

SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORY

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Film Review

Shared Legacies: The African American–Jewish Civil Rights Alliance.

Directed and produced by Shari Rogers. Spill the Honey Productions, 2020.
96 minutes.

NOTE: This review is based on the version of Shared Legacies that screened at the Atlanta Jewish Film Festival on February 10, 2020. In light of recent events, the film’s director and producer plan to revise it to reflect today’s ongoing social unrest.

Despite a torrent of rain slashing Atlanta’s streets, droves of people from across the sprawling metropolis attended the Atlanta Jewish Film Festival’s (AJFF) opening night gala and the worldwide premier of this year’s lead film, *Shared Legacies: The African American–Jewish Civil Rights Alliance*, at the Cobb Energy Performing Arts Centre on February, 10, 2020.

Over the past two decades, AJFF has become the largest Jewish film festival in the world, with tens of thousands of annual attendees, and a packed house helped celebrate its twentieth anniversary. Immediately before the film’s debut, Peter Yarrow set the mood in leading a rendition of “Blowing in the Wind” with a joint choir from The Temple and Ebenezer Baptist Church. At the center of the festivities was the Atlanta regional office of the American Jewish Committee, the driving force behind both the creation of the Atlanta Jewish Film Festival and the Atlanta Black-Jewish Coalition. The backdrop only heightened the evening’s exuberant celebration of the unique relationship American

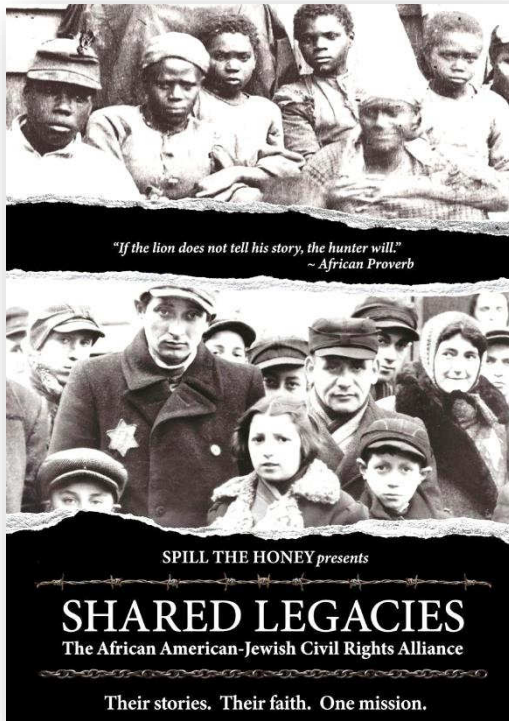
blacks and Jews share, especially in the cradle of the civil rights movement.

Dr. Shari Rogers, director and producer of *Shared Legacies*, collected a veritable who's who of civil rights and social justice veterans, path-breaking rabbis and ministers, as well as the lieutenants and foot soldiers who shaped modern American history, both in the film and panel discussion on stage after the screening. The film deftly captures interviewees in uniquely familiar settings—the living room sofa, the dining room table, the pew bench in houses of worship—and weaves Talmudic-like conversations recounting singular moments and events in the struggle to achieve full citizenship.

Throughout the feature-length documentary, Rogers curates past and present interviews as well as archival footage of the civil rights movement, the Holocaust, and other places and eras to construct a metanarrative about the intimacy these two communities formed amid shared suffering. Within this framework, Rogers achieves something remarkable. She transforms historical giants who captured the nation's and world's imaginations—Martin Luther King, Jr., of course, as well as Andrew Young, Julian Bond, Rabbis Abraham Joshua Heschel and Joachim Prinz, and many others—into complex yet life-sized figures illuminated by small acts of humanity.

From the very first scene of the film, Rogers demonstrates the intergenerational closeness of black-Jewish relations through an anecdote shared by Lonnie Branch. He recounts that as the only black student at his New Jersey high school, he was paired with the only Jewish person from his class, Carol, for ballroom dancing class. After losing touch many years later, he received a message from a woman named Esther, who recounted an identical experience during World War II. Confused and thinking he may have misremembered her name, he soon realized Esther was speaking about Branch's father, who vividly remembered this interaction.

In another poignant moment, Heschel's daughter, Susannah, a noted scholar, sits in a home that served as an organizing base in Selma prior to the five-day march to Montgomery. Paired with Clarence Jones, a civil rights lawyer and one of King's most important advisors, the screen pans through the altogether modest house, revealing walls cluttered with photographs, a homely fireplace, and countless other



ephemera from the period. Susannah Heschel describes how in the lead up to the third and final march attempt, it was like a civil rights sleepover. Rabbis, priests, and ministers gathered for this forward push toward securing voting rights. Before embarking on their fraught march, they prayed alongside one another like so many of God’s children.

And then come the Atlanta-focused narratives, where the inter-community coalitions and collaborations beautifully display magnanimity of spirit and courage of character despite the era’s turbulence and upheaval. The film masterfully touches on King’s awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964, his acceptance speech in December of that year, and the main Atlanta players who organized the city’s first integrated banquet that honored both King’s and Atlanta’s achievement. Or when Atlanta-born-and-bred Sherry Frank describes how her uncle

owned a clothing store downtown called Zimmerman's. As opposed to the prevailing custom, her uncle's policy allowed his African American patrons to try on clothes and use store credit. When her "Uncle Joe" passed away, Frank realized how much these small but genuine humanizing efforts meant to the individual patrons chafing against Jim Crow second-class citizenship when Reverend Martin Luther King, Sr.,—"Daddy King"—preached at his funeral, held at Congregation Shearith Israel.

For all Rogers's commendable efforts toward documenting black-Jewish intersectionality, the shared suffering, and the epic struggle for freedom and full citizenship that the film alludes to, it largely avoids how the camaraderie of such deeply connected communities unraveled in the past half-century. To better understand the beginnings of this fragmentation, one needs only analyze Atlanta following the civil rights movement and King's assassination in 1968. After World War II, national highways were expanded. White veterans attended college and qualified for federally backed mortgages through the GI Bill of Rights. Atlanta's city limits expanded, and suburbs started sprouting in every direction. Whites, including many Jews, who once lived in the city proper, started fleeing in ever-increasing numbers. The trickle became a flood after Atlanta's decision to voluntarily desegregate schools in the early 1960s. New synagogues and communal institutions sprang up to serve the far-flung community. The Black Power movement, restrictive quotas rather than affirmative action, and Andrew Young's meeting with Yasser Arafat in 1979 exacerbated the friction between the two minority groups.

At the same time, Jews and blacks were now competitors in the realm of the city's power politics. The rise of Maynard Jackson, Atlanta's first African American mayor, coincided with the reelection bid of its first Jewish mayor, Sam Massell. In a bitterly fought 1973 election, Massell's campaign published an advertisement on the front page of the *Atlanta Constitution* declaring that "Atlanta's Too Young to Die," a dire prediction that a black mayor would lead to the city's economic demise. Now, Jews had the resources needed to pivot towards the suburban American Dream while resting on their civil rights laurels. Scarred from Leo Frank's lynching and seemingly vindicated through their prior support of civil rights, Atlanta's Jews had done their duty. In place of familiarity derived from physical proximity, distance grew.

At one point in the film, Susannah Heschel quotes a Yiddish proverb with the moral: If you don't know what *pains* me, how can you *love* me? And this is the central question left unaddressed in Rogers's film. How much can the Jewish community really understand the black community's suffering when such a large number have walled themselves off from the city itself? How can our communities know one another when Jews largely benefit from America's meritocracy while the black community continues to suffer from income inequality, mass incarceration, and voter disenfranchisement—in Georgia and across America?

Although the documentary fails to reach that level of analysis, it does highlight the formation of the Atlanta Black-Jewish Coalition in 1982. Created by the Atlanta regional office of the American Jewish Committee, the coalition campaigned to renew the Voting Rights Act (VRA). These efforts succeeded in the VRA's renewal and also reinvigorated the bond between the two communities from up high, which was evident among participants in the panel discussion following the screening.

The film's thesis invokes viewers to serve as our brother's keeper and to bear witness to this country's atrocities so that we may redeem the past and present and one day, perhaps, ourselves. At that point, we won't just be preserving and celebrating past achievements. We will inscribe the next chapter of our shared legacies.

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