

Sussex Research

Closing Ranks: Montgomery Jews and civil rights, 1954–1960

Clive Webb

Publication date

01-12-1998

Licence

This work is made available under the **Copyright not evaluated** licence and should only be used in accordance with that licence. For more information on the specific terms, consult the repository record for this item.

Document Version

Published version

Citation for this work (American Psychological Association 7th edition)

Webb, C. (1998). *Closing Ranks: Montgomery Jews and civil rights, 1954–1960* (Version 1). University of Sussex. <https://hdl.handle.net/10779/uos.23367608.v1>

Published in

Journal of American Studies

Copyright and reuse:

This work was downloaded from Sussex Research Open (SRO). This document is made available in line with publisher policy and may differ from the published version. Please cite the published version where possible. Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners unless otherwise stated. For more information on this work, SRO or to report an issue, you can contact the repository administrators at sro@sussex.ac.uk. Discover more of the University's research at <https://sussex.figshare.com/>

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS



Closing Ranks: Montgomery Jews and Civil Rights, 1954-1960

Author(s): Clive Webb

Source: *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 3, Part 1 (Dec., 1998), pp. 463-481

Published by: [Cambridge University Press](#) on behalf of the [British Association for American Studies](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27556479>

Accessed: 23/06/2014 11:23

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Cambridge University Press and British Association for American Studies are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Journal of American Studies*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Closing Ranks: Montgomery Jews and Civil Rights, 1954–1960

CLIVE WEBB

The arrest of Rosa Parks on 1 December 1955 provided the spark which ignited the long smouldering resentments of black Montgomerians. For 381 days they waged a boycott of the city bus lines, frustrating the opposition of white authorities and financially crippling the local transit company. More profoundly it resulted in a Supreme Court decision outlawing segregation on public transportation. Equally momentous was the emergence of the man who would serve as the spiritual figurehead of the civil rights movement: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

In the wake of the Montgomery bus boycott, one national black newspaper acclaimed King as “Alabama’s Modern Moses.” Since the darkest days of slavery African-Americans had sought spiritual salvation by comparing their own condition to that of God’s Chosen People, the Israelites of the Old Testament. Throughout their years of enslavement they prayed for the Moses who would deliver them from their suffering unto the Promised Land. During the boycott, the black citizens of Montgomery had similarly sustained their morale by singing the old slave spirituals, raising their voices at the nightly mass meetings in rousing renditions of “Go Down Moses, Way Down in Egypt Land.” “As sure as Moses got the children of Israel across the Red Sea,” King exhorted the black community, “we can stick together and win.” Others too drew the analogy between the historical experience of Jews and the contemporary predicament of African-Americans. Looking back on the boycott, white liberal activist Virginia Durr evoked the spectre of Nazi Germany in describing the strength of racist opposition.¹

Clive Webb is a Lecturer in American History in the Department of History, University of Reading, Whiteknights, P.O. Box 218, Reading RG6 6AA.

¹ Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, eds., *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s* (London: Vintage, 1995), 30, 28; Howell

Ironically the parallel between the centuries of suffering endured by African-Americans and Jews was lost on one group of people. During the long, bitter struggle against segregation, the Jewish community in Montgomery acquiesced with the authorities in opposing the boycott. "Montgomery Jews want to bury their heads," asserted King, "and repeat that it is not a Jewish problem. I want to go on record, and agree that it is not a Jewish problem, but it is a fight between the forces of justice and injustice. I want them to join with us on the side of justice."²

King expressed disappointment with the response of whites in general. He was however especially frustrated at the failure of Jews to assist the cause. Jews had suffered untold discrimination across the globe and down through the centuries. Their perseverance in the face of extreme prejudice had served as an inspiration to blacks suffering under the Jim Crow system. It was expected that they would show more sensitivity than other whites towards the boycott. As noted by the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council, "Negroes see Jews in the South as part of the hostile white community, yet as members of a minority group, from whom a measure of support for Negro aspirations should consequently be forthcoming. Because such support is less than expected, the hostility toward all whites is augmented in the case of Jews by an added measure of resentment." Some of this resentment was expressed by King himself. As he wrote to one Jewish activist: "I think we all have to admit, that there are Jews in the South who have gone out of their way to consort with the perpetrators of the status quo. I saw this in both Montgomery, Alabama and Albany, Georgia."³

How then do we account for the hostility of Montgomery Jews? The historian David Chappell has recently analysed white reaction to the bus boycott. His study reveals that despite initial uncertainty the white community soon stood in collective opposition to desegregation. The small minority of dissenters were silenced by fear of the majority.⁴ It is the

Raines, *My Soul Is Rested: Movement Days in the Deep South Remembered* (New York: Penguin, 1983), 56.

² William S. Malev, "The Jew of the South in the Conflict on Segregation," *Conservative Judaism*, 13:1 (Fall 1958), 45.

³ Martin Luther King, Jr. to Rabbi Jacob M. Rothschild, 28 Sept. 1967, Box 8, Folder 1, Jacob M. Rothschild Papers, 1933–85, Special Collections Department, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University, Atlanta; National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council, Joint Program Plan, 1960–61, 15, National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council Papers, New York.

⁴ David L. Chappell, *Inside Agitators: White Southerners in the Civil Rights Movement* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 62, 69–71.

intention of this article to assess whether or not Jews were among the liberal faction forced under duress to dissociate themselves from the boycott. A specific case study of Montgomery reveals that the Jewish community was indeed concerned more with self-preservation than with the morality of the boycott. As will be seen, however, it also reveals some more unpleasant truths.

These truths provide a further dimension to the continuing debate about the relationship between African-Americans and Jews. Since the 1960s, scholars have produced a substantial literature on this subject. The overwhelming concern of such studies has been to trace the formation and eventual fracturing of a supposed political alliance between the two peoples. This alliance is alleged to have reached its apotheosis during the civil rights demonstrations of the early- to mid-1960s, but to have collapsed under the strain of the black separatist movement in the latter part of that decade.⁵

In recent years, revisionist historians have challenged conventional notions about the relationship between African-Americans and Jews. Serious doubts have been cast upon the strength and cohesion of the alliance. In particular, questions have been asked as to whether those Jews who immersed themselves in the civil rights struggle drew their motivation from their distinctive ethnic and religious identity or were simply part of a broader white liberal movement.⁶

This article offers a further dimension to the revisionist argument. The existing studies on the relationship between African-Americans and Jews have focused almost entirely upon cosmopolitan northern cities such as New York and Chicago. The interaction between the two peoples in the

⁵ As Jack Salzman observes in the introduction to the latest anthology on this subject: "There was a time, not even so long ago, that 'Grand Alliance' would have been a more appropriate title for a volume devoted to the relationship between African Americans and American Jews." Salzman, "Struggles in the Promised Land," in Jack Salzman and Cornel West, eds., *Struggles in the Promised Land: Toward a History of Black-Jewish Relations in the United States* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1. This theme is also explored in, among others, the following works: Paul Berman, ed., *Blacks and Jews: Alliances and Arguments* (New York: Delacorte, 1994); Murray Friedman, *What Went Wrong? The Creation & Collapse of the Black-Jewish Alliance* (New York: Free Press, 1995); Jonathan Kaufman, *Broken Alliance: The Turbulent Times Between Blacks and Jews in America* (New York: Mentor, 1988); Michael Lerner, *Blacks and Jews: Let the Healing Begin* (New York: Putnam, 1995); Robert G. Weisbord and Arthur Stein, *Bittersweet Encounter: The Afro-American and the American Jew* (Westport, Conn.: Negro Universities Press, 1970).

⁶ The revisionist interpretation can be found in Leonard Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 197–227. See also Salzman, 5, 8–9.

southern states has, in contrast, received relatively little attention.⁷ This has been a crucial omission. Closer scrutiny of the response of southern Jews to the desegregation crisis provides a contrasting perspective to the prevailing orthodoxy on black–Jewish relations. “The Jew in the South does not consider this problem on the simple basis of being either for or against the elimination of racial segregation,” once observed the journalist Harry Golden. “In fact the Jew in the South rarely thinks at all in terms of the Negro.”⁸ An examination of events in Montgomery not only challenges assumptions about the character of the political alliance between the two peoples, but questions its very existence.

Jews first settled in Montgomery during the early nineteenth century. Not until June 1852 were there sufficient numbers to organize a formal congregation, Kahl Montgomery. It was a further eleven years before construction work was completed on Temple Beth-Or. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Jewish community in Montgomery grew and diversified. By the 1950s, there were three different congregations. In addition to those who worshipped at the Reform temple Beth-Or were the Conservative congregation Agudath Israel and the smaller Sephardic congregation Etz Ayahem. Together these congregations included 1200 individuals, in a city with an overall population of 130,000.⁹

Despite the paucity of their numbers, Jews exerted a considerable influence in Montgomery, especially in economic affairs. Jewish names such as Weil, Cohen, and Klein figured prominently on the shop fronts in the downtown area. The president of the Chamber of Commerce, Max Baum, was also Jewish. Baum was but the latest Jew to hold high office in Montgomery: as early as the 1870s, Mordecai Moses had been elected mayor of the city.¹⁰ Such accomplishments reflected the sound relationship between Jews and Gentiles in the city. In 1952 Congregation Kahl

⁷ Salzman, 13. *Struggles in the Promised Land* is the first volume on the subject of black–Jewish relations to devote substantial attention to the southern states. See the articles by David Brion Davis, Jason H. Silverman, and Deborah Dash Moore. The most comprehensive analysis of the relationship between Jews and African–Americans in the South is provided in Mark K. Bauman and Berkley Kalin, eds., *The Quiet Voices: Southern Rabbis and Black Civil Rights, 1880s to 1990s* (Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 1997).

⁸ Harry Golden, *Only in America* (New York: PermaBooks, 1959), 126. A similar line of argument is adopted in Leonard Dinnerstein, “Southern Jewry and the Desegregation Crisis, 1954–1970,” *American Jewish Historical Quarterly*, 62:3 (1973), 232–33.

⁹ *The First 100 Years of Kahl Montgomery* (Montgomery: Paragon Press, 1952); *American Jewish Year Book* (1955), 177.

¹⁰ Louis Schmier, ed., *Reflections of Southern Jewry: The Letters of Charles Wessolowsky, 1878–1879* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1982), 72.

Montgomery had celebrated its hundredth anniversary. The event elicited warm congratulations from such dignitaries as Mayor William Gayle and Governor Gordon Persons.

The outbreak of the bus boycott only three years later suddenly threatened to destabilize the Jewish community. Although Montgomery Jews refrained from any involvement in the escalating struggle over civil rights, they were alarmed at the actions of their co-religionists in other parts of the country. Northern Jews had played a conspicuous role in the civil rights movement ever since the establishment of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1910. Among the signatories of the original NAACP charter were a number of elite German Jews: Dr. Henry Moskowitz, Mrs. Lilian Wald, and Rabbis Emil Hirsch and Stephen S. Wise. Five years after the formation of the NAACP, another Jew, Dr. Joel E. Spingarn, was elected chairman of the Board of Directors. Although originally established with the singular purpose of protecting the civil liberties of American Jews, defence agencies such as the Anti-Defamation League and American Jewish Committee had by the 1940s also begun to lend their active support to the black cause.¹¹

It was therefore little surprise that Jewish civic, religious, and political organisations throughout the North should have championed the Supreme Court decision of May 1954. Evidence of the psychological damage suffered by black children in segregated schools was provided by both the American Jewish Committee and American Jewish Congress. The Anti-Defamation League had acted as a friend of the court in support of the NAACP. After the Court had upheld the plaintiffs' case, an ecstatic Henry Schultz, national chairman of the ADL, informed reporters that the decision "will wipe out the anachronistic 'separate but equal' doctrine that has been nothing more than a legal cover for the imposition of second-class status on millions of Negro citizens. The people of the South, white and Negro, will be the better for it."¹²

The Montgomery bus boycott received equally enthusiastic support

¹¹ Jack Salzman et al., eds., *Bridges and Boundaries: African Americans and American Jews* (New York: George Braziller, 1992), 193, 196; John P. Roche, *The Quest for the Dream* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 134. The American Jewish Committee (AJC) was founded in 1906 by a group of wealthy German Jews. Appalled at the suffering of Russian Jews during the Tsarist pogroms, its members sought to combat anti-Semitism at home and abroad. The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) was established in 1914. Its objective was the elimination of anti-Semitic literature within the United States. A third Jewish defence agency, the American Jewish Congress (AJC) appeared in 1917. In contrast to the other agencies, the Congress was dominated by Eastern European Jews. Unlike the ADL and AJC, it also lacked any significant southern membership, and therefore avoided the sectional infighting that plagued the other two organizations.

¹² *Southern Israelite*, 28 May 1954.

from northern Jews. Jews made significant donations to the MIA.¹³ Their public expressions of sympathy emphasised the morality of the black cause and the dignity and determination of the boycotters themselves. This was never more true than during the Passover festivities of 1956. Passover commemorates the emancipation of the ancient Hebrews from their enforced servitude in Egypt. In the words of one rabbi, it is “a celebration of the spiritual idea of freedom.” In the minds of many national Jewish leaders, the bus boycott in Montgomery was a potent expression of the struggle for human liberty. Mrs. Moise Cahn, president of the National Council of Jewish Women, urged greater effort on the part of every citizen to “ensure equal justice” for African-Americans. In an effort to destroy the morale of the boycotters the Montgomery police had resorted to tactics of intimidation and unfair arrest. On 26 January, Martin Luther King had himself been imprisoned after an alleged speeding offence. In his Passover address, Rabbi William Rosenblum of New York asserted that the conviction of the MIA president “emphasises some of the amazing contradictions upon which the American people and the world should ponder.” After the bomb attacks on the homes of both King and fellow MIA activist E. D. Nixon, the Chicago Rabbinical Association similarly issued a resolution denouncing as “treasonable” any act of violence intended to undermine the integration process. The Association proclaimed 28 March a day of prayer for “the harassed Negroes of Montgomery, Ala.”¹⁴

Montgomery Jews responded with extreme indignation to the intervention of their northern co-religionists in the integration struggle. Harsh reprisals were exacted against the defence agencies. Membership subscriptions were cancelled. Donations dried up. The Jewish Federation of Montgomery in particular resorted to financial blackmail, threatening the cancellation of its annual financial contribution to its national organization, in an effort to silence public support of desegregation. According to the sociologist Joshua Fishman, the Anti-Defamation League was similarly “plagued” with “resignations and protests.”¹⁵

Nor were Montgomery Jews alone in expressing their concern at the involvement of the organization in the racial crisis. One weekend in late October 1957, members of the ADL national executive committee met with representatives from five Alabama cities in an effort to address their

¹³ Kaufman, *Broken Alliance*, 63.

¹⁴ *New York Times*, 24 Mar. 1956, 17; 25 Mar. 1956, 58; *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 24 Mar. 1956, Pt. 2, 12.

¹⁵ Will Maslow, “My Brother’s Keeper... Negro–Jewish Relations in the United States,” *World Jewry*, 1:2 (1958), 5; Joshua A. Fishman, “Southern City,” *Midstream*, 7:3 (Summer 1961), 42.

escalating alarm. The opinions of the Alabama officials carried sufficient weight that a compromise proposal was agreed: "Whenever any public action shall be contemplated by the ADL affecting a regional constituency, such action shall be taken only after consultation with such regional constituency; in any public action by the ADL, full consideration be given to the welfare and best interest of all Jews throughout the country, including those who reside in the region affected."¹⁶

Similar turmoil was suffered by the American Jewish Committee. In 1958 the organization called an emergency meeting to discuss its role in the civil rights movement. The meeting had been forced upon the Committee by the actions of the Montgomery Jewish Federation. Its members had the previous year threatened to shut off all funds to their parent organization unless the AJC reconsidered its involvement in the integration struggle. The AJC had initially attempted to call the bluff of their blackmailers. The Federation, however, was not bluffing. In May 1957 its members proceeded to cancel their annual financial allocation to the Committee. Tempers had not subsided by the time AJC delegates met in New Orleans. Montgomery businessman Leonel Weil seized the occasion to castigate the national executive for its failure to consult openly with southern members. Concerned to end the internecine squabbling, AJC officials agreed in similar terms to the ADL compromise that they would seek the opinions of their southern members before engaging in any future civil rights activity.¹⁷

What provoked such hostility towards the national defence agencies? The answer was more than a minor dispute over the unilateral manner in which northern officials determined tactics. Indeed the determining factor was fear. The involvement of Jewish organizations in the integration struggle had fuelled the fevered imaginations of conspiracy theorists across the American South. Racial segregation operated on the assumption

¹⁶ Herbert R. Moulitz, Report 1957–58 [15 Mar. 1958], Box 1, Folder 2, Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith Records, 1946–82, The Amistad Research Center at Tulane University.

¹⁷ Will Maslow, "Negro-Jewish Relations in the United States," Gen-10, 56–61, Box 257: Race Relations: Negroes, American Jewish Committee Papers, Yivo Institute for Jewish Research, New York; Richard Yaffe, "Negro Integration and Jews in the South," *Israel Horizons*, 6:6 (June–July 1958), 30; Leonel Weil to Charles J. Bloch, 16 Jan. 1959, Box 19, Folder 91, Charles J. Bloch Papers, Macon, Georgia Public Library. American Jewish Committee member Cecil Alexander similarly recalls a regional meeting of the organization at which Montgomery Jews spoke openly against any further entanglement in the race issue. Alexander, who was actively involved in the integration of his native Atlanta, was criticized for "exposing" Jews in less cosmopolitan cities including Montgomery. Cecil Alexander, interview with author, 13 Nov. 1993.

that African-Americans accepted unquestioningly their status as second-class citizens. When blacks began to mobilize themselves into a mass-based protest movement, many whites therefore became suspicious. Unwilling to accept that African-Americans possessed either the ability or the incentive to attack Jim Crow, they searched for the troublemakers who had secretly stirred racial unrest in the South, and were now manipulating the situation to their own political advantage. This search often led segregationists to the national offices of the Jewish defence agencies. As one newspaper suggested, white supremacists were increasingly of the opinion “that the South’s problem – its implacable enemy – is not the Negro but the Northern Jew.”¹⁸

As this quotation would suggest, even hard-line segregationists were often able to distinguish between northern and southern Jews. It would not be long however before the actions of the national organizations tarred all Jews with the same brush. In the ominous words of one southern writer, “The Hebrew who draws criticism upon himself draws it likewise upon Jews everywhere.”¹⁹

In the face of such scarcely veiled threats, it was little surprise that Montgomery Jews should seek to dissociate themselves from the national defence agencies. During a field trip to Alabama in the fall of 1961, Benjamin Muse of the Southern Regional Council met with a number of Jewish leaders, amongst them Montgomery businessman Eugene Heilpern. A man “of liberal convictions,” Heilpern had been intimidated into silence by the spread of anti-Semitism. During his conversation with Muse he handed over a leaflet circulated by the White Citizens’ Council “which combined rank anti-Semitism with its anti-Negro message.” Heilpern was in no doubt as to who was to blame for the deteriorating political situation. As Muse remarked in his report, Heilpern was “in controversy with National Jewish groups” and in particular the ADL, whom he believed were “jeopardizing” the security of Jews in Alabama.²⁰

In a determined effort to counter the damage done by the national defence agencies, Montgomery Jews constructed an impenetrable wall of silence around themselves. Their fears were by no means unfounded. Between November 1957 and October 1958, terrorists launched a series of

¹⁸ Harry Golden and Julian Scheer, “Southern Jews and Segregation: Development of attitudes and actions regarding a cardinal issue,” *Jewish Life*, 10:7 (May 1956), 26; *Presbyterian Outlook*, 27 Oct. 1958.

¹⁹ William D. Workman, Jr., *The Case for the South* (New York: The Devin-Adair Company, 1959), 119, 223.

²⁰ Benjamin Muse, confidential memorandum of 18 Oct. 1961, “Alabama: September 15–17 and October 2–5,” Series I, Reel 56, Document 1842, 1954, Southern Regional Council Papers, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Atlanta University.

bomb attacks on synagogues across the South. Three temples were destroyed. A further three survived only when the dynamite failed to explode.²¹

Montgomery escaped any such incident. Indeed there was reason to be optimistic that the forces of massive resistance in Alabama would not target Jews. Reports broke in March 1956 that an ideological rift had torn the Alabama Citizens' Council in two. The ultra-segregationist Asa Carter had been expelled from the Alabama White Citizens' Council for inviting anti-Semitic speakers to recruitment drives, and demanding that Jews be removed from the organization's membership roster. His newly formed North Alabama Citizens' Council excluded anyone who did not "believe in the divinity of Jesus Christ," underlining the message by including in its journal "an attack on the 'Hadassah newsletter' for picturing a Negro and white child together." Horrified that this might endow the movement with a reputation for reckless fanaticism rather than responsible leadership, other members had established their own Central Alabama Citizens' Council. According to its initial press release, this latter group was "not interested in religious bias or prejudice," but "concerned only in maintaining segregation." Anti-Semitism indeed proved to be a major fault-line between the Citizens' Councils and more extreme segregationist groups. When the National Citizens' Council held its annual convention in Montgomery in August 1958 it elected Roy Harris as its president. Harris was equally concerned not to allow accusations of anti-Semitism to undermine the respectability of the Citizens' Councils. In his words, "anti-Jews would ruin the meeting." In a similar move, the Montgomery County Citizens' Council deplored anti-Semitism in the pages of its monthly journal, the *States Rights Advocate*.²²

Expulsion from the ranks of the Citizens' Council was none the less not enough to silence the anti-Semitic extremists. Hate groups seized upon the

²¹ Jackson Toby, "Bombing in Nashville: A Jewish Center and the Desegregation Struggle," *Commentary*, 25:5 (May 1958), 385-89; Nathan Perlmutter, "Bombing in Miami: Anti-Semitism and the Segregationists," *Commentary*, 25:6 (June 1958), 498-503; Arnold Shankman, "A Temple Is Bombed - Atlanta, 1958," *American Jewish Archives*, 23:2 (Nov. 1971), 125-53; *National Jewish Post and Opinion*, 29 Nov. 1957; Murray Friedman, "Postscript to an Act of Violence," *ADL Bulletin*, 15:6 (June 1958), 5; *Birmingham Post-Herald*, 29 Apr. 1958.

²² *New York Times*, 6 Mar. 1956; Neil R. McMillen, *The Citizens' Council: Organized Resistance to the Second Reconstruction, 1954-64* (Urbana, Chicago, London: University of Illinois Press, 1971), 49-50; Arnold Forster, "The South: New Field for an Old Game," *ADL Bulletin*, 15:8 (Oct. 1958), 1; George Thayer, *The Farther Shores of Politics: The American Political Fringe Today* (London: Allen Lane, 1968), 113-14; Arthur J. Levin, "Since the Supreme Court Decision," *ADL Bulletin*, 15:6 (June 1958), 6.

social unrest caused by the bus boycott, hoping to channel white anger towards the Jew. The mails were flooded with anti-Semitic materials, inducing a state of panic amongst Montgomery Jews, and forcing the national defence agencies on to the defensive.²³ As late as 1965 a concerned Jewish citizen wrote to the local office of the Anti-Defamation League to report that the Alabama state legislature had recently been inundated with anti-Semitic literature, including the notorious newsletters *Common Sense* and *The Cross and the Flag*.²⁴

City authorities denounced those responsible for distributing hate literature. An editorial in the *Montgomery Advertiser* similarly insisted that “In no other city in this country, could there be a finer group of Jewish citizens.”²⁵ Yet despite the efforts of both politicians and the press to discredit the opinions of anti-Semites, the notion that Jews were the secret masterminds behind the civil rights movement captured the imagination of a worrying number of white Montgomerians. As Harold Fleming, Executive Director of the Southern Regional Council, observed, 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 other Southern cities.”²⁶

In 1958, Retired Rear Admiral John C. Crommelin had launched a singularly unsuccessful bid to become the new governor of Alabama, capturing less than half of one per cent of the total vote. When the segregationist movement in Alabama split over the issue of anti-Semitism in 1956, Crommelin had been among those who joined Asa Carter in establishing the extremist North Alabama Citizens’ Council. Under the

²³ Northern Jewish activists engaged in the civil rights struggle conceded that political tensions within the South had increasingly assumed anti-Semitic overtones. Among those who acknowledged the difficulties faced by southern Jews were Henry E. Schultz of the ADL and Frederick F. Greenman, campaign chairman of the Joint Defense Appeal. *New York Times*, 27 Nov. 1956, 13 Apr. 1956.

²⁴ The local citizen was Raymond E. Cohen, owner of a record store in Montgomery. Monroe Schlactus, ADL Alabama Regional Director, to Raymond E. Cohen, 25 June 1965, Box 1, Folder 30, Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith, Alabama Regional Office, records, 1945–79, Department of Archives and Manuscripts, Linn-Henley Research Library, Birmingham, Alabama, Public Library.

²⁵ Quoted in *National Jewish Post and Opinion*, 25 May 1956. The *Advertiser* also published an article in praise of B’nai B’rith, an organization that “has served American progress in the fields of patriotism, charity, health and brotherly understanding.” This was in spite of the conspicuous support for the boycott by the Anti-Defamation League. *Montgomery Advertiser*, 8 Mar. 1956.

²⁶ Harold C. Fleming to Will Maslow, 14 July 1959, Series 1, Reel 3, 0755-0756, Southern Regional Council Papers.

influence of Carter, he had, by the time of his gubernatorial campaign, become increasingly outspoken in his belief that the civil rights movement was a “Jewish–Communist conspiracy.”²⁷

Despite his dismal showing during the election, the old naval officer was still a potent threat to the Jewish community. In 1959 Crommelin sought election as the new mayor of Montgomery. The Rear Admiral had bought air time on one local television channel during his campaign for governor a year earlier. He had used the broadcast to scare voters into believing “that this bombing of the churches in Montgomery – the colored churches – was a planned program by the Communist–Jewish conspiracy to effect the civil rights legislation.” His mayoral campaign was marked by equally hysterical accusations. To the dismay of local Jews, Crommelin’s rhetoric found a receptive audience. On polling day he captured 1,760 votes, a respectable 10 per cent of all ballots cast.²⁸

Montgomery Jews had to safeguard not only against extremists such as Crommelin, but also the mainstream segregationist movement. The Citizens’ Council was not intrinsically anti-Semitic. Some Jews none the less suffered as a consequence of its widespread persecution of suspected liberals. Almost every member of the political establishment in Montgomery was publicly associated with the Citizens’ Council, including Mayor William Gayle and Police Commissioner Clyde Sellers. As MIA lawyer Fred Gray asserts, the Council “pretty much expressed the position of the white community.” Those who refused to join therefore risked accusations of treachery towards the race. Indeed the Council launched a door-to-door membership drive, threatening to publish the names of those who declined to pay the \$5 membership fee. In the words of Fred Gray, “the possibilities of reprisals or ostracism” were all too real.²⁹

²⁷ “Crommelin,” *ADL Facts*, 13, 2 (Apr.–May 1959), 115; James Graham Cook, *The Segregationists* (New York: Appleton, Century, Crofts, 1962); Thayer, 43–4.

²⁸ “Crommelin,” 115–16; Cook, 162.

²⁹ James A. Colaiaco, *Martin Luther King Jr.: Apostle of Militant Nonviolence* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1988), 13; David J. Garrow, ed., *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It: The Memoir of Jo Ann Gibson Robinson* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987), 111–12; McMillen, 44; Fishman, “Southern City,” 45; Fred Gray, interview with author, 9 July 1996. The Anti-Defamation League closely monitored the activities of the Montgomery Citizens’ Council. In April 1956, ADL assistant director Frederick Routh forwarded a number of clippings and leaflets concerning the Council to the organization’s Southeastern Regional Director, Arthur Levin. The cover note remarked that “I think these should interest your people in Montgomery.” Frederick B. Routh to Arthur J. Levin, 19 Apr. 1956, Series 1, Reel 4, 0511, Southern Regional Council Papers.

The intensity of the criticism levelled by Montgomery Jews none the less shocked northern officials in the national defence agencies. Albert Vorspan, a social action official of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, met with Jewish leaders across the South in order to assuage their anxieties. Although he was seldom able to secure complete agreement with southern Jews, he was usually received politely. Such was not the case in Montgomery. Having hoped he might convince his audience that the national Jewish organizations were taking the high moral ground in supporting integration, Vorspan was horrified to hear himself and other New York Jews described as “worse than Hitler,” because of the way they “stirred up anti-Semitism.” Nor did the overtures of southern officials succeed in striking a more agreeable note. Birmingham lawyer Meyer Newfield, who served on both the ADL’s Southeastern Regional Advisory Board and its National Commission, met with Montgomery Jews in 1960 to discuss the local situation. “Upon arrival in Montgomery,” he lamented to Arthur J. Levin of the Atlanta ADL, “I was requested to speak about anything but sit-ins and integration.”³⁰

Despite the most determined efforts of the Jewish community, the desperate struggle to establish its loyalty had yet to be successfully resolved. Having repelled the invading activists from the North, it now had to stamp out the traitors within its own ranks.

During the late 1950s rabbis from across the South overcame not only their own fears, but the objections of their congregations, in asserting their support for desegregation. Inspired by the social activist teachings of their faith, the rabbis often found themselves in the full glare of the public spotlight. In the autumn of 1957 the North Carolina Association of Rabbis had, for example, issued a resolution approving “wholeheartedly and unstintingly” the actions taken in compliance with the Supreme Court decision by the school boards in Charlotte, Greensboro and Winston-Salem. Later that year, six rabbis in Houston announced similar support for the *Brown* ruling.³¹

The political climate in North Carolina and Texas admittedly enabled the rabbis to be more outspoken than their counterparts in Montgomery. Neither state was situated in the Deep South. Such was the strength of liberal sentiment that the rabbis were not at risk of serious recrimination.

³⁰ Al Vorspan, “Birmingham Revisited,” *Reform Judaism* (Fall 1993), 60; Meyer Newfield to Arthur J. Levin, 5 Jan. 1961, Meyer Newfield Papers, 1950–73, Department of Archives and Manuscripts, Linn-Henley Research Library, Birmingham, Alabama.

³¹ *Southern Israelite*, 6 Sept. 1957; 1 Nov. 1957.

The rabbis in Houston were, for instance, among a much larger number of 173 clergymen who had added their signatures to the statement in support of school integration. With the worthy exception of the Reverends Robert Graetz and Thomas R. Thrasher, no white minister in Montgomery had offered even tacit support for the bus boycott. Graetz had been rewarded for his bravery with a bomb which tore through his home in August 1956.³²

With white Montgomerians almost unanimous in their opposition to integration, anyone who dared voice their dissent would be an immediately identifiable target. Should that individual also happen to be Jewish it would provide anti-Semites with concrete evidence of a “Zionist conspiracy” against the citizens of Montgomery. Confronted with such an appalling prospect, it is little wonder that the rabbis should have remained silent.

Elias Levi was rabbi of the small Sephardic congregation Etz Ayaahem. His response to the boycott may have been determined by the rabbi of the largest and wealthiest synagogue in the city, Eugene Blachschleger. Blachschleger had served as spiritual leader of the Reform Temple Beth-Or since 1934. Since his arrival in the city he had worked ceaselessly as an “ambassador of good will between the Jews and Christians.” His efforts were rewarded when he became the first rabbi ever to be elected to the Montgomery Ministerial Association. Blachschleger had every reason to fear that not only his own reputation but the relationship which he and his congregation had carefully cultivated with the Gentile majority would be ruined if he backed the boycott. “If Martin Luther King passed me on the street,” Blachschleger once informed a fellow rabbi, “I would not recognize him. We have never spoken to each other.”³³ So assiduously did Blachschleger avoid public attention that his only mention in the *Montgomery Advertiser* throughout the boycott concerned his discussion of the novel *Marjorie Morningstar* at a meeting of a local literary club.³⁴

³² Chappell, *Inside Agitators*, 57; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 8. Both clergymen received local media attention. Graetz was discussed in detail in the *Montgomery Advertiser*, 10 Jan. 1956, 4; 12 Jan. 1956, 4. Thrasher, an Episcopalian minister, made a public appeal for negotiation, and denounced the extremism of the Citizens’ Council. *Montgomery Advertiser*, 3 Mar. 1956, 4.

³³ *The First 100 Years of Kahl Montgomery*, 22–23; Charles Mantinband to Harry Golden, 19 Dec. 1963, Charles Mantinband Papers, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.

³⁴ *Montgomery Advertiser*, 5 Jan. 1956. In a further interview Blachschleger admitted that he “made no public pronouncements on this subject [desegregation] either from my pulpit or in the columns of our daily press.” P. Allen Krause, “Rabbis and Negro Rights in the South, 1954–1967,” *American Jewish Archives*, 21:1 (April 1969), 63.

Blachschleger had every reason to retain his anonymity. The rabbi was under no illusion as to the consequences of supporting the civil rights struggle. He had after all only to recall the fate suffered by his Conservative counterpart, Seymour Atlas. Atlas had occupied the pulpit at Agudath Israel for the best part of a decade. Initially he had been seized with the same political paralysis as his congregation. Struggling free of his fears he eventually appeared alongside Martin Luther King on a local television show, and again on a radio discussion of the boycott. Much to the alarm of the congregation, his presence attracted national media attention. *Life* magazine included a photograph of the fastidious rabbi, his hair brylcreemed and thin moustache finely combed, in a feature on events in Montgomery. Atlas was summoned by the board of trustees to an emergency meeting, at which he was told to retract his support for the boycott. In addition he was ordered to submit any public speech to the board “two or three days before printing or delivery of the same.”³⁵

Atlas was unrepentant. At his next service he offered a defiant prayer in support of the boycott. It was more than the increasingly irate trustees were willing to tolerate. Snubbed by his own congregation, a dispirited Atlas tendered his resignation. Adamant that such an episode should never be repeated the trustees resolved that any future rabbi must consent to avoid the integration issue “in any matter, shape or form whatsoever.”³⁶

The story of Rabbi Atlas received front page coverage in the national Jewish press. Alarmed at the impression others would have of them, the members of Agudath Israel issued their own interpretation of events. Dr. Irving D. London, a former president of the congregation, insisted that the board of trustees had agreed in November 1955, one month before the boycott even began, not to renew Atlas’s contract.³⁷

Forty years later it has become all but impossible to separate accusation from counter-accusation. The exact circumstances surrounding the departure of Rabbi Atlas cannot be ascertained. It is none the less of note that a similar episode had occurred twenty years earlier. On 25 March 1931, nine black youths were arrested for the alleged rape of two women on a Southern Railway freight train. The Scottsboro case sparked outspoken attacks not only against the defendants but their lawyer, a New York Jew by the name of Samuel Leibowitz. Desperate not to be associated with such a controversial figure, the Alabama Jewish community maintained a distinctly low profile throughout the affair.

³⁵ *Life*, 5 Mar. 1956, 41; *National Jewish Post and Opinion*, 17 May 1957.

³⁶ *National Jewish Post and Opinion*, 17 May 1957. ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 14 Jun. 1957.

However, one individual would not be silenced. Rabbi Benjamin Goldstein was at that time the spiritual leader of Temple Beth-Or. At a rally held in support of the Scottsboro boys on 26 March 1933, the rabbi openly decried what he considered to be their wrongful conviction. A dismayed and disgusted congregation ordered Goldstein to retract his statement or resign. Goldstein resigned. As the man who succeeded Goldstein, Eugene Blachschleger must have been all too aware of these events. The resignation of Rabbi Atlas offered him an even more vivid reminder of what might happen were he to risk supporting the boycott.³⁸

The ethical dilemma experienced by the rabbis reflects the difficulties faced by the liberal white elite during the desegregation crisis. Southern rabbis were torn between personal sympathy for the integrationist stance of the national Jewish leadership and the need to maintain the support of congregations who virulently opposed change. This precarious position was shared to some extent by southern union officials who struggled to implement the integrationist policy of the AFL-CIO in the face of strident resistance from their local membership. Isolation and a sense of paralysis distinguished liberal white leadership in the South. Rabbi Blachschleger was no exception.³⁹

Blachschleger and Atlas were forced to contend with more than fear on the part of their congregations. No matter how legitimate the anxieties of Montgomery Jews, the rise of anti-Semitism does not entirely explain their refusal to support the civil rights cause. As observers such as Murray Friedman and Leonard Dinnerstein have pointed out, southern Jews often enjoyed tremendous financial success and widespread social acceptance, but only because of their willingness to adapt to the strict racial mores of their white neighbours.⁴⁰ This was never more true than in Montgomery. As Eugene Heilpern informed Benjamin Muse of the Southern Regional Council, the local Jewish leadership faced an ethical dilemma. Heilpern himself was a successful businessman “closely

³⁸ Dan R. Carter, *Scottsboro: A Tragedy of the American South*, rev. edn. (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), 254–59; Herman Pollack, “A Forgotten Fighter For Justice: Ben Goldstein-Lowell,” *Jewish Currents*, 30:6 (June 1976), 14–18.

³⁹ The conflict within southern unions over integration is discussed in Robert J. Norrell, “Labor Trouble: George Wallace and Union Politics in Alabama” in Robert H. Zieger, ed., *Organized Labor in the Twentieth-Century South* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 250–72. On tensions between rabbis and their congregations across the South, see Bauman and Kalin, eds., *The Quiet Voices*.

⁴⁰ Murray Friedman, “One Episode in Southern Jewry’s Response to Desegregation: An Historical Memoir,” *American Jewish Archives*, 33:2 (November 1981), 171; Dinnerstein, “Southern Jewry,” 233.

identified with the power structure" in the city. Such was his personal and professional standing that he openly entertained "some thought of running for Mayor." Although a man "of liberal convictions" Heilpern was alarmed at the intervention of national Jewish organizations in support of integration. The identification of all Jews with the civil rights cause would inevitably undermine any hope that he had of being elected.⁴¹

While Eugene Heilpern struggled with his conscience over whether to abandon his principles in pursuit of personal gain, other Montgomery Jews had long since decided where they stood on the race issue. Harry Golden included one particularly startling episode in his account of the events leading to the resignation of Rabbi Atlas. According to Golden one of the trustees at Agudath Israel had suggested to the rabbi that were he to become a member of the local Citizens' Council, he could "remain in Montgomery as long as you care." An appalled congregation immediately denied that such a conversation had taken place. Dr. Irving D. London dismissed the accusation that Montgomery Jews were in any way supportive of the Citizens' Council.⁴²

Whether or not the deception was deliberate is impossible to tell. What is certain is that Dr. London did not provide reporters with an accurate assessment of the political loyalties of the local Jewish community. "In the entire South," asserted Harry Golden, "there is no one less convincing than a Jewish white supremacist." Such was the prevailing political climate in the South, according to the journalist, that Jews must be seen to support segregation, or risk potentially violent reprisals. Eager to establish their credentials as loyal white Southerners, many Jews had rushed to join the ranks of the Montgomery Citizens' Council. Especially among those Jews more recently settled in the city, there was often an urgent desire not to be seen as outsiders. As one Jewish Council member boasted to journalist Stan Opotowsky: "Look, I hated niggers in Philadelphia and I hate 'em in Alabama."⁴³

Arguably most Jews who joined the Citizens' Council did so not out of any ideological conviction, but in order to protect their personal status. Although they had taken out their subscriptions, they provided only the most perfunctory support, parroting the opinions of those around them. It is however not uncommon for an actor who repeats his lines often

⁴¹ Benjamin Muse, "Alabama," 3.

⁴² *National Jewish Post and Opinion*, 14 June 1957.

⁴³ Golden, *Only in America*, 127; Stan Opotowsky, "Inside the White Citizens Council: Why Some Jews and Catholics Join Up," *Afro-American*, Afro Magazine Section, 23 Mar. 1957, 3.

enough to end up identifying with the part he plays. The individual interviewed by Stan Opatowsky suggests exactly this. Jews were, in fact, active and outspoken supporters of racial segregation. Financier Les Weinstein served on the Board of Directors of the Montgomery Citizens' Council.⁴⁴ Fellow businessman Burk Klein was an equally staunch segregationist. Klein corresponded regularly with Charles Bloch, the Jewish lawyer who served as vice-president of the States' Rights Council of Georgia. In one letter, Klein denounced the American Jewish Congress for its active involvement in the civil rights issue. "It is composed of so-called 'liberals.'" he seethed, "residing in the larger Eastern cities and has no membership that we know of in the South." Both Bloch and Klein were determined to drive an ideological wedge between northern and southern Jews. On another occasion the two men discussed plans to attack "Northern intrusions" at a meeting of the Southeastern Region of the United American Hebrew Congregations.⁴⁵

By the time of the bus boycott there were many Jewish families whose roots in Montgomery stretched back several generations. During its one hundred year history the Jewish community had inevitably been shaped by the larger societal forces operating at every level of city life. Interaction with the Gentile majority had led to the fastening of new ties of loyalty besides those which bound together families and members of the same faith. Montgomery Jews had in effect evolved into Jewish Montgomerians.

Acceptance of the caste system was part of this larger process of acculturation. Ever since their arrival in the early nineteenth century, Montgomery Jews had been at best passive supporters of the status quo, at worst, actively involved in the oppression of African-Americans. During the *antebellum* era, they had engaged in the economic exploitation of slaves. When the Civil War erupted they had been willing to fight and die for the preservation of that slave property.⁴⁶ Almost a hundred years later Jews opposed the bus boycott not only in order to shield

⁴⁴ Stephan Leshner, *George Wallace: American Populist* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1993), 69. Leshner also observes that a number of Montgomery Jews acted as advisors to Alabama Governor George Wallace. *Ibid.*, 70.

⁴⁵ Burk H. Klein to Charles J. Bloch, 23 Jan. 1963; Charles J. Bloch to Burk H. Klein, 8 Nov. 1962, Box 27, Folder 119, Charles J. Bloch Papers. For the political career of Charles Bloch, see Clive Webb, "Charles Bloch: Jewish White Supremacist," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* (forthcoming).

⁴⁶ Leopold Jacob Weil to Josiah Weil, 16 May 1861, photostat copy filed in Box 6, Folder 4, Jacob Rothschild Papers, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University, Atlanta; Eli N. Evans, *The Provincials: A Personal History of Jews in the South* (New York: Atheneum, 1973), 62-3.

themselves against a segregationist backlash, but because they shared the same attitudes towards African-Americans as did other whites. Although some Jews were pressurized through force of white public opinion into supporting segregation, others were active and willing participants in the massive resistance movement. Members of the Montgomery Jewish Federation for instance informed the American Jewish Committee that they were morally opposed to integration. As they asserted: "The white community in the South is generally opposed to desegregation... The Jewish community in the South is a part of the white community in the South."⁴⁷

MIA lawyer Fred Gray argues that he was not disappointed by the response of Montgomery Jews to the bus boycott, since he never expected their support., As Gray puts it, he perceived "no basic distinction between Jews and other Caucasians" in terms of their attitude towards the race issue.⁴⁸ Martin Luther King had an altogether more idealistic conception of the Jewish community. His opinions were informed by a belief in the essential decency of most human beings, as well as an awareness of the historical experiences of the Jewish people. None the less, he had no substantial evidence to support his faith in the liberalism of local Jews. In the climate of fear and hatred which surrounded Montgomery during the bus boycott, it was arguably unfair to expect Jews to join the civil rights struggle. It is understandable that they should have blurred the "basic distinction" between themselves and other whites.

Similar anxieties determined the decision of Jews in other Alabama cities such as Dothan and Selma to dissociate themselves from the national defence agencies. As Birmingham Jewish community leader Karl Friedman asserts, "they surrendered their B'nai B'rith charters and got out of the Anti-Defamation League because of the pressure." Events in Montgomery therefore provide a microcosmic portrait of the situation which confronted all southern Jews during the desegregation crisis. Friedman also affirms that the Citizens' Council across Alabama attempted to "urge or persuade or cajole" Jews into joining their ranks. Inevitably most paid the subscription fee.⁴⁹

Such actions had by 1960 enabled Jews in Montgomery to avoid confrontation with either African-Americans or whites. In the years which followed, however, the city would be confronted with further

⁴⁷ Yaffe, "Negro Integration and Jews in the South," 30.

⁴⁸ Fred Gray, interview with author.

⁴⁹ Karl Friedman, interview with author, 16 Feb. 1994.

racial crises. Jews would have to brace the impact of the Freedom Rides and in particular the struggle to desegregate public facilities, including the downtown stores. Having endeavoured to sit out the conflict behind the lines, they would suddenly discover that their businesses occupied the newly shifted battleground.