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Mark K. Bauman, *Editor*

Rachel Heimovics Braun, *Managing Editor*

Eric L. Goldstein, *Book Review Editor*

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At One with the Majority

by

Mary Stanton

For more than 150 years, Montgomery, Alabama's Jews have contributed to the city's civic, cultural, and financial health, yet when scholars explore "the Jews of the South," they generally cite the communities of Atlanta, Charleston, Savannah, New Orleans, and Richmond. Montgomery's history is interwoven in a tapestry of civil rights and civil liberties struggles which produced the conditions that gave rise to the 1955/1956 bus boycott, a demonstration that paralyzed the city, divided families and friends, and challenged individual consciences. How the capital city's Jews dealt with these tensions is the story of their southern experience.

The literature concerning southern and even Montgomery Jews and black civil rights is extensive. During the 1960s when Allan Krause surveyed Reform rabbis in the region, few reported active participation. Like and because of their congregants, most were silenced by fear. The authors in an anthology edited by Mark K. Bauman and Berkley Kalin found more outspoken rabbis, traced the activism backward in time, and related it to a broader social agenda. Clive Webb expanded on this framework. Like his predecessors, he recognized the limits intimidation placed on the actions of the majority. Deep South cities like Montgomery fostered further challenges. As Webb and others have demonstrated, some Jews did not require coercion to agree with southern racial mores. They and those who might be defined at the time as moderate and even liberal opposed the actions of national Jewish

organizations. Nonetheless a small number of Jews, particularly rabbis and women, did speak out, sometimes with dire personal consequences. This essay largely agrees with these earlier conclusions, brings together the materials on Montgomery over an extended timeframe, relates the events to the emergence and growth of congregational life, and adds detail to the analysis of the roles of the city's Jews during the modern civil rights era.¹

*Montgomery Jewish History:
From the Beginnings through the Civil War*

In the 1830s Jews began to arrive from Bavaria where they had been subjected to the *Matrikel*, a civil code requiring them to register in order to marry or work. Severely limiting the number who could marry or enter the work force, the *Matrikel* also regulated everything from how many Jews could settle in a town or village to how many children they could produce.²

In 1838 Henry and Josiah Weil emigrated and then supported themselves as dry goods peddlers while they learned English and saved towards establishing a business. It is no mystery why the brothers were anxious to assimilate in a country where hard work was rewarded, where Jews were permitted to own land and leave it to their children, speak their minds, vote, and even run for office. Their sentiments were reflected in Rabbi Gustav Posnanski's remarks at the 1841 dedication of K. K. Beth Elohim in Charleston, South Carolina. "This country," he said, "is our Palestine, this city our Jerusalem, this house of God our Temple."³

The Weils ultimately entered the cotton business. Alabama was the land of cotton in fact as well as in song, and Montgomery County produced nearly one fifth of the state's crop. The Weils ginned, bagged, and shipped cotton down the Alabama River to Mobile for sale, collected a broker's percentage, and provided cash advances at interest to the planters. By the turn of the century, J. & H. Weil Cotton Merchants was thriving.

As the economy expanded, more enterprising individuals, including immigrant Jews, were drawn to the city. By 1850, Emanuel and Meyer Lehman arrived from the German city of Rimpar to join their brother Henry who, like the Weils, had

Lehman, Durr advertisement c. 1861.
(Courtesy of Mary Ann Neeley, Landmarks Commission,
Montgomery, Alabama.)

peddled cloth, thread, needles, and notions for six years until he was able to rent a store on Commerce Street.⁴ Since many of his customers were cash-poor farmers, Henry was often paid in raw cotton. His ambitious younger brothers, intrigued by the Weils' success, encouraged him to learn the cotton business. Henry was happy to sell dry goods, but he dabbled in cotton brokering to please his brothers. By the time he died of yellow fever in 1855, his cotton business had outstripped his dry goods. In 1858 Emanuel opened a second office in New York City to establish a presence in the commodity trading capital of the nation. Most of the Lehman accounts came from New York, Chicago, Liverpool and London. To service the business, Meyer remained in Montgomery purchasing cotton, while Emanuel brokered it from New York. The arrangement worked well until the Civil War. In 1861 a northern

blockade cut the brothers off from each other, and Meyer suddenly needed warehouses to store his cotton. He entered into a partnership with gentile warehouseman John Wesley Durr, creating Lehman-Durr, one of Alabama's largest cotton factoring operations. It was unusual, but not unheard of, for Jews and gentiles to enter into business partnerships. A later successful example of this is Montgomery's insurance brokerage firm of N. B. Holt and Leopold Straus.

The stories of the Weils and Lehmans are exceptional because of their early arrival and success but also representative of the immigrant Jewish occupational path. Many German Jews entered Montgomery's merchant class which supported the plantation economy. They prospered as the planters prospered, and few were likely to criticize the practice of slavery, the labor system which fueled the cotton industry. Prosperity brought social mobility, and many of these Jewish merchants, like many gentile merchants, became slaveholders. This was not unique to Alabama's capital city. Historian Jacob Rader Marcus noted that as early as 1820 over 75 percent of Jewish families in Charleston, Richmond, and Savannah owned domestic slaves and almost 40 percent of all Jewish householders in the United States owned one or more slaves. In his study of the Jews of Charleston, James Hagy also found that Jews owned slaves in roughly the same proportion as their white, Christian, urban counterparts.⁵ While the majority of Montgomery's Jews did not own slaves, the prosperous Weils kept both household and field slaves, and by 1860 Meyer Lehman had purchased a total of seven domestic slaves.⁶

On November 17, 1846, Chevra Mevaker Cholim, a Jewish benevolent society designed to care for the sick, assist the poor, and provide traditional ritual burials for the dead, was organized. Two years later, Congregation Kahl Montgomery was chartered.⁷ Services were initially conducted at Lyceum Hall downtown and later above Meyer Uhlfelder's Dry Goods on North Court Street. Almost a century later, the Montgomery Fair Department Store, where Rosa Parks worked as a tailor's assistant, occupied the same site as Uhlfelder's.

*The former Kahl Montgomery synagogue at Church and Catoma streets.
This building was dedicated in 1861 and sold to the Church of Christ in 1900.
(Courtesy of Mary Stanton who photographed the building in 2006.)*

Sabbath services attracted curious Christians who wanted to experience “the ritual practices of the chosen people of God.”⁸ They were fascinated by these “Hebrews” who wrapped themselves in shawls and sat around a lectern listening to scripture read in a mysterious language, some rocking back and forth in concentrated prayer. The gentiles felt no compunction about attending what they considered public worship. Christian services, after all, were theoretically open to all who wanted to hear the word of God, even to African Americans who were relegated to sitting in balconies apart from the white congregants. And the city’s Jews made the gentiles feel welcome.

In 1854, New Orleans merchant Judah Touro bequeathed the new congregation two thousand dollars with which a parcel of land was purchased at Church and Catoma streets. Ground was broken for a sanctuary just before the Civil War began. For Alabama, the road to war started at the 1860 National Democratic

Convention in Charleston when state representative William L. Yancey challenged the party to “protect slavery or prepare for Southern secession.” After Abraham Lincoln’s election in November, a state convention was called. On January 11, 1861, the delegates voted sixty-one to thirty-nine to secede and created the Republic of Alabama. Representatives from South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida, Georgia, and Louisiana subsequently gathered in the capital city on February 4 to establish a Confederate congress and write a constitution. Former Mississippi Senator Jefferson Davis was elected provisional president on February 9, and Montgomery became the capital of the Confederacy owing to its central location and access to water and rail transportation.

Within weeks, Davis ordered General Pierre G. T. Beauregard to remove the federal troops from Fort Sumter, South Carolina. On April 13, 1861, the fort was surrendered, and two days later Lincoln declared a state of insurrection. At that time, 125,000 Jews were living in the North with 25,000 below the Mason-Dixon Line, mostly in New Orleans, Charleston, and Atlanta. Montgomery’s Jewish population of roughly one thousand produced its share of military volunteers and dissenters.⁹

As the secession vote demonstrated, not all Alabamians were of one mind concerning the Confederacy. The Moses brothers, Alfred, Mordecai, and Henry, offered their services to Governor John Gill Shorter who appointed Alfred clerk of the Confederate District Court. Mordecai enlisted in the 46th Alabama under Captain James Powell and was later commissioned for diplomatic and fundraising service in the West Indies and Canada. Henry served in the infantry.¹⁰ Cotton merchant Emanuel Lehman accepted an ambassadorship to England and furthered his lucrative cotton contracts with Liverpool merchants. He managed to dovetail his business interests with raising funds for the Confederacy on trips back and forth across the ocean. Lehman made the highly irregular arrangement work and grew rich in the process. His brother Meyer raised funds for relief of Alabama’s prisoners of war until the merger with Durr when Meyer temporarily relocated to Union-occupied New Orleans in order to more easily fulfill the contracts that Emanuel was negotiating. The Lehmans’ rival,

Leopold Jacob (Jake) Weil, younger brother of Henry and Josiah, was commissioned as a lieutenant in the Fourth Alabama Regiment under Captain Jacob Greil, a Montgomery Jewish dry goods wholesaler. Jake Weil's ambivalence is evident in a letter he wrote to a fourth brother back in the Germanic states. "The enemy has provoked war by invading the South," he said, "[T]his land has been good to us all. . . . I shall fight to my last breath to defend that in which I believe."¹¹ Defending his adopted country was apparently what drove Weil, not chattel slavery. Before reporting for duty he freed all of his field slaves and retained the domestics to keep his household running in his absence.

On March 8, 1862, in the midst of the hostilities, James K. Gutheim, spiritual leader of Dispersed of Judah congregation in New Orleans, presided at Kahl Montgomery's dedication. During the invocation, Gutheim, a passionate supporter of the Confederacy, prayed "Bless, O Father, our efforts in a cause which we conceive to be just; the defense of our liberties and rights and independence under just and equitable laws. May harmony of sentiment and purity of motive, unfaltering courage, immovable trust in our leaders, both in national council and in the field, animate all the people of our beloved Confederate States, so as to be equal to all emergencies — ready for every sacrifice, until our cause can be vindicated."¹²

Lay leaders conducted services until September 1863 when Gutheim, by that time a refugee, agreed to serve as the congregation's first professional spiritual leader. When federal troops had occupied New Orleans in 1862, Yankee General Benjamin "the Beast" Butler required every citizen to take an oath of allegiance to the Union. Gutheim refused. In June 1863 the Jewish monthly journal *Occident* reported that "it is with deep regret that we announce the departure of our friend and former correspondent, the Reverend James K. Gutheim from New Orleans in obedience to a military order banishing those who will not or cannot take the oath of allegiance offered to the citizens of that place. We know the value of Mr. Gutheim as a Jewish minister, and fear that his leaving may result in the dismemberment of his flock during the prevalence of the fearful war now raging in the country."¹³

Dispersed of Judah need not have worried. Gutheim returned to New Orleans and that congregation as the war came to a close.¹⁴ In late 1864 he was succeeded at Kahl Montgomery by Rabbi M. H. Meyers, who had been trained in England and who was followed one year later by Rabbi G. L. Rosenberger. Rabbi Edward Benjamin Morris Browne, fondly known as “Alphabet Browne” because of all the academic degrees he had earned, occupied the pulpit for nine months beginning in 1869. Browne was a physician, lawyer and linguist as well as a rabbi. He subsequently served Atlanta’s Hebrew Benevolent Congregation (commonly known as The Temple) from 1877 to 1881, and become the first editor of *The Jewish South*.

This pattern of short-term spiritual leadership continued for the next seven years. Historian Janice Rothschild Blumberg, a great-granddaughter of Rabbi Alphabet Browne, notes:

[During] this period all rabbis in America were foreign born, often loners who had immigrated as individuals seeking freedom from the restrictions of Jewish life in Europe as well as pulpit opportunities that those inclined toward reform would have been unlikely to find in the old country. Each tried to establish his own interpretation of reforms that would sustain Judaism in America with its relatively open society and few facilities to maintain tradition. Inevitably, lay leaders often disagreed with their rabbis and the rabbis with each other. Tempers were volatile, membership fluid, and financial support inadequate, all of which contributed to brief tenures for the rabbis.¹⁵

The war dragged on through spring 1865, and three days after General Lee’s surrender at Appomattox, Virginia, Wilson’s Raiders, who had burned Selma, entered Montgomery. Before the Yankees arrived, however, resourceful Montgomerians tore down their warehouses and burned their provisions to keep the raiders from obtaining anything of value. Mayor Walter Coleman surrendered the city to General James Harrison Wilson on April 12, 1865. The city escaped Selma’s fate and recovery began early. By summer, although goods were still scarce and the government was barely functioning, Montgomery started to return to life. Alabama was under military rule, however, and former Confederates were

*Lehman, Durr & Co. headquarters, looking north on North Court Street, 1874.
The Oddfellows Hall, above Lehman, Durr, was the site of the first
High Holy Day services led by the Chevra Mevacher Cholim in 1846.
(Courtesy of Landmarks Commission, Montgomery.)*

denied the vote. The Republican Party of northerners, pro-Union southerners, and freed slaves quickly gained control of the municipal government.

Meyer Lehman returned from New Orleans late in 1865 to help John Wesley Durr rebuild the Lehman-Durr warehouses, and he and his brother were forgiven their unusual wartime living arrangements after loaning the state \$100,000 and investing heavily in rebuilding Alabama's railroads. In 1868, the brothers bought out John Wesley Durr's interest in the firm and Meyer joined Emanuel in New York City, leaving a brother-in-law to run the southern operation.¹⁶ Many such businesses illustrated Jewish

links across regions that helped ease the South's financial difficulties in the postbellum era and contributed to the creation of the infrastructure which fueled New South revitalization. The Lehman brothers continued to invest in the South although they never returned. They became so successful that when the New York Cotton Exchange was established in 1870, Meyer served on its first Board of Governors.¹⁷

Emanuel's son, Herbert, was elected Governor of New York in 1933 and later served in the U.S. Senate for a period that included the Montgomery bus boycott. Ironically, Herbert served on the national board of the NAACP when attorney Clifford Durr, grandson of John Wesley Durr, helped bail Rosa Parks out of jail after her arrest for refusing to give up her seat on a city bus. These activist descendants of one staunch defender of the Confederacy and two postwar financiers are emblematic of Montgomery's ongoing conflicted relationship with slavery, secession, and later segregation.

Reconstruction to the Early Civil Rights Era

The Civil War destroyed the South's planter aristocracy permitting a new generation of lawyers, farmers, and merchants to become leaders in Montgomery. They were determined to rescue the capital city from Reconstruction. In 1871, Mordecai Moses, who ran an insurance business, Roberts, Moses and Company, with his brothers, successfully ran for alderman. Four years later he was mayor. A "Redeemer," the *Montgomery Advertiser* endorsed Moses as "the candidate of the white men of Montgomery . . . both Jew and Gentile."¹⁸ He represented the Democratic Party's determination to nullify the political gains that "carpetbaggers," "scalawags," and ex-slaves had made during Reconstruction.

When a Republican took issue with Mayor Moses and used an antisemitic slur, *Montgomery Advertiser* editor Major William Wallace Screws defended his fellow Confederate veteran, "A Jew!"

What is there in that name that can be a reproach to any man, woman or child, now living on earth? MOSES, the wisest of law

givers, was a Jew. JOSHUA who commanded the sun to stand still . . . was a Jew. DAVID, 'a man after God's own heart,' was a Jew. SOLOMON . . . was a Jew. The prophet ELIJAH . . . was a Jew. JESUS CHRIST himself was a Jew! His mother was a Jewess. . . . In every age . . . the Jews have done their whole duty to the country in which they have resided. . . . Who has surpassed them in public spirit, in works of charity, and in devotion to principle? It is too late in the history of the world for any such illiberality to prevail as that a man does not deserve public confidence because he is a Jew."¹⁹

In 1881 Mordecai Moses retired from politics after serving three terms as mayor and became president of the Montgomery Gas and Electric Company. When his youngest sister Emily died in 1931, the *Advertiser* proclaimed that, "there was never a finer family who were more closely identified with the progress of this city than the Moses family. . . . They saw a great future and did wonderful things for Alabama."²⁰

By 1870, Kahl Montgomery was the city's center of Jewish life. Although Jews had easily assimilated into the business world, they remained subject to social exclusion. No matter how much money they had, Jews were not eligible for membership in the gentile men's exclusive enclaves, the Saxon, Magnolia, Joie de Vie, and Shooting clubs. In 1871, 150 Jewish men, many of whom were members of Kahl Montgomery, organized the Standard Club to meet socially and professionally and to demonstrate their standing in society. By the turn of the twentieth century it became a place where young Jewish women of prominent family background were introduced to Jewish men from the same class. Dances and cotillions, the equivalent of gentile southern balls, were routinely held during Falcon Picnic. Similar events were sponsored in Atlanta, New Orleans, Charleston, Savannah, Richmond, and Mobile, and weddings were celebrated among the southern Jewish gentry.²¹

Beginning with Gutheim, every spiritual leader who served Kahl Montgomery was a Reform rabbi. By the 1870s, keeping kosher was becoming optional, men and women were sitting together during services, English was used for some prayers, and organ music had become an integral part of worship. This made

the minority traditionalists uncomfortable. They agreed with Baltimore's Orthodox Rabbi Bernard Illowy who had written in 1858 that "Israelites of this country esteem nothing holy in their house, nothing holy in their lives, and stand before the world without a God, without a faith." Illowy accused reformers of "dealing with truth as with ordinary merchandise, laying aside what is no longer fashionable, and changing for this reason, their views, from day to day, because, they must manufacture their principles anew, to have them always in accordance with the popular taste."²² Although Kahl Montgomery remained united, as previously indicated, the dissension contributed to the coming and going of rabbis. This happened throughout the country as one faction or another gained influence. In 1874, the reforms were formally acknowledged when the membership voted to adopt the ritual used by Temple Emanu-El in New York City and to change its name to Temple Beth Or, the House of Light. These were majority but not unanimous decisions.²³

On December 3, 1876, Reform Rabbi Sigmund Hecht, the congregation's first long-term spiritual leader, arrived in a city of almost seventeen thousand including six hundred Jews. During his twelve-year tenure, a Sunday school was organized, the pulpit was moved from the center of the sanctuary to the front as in the Christian churches, and confirmation classes were introduced. The congregation was clearly moving its practices further along the route of Reform.

In 1885, Hecht worked with Gutheim to organize the Conference of Rabbis of Southern Congregations. In December 1885, the conference adopted the Union of American Hebrew Congregations' principles of progressive Judaism as outlined in its Pittsburgh Platform of that year. The Southern Conference was headquartered in New Orleans and led by Gutheim, who is remembered as a father of Reform Judaism in the South. The conference was also a direct predecessor of and inspiration for the Union of American Hebrew Congregations.²⁴

Rabbi E. K. Fisher succeeded Hecht in 1888, ushering in a second period of short-term professional spiritual leadership that continued through 1897 until tall, handsome Rabbi A. J. Messing,

*Temple Beth Or, Sayre and Clayton streets, dedicated June 6, 1902.
The congregation moved away in 1960 and the building was later demolished.
(Courtesy of Alabama Department of Archives and History.)*

Jr., was called. This blonde, blue-eyed bachelor wore a clerical collar and was widely recognized in the gentile community as the minister of the Jewish church. On November 30, 1899, Messing established a tradition of hosting a joint Thanksgiving service with Methodists, Presbyterians, and Baptists. Messing was unusually effective in his role as ambassador to the gentiles, a skill valued by his congregation since it reflected their desire to fit into the community and be accepted. This role was typical of other Reform rabbis of the era.²⁵

During Messing's tenure, Beth Or celebrated its fiftieth anniversary and plans were drawn up to construct a larger building to reflect the growing affluence of the membership. The Catoma Street temple was sold to the Church of Christ for \$7,500, and a parcel of land was purchased one block away at Sayre and Clayton streets. The cornerstone was laid there by Mayor E. B. Joseph

on January 1, 1901, and this building, which no longer stands, was dedicated on June 6, 1902. At this point the members who had never been comfortable with the Reform ritual withdrew to establish a second congregation in conjunction with a group of recently arrived eastern European Orthodox Jews.²⁶ The transition was accomplished without rancor, and the congregations remained close.

The sixteen-member Orthodox Congregation Agudath Israel, or Brothers of Israel, initially held services in the homes of members and celebrated the High Holy Days at the Oddfellows Hall on Court Square until Max Shulwolf, first congregation president, donated two rooms of his home for ongoing Sabbath worship. As the congregation grew, space was leased above stores and factories, and in 1910 Rabbi Henry Drexel filled the pulpit. Four years later a synagogue was built at 510 Monroe Street. Agudath Israel grew quickly as a steady stream of immigrants fleeing Russia, Austria-Hungary, Rumania, and elsewhere in eastern Europe, and, later, Poland arrived.

These immigrants were not anxious to assimilate. The men wore yarmulkes, spoke Yiddish, and fully intended to transplant their traditional practices to their new homeland. Many became grocers and dry goods vendors and lived in rooms behind or above the shops they rented in the Monroe Street business district where many of their customers were black. Monroe Street was the center of black activity in the downtown area with the Pekin Vaudeville Theater, Pekin Restaurant, and Pool Room, all located there. Blacks shopped in the Jewish stores and found that they were permitted to try on merchandise, make returns, and treated with a respect seldom extended to them on Dexter Avenue, the white shopping district. To the immigrant Jews struggling to make a living, a customer was a customer. They had yet to absorb the culture of white supremacy as many of the German Jews had, and their major concern was feeding their families.²⁷

In 1907, Beth Or's Rabbi Messing became the focus of a major scandal when it was discovered that he was involved with the wife of a prominent gentile.²⁸ The temple trustees quietly and quickly removed him. Rabbi Benjamin C. Ehrenreich, a

thirty-year-old progressive whose wife was distantly related to Josiah, Henry, and Jake Weil, was elected to succeed him.²⁹ At the time, David Weil, another distant cousin, served as president of the congregation. Although Ehrenreich had been trained at the Conservative Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City, he practiced Reform Judaism. Unlike most Reform Jews, however, he retained his zeal for Zionism. Introduced to the movement by Columbia University linguistics professor Richard J. H. Gottheil, a founder of the Federation of American Zionists, Ehrenreich became its first recording secretary. He did not subscribe to the notion that Reform Judaism and Zionism were irreconcilable.³⁰

In the 1885 Pittsburgh Platform of Reform Judaism, the rabbis had dismissed Zionism, explaining that “we consider ourselves no longer a nation, but a religious community and therefore expect neither a return to Palestine . . . nor restoration of any of the laws concerning the Jewish State.” Some feared that advocacy for a Jewish homeland would subject Jews to allegations of split loyalties. Southern Jews were especially sensitive about this. These were, after all, the charges that the Klan would publicly level against Catholics for their allegiance to the Pope during the 1920s. Ehrenreich defended Zionism as a humanitarian effort on behalf of Jews who were not able to feel at home in the countries where they lived.

I am an ardent Zionist. Assimilation with the manners and customs of the people among whom we live is highly necessary and most important but the only trouble is that outside the United States and England it seems that nations of the world are unwilling to permit any such assimilation as much as the Jews of these countries may deny it.³¹

Although Ehrenreich broke with the Pittsburgh Platforms position on Zionism, he staunchly supported its advocacy of social reform. Shortly after the Ehrenreichs arrived in Montgomery, the rabbi preached a sermon calling for establishment of a juvenile court. Children were being sentenced for crimes as adults and Ehrenreich considered this a failure of the local justice system. His advocacy for reform and justice, of which support for social justice for African Americans was part, reflected his emphasis on

*Rabbi Bernard Ehrenreich with his first confirmation class at Beth Or, 1907.
(Courtesy of Temple Beth Or.)*

Prophetic Judaism throughout his tenure. He shared his passion with his wife, Irma Bock, a suffrage activist who later served as president of the Montgomery chapter of the National American Woman Suffrage Association.

Sensitive to prejudice, Ehrenreich was quick to defend Judaism. In 1908 he took issue with Dr. Lincoln Hulley of Florida's Stetson University who, while addressing the Alabama Educational Association's annual meeting in Montgomery, included several "Jew jokes" about Jewish merchants setting fire to their own businesses to collect the insurance. Ehrenreich called him to task the following day when he delivered his own presentation.³² Ehrenreich, like many Reform rabbis, felt the need to defend Judaism against prejudice. In the early twentieth century ethnic and religious jokes were staples of the vaudeville circuit and the old Jewish peddler had become a stock character on the stage,³³ but Ehrenreich considered such low humor inappropriate for a college

president. When several members of the Alabama Education Association and some Beth Or trustees criticized the rabbi's response as an over-reaction, Ehrenreich defended himself in a letter to the *Jewish American* on May 1, 1908.

The real harm was done because the address was delivered to many men and women who rarely if ever come in contact with the Jew and thus are led astray into believing that the words of the speaker and his jokes are based in fact. If one joke only had been told, he may have been pardoned, but to repeat and emphasize and particularly to point out that in connection with fire the Jews' name was always coupled is sinful as well as malicious.³⁴

Besides showing Ehrenreich as a defender against discrimination generally, this incident also illustrates early conflict between him and his congregants with them criticizing his outspokenness and he defending his actions. Civil rights would provide the main battlefield for such interaction.

In 1915, Ehrenreich invited philanthropist Julius Rosenwald, president of Sears, Roebuck & Company and a man Ehrenreich greatly admired, to visit Beth Or. Rosenwald was a trustee of the nearby Tuskegee Institute and a friend of Booker T. Washington, the school's founder. Two years earlier he had established the first of his Rosenwald Schools in nearby Macon County. Between 1913 and his death in 1932, Rosenwald would provide matching funds to build six thousand schools for southern black children. In a lengthy obituary in *Crisis* magazine, the journal of the NAACP, Editor W. E. B. DuBois called Rosenwald "a subtle stinging critic of our racial democracy." DuBois wrote: "The South accepted his gift . . . and never grasped the failure of democracy which permitted an individual of a despised race to do for the sovereign states of a great nation that which they had neither the decency nor justice to do for themselves."³⁵

Rosenwald encouraged Ehrenreich to become involved in education reform and the congregation registered no strong objection. Given Washington's tacit acceptance of Jim Crow, support for Tuskegee and even for Rosenwald's separate black schools was not terribly controversial. The trustees did become concerned

a year later, however, when Ehrenreich expressed outrage after George Washington Carver was forced to use the freight elevator at Montgomery's Exchange Hotel. The Tuskegee scientist was trying to get to the ballroom for a presentation he had been asked to make to the United Peanut Growers' Association. Several trustees counseled Ehrenreich not to make an issue of it or to underestimate the gentile community's obsession with white supremacy. Criticizing southern white social policies that were belittling to blacks crossed the line of acceptable behavior.³⁶ The rabbi was deeply disturbed by the Carver incident. Like Max Heller of New Orleans, another southern Reform rabbi and Zionist, Ehrenreich frowned on the fact that the civil rights of black citizens could be so easily dismissed by a presumed democratic society. Both believed that this did not bode well for any minority and that black and Jewish acceptance in America were connected. Ehrenreich was also concerned with the reaction of his congregants.³⁷

Ehrenreich better understood his trustees' fears when on August 17, 1915, Leo Frank, the Jewish manager of an Atlanta pencil factory convicted of murdering "Little Mary Phagan," a thirteen-year-old employee, was kidnapped from a Georgia penitentiary.³⁸ Furious that Governor John Slaton had commuted Frank's death sentence to life in prison, twenty-five men, some leading citizens, broke him out of jail and drove him 175 miles to Marietta, the murdered girl's hometown, where they lynched him. Despite Frank's contradictory evidence, the jury had taken only four hours to convict him. "Let the Jew libertine take notice," ranted Tom Watson, controversial Populist politician and publisher, "Georgia is not for sale to rich criminals."³⁹ After the lynching, souvenir photographs of Frank's dangling body were sold throughout the city.

At the time of Phagan's murder, Georgia was the only state that allowed factory owners to employ ten-year-old children and work them eleven hours a day. In the industrial New South, rural children were increasingly being sent to the city to help support their families since their farms could no longer sustain them. A man like Frank, an outsider as a northerner and a Jew, and a member of Atlanta's business elite, seemed a perfect target for

resentful parents, disgruntled workers, and advocates for child labor laws. Strong evidence pointing to the factory's black janitor, Jim Conley, was discounted, and the prosecution actually called Conley as a witness against Frank. The Reverend L. O. Bricker, Mary Phagan's minister, observed soon after the lynching that it was as if the death of a black man [Conley] "would be a poor atonement for the life of this innocent little girl . . . but a 'Yankee Jew' would be a victim worthy to pay for the crime."⁴⁰

Many members of Montgomery's Temple Beth Or had friends and family living in Atlanta and the brutal murder terrified them. They entreated Ehrenreich to tread carefully since he represented them to the gentile community.

Why would an energetic progressive like Ehrenreich remain in such an environment? Historian Harold Wechsler speculates:

[In his early adult years, Ehrenreich] gained a reputation as an organizer and that talent served him in good stead for the rest of his life. Yet, as the years passed he gradually concluded that his real mission did not consist primarily of collective action, but in maintaining the dignity and sanctity of the individual through personal action. His move to Montgomery in 1906 may serve as a symbol of this shift in attitude."⁴¹

Ehrenreich remained in the capital city for almost fifteen years. After the Leo Frank lynching, however, he honored his trustees' wishes and focused his energies on the chaplaincy at nearby Camp Sheridan. During World War I, he offered his home at 906 South Perry Street as a clubhouse for Jewish officers and enlisted men. After the war, he helped found the Jewish Charities of Montgomery and also played an active role in civic affairs, serving as vice chair of the Chamber of Commerce, and joining the Masons, Elks, and Kiwanis. No record survives of any public pronouncements he may have made on behalf of black civil rights after 1915.

During Rabbi Ehrenreich's tenure, Ralph Cohen, a Ladino-speaking Jew, emigrated with ten of his countrymen from the island of Rhodes. They were fleeing the chronic economic instability under the rule of the Ottoman Turks. For centuries these Sephardim lived under Turkish rule and supported themselves as

shopkeepers, artisans, and civil servants. They established their Kalal synagogue in 1675, and the Jewish quarter was known as "La Piccola Gerusalemi," the Little Jerusalem.⁴² The Turks were in an almost constant state of warfare and as their empire crumbled, life became more difficult for the Jews who were treated like foreigners.

After his arrival in 1906, Cohen worked hard, learned English, and became a leader of Montgomery's vibrant Sephardic community that grew as Rhodes' political turmoil fueled Jewish emigration. On November 17, 1912, he married Sadie Toranto in Montgomery's first Sephardic wedding. The ceremony was conducted by Agudath Israel's Orthodox rabbi Henry Drexel.

Many of these new immigrants sold ice cream, fruits, soft drinks, and tobacco or repaired shoes in what became the Cottage Hill section of the city. Later, they established cafes, delicatessens, and supermarkets. David Varon, owner of the Daylight Café on Bibb Street, was said to have cashed more paychecks over his counter each week than many of Montgomery's banks.⁴³ Like their eastern European counterparts, many Sephardim did not work on the Sabbath, although some, even those who called themselves Orthodox, did.

In 1908, Sephardic Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services led by Cantor Simon Franco were conducted at the Agudath Israel synagogue on Monroe Street. The following spring, twenty more Rhodian immigrants arrived and Solomon (Sam) Benton assumed responsibility for organizing a benevolent society to assist these newcomers find work, care for the sick, and bury the dead in a dedicated area of Greenwood Cemetery. They also raised funds for the Behor Holim Society in Rhodes which assisted the poor. On July 27, 1912, fifty Rhodian Jews, with a bank account of two hundred dollars, established congregation Etz Ahayem, the Tree of Life, under the leadership of Solomon Rousso, Simon Franco, and Sam Beton. Rousso, who operated the Montgomery Delicatessen, served as president of what was Alabama's first Sephardic congregation.⁴⁴

Sephardic Orthodoxy differed from the somber eastern European tradition. The entire service was chanted in Ladino and

*Etz Ahayem, 450 Sayre Street, dedicated on May 19, 1927.
(Courtesy of Mary Stanton who photographed the building in 2006.)*

incorporated both sacred and folk music. During wedding ceremonies the father of the groom wrapped the couple in a prayer shawl. For them joyous feasting and dancing were integral parts of religious celebration. Had not King David danced in the streets when he brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem?

Many Orthodox Jews, however, questioned if the Sephardim were Jews at all because their practices, language, culture, and even foodways were so different from their own. Yet divisions never rose to an issue separating the congregations in Montgomery. Perhaps because of their small numbers, one percent of the population, eastern European Orthodox, German Reform, and Sephardic Orthodox made a special effort to get along. In other

communities it was unusual for Reform and Orthodox rabbis to perform Sephardic weddings and funerals, but in Montgomery the rabbis helped out. Besides, finding Sephardic rabbis in the United States was difficult. Sephardic children also attended the Beth Or Hebrew School. *Montgomery is different* became a familiar refrain in the Jewish community. The three congregations might debate politics or religious practice, but they were united in spirit and shared efforts in the areas of religious education, philanthropy, and recreation. Many of the men were brothers in the city's B'nai B'rith and Masonic lodges. Many German Jewish women joined the Montgomery Council of Jewish women while eastern European and Sephardic women were more likely to associate themselves with Hadassah, although there was a good deal of cross over.

Relations with the gentile population were also generally good. Some Jews assimilated more readily than others, some intermarried, and most were cautiously optimistic. Most agreed that although random incidents of antisemitism were not unheard of, *Montgomery was different*.

On July 20, 1918, Congregation Etz Ahayem purchased a house at 450 Sayre Street to use as a synagogue. On the eve of the High Holy Days, Rabbi Ehrenreich presented the congregation with a Sefer Torah, the gift of Congregation Beth Or. Eight years later, Etz Ahayem razed the Sayre Street house and built a synagogue in its place. Mayor W. A. Gunter laid the cornerstone on May 19, 1927, and on Sunday afternoon, September 25, at the dedication, Circuit Court Judge Walter B. Jones observed:

[Every] good citizen of Montgomery, regardless of his denomination rejoices with the congregation of Etz Ahayem in [its] possession of this splendid Temple of Worship. . . . I know that church and synagogue can never be identical in forms, but they can become alike in purpose and spirit. I know that there are many and great differences between Judaism and Christianity, but I know, too, that there are many common ties and likenesses which unite us.⁴⁵

In January 1921, Rabbi Ehrenreich left Temple Beth Or on very good terms to become the full-time director of Camp

*"New Klan" recruitment parade on Dexter Avenue, 1925.
To the right is the entrance to Kress's Department Store.
(Courtesy of Alabama Department of Archives and History.)*

Kawanga for boys in Wisconsin, which he had founded in 1915. He was succeeded by Rabbi William Schwartz, who, like Rabbi Messing, was adept at maintaining good relations with the gentile community. This was an especially valuable skill, for during Schwartz's tenure, the Klan made its presence felt in Montgomery. In 1925 one-hundred robed, American flag-waving Klansmen, led by Birmingham's grand dragon, Horace Wilkinson, marched down Dexter Avenue to kick off a membership drive. Begun in Atlanta in 1915 this Klan defined itself as a fraternal organization like the Kiwanis or Rotary and sponsored family picnics, raised funds for charity, and strongly advocated "law and order." Men and women, disoriented by the rapid social changes that followed World War I, welcomed the Klan's promise to take action against the nation's immigration policy, immigrants, and Jazz Age immorality. Emissaries from this Invisible Empire visited local men and women whose morals or behavior violated the Klan's

definition of Christian sensibilities and frequently flogged them into repentance. In Birmingham they issued burning-cross warnings to keep blacks, Catholics, Jews, immigrants, union organizers, and communists "in their places," and provided financial support to politicians who demonstrated loyalty to "patriotic American values." Although no antisemitic incidents were reported in Montgomery, it was deemed dangerous to be too different, and the Beth Or congregation under Rabbi Schwartz's leadership tried hard not to be.

In 1928, Rabbi Benjamin Goldstein, a 1926 graduate of the Jewish Institute of Religion (JIR), succeeded Schwartz. Given the trustees' discomfort with Ehrenreich's early activism and their appreciation of Schwartz's talents as an ambassador of goodwill, Goldstein seems an odd choice. He had been trained by Rabbi Stephen Wise, one of the nation's foremost Zionist spokespeople, founder of the JIR as well as the American Jewish Congress, and among the founders of the NAACP. Moreover at the 1905 dedication of New York's Free Synagogue Wise defined the rabbi's function as "not to represent the view of the congregation, but to proclaim the truth as he sees it." It is even more curious that Goldstein accepted the call after the search committee advised him that he was to "leave the Negro question alone."⁴⁶

Nonetheless, when in 1885 a group of Reform rabbis had gathered in Pittsburgh to write their Declaration of Principles, they maintained that Reform Judaism had a social mission. "We acknowledge that the spirit of broad humanity of our age is our ally in the fulfillment of our mission," they had written, "and therefore we extend the hand of fellowship to all who cooperate with us in the establishment of the reign of truth and righteousness among men." From their perspective, to deny the Torah's moral and ethical precepts was to deny the very essence of Judaism. It was inevitable that aspects of Reform Judaism would collide with the culture of white supremacy, just as aspects of Christian doctrine conflicted with it. The trustees of Beth Or recognized in Goldstein a rabbi who would challenge them, as Ehrenreich had, and yet they hoped that this charming young intellectual would also be able to maintain

the congregation's equilibrium in the racially polarized culture. This was a tall order.

Montgomery Jews and Early Civil Rights Struggles

Initially Goldstein was careful. Although he criticized the local planters for paying starvation wages to both black and white agricultural workers, when he spoke of human rights he usually used only the broadest language. Goldstein concentrated on intellectual enrichment for his congregation and introduced a Friday evening lecture series recruiting guest speakers, some on the caliber of philosopher Bertrand Russell.⁴⁷

In 1931, at the height of the Depression, Goldstein joined a Norman Thomas study group with half a dozen or so of Montgomery's white gentile socialists. Thomas, a gentile pacifist, was a leader in the American Socialist Party and the American Civil Liberties Union and a perennial candidate for the U.S. presidency. He is also remembered for his efforts to open up American immigration to Jewish victims of Nazi persecution in the 1930s. The members of the socialist study group were predominantly female: teachers, social workers, and some wives of affluent Beth Or members. Women generally were freer to pursue social concerns under the umbrella of clubs dedicated to civic and social improvement. They also used religious organizations, such as the United Church Women, as bases of operation that were difficult to attack because of their aura of respectability. But several in this group were associated with the more radical Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and the Fellowship of Reconciliation.⁴⁸ These included Professor Olive "Polly" Stone, a gentile sociology professor and dean of women at Montgomery's Women's College (later Huntingdon), Darlie Speed, whose grandfather had been president of the Mobile and Montgomery Railroad, her twenty-two-year-old daughter Jane Speed, and Bea Kaufman, an officer of the Montgomery Council of Jewish Women (whose husband Louis was a Beth Or trustee).⁴⁹

These local intellectuals considered themselves democratic socialists who advocated education, political, and social reform,

*Rabbi Benjamin Goldstein of Temple Beth Or
with his wife, Margaret, and their daughter Josie.
(Courtesy of Jo Goldstein Rogers.)*

including equal rights for women and blacks. They met alternately at Beth Or and the Women's College to discuss such works as Sidney and Beatrice Webb's *History of Trade Unionism*, the satirical plays of George Bernard Shaw, and the futuristic novels of H. G. Wells. Although some admired communist doctrine, most, like Norman Thomas, advocated incremental rather than revolutionary change. They were deeply concerned about the rise of European fascism which they equated with the ranting of white supremacy. One of their more popular and very controversial

guest speakers was Jeanette Rankin, former U.S. Representative from Montana, who in 1917 voted against President Woodrow Wilson's resolution to enter World War I and subsequently lost her bid for reelection.

In 1930, Professor Stone, whose family came from Dadeville in Tallapoosa County, began documenting the rise of a sharecropper movement there for her dissertation. She periodically invited union organizers to speak to her students and to the study group. Through Stone, Goldstein became acquainted with a number of black communists who were organizing the Tallapoosa sharecroppers and cotton pickers. The union fought for their right to market their own crops, earn a minimum wage of a dollar a day, and take a three hour midday break. Members of the study group collected food and clothing for the workers and several provided financial support.⁵⁰

Then, on March 25, 1931, nine black teenagers looking for work hitched a ride on a Southern Railway freight line and were arrested near Scottsboro in Alabama's northeast corner. Charged with raping two white women, they narrowly escaped lynching. In less than three weeks they were indicted, tried, convicted, and sentenced to die in the electric chair. White jurors were observed laughing outside the Scottsboro courthouse after only five minutes of deliberation. Although none of these innocent young men was executed, the last one was not released from prison until almost twenty years later.⁵¹

The study group raised funds for the Scottsboro Boys' defense, and Rabbi Goldstein was the only white clergyman to visit them on death row in Montgomery's Kilby prison. He subsequently joined the International Labor Defense's Scottsboro Defense Committee. The ILD was the legal arm of the American Communist Party. Bea and Louis Kaufman, who had become very close to Goldstein, offered their home to shelter visiting ILD attorneys and labor organizers during this difficult period.⁵²

Grover Hall, editor of the *Montgomery Advertiser*, believed that the Scottsboro Boys had received a fair trial. The communists who defended them were, in his mind, opportunists, "[b]uzzards

and carpet baggers who sought publicity and political power and cared little about justice."⁵³ While Hall did not attack Goldstein personally, his editorials did little to endear the activist rabbi to genteel Montgomery.

Few whites in the capital city defended the Scottsboro Boys, since such a position was considered radical. Moderates were those who believed that segregation could coexist with educational and economic reform for blacks. Free speech and eccentricity, however, as exemplified by the Norman Thomas Socialist Club, were grudgingly tolerated. Once the Red Menace was pressed into the service of protecting segregation, however, everything changed.

By the end of 1932, vigilantes had made several raids on the homes of the black Tallapoosa County sharecroppers, many of whom were beaten and jailed and several were murdered. Goldstein provided bail for those who were arrested, and the indicted organizers were defended pro bono by attorneys from the ILD. The rabbi and Darlie Speed unsuccessfully petitioned Governor Benjamin Meek Miller to investigate the murders. The governor's refusal to take action appears to have radicalized Speed.⁵⁴ She and Goldstein decided to investigate on their own, and they drove to Tallapoosa County to meet with the sharecroppers. When the rabbi returned, he invited local black ministers to his home and organized a food and clothing bank for the sharecroppers' families. This was a radical undertaking for the milieu that flew in the face of the strictly segregated society.⁵⁵

At this point, Beth Or's trustees resolved to take action against their rebellious rabbi. They ascribed their success to being unobtrusive, helpful, and adaptive, qualities their young rabbi clearly lacked. However, on March 26, 1933, before they had a chance to meet with Goldstein and against their wishes, he spoke at an ILD-sponsored fundraiser attended by five hundred blacks and fifty whites at a black church in Birmingham. On Yom Kippur he told his congregation that he believed the Scottsboro Boys were innocent. Goldstein was again warned to curtail his activism. But it was too late. He was deeply moved by the plights of the sharecroppers and the Scottsboro Boys, and he replied that it was

impossible to discuss social justice on Friday night and stand on the sidelines Monday morning.⁵⁶ Jewish heritage, he said, should never be used to sanctify existing institutions and practices because they need justification.⁵⁷

In spring 1933, during Scottsboro defendant Heywood Patterson's trial, prosecutor Wade Wright pointed to ILD lawyers Samuel Liebowitz and Joseph Brodsky and entreated the jury to convict Patterson in order to show the world that "Alabama justice cannot be bought and sold with Jew money from New York."⁵⁸ Patterson was speedily convicted and, on April 10, 1933, sentenced to death.

The co-opted jury terrified the Beth Or trustees who equated Wright's remarks with those of Tom Watson who had incited the Leo Frank mob twenty years earlier. Temple president Ernest Mayer delivered an ultimatum to Goldstein.⁵⁹ He was to sever his ties to the Scottsboro Boys, the ILD, the sharecroppers, and the local radicals or resign. The Ku Klux Klan was threatening to organize a boycott of Jewish businesses, and Mayor Gunter wanted Goldstein arrested for violating the city's criminal anarchy ordinance.⁶⁰ Older temple members took these threats seriously, recalling how some of Atlanta's Jewish businesses had been boycotted after Leo Frank's arrest and how flyers had been distributed throughout the city advising people to "buy American."

Businessman Charles Moritz led the charge against Goldstein, and only two trustees, Louis Kaufman, husband of socialist study group member Bea Kaufman, and Simon Wampold, defended him to the board.⁶¹ Goldstein resigned on April 12 and issued a statement which was published in the *Jewish Daily Bulletin* the following day: "My resignation resulted from my activities not only on behalf of the Scottsboro Negroes for whom I demanded a fair trial and a change of venue, but also on behalf of the Tallapoosa Negro share-croppers for whom last December I demanded fair treatment." On May 25, he told a *Montgomery Advertiser* reporter that anyone "who tries to take an impartial attitude toward the conduct of the Scottsboro case is immediately branded a communist and a nigger lover."

The trustees responded with their own press release repudiating outside interference in southern affairs and pledging their unequivocal support for segregation.⁶² A few members told a *Montgomery Advertiser* reporter that they privately agreed with Goldstein but that his outspokenness threatened the welfare of the city and of the Jews in particular.⁶³ Goldstein had testified that anyone who took an impartial attitude towards the Scottsboro case was sanctioned. In an interview that appeared in the same edition of the *Alabama Journal*, which carried the banner headline "Many Jews Deny Goldstein Statement," Colonel Leo M. Strassburger, a former Beth Or trustee, reported that he was "very much surprised to read the statement attributed to Rabbi Goldstein."

If he was quoted directly, he is absolutely wrong: there is not a word of truth in his charges, and his statements are not representative of the better element of Montgomery Jews. Rabbi Goldstein never became acclimated; he could not fit in with our scheme of life although he attained greatness in his own sphere as a scholar.⁶⁴

Darlie Speed, the socialist group's only admitted communist, also left Montgomery. She said that she had once been confident that the "good people of Alabama would come to the aid of the young black men [Scottsboro Boys]." But, as she told a reporter for the *New York Herald Tribune*,

[You] cannot defend a black man in the South. The white man is always right, and nothing can shatter that class-conscious race-conscious belief. . . . We heard the best citizens of the South say, 'Oh, the Scottsboro boys are innocent, alright, but if we let Negroes get by with this case no white woman will be safe in the South.' It became apparent that the ILD was the only group in America that would defend a black. . . . The South pushed me right into the arms of the ILD and the revolutionary movement.⁶⁵

Polly Stone remained on the faculty at the Women's College only because President Walter Agnew believed in the Scottsboro Boys' innocence. Almost twenty years later, Agnew would address the biracial membership of the Montgomery Council on Human Relations during the bus boycott about the need to "dismantle the doctrine of white supremacy." He counseled

that race relations could never be “improved” in a caste system and that the only lasting solution to the boycott was ending segregation.⁶⁶

Montgomery, it seemed, tolerated free thinkers only up to the point of action. Rabbi Goldstein stepped over that line, and while Dr. Agnew protected Stone, she soon found it impossible to cope with the ostracism of her friends and colleagues. In 1934, she resigned and moved to Atlanta where she helped organize the Southern Committee for People’s Rights, a group committed to ending segregation through education.

After Goldstein’s resignation, he, his wife Margaret, and their two daughters moved to New York City. Because of his involvement with the ILD, the communist taint followed him, and by 1935, he was still without a pulpit. His notoriety brought him invitations for speaking engagements for the American League Against War and Fascism, and the American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy, but no job offers. In 1937 he relocated his family to Los Angeles where he worked as a film distributor, a publicist for the Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences, and a quality control manager for the Technicolor Corporation. In 1945, he divorced Margaret after eighteen years of marriage, and she took their daughters back to New York. He remarried and took his wife’s name, becoming Ben Lowell. Two years later, in April 1948, Rabbi Arthur Lelyveld of B’nai B’rith Hillel Foundations in New York City offered him a position as National Administrative Assistant. Two years later, however, Lelyveld asked for his resignation after Goldstein spoke at a June 19, 1950, Town Hall rally in support of the Hollywood Ten, the nine screenwriters and one director who refused to answer questions about their involvement in leftist organizations when called to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee. Goldstein had become involved with the “freedom of thought movement” that their subsequent imprisonment provoked, and Lelyveld concluded that he could not afford such a polarizing presence on the Hillel staff. At this point, Goldstein’s second marriage broke up, and he accepted temporary pulpit assignments in Queens, New York, and Havana, Cuba.

Ultimately he made his way back to Los Angeles where he died of cancer in 1953 at the age of fifty-two.⁶⁷

Darlie Speed and her daughter Jane relocated to Puerto Rico after Jane's marriage to labor organizer Cesar Andreu Iglesias. They never lived in Montgomery again. Only Bea and Louis Kaufman remained in the capital city. In the late 1930s Bea was appointed legislative chair of the city's Federation of Women's Clubs, and she campaigned for a woman's right to serve on juries. From 1939 through 1945 Bea worked as a field organizer for the Council of Jewish Federations. In 1945, she became circulation manager of the *Southern Farmer*, a liberal journal published by labor activist and former New Deal administrator Aubrey Williams, who lived in Montgomery. Williams later became president of the Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF), the only biracial anti-segregation organization in the South. Bea joined SCEF at its inception in 1946, and she and Louis remained active members of Montgomery's small, white, liberal circle. Louis Kaufman never lost his job as a salesman for Schloss and Kahn nor was he forced to resign his position on the Beth Or Board of Trustees. His conservative friends preferred to consider him "eccentric." It was acceptable for social activists to work towards "economic and educational reform for Negroes" if they remembered that segregation was sacred. Bea was not afraid to cross that line, but Louis was. She eventually left him and moved to Chicago where she pursued more radical activities.⁶⁸

Rabbi Eugene Blachschleger, who had been serving as an associate rabbi in Richmond, Virginia, replaced Goldstein on September 1, 1933. A graduate of the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, he was a warm, witty, and seemingly light-hearted man. Montgomery would be his first and last pulpit. With the help of his wife, Bernice, he worked to improve educational and recreational programs for Jewish youth. He involved Beth Or in pulpit exchanges with Christian ministers and provided strong leadership for his congregation for thirty-two years. Blachschleger led Beth Or through the war years and extended spiritual care to members of the armed forces serving at nearby Maxwell Air Force Base. He ministered to both Beth Or and Etz Ahayem during the

revelation of the Holocaust, which caused many in both congregations to bitterly question God's justice. Many members of Beth Or lost family and friends to Hitler's madness. In July 1944, 1,673 Rhodian Jews were sent to Auschwitz and only 151 survived. Nearly every one of Montgomery's Rhodian Jews lost parents, aunts, uncles, brothers, sisters, and cousins as well as friends and neighbors, and the grief at Etz Ahayem was overwhelming.

Blachschleger was the first rabbi in Montgomery invited to join the all-white Ministerial Association, and he worked hard to promote interfaith, if not interracial, brotherhood in the years before resistance to the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision tore the veneer of civility off segregated Montgomery and exposed a very ugly underside.

Montgomery Jews and Desegregation

The 1954 Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, which declared segregated public education unconstitutional, was received with horror in the former Confederate capital. Montgomery's collective response was led by those committed to maintaining white supremacy. Liberals and progressives remained silent, for the most part, as segregationists closed ranks and retaliated against both outside agitators and internal dissenters who disagreed with them.

Northern Jews largely applauded the *Brown* decision while southern Jews, like most southern moderates, said nothing. In later years many would explain that they had been waiting for the progressives and the clergy to pull together an opposing coalition. Some anticipated that the national tide of the decision would carry the South, while some Jews believed that anti-segregation leadership needed to come from the Christian community since they considered racial animosity a "Christian problem."⁶⁹ For whatever reason, grassroots support for *Brown* never materialized, despite the initial restraint of Alabama's elected officials.

While Mississippi Senator James Eastland told a cheering crowd in Senatobia that they were obliged to defy the Supreme Court because, "on May 17, 1954, the Constitution of the United States was destroyed," Alabama's Governor Gordon Persons

chose to wait and see. The governor resisted pressure to call a special legislative session to close the public schools to circumvent the ruling. Alabama's moderates simply waited too long for someone else to organize, and the White Citizens Council (WCC) rushed in to fill the vacuum. Founded in Mississippi by plantation manager "Tut" Patterson and circuit judge Tom Brady, the WCC offered a means to resist *Brown* without violence. It employed economic terrorism.⁷⁰ Those who supported school integration, or any form of integration, would suffer rent increases, evictions, foreclosures, intimidation of customers, and boycotts of their businesses. In an effort to strengthen the resistance, segregationists like Patterson aligned themselves with northern anti-communist activists.

"Integration represents darkness, regimentation, totalitarianism, communism and destruction," Patterson maintained. "There is no middle ground." Bankers, insurance agents, school officials, attorneys, and other community leaders signed on, so membership remained respectable. "Councilors" described themselves as law-abiding citizens who, while they challenged federal authority, always operated within state law. Unlike the Klan, whom they disdained, their meetings were open to the public. Recruitment drives were often conducted at civic organization meetings. A Mississippi WCC leader observed that "if you take the Farm Bureau, Rotary, Kiwanis and Lions Club out of the Citizens' Council Movement you wouldn't have much left."⁷¹ In Mississippi, Rabbi Benjamin Schultz joined a host of Christian clergy in publicly endorsing the movement. In Montgomery, it was blessed by the Reverend Henry Edward "Jeb" Russell of Trinity Presbyterian, brother of the outspoken segregationist Senator Richard Russell of Georgia; Dr. G. Stanley Frazer of St. James Methodist Church; and the Reverend Henry Lyon of Highland Avenue Baptist Church. The majority of the city's clergy, however, including its rabbis, Eugene Blachschleger and Seymour Atlas of Agudath Israel, refrained from making statements.

That summer, a member of the Mississippi WCC who identified himself as a past president of the local B'nai B'rith lodge, published the pamphlet, *A Jewish View on Segregation*. In it he expressed deep resentment for the national Anti-Defamation

League's (ADL) endorsement of *Brown*. "Why the [ADL] should have become so saturated with its importance in this highly controversial matter [i.e., integration] is beyond the comprehension of thousands of American Jews who have not been consulted or given an opportunity to express their views on the merits of this policy," he wrote. "A small group of so-called leaders in the order, who are biased in favor of integration, are attempting to speak and act for thousands who do not support [those] views and resent reading in the press partisan criticisms on a matter that does not come within the purview or functions of the league."⁷² Many of Montgomery's Jews, just like this Mississippian, were anxious to distance themselves from the national social action organizations. When the American Jewish Committee, the American Jewish Congress, and the ADL endorsed *Brown*, Montgomery's Jewish Federation threatened to withhold allocations.⁷³ "The White community in the South is generally opposed to desegregation," the federation leaders wrote, "[and the] Jewish community in the South is part of the White Community in the South."⁷⁴

Jews routinely served on the boards of the city's charitable and fraternal organizations, and several were associated with the political power structure. In 1952, Max Baum, director of the First Alabama Bank, and a trustee of St. Margaret's Hospital, presided over the Chamber of Commerce; Sidney Levy served as Chamber treasurer; Mortimer Cohen, an investment banker, led the Montgomery Kiwanis; and Rabbi Seymour Atlas served as master of the Scottish Rite Masonic Lodge. Ruben Hanan of Etz Ahayem was a key advisor to Governor James Folsom and later to Governor John Patterson. Despite this seeming acceptance, however, when Beth Or organized a combined banquet for its April 1952 centennial and Blachschleger's twentieth anniversary, the event could not be held at the Montgomery Country Club. Jews were still excluded and remained so until the early 1990s. For many this was a reminder that "separate but equal" extended beyond the ranks of black people in the white supremacy system.

While many continued to maintain that *Montgomery was different*, the feeling that there was something tentative about Jewish acceptance could not be completely discounted. Some Jews

admitted to each other that without the fear of miscegenation focused squarely on blacks, Jewish “otherness” could easily become an issue.⁷⁵ Desire for acceptance, fear of antisemitism, and civic participation, among other factors, created a difficult matrix within which to confront massive resistance.

In 1956 journalist David Halberstam observed, “Before the advent of the Councils a man who spoke up against Jim Crow merely ran the risk of being known as a radical; today he faces an organized network of groups consciously working to remove dissenters—his job and his family’s happiness may be at stake.”⁷⁶ WCC cofounder Tom Brady, in an effort to explain how the “separate but equal” doctrine had been overturned, identified communist and Jewish conspirators.

It is lamentable that attention should be called to the alarming increase of Jewish names in the ranks of communist front organizations. Of all the nations which have ever been on this earth, the United States of America has been the kindest to the Jew. Here he has suffered but little ostracism—and he has brought most of this upon himself.⁷⁷

As the communist-Jewish conspiracy theory became more respectable, the relative paradise that Jews believed they had found in the South and particularly in Montgomery began to unravel. Nearby Selma established Alabama’s first WCC in June 1955 and the capital city followed suit in October. Not an immediate success, the early meetings were held at St. James Methodist Church with the support of the Reverend Dr. G. Stanley Frazer and for two months the group struggled to attract membership. By the end of November there were only 160 members. Then, in early December the bus boycott began. That and the attempted integration of the University of Alabama caused the WCC to grow exponentially. By the beginning of the new year, almost five thousand white residents had signed up. Larger quarters were rented downtown on Perry Street. The organization subsequently launched a door-to-door membership drive and threatened to publish the names of residents who refused to join. Jews were expected to support the effort and most did. The WCC grew so powerful that within the first few months of 1955, Mayor W. A.

Gayle, Public Safety Commissioner Clyde Sellers, Commissioner of Public Works Frank Parks, and the entire City Council were members.⁷⁸

Gentiles maintained that they joined the WCC to keep apprized of what was going on and to keep it respectable. Some Jews joined for the same reasons, while others signed up to protect their financial interests and demonstrate that they would cooperate with the effort to maintain a segregated city. As retail tradesmen, Jews were especially vulnerable to economic terrorism. Although antisemitism was officially disavowed by the WCC,⁷⁹ a pamphlet circulating in 1956 threatened:

[Where] prominent Jewish leaders have enrolled as members and taken an active part in the duties of the Council, there is no chance of anti-Semitism creeping in. . . . [But] the Jew who attempts to be neutral is much like the ostrich. And he has no right to be surprised or amazed when the target he so readily presents is fired upon.⁸⁰

After joining the WCC, a nervous group of Montgomery's Jewish businessmen purchased an ad in the *Advertiser* to assure the city fathers that they were "at one with the majority viewpoint in the gentile community." When more progressive Jews criticized what they considered an overreaction, these merchants explained that they were merely trying to prevent an antisemitic backlash. But there appeared to be no need. Montgomery demonstrated that indeed it *was* different in this strange instance. When the North Alabama WCC insisted that its members "believe in the divinity of Jesus Christ," Montgomery's WCC under the direction of state Senator Sam Englehardt, formed an independent Association of Citizens Councils based in the capital city.⁸¹ The Englehardts were a successful cotton planter family that owned thousands of acres in nearby Macon County, with an 85 percent black population. Sam Englehardt had run for the state senate in 1950 on a promise to maintain white supremacy, and it behooved him as a planter to keep blacks out of the Macon County voting booths. The Englehardts, however, had done business with Jewish cotton factors for generations, and their interests were intertwined. The senator was not interested in alienating some of his most powerful supporters.

Victor Kerns, a science teacher at Lanier High School who was serving as spiritual leader of Etz Ahayem while that congregation was without a rabbi, experienced a more ominous side of this "white collar Klan."⁸² At a 1955 faculty meeting, he and his colleagues discussed a bill introduced into the state legislature by Senator Englehardt proposing suspension of public school teachers' tenure in order to permit local boards to fire educators who supported *Brown*. Leaders of the teachers association counseled the faculty to support the bill (against their own career interests) since resistance would be interpreted as a vote for integration. The tall, stocky young man, who had been raised in Brooklyn, and was not shy, could not bring himself to do it. In the first place, it seemed absurd to him for professionals to meekly surrender their rights to tenure, and, in the second place, he knew that he was not the only member of the faculty who questioned segregation. He and his wife, Ann, were members of the city's biracial Council on Human Relations, established shortly after the *Brown* decision, and he had discussed his strong feelings about racial justice with his colleagues before. That afternoon he assured them that he had no objection to teaching black students.⁸³ Kerns had lived in Montgomery for almost ten years, but he never fully internalized the degree to which white supremacy permeated the culture. After the faculty meeting, he was besieged with threatening phone calls and hate mail, and he was visited by two armed men who told him that if he did not stop his "nigger talk" something was going to happen to him. Neighbors and colleagues shunned him and old friends shunned not only him, but Ann and her widowed mother. Ann Rosenbaum Kerns had grown up in Montgomery. She had gone to school with, and was raising her own children among, the same people who apologetically explained that associating with her and Victor would bring "trouble" on themselves. One sentence spoken forthrightly among his colleagues had poisoned Kerns' life in Montgomery, a life that for the Rosenbaum family had gone back for generations. He had not meant to hurt anyone, but he had stepped outside the code, and he and his family were being punished. Ann could not bear the ostracism, and, although Kerns was neither fired, nor physically harmed, she

suffered an emotional breakdown. At the end of the semester, the Kerns, their two small children, and her widowed mother, moved to Auburn, Alabama, where he applied to the university to complete his doctoral studies.

It is little wonder then that Jewish businessmen dependent on the good will of their white and black customers chose not to draw attention to themselves. As in the gentile community, however, not every Jew remained silent out of fear. Some shared their neighbors' convictions about the inferiority of blacks. After living in the segregated South for generations some Jews felt more comfortable among southern Christians than among Jews from other parts of the country.

The WCC pressured merchants, retailers, private and public organizations, and ordinary citizens to fire their black employees. Members circulated a handbill in the downtown which warned, "If you continue to employ even ONE negro, you shall be labeled as a renegade white the rest of your life. Don't you realize that you are giving them money to be used against white people? THE LINE HAS BEEN DRAWN, GET ON ONE SIDE OR THE OTHER [capitals in original.]"

Jewish wholesalers and retailers, like many gentile businessmen, employed black men as stock boys, janitors, deliverymen, and truck drivers. Middle class Jewish homes, like middle class gentile homes, generally retained and depended on black cleaning women, black nannies, and black cooks. White landlords who rented to black tenants were not anxious to evict them. Money was money. Many, including Jews, quietly ignored the WCC demands. While they were not willing to grant blacks social equality, neither were they ready to refuse their dollars. The WCC had obviously underestimated the impact of black buying power.⁸⁴

As blacks became more assertive, however, Jewish businessmen found themselves increasingly singled out for criticism. The Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, an activist friend of Martin Luther King, Jr., whose home was bombed after he attempted to register his three children at Birmingham's previously all-white schools, was interviewed in May 1957 by Ralph Friedman, a reporter for

the weekly *National Jewish Post and Opinion*. Shuttlesworth assured Friedman:

Jews not only control the wealth of America, but they control American cities. The basis of segregation is economics. If the Jews would give their money and support desegregation then the barriers would fall. . . . The Jews own the downtown stores. . . . Most of their customers are Negroes. . . . They could stop segregation just by taking down the signs.⁸⁵

"Why won't you speak up?" the thirty-five-year-old black minister challenged Friedman. "Why are you all so silent?" Shuttlesworth subscribed wholeheartedly to the fallacies that all Jews were rich and powerful, a conclusion he reached because of Jewish ownership of Birmingham's largest retail stores. Yet, the city's movers and shakers were the iron, steel, and coal magnates, not one of whom was Jewish. Ironically Jews would bear the brunt of animosity and prejudice from both sides.

In 1957, there were 4,000 Jews in Birmingham out of a total population of 600,000. If the Jewish retailers removed their "whites-only" signs, as Shuttlesworth demanded, whites would boycott them and the Jewish merchants would be driven into bankruptcy. But Shuttlesworth would not be mollified. He told Friedman that while African Americans were grateful for northern Jewish support, the battle was being waged in the South and southern blacks needed the help of southern Jews.⁸⁶

Southern Jews who relied on black and white customer good will felt pressure from all sides: northern Jewish liberals, southern segregationists, and disappointed black activists. It troubled some of them, but others, and this is a number impossible to determine, like the majority of their gentile neighbors, found the southern way of life satisfying and were willing to do whatever it took to maintain it.

In Montgomery, as in most Deep South cities, a chain was strung across the aisle of every city bus. Whites sat in front of it, and blacks behind. Montgomery was different only in that once all of the front, white seats were taken, municipal law permitted whites to move the chain back and claim additional black seats. Theoretically, if enough whites boarded the bus, all the blacks

would have to give up their seats. Legend has it that Rosa Parks was asked to move to the back of the bus. This is not true. She was sitting in the first row of the black section when the bus stopped at the Empire Movie Theater on Montgomery Street, and a large group of whites boarded. At this point, white patrons expected that the chain would be moved back to accommodate them. The driver, attempting to do that, demanded that Parks give her seat to a white man, and the rest is history.⁸⁷

If the *Brown* decision drove a wedge between Montgomery's progressives and its segregationists, between moderates and conservatives in each of its religious congregations, and between northern and southern Jews, the boycott completed the job. It paralyzed the city for an entire year and became the test case for extending *Brown* to municipal transportation. The Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), an umbrella organization created to coordinate it, was led by twenty-six-year-old Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. Under his leadership, the MIA issued three demands: (1) a guarantee of courteous treatment of blacks on the buses, (2) seating of bus passengers on a first come, first served basis with whites starting from the front and blacks starting from the back (so that no one would have to surrender a seat or stand over an empty seat), and (3) employment of black bus drivers on predominantly black routes.⁸⁸ There was no demand to end segregation, nor would there be for two months. From the beginning, King insisted that the demonstration be conducted non-violently, and Montgomery's black community remained faithful to his vision. He set the tone with his first speech at a mass meeting on December 5, 1955, at the Holt Street Baptist Church.

Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, and pray for them that spitefully use you. If we fail to do this, our protest will end up as a meaningless drama on the stage of history and its memory will be shrouded with the ugly garments of shame. In spite of the mistreatment that we have confronted, we must not become bitter, and end up by hating our white brothers.⁸⁹

Montgomery's Jews confounded King by ignoring the boycott. He expected unilateral Jewish support since northern Jews

were his staunchest white allies. The black press had crowned him “Alabama’s Modern Moses,” and he often cited parallels between his oppressed people and the Hebrews whom God had delivered from Egyptian slavery. It shocked him to learn that many of Montgomery’s Jews actually *appreciated* the benefits of white supremacy. “The national Jewish bodies have been most helpful,” he admitted, “but the local Jewish leadership has been silent. Montgomery Jews want to bury their heads and repeat that it is not a Jewish problem, but it is a fight between the forces of justice and injustice and I want them to join with us on the side of justice.”⁹⁰

Several of Montgomery’s white religious congregations—Christian and Jewish alike—contained a small core of what is best described as “liberal segregationists.” These were whites who believed that economic and educational advancement for black people could coexist with segregation. They were far smaller in number than the conservative majority who were powerful enough to remove clergy whose ideas about white supremacy differed from their own. Clergymen who were removed as a result of supporting the *Brown* decision, the boycott or related incidents included Andrew Turnipseed of the Dexter Avenue Methodist Church, Tom Thrasher of the Episcopal Church of the Ascension, Ray Whatley of St. Mark’s Methodist Church, and Seymour Atlas of Congregation Agudath Israel.

Soft-spoken twenty-five-year-old Atlas arrived in Montgomery in 1946 to replace Rabbi Sam Lehrer who had served the Orthodox congregation for two years. The son of Rabbi Elias Atlas, and a seventh-generation rabbi, he was born in Greenville, Mississippi, and raised there and in Shreveport, Louisiana. In 1932 during the Depression his family had lived in New York for a short period of time, and Atlas later returned to study at the *Mesivta Torah Vodaath* in Brooklyn and then received ordination from a rabbinical seminary. He and his wife Beverly, a Lithuanian immigrant, loved the capital city. They believed it was a good place to raise their three children. The rabbi’s younger brother also lived with them and attended Huntingdon College in Cloverdale. This born and bred southern rabbi would ultimately

come into conflict with a congregation board less than half of whom were from the South.⁹¹

Agudath Israel was not a rich congregation, and Seymour and Beverly Atlas assumed many of the teaching and administrative functions that would ordinarily have been the responsibility of an associate. The membership was predominantly first and second generation retailers and wholesalers who, although not poor, were frugal, traditional, and patriarchal.⁹² They worried that their children were losing their sense of themselves as Jews. The public schools, for example, began their day with prayer and New Testament scripture readings, and Jewish children heard their schoolmates, even those from Beth Or, talk about Christmas trees and Easter eggs, and asked why they could not have those things. The parents' concerns were not assuaged by their rabbi who some believed was too Americanized himself.

Atlas did, in fact, understand southern mores better than he understood his congregation. He had grown up accepting segregation, and it was only as a young seminarian that he began to feel differently, a change he attributes to religious conviction. He had always been comfortable with black people, however, and in 1955 he shared his love for philosophical debate with his neighbor down the block, Martin Luther King, Jr. King asked Atlas to tutor him in Hebrew, and they worked together until the minister was able to read the Old Testament haltingly. On several occasions Atlas was invited to address King's Dexter Avenue congregation in their social hall.⁹³

Ironically during the third week of February 1956, at the height of the boycott, Brotherhood Week was being observed in Montgomery. Atlas, who was known to many of the black clergy because of his friendship with King, agreed to participate in an interfaith clergy panel discussion sponsored by WRMA, a black radio station. His partners were the Reverend L. Roy Bennett, president of the Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance and vice president of MIA, and Father Michael Caswell, a white Catholic priest who ran Our Lady of Mount Meigs mission and orphanage on the Atlanta Highway outside the city. Atlas was the only white clergyman from downtown Montgomery.

*Rabbi Seymour Atlas (r.) of Agudath Israel with (counterclockwise)
Reverend L. R. Bennett of Mount Zion A. M. E. Church and
Father Michael Caswell of Our Lady of Mount Meigs orphanage.
They are preparing to broadcast a discussion during
Brotherhood Week, 1956, on WRMA radio.
(Life, February 1, 1956. Courtesy of Time-Life Pictures.)*

Earlier that week a grand jury, invoking a little known and virtually never used state law against conspiracy, had indicted ninety of the boycott leaders, twenty-four of whom were ministers. Montgomery quickly filled with reporters from the national news media and the morning of the broadcast, Bennett was arrested. One of the journalists bailed him out, however, and delivered him to the WRMA station in time for the program. Although Bennett was rattled, he insisted that he felt no hatred for those who had arrested him. He pleaded with his overwhelmingly black radio audience to continue the protest in a dignified and non-violent fashion.

A *Life* magazine photographer snapped a picture of the three clergymen, Bennett, Caswell, and Atlas, sitting around the table in the studio, which ran on March 5, 1956, along with a picture of eighty of the indicted boycott leaders standing on the steps of the capitol.⁹⁴

Agudath Israel's president, Yale Friedlander, insisted that Atlas inform *Life's* editor that Brotherhood Week had nothing to do with the boycott and demand a retraction. The rabbi explained that he had not expressed support for the boycott and asked how he was supposed to retract a picture. The photograph of the three clergymen, he maintained, merely underlined their support of brotherhood.⁹⁵

During the following Sabbath service the rabbi "offered up a prayer for the success of the bus strike against racial segregation."⁹⁶ Subsequently he submitted his sermon title to the local papers as he normally did, and one of the typesetters called a synagogue trustee with a warning that his rabbi was planning to preach on "Social Integration."

On Sabbath morning all of the board members sat at the front of the synagogue waiting for the rabbi's message. This was an unusual occurrence since most opened their businesses on Saturday and did not attend regularly. According to the rabbi, "I was always outspoken against segregation." One of the board members had called him and begged him to change the topic since "all the KKK would be there and it would be bad for the Jews." Seeing the board present and knowing the reason for their attendance, Atlas "decided at the last minute to make a bunch of fools of them" and proceeded to talk about the social integration of the Jews and Arabs in Israel. International tensions had been building for weeks among the Egyptians, Israelis, British, and French over control of the Suez Canal. War appeared to be inevitable, and it came when Egypt nationalized the canal a few weeks later. But the lessons of modern history were lost on the trustees. Although the rabbi wrote, "They were quite taken by surprise and felt very little for having made such a commotion," the officers became even angrier because they felt he had purposely humiliated them. President Friedlander asked Atlas to submit the text of his sermons, articles,

and speeches not less than three days before they were to be delivered or published from that point forward. The rabbi refused.⁹⁷

Even as he resented the pressure that the officers were exerting on him, Atlas understood that they were fearful of being labeled "other," as the Jews of Europe had been and indeed African Americans were. White supremacy reminded them of the hated master race rhetoric of Nazism. Some responded with timidity, while others were determined to maintain their place in the community by becoming leaders of the WCC. Both Atlas and journalist Harry Golden, who wrote about the events immediately after they occurred, argued that the latter were under a delusion.

Journalist Pat Watters, who covered the civil rights movement for the *Atlanta Journal*, noted that, "one of the sadder phenomena across the South was the figure of the lonely fearful Jew who sought to out-bigot his white neighbors, not merely a member, but a leader, often, in the Citizen's Councils."⁹⁸ Retail executive Les Weinstein, a devout member of Agudath Israel, a tireless fundraiser for St. Jude's Children's Hospital, and a friend of Atlas, was an early WCC volunteer. He apparently experienced no conflict between any sense of religious morality and his conviction of black inferiority. Weinstein argued that states had a constitutional right to mandate segregated public education. Ultimately, he was appointed to the WCC Board of Directors.⁹⁹ This issue of racial segregation divided both the congregation and individual families. While prominent retailers like Bert Klein and Myer Sigal publicly defended segregated schools, Klein's sister, Ella Swartz, joined the biracial Fellowship of the Concerned, which worked to keep the public schools open.¹⁰⁰ Another trustee who had recently joined the WCC reminded Atlas that Rabbi Goldstein had ruined his career over the Scottsboro case and advised Atlas to restore his credibility by joining the organization.¹⁰¹ Dr. Irving London, the immediate past president who had been raised in Brooklyn and was close to Atlas, continued to counsel him to be reasonable. While it is true that many educated, influential, and even religious people were WCC members, Atlas refused to join. The boycott, he argued, was not the issue. He would not take any

side, particularly one that advocated supremacy over African Americans. At this point London became impatient with the rabbi's unwillingness to distance himself from the issue which many believed would hurt the entire congregation. Some of the officers determined to force him out. A rumor circulated that Atlas had accepted a position with the NAACP, and some argued that as a Hebrew teacher at Etz Ahayem, Beverly Atlas competed with him and his congregation and thus her position constituted a conflict of interest.¹⁰² Atlas requested that his future be put to a full congregational vote. He was sure that he had substantial support among the membership and would be affirmed.

During this period, Agudath Israel came to terms with the fact that it was an Orthodox congregation in name only. Members conducted business and drove their cars on the Sabbath, prayers were offered in English, and it was virtually impossible to keep a kosher kitchen in Montgomery. The congregation passed a resolution to formally adopt the Conservative ritual, and Golden identified the congregation as Conservative shortly after Atlas' departure. The man who replaced Atlas was a Conservative rabbi. Neither the rabbi nor his critics point to the change as a factor in the non-renewal of his contract or his departure. Despite the impending change, Atlas wanted to stay, and many members wanted him to continue although others recommended that he remain only as a Hebrew school-teacher.

Be that as it may, exercising its prerogative in executive session, the board voted twenty-seven to one against renewing his contract. The lone dissenter was London.¹⁰³ Later London maintained that the vote for non-renewal took place before the radio broadcast, that it had nothing to do with the rabbi's position on civil rights, and that the board's decision was ratified by the congregation. Atlas disagreed and believed that it was directly related to his outspoken stance. He wrote that he had been outspoken even before the boycott and that he "was on the side of justice and too outspoken in behalf of the Negro."¹⁰⁴ Regardless of the reasons for non-renewal, Atlas and the board negotiated a settlement for

the remainder of his contract after nine and one-half years of service clearly because of the civil rights incidents. Atlas left Montgomery with his wife, their seven- and five-year-old daughters, and two-year-old son. He went to Miami for a few weeks. While there, he was called to the pulpit of B'nai Shalom in Bristol, Virginia. The person who took Atlas' place on the pulpit entered into a "gentlemen's understanding" promising not "to force my position on them through the pulpit and in speeches to the community" although he opposed segregation.¹⁰⁵ From the Bristol pulpit Atlas went to Birmingham where his new congregants were warned by their Montgomery neighbors concerning the rabbi's "penchant for activism." The Birmingham community sent a committee to investigate and realized that what they had been told was erroneous.

Before the bus boycott, Atlas had been one of the most respected members of the city's Jewish community, and Gene Blachschleger of Temple Beth Or was one of his closest friends. Blachschleger was a gradualist on the subject of integration. He believed that justice would eventually come, but that provocations like the boycott only encouraged segregationist violence, and he was very fearful of violence. He assured his own board that "I make no public pronouncements on the subject of desegregation either from my pulpit or in the columns of our daily press. . . . [If] Martin Luther King passed me on the street I would not recognize him. . . . We have never spoken to each other."¹⁰⁶

Like many southern rabbis, Blachschleger was deeply concerned that endorsement of the *Brown* decision and the boycott by the national Jewish organizations were making southern Jews the targets of agitated segregationists. In spring 1956, he requested that the Commission on Social Action of the Union of Hebrew Congregations send a representative to Montgomery to study the situation and consider the damage that was being done. Albert Vorspan, executive secretary of the commission, accepted the invitation.

Vorspan spent several weeks visiting Deep South cities and speaking with rabbis, members of Jewish congregations, and businessmen. He was in Montgomery almost a week, and

on April 24 submitted a confidential report to the commission noting that

[In] the more embattled communities like Montgomery . . . there is genuine fear, sometimes based on hard realities, sometimes based on hysterical, almost paranoid, reaction. [They] do not talk of the dangerous anti-Semitic potential; they feel that they have already been harmed by the statements and actions of Jewish organizations nationally and locally. They believe that the Jewish leadership, by identifying the Jewish community with anti-segregation has coupled Jew and Negro in the public mind and thus are bringing down upon the Jewish community the fanatical and powerful hatreds of the communities as a whole. Many of these people are essentially assimilationist and are fully integrated into the business and civic life of the general community. They obviously feel deeply threatened when they are singled out and set against the deeply-held prevailing sentiments of the community.

They argue that they are not 'expendable' and they bitterly resent the fact that they are committed in this struggle by the American Jewish Congress, the American Jewish Committee and the ADL and other national Jewish bodies. Their claim that they are fully accepted and 'secure' in the community is of course refuted by the agonizing anxiety as to the loss of their status, prestige and business.¹⁰⁷

Vorspan clearly understood the problem and was able to recognize the seldom stated but long held fear that Jewish acceptance by Montgomery's gentiles had always been conditional. Despite Vorspan's report, however, on June 22, Dr. Maurice Eisendrath, president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, praised the boycott in the *National Jewish Post* as "the most radiant example of religion in action," and charged that "hardly a single white Christian clergyman or rabbi in Montgomery dared to raise his voice on behalf of the sublimely courageous group led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr."¹⁰⁸

On August 9 the Beth Or board resolved to contact Eisendrath and confront him about the "veiled remarks he cast against our rabbi." Myron Rothschild volunteered to write a letter on behalf of the congregation. Rothschild assured Eisendrath that "our

rabbi throughout has acted in good conscience and has certainly carried out the wishes and feelings of his congregation." There is no record of Eisendrath's response in the Beth Or archives. Given the circumstances, Blachschleger concluded painfully that he could not publicly support his friend, Seymour Atlas.

Leslie Dunbar, director of the Southern Regional Council from 1959 to 1965, has observed, "It is difficult to convey to persons who did not live in the South during [the 1950s] a feeling of how it was. The difficulty would be greater had not all the country experienced the ravages of McCarthyism. Imagine the emotional and political atmosphere of the McCarthy days intensified many times and compressed within a single region."¹⁰⁹

On February 1, 1956, Rosa Parks' NAACP attorney, twenty-five-year-old Fred Gray, petitioned the federal district court for a declaratory ruling on whether Montgomery's Jim Crow bus ordinances violated the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution. After two months of unproductive negotiating, the MIA decided to go the distance and petition for full integration, something that had not been one of their original demands.

On June 5, 1956, on a special panel of judges appointed to hear the case, U.S. District Judges Frank Johnson and Seybourn Lynne, and Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals Judge Richard Rives, all native Alabamians, ruled on the petition. Although the Supreme Court had not considered the constitutionality of segregated local transportation, Judges Johnson and Rives, in an opinion written by Rives, who had lived in Montgomery his entire life, held that "the statutes requiring segregation of the white and colored races on a common carrier violate the due process and equal protection of the law clauses of the Fourteenth Amendment." Judge Lynne dissented, arguing that the Supreme Court never intended *Brown* to be applied outside public education. Segregationists were stunned. It was inconceivable to them that two native Alabama judges could deliver this ruling, which they immediately appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court. When the judges' decision was affirmed on November 13, 1956, rage was inflamed throughout the state.

In the end, how Jews reacted or failed to react to preserving segregation made little difference in how they were treated. Apoplectic segregationists, unable to break the back of the boycott, demanded scapegoats. Northern Jews, whom they had associated with communism since the Scottsboro days, filled the bill, and southern Jews became guilty by association. They suffered even in Montgomery where Jew and gentile had worked side by side for over 150 years.

The proud Deep South city could not accept the ramifications of the boycott's success when on December 21, 1956, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Ralph Abernathy boarded a bus for the first time in 381 days. Two years later, the MIA brought suit in federal court to desegregate the municipal parks. On January 1, 1959, the city commissioners responded by closing all fourteen of them. The Oak Park Zoo was shut down, the animals were sold, and the Bell Street swimming pool was filled with cement. That summer, Montgomery joined Tuscaloosa, Gadsden, and Selma in permitting the Ku Klux Klan to post welcome signs at its city limits. The local Klavern raised an eight-foot circular billboard on U.S. Route 31 featuring a line drawing of a white robed Klansman rearing up on a fully robed horse and waving a blazing cross in his right hand. "Capital City Klaverns Welcomes You" was printed underneath him. By that time in Montgomery, the Invisible Empire had displaced the WCC, which was in disgrace for its inability to break the boycott.

Bitter segregationists railed that blacks were too poor and too disorganized to have sustained a year-long boycott on their own and must have been organized and bankrolled by someone else. In July 1958, Dan Wakefield of the *Nation* interviewed South Carolina State Senator Edward McCue, a leader of the Defenders of State Sovereignty and Individual Liberties. "Of course we know this whole [integration] thing is being aided and abetted by the Communists and the Jews," McCue told him.

The Communists want to mongrelize the race—weaken and conquer; and the Jews, they're so clannish, they want it so that they will end up being the only pure white race left. . . . We don't

want any trouble down here, but boy, you haven't seen trouble compared to what there'll be if integration starts.¹¹⁰

Between November 1957 and October 1958, synagogues were bombed in Atlanta, Nashville, Jacksonville, and Birmingham, communities where school integration was being attempted.

In Montgomery, Rear Admiral (ret.) John Crommelin, an antisemitic zealot, active in both the WCC and the Klan, led the charge. A World War II naval air hero, Crommelin had been involved in the 1949 "revolt of the admirals" against unification of the armed forces under a civilian secretary of defense. After leaking confidential Navy memoranda to the press, he was charged with "faithlessness" and "insubordination" by the Navy and discharged on March 15, 1950. Unable to accept personal responsibility for the loss of his commission, he blamed Jews and communist subversives in the Truman administration.¹¹¹

"The biggest lie of all is the claim that the modern Jew is a white man," Crommelin wrote. He maintained that Jews were not entitled to white privilege because of their "race-mixing" tendencies and manipulation of black leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. The Jewish "master plan," he insisted, "[is] to create a mulatto race through integration, eliminate the privileged legal status of whites, and become the master race with headquarters in the state of Israel and in the United Nations."¹¹² He spilled his venom in the States Rights' Party newsletter, *The Thunderbolt: The White Man's Viewpoint*, via his monthly column, "Jews in the News." Crommelin maintained that blacks would have remained content with segregation if they had not been brainwashed by Jews. "The Negro is the malarial germ," he wrote, "but the Jew is the mosquito."¹¹³

In 1959, Harold Fleming, executive director of the Southern Regional Council, observed that "Montgomery represents an inflamed situation where racial tension has been accompanied by overt appeals to anti-Semitism; I gather that feelings of insecurity and anxiety in the Jewish community are accordingly greater there than in most Southern cities."¹¹⁴

Although the majority of Montgomery's moderate Jews and gentiles never resisted segregation in meaningful numbers, some made cash donations (since checks could be traced) to the MIA, the Negro Voters' League, and the local NAACP.¹¹⁵ These residents hoped against hope for a painless solution to a painful crisis. South Carolina journalist William D. Workman, Jr., assured them that they were chasing shadows.

The well intentioned peacemakers of the North and South who counsel 'moderation' embody a basic flaw in their reasoning: There is no basis for compromise for those, on both sides of the issue, who think in terms of principle alone. Philosophically, the matter of integration, like that of pregnancy leaves no middle ground. Segregation and integration are absolutes.¹¹⁶

In 1967, a near-distraught Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., pointed out that "there are Jews in the South who have not been anything like our allies in the civil rights struggle, and have gone out of their way to consort with the perpetrators of the status quo. I saw this both in Albany, Georgia, and in Montgomery, Alabama."¹¹⁷ Jews, it would seem, were to be held to a higher standard. Rabbi Charles Mantinband, who served a Florence, Alabama, Reform congregation from 1946 to 1952 and, later, Hattiesburg, Mississippi's Temple B'nai Israel, wrote wistfully:

[Life] can be very placid and gracious in this part of the country—if one runs with the herd. The South is turbulent and sullen and sometimes noisy, but there is a conspiracy of silence in respectable middle class society. Sensitive souls with vision and the courage of the Hebrew prophets are drowned out. Timid souls, complacent and indifferent seldom articulate their protests.¹¹⁸

In the end Montgomery, Alabama, had not proved to be very different after all. Although Jewish responses to segregation and racism ran the spectrum from heroic integrationists to ardent segregationists, the environment and choices people made contributed to the general pattern of silence and acquiescence.

NOTES

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¹ For the historiography, see Mark K. Bauman and Berkley Kalin, ed., *The Quiet Voices: Southern Rabbis and Black Civil Rights* (Tuscaloosa, AL, 1997); Clive Webb, *Fight Against Fear: Southern Jews and Black Civil Rights* (Athens, GA, 2001); Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, *Troubling the Waters: Black-Jewish Relations in the American Century* (Princeton, NJ, 2006); Eric Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton, NJ, 2006).

² Daniel Weinfeld, "Samuel Fleishman: Tragedy in Reconstruction-Era Florida," *Southern Jewish History* 8 (2005): 32.

³ Allen C. Brownfeld, "Reform Judaism Is Abandoning Its Universalist Roots and Embracing Jewish Nationalism," *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs* (October/November 1999): 83-88.

⁴ For background on the Lehman family see Elliott Ashkenazi, "Jewish Commercial Interests between North and South: The Case of the Lehmans and the Seligmans," *American Jewish Archives* 43 (Spring-Summer, 1991): 25-39.

⁵ Jacob Rader Marcus, *United States Jewry, 1776-1985* (Detroit, 1989), 586; James Hagy, *This Happy Land* (Tuscaloosa, AL, 1993).

⁶ Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Montgomery County, Alabama.

⁷ See Temple Beth Or, *The First One Hundred Years of Kahl Montgomery* (Montgomery, AL, 1952) and Temple Beth Or, *One Hundred Fifty Years of Kahl Montgomery, 1858-2000* (Montgomery, AL, 2000).

⁸ "Churches of Montgomery: Kahl Montgomery," *Montgomery Daily Advertiser*, July 2, 1871.

⁹ Robert Rosen, *Jewish Confederates* (Columbia, SC, 2000), 25-31.

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¹⁰² Rabbi Seymour Atlas to Bob Lupo, *National Jewish Post and Opinion*, June 9, 1957.

¹⁰³ Dr. Irving London to Harry Golden, May 27, 1957, Golden Papers, box 4, folder 26.

¹⁰⁴ Seymour Atlas to Bob Lupo, June 9, 1957, Golden Papers.

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