00] education, illiteracy, then you lay the groundwork for people who come in with their messianic proselytizing to try to win over that society. And millions of people lose their lives as a result of that destruction. Then I came back and met with members of the State Department. My recommendations, for whatever they're worth... I'm not Henry Kissinger and don't pretend to be that kind of geopolitical specialist. But just what I came out of is, on the one hand, I think it is important to try to press the existing governments, with whom we have relationships, to uphold human rights, to curb the death squads where right-wing governments are in power and allow them to go berserk, at the same time to have a massive program of economic, social aid for the vast human problems that exist in every one of those countries. Ultimately that will be the best payoff, if one must think in those commercial terms, [23:00] for the United States, as well as for the international community. But it simply breaks your heart to go into a country that is thriving, as Brazil is, and to see the favelas outside Rio and people living on the -- on the level of animals -- and somehow not to see some connection between what is happening in Brasília and the economic policies there. Brazil, incidentally, is the fifth largest arms exporter in the

world. We talked about arms export. Brazil's largest clients are Saudi Arabia and Iraq. They signed some massive agreements while I was there. Well, you can't meet the needs of the people in the favelas by building a major part of your whole economic program on a high-technology arms industry. There are a vast level of human needs in terms of land reform, in terms of -- in terms of education, community [24:00] organization, which have to be met. And thank God, there are -- especially Catholic friends there, the [Marinols?], among others, an order out of the -- Cardinal Cushing organized the Order of St. James -- I think, among others, who have been there. And I must say that I took very great heart. I went, in San Paolo, to a hospital called the Albert Einstein Hospital. It was built by the small Jewish community of San Paolo, Brazil. They have a whole floor on that hospital which is devoted entirely to the poor people of the favelas. And every day dozens of people are brought in with great sicknesses and illness and all kinds of diseases and they're taken care of free. And there's a child's clinic to take care of children, to break them out of a vise. And no big speeches are made and no big publicity. This is what they think the good Jews do, help save lives, help heal. [25:00] And between what religious leadership and those communities are

doing, in those practical ways -- I believe is the wave of the future. Some big governments will catch up with the prophetic presence of religious leadership in those countries. That's the way we must go.

Q: Uh-huh. What's your opinion of the Sanctuary Movement here in the United States?

TANENBAUM: Well, I know there are all kinds of legal questions raised about appropriateness. I have to say, for myself... I speak out of my own Jewish experience. I know what happened to Jewish refugees in the face of the destruction of Jewish lives by the Nazis, when Jews were looking for such sanctuary, all over the world, and all they got anyplace, most of the countries of the world, and, I must say, the United States as well, was that classic response, "Sorry, there's no room at the inn." Thousands and thousands of Jews died because people had all kinds of legal [26:00] reasons why they could not be accepted, be given first asylum, to save their lives. So that while I would want to honor all the basic legal questions that are involved, when I see suffering human beings, I fall back on a very profound sentiment that I hold, namely, societies, states exist for the sake of the people, people do not exist for the sake of the state. And the society, then, has an obligation to find a way to so bend its laws, so

interpret its laws to make it possible to save lives.

That's the first obligation. Afterward, we'll work out all of the juridical niceties.

Q: You speak about having the moral will and the moral determination to feed the hungry, clothe the naked. I'd like to get into the area of spirituality, of Jewish spirituality. What can nourish moral will and determinism in our world today?

TANENBAUM: [27:00] I think it's profoundly important to have constant connection with one's spiritual taproots. You cannot have a cut-flower morality. That is, there are people who come out of religious traditions and don't continue their attachment to the life of the church or the life of the synagogue and take out only its ethical teachings. They'll say, "I'm a good Christian," "I'm a good Jew, because I help people." That becomes like cut flowers. They're beautiful while they're in a vase but they'll last three days. And if there's no nourishment with their roots, deep in the ground, constant replenishing spiritually, after a while they give out. And I think it is important for all of us to realize... I know, for myself, the kind of efforts I try to be engaged in, [28:00] especially with our young people. You don't have to be in a synagogue. I work with university kids who gather together in a room. And the

first thing we do is study a sacred text. What does the Talmud, what do the rabbis teach about our obligations in charity, *tzedakah*? What are our obligations in relation to the homeless, whom there are now perhaps more than three million in the United States? And then, after studying the sacred texts, being clear about what the tradition has to say to us, in very sharp, profound ways, then we'll pray together. We'll hold hands and we will pray, in our traditional prayers, within which there are enormous moral, spiritual affirmations of responsibility for the welfare of others. And then, after prayer, then we act, then organize taskforces to go into a community to help [29:00] bring homeless people off the street, some of them who are dying in the midst of New York City, under these incredible skyscraper buildings. So those, I have found, have been the three elements of this kind of spirituality. Study is knowledge of the word of the Lord and the will of the tradition for your people. To pray, to intensify the spirituality and the consciousness of what one's life is about, the meaning of one's life, the purpose of one's existence. And then none of that is complete unless it acts out in the real world, in deeds of what we call in Jewish tradition *mitzvot*, religious deeds, righteous acts to help save life, ennoble human life. And that spirituality has, I

think, probably sustained me, I know, over the greater part of my career. It has not been easy working in ecumenism, Jewish-Christian relations, over the past 30 years. [30:00]

The forces against wanting to see growth and progress in those relationships have been massive, much of it political, ideological, some of it quite theological, traditional. And sometimes I used to feel like Sisyphus. You know, you're pushing the rock up the top of the mountain, you think you've gotten to the top, and then, bang, you drop down again. Somebody knocks you over the hill. But you keep pushing. What I think has sustained me has been several things, one of which has been this very deep life rooted in Jewish piety, Jewish faith, Jewish spirituality, and also the experience of growing numbers of Christian friends, whom I have come to love as brothers and sisters, people to whom I would entrust the life of my children, as much as I would to any Jewish member. And that growing circle of a kind of community of conscience, where we deeply understand each other... [31:00] And sometimes my understanding with Christians is greater than some of my understanding with Jews with whom I don't share the same worldview. There's a deep sense of being bound together by these common affirmations, these common hopes -- I think is probably what has kept me sane, if I am sane, in the kind

of world which frequently looks absurd and mad, crazy. And you have to somehow make sense out of it. And that's what I see the whole tradition doing, imposing order, finding sense, finding meaning in what can be an absolutely absurd reality to cope with, some of which we've talked about.

Q: Thank you.

TANENBAUM: Thank you.

___: Thank you. That was [a really good ending?].

(laughter)

TANENBAUM: Oh... [32:00]

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