

# Rabbi's concern for '80s: refugees and hungry persons

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An American Jewish leader, speaking to Mobile Christians and Jews, said a major concern of his in this decade and beyond is for homeless and hungry persons throughout the world.

**SPEAKING TO** participants in the Mobile Area Jewish-Christian Dialogue at the local Jewish Community Center was Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum, inter-religious affairs director for the New York-based American Jewish Committee, an organization founded in 1906 primarily in reaction to anti-Semitic outbreaks in Russia. Since then the organization has been involved in programs of education and civic action against all forms of discrimination and prejudice in this country and abroad.

Tanenbaum said that in a discussion he had with Jerry Falwell, head of Moral Majority, a national, conservative Christian movement based in Lynchburg, Va., Falwell listed as the major American issues "prayer in the public schools, tax credits, no Medicaid for abortions for welfare mothers."

**THE RABBI** presented his own view: "Those are very important issues, and they need to be discussed with moderation and seriousness, but when you list as the major issues for America those concerns, and there is no consciousness of the magnitude of human suffering taking place in the world, then one is engaged in a virtual obscenity.

"I would suggest to you that what Jews and Christians have stood for across 2 millennia in our lives, not just in our pieties and liturgical formulae, is the affirmation of the value of human life, the building up of a whole generation of people who understand that this is not a casual phrase, but is the very key to the survival of the human family."

**HE SAID** Jews and Christians must be aware "of the preciousness of the life of every human being, of the responsibility of being present to people who hurt and suffer."

Christians and Jews, said the rabbi, have cooperated in world hunger and refugee programs. "Christians and Jews faithful to their traditions and ideals literally have changed the course of human history."

**TANENBAUM TOLD** his audience two stories about human suffering which he described as "life-shaping modern parables" in his own life.

The first story was based on an experience of his in February 1978 when he was a member of a fact-finding team sent to Southeast Asia by the American government.

The Vietnam War had ended, and the communists had defeated South Vietnam and taken control of it. South and North Vietnam had been unified into a single nation.

**THE COMMUNIST** government had begun transferring large numbers of people from cities to farm areas to increase farm production. In 1978 urban people of both Vietnamese and Chinese ancestry in Vietnam were fleeing by the thousands for various reasons, including the fact that the government was ordering them to become farmers.

**IN JAKARTA**, Indonesia, Tanenbaum went aboard "a battered boat" in which sat a Vietnamese man, his wife and eight children, his brother and his brother's wife.

The Vietnamese man "told me this story, which is the parable for our time, the parable for Jews and Christians and others," said the rabbi.

The man, a Roman Catholic, had been a high school teacher in a Catholic mission school in Saigon. "His family had lived in Saigon for centuries. They were urban dwellers."

**ABRUPTLY THE** man was told by soldiers that on the next day he would "go out to the rural collective center, where you are to be re-educated."

Said the Vietnamese man to the rabbi, "I suddenly felt as if my whole identification as a person, my whole dignity as a human being was taken away from me.

"No one asked me what I wanted, where I came from, what I wanted for my children. My freedom was being taken away from me."

**THE FAMILY** escaped during the night in "a battered and frail boat" acquired with the family's entire life savings.

In the South China Sea, the family "tried to land in three countries, great fellow countries of the Third World, and they pushed us back," according to the head of the family.

He said that by the third week his family was without water or food. "We began drinking sea water and eating seaweed.

"Our children began to become deathly ill. Their bodies raged with fever. They could not sleep at night, screaming with terror."

**THE MAN TOLD** the rabbi, "There was something worse than the hunger." The family counted 23 cargo ships filled with economic supplies going to Singapore.

The ship crews either ignored or laughed at the man who was waving a white flag.

"We suddenly began to realize that was hopeless. We would not be picked up. All we now hoped for was that we would get some water, a bag of rice so we could make it to some island off Indonesia, somewhere we could finally rest our bodies, put our lives together."

According to the rabbi, the Vietnamese man, "seized by a passion, turned to me and said, 'When I was in Catholic mission school, our teacher said something to us about the Jews in Nazi Germany in the 1930s.

"I never really understood what that was all about. I now know what it must have been like to have been a Jewish person living in Germany in 1938-1939.

"There is something worse than physical pain, hunger. It is the knowledge that you have been abandoned by the world, the knowledge that human life has become worthless. My children mean no more to the world than that flotsam there in the sea."

**ENTERING HIS** second story, the rabbi said, "I suddenly found my consciousness flooded with an image of 1939."

In that year a ship named the St. Louis left Germany with 960 Jewish men, women and children aboard. They were fleeing the Nazi Holocaust.

Each person aboard had paid thousands of dollars to a representative of the Cuban government for a landing immigration certificate "as assurance that when he would come to Cuba he would finally find aid and an end to the possibility of destruction."

**AS BACK-UP** security, 700 of those aboard the ship had acquired immigration quota numbers "which would have enabled them to land in the United States if something were to fail in Cuba."

In the harbor of Havan, Cuba, the Jews were told by government representatives they would not be allowed to land unless they produced \$1 million by the next day.

**THE SHIP** captain, a Dutch Christian who had seen himself as being on a mission of mercy, "was beside himself," said Tanenbaum.

The captain notified the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, a relief agency, about the plight of his ship's passengers. The Jewish committee's appeals to then Cuban President Federico Laredo Bru were in vain.

The Jewish relief agency sought help for the ship's passengers in every Latin American country to no avail.

**THE SHIP** "hung around for a day or two" outside Miami.

Cordell Hull, then U.S. secretary of State, said, "We have determined we will not interfere with the internal affairs of Nazi Germany."

Eventually the refugees were taken in by England, France and the Netherlands. Most were killed in Nazi death chambers when "the Nazis made their sweep into the Lowlands."

**AFTER ATTENDING** a 1939 rally of Jews in New York City, the then young Tanenbaum felt frustration that words were being spoken but "nothing was happening that would help save lives."

In a "life-changing experience," he said he determined to do whatever possible "to stand against an epidemic of dehumanization in the world." He committed himself to joining others in trying "to put an end to that cycle of indifference and spectatorship."

Said the rabbi, "I am persuaded that this is a parable for our times. It is a central moral, human, spiritual challenge to Jews and Christians and other people of conscience, but particularly to Jews and Christians who take seriously their commitment to the Torah and to the Gospels."