

The Temple Bombing¹

It's a warm Friday night in May, in the year 1958. In Atlanta, Georgia, Rabbi Jacob Rothschild is preaching at Shabbat services. Rabbi Rothschild serves the Hebrew Benevolent Congregation, better known as "The Temple," the oldest Reform synagogue in Atlanta, housed in a beautiful building.

The title of Rabbi Rothschild's sermon is: "Can this be America?" The rabbi preaches: "Bombings have shocked and bewildered us. Synagogues and centers have been bombed in such widely scattered southern cities as Miami, Charlotte, Gastonia, Nashville, Jacksonville. An attempt was made on a conservative synagogue in Birmingham. It doesn't seem possible, we'd like to ignore the whole thing. We think 'maybe if we talk about it, we'll be bombed too.'" Rabbi Rothschild concluded by saying that the congregation must "resolve not to surrender to violence. Or submit to intimidation."²

These bombings were a clear response to a new law of the land. After the Supreme Court ruled in 1954 that states could not segregate schoolchildren by race, white supremacists went into action. They opened their meetings with Nazi salutes, burned crosses, marched by firelight and planted bombs. By the time of the rabbi's sermon, homemade bombs were exploding across the South, primarily targeting black churches, ministers, businesses and social halls. But roughly ten percent of the bombers' targets were synagogues and Jewish community centers.

We here today know how this era ended in our country. We know that the South was slowly desegregated and the Voting Rights Act eventually passed. And we know the price paid for these civil rights. We've seen the black-and-white footage of the firehoses and the biting dogs unleashed on demonstrators. We remember the Freedom Summer murders of James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner. We've heard the stirring words of Martin Luther King, his "I Have a Dream" speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, and we know how, years later, he was shot and killed.

Rabbi Rothschild gave his sermon before these events. When he delivered it, he did not know how this struggle would end. We have something to learn by revisiting that moment in time, when history was unfolding and he was a part of it. We have something to learn because history is unfolding now, and we are a part of it. We have something to learn because injustice remains, and we are called to address it.

Rabbi Rothschild was from Pittsburgh, a veteran of the second World War where he served as a chaplain. He moved to Atlanta in 1946 at the age of 35. Five minutes after his arrival he knew he was in a different culture. There were the signs at the train station: *White Waiting Room. Colored Waiting Room.* The signs on restrooms: *Men. Women. Colored.* These signs were for

¹ Melissa Fay Greene's well-researched and documented book [The Temple Bombing](#) has been a valuable resource for this sermon.

² From [The Temple Bombing](#), p. 233

those who came from outside the South. Native southerners didn't need a sign to tell them that the clean, well-functioning restrooms were only for whites. This was new to Rabbi Rothschild, and he was "thrown off balance by the signs and by other marks of the Jim Crow system."³

The bigotry and discrimination the rabbi encountered in the South reached every facet of life. Coretta Scott King recalls growing up in rural Alabama and "suffering the typical indignities inflicted on a black child."⁴ One example: Young Coretta had to enter the white-owned drugstore through the side door and wait until all the white children were served before her. When she could finally order, she didn't get the flavor she wanted. "No matter what flavor I asked for," she recalled, "the man would give me whatever he had too much of."⁵

It didn't take Rabbi Rothschild long to speak out against segregation, racism, and the injustice he saw around all him. In the rabbi's study, he read the words of the prophet Isaiah: *Cease to do evil, learn to do good. Devote yourselves to justice; aid the oppressed.*⁶ Rabbi Rothschild listened to the voice of our prophets and he took their words seriously. His God was the God of justice, and he preached accordingly, from his own pulpit and at speaking engagements in the broader community.

But not all Jews agreed with Rabbi Rothschild. Many Southern Jews resented "Yankee Jews" like the rabbi. They thought Rabbi Rothschild just didn't understand the Southern culture. Southern Jews resented the fact that some other Yankee Jews would come down South to demonstrate, and then return north, never having to live with the consequences.

Southern Jews didn't want to draw attention to themselves. It wouldn't do to get their white neighbors angry with them. They remembered what had happened in Atlanta earlier in the century, when a Jewish man named Leo Frank was wrongfully accused of murder, prompting mob cries of "crack that Jew's neck!" Those cries were heeded. On August 17, 1915, Leo Frank was lynched by a mob in Marietta, Georgia.

One southern rabbi pleaded with Rabbi Rothschild to temper his comments about civil rights and to urge the Jews in the north to stop agitating against segregation. It was too dangerous. Rabbi Rothschild wrote in May 1958 – "If this is dangerous, then I shall have to live dangerously. Because, I firmly believe, that this is my responsibility as a rabbi. And even if I weren't a rabbi, it would be my responsibility as a human being...."

This is what the rabbi said to others. He wore a courageous public face. But I wonder how he felt in his private hours. I wonder whether he had sleepless nights thinking about what might happen if he continued to rile the racists.

³Ibid.

⁴ Levingston, Steven, Kennedy and King

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Isaiah 1

Early on the morning of October 12, 1958, fifty sticks of dynamite exploded in the Temple. Minutes later, the offices of United Press International received a phone call from “General Gordon of the Confederate Underground.” The message was: “We bombed a temple in Atlanta. This is the last empty building in Atlanta that we will bomb. All nightclubs refusing to fire their Negro employees will also be blown up...Negroes and Jews are hereby declared aliens.”

The Temple custodian discovered the wreckage when he arrived to open the building for Sunday school. Weeping, he called the rabbi’s house. Rabbi Rothschild put on a suit and hurried over to the site.

The rabbi’s wife Janice stayed at home to begin the telephone calls to cancel Sunday school. Janice was on the phone all day as news of the bombing spread and well-wishers from all over the country phoned her.

It never occurred to Janice that she herself was in danger. Then she picked up a call from a man claiming to be “one of them” that bombed the Temple. This man said there was a bomb under her house, and she had five minutes to get out to save her life. She fled. It turned out to be a hoax.⁷

After the Temple bombing, did Rabbi Rothschild allow himself to question whether his activism endangered not only his own life but the lives of his family members? We don’t have a record of his innermost thoughts. But he was a human being. How could he not be shaken? In his most private moments, he must have questioned whether he was doing the right thing. He must have wondered whether he could go on.

While there are no witnesses to the private moments of fear the rabbi must have felt, we do know the title for the sermon he delivered to an overflowing and united congregation the following Friday evening. The title came from the prophet Micah: “And None Shall Make Them Afraid.”⁸

David and I visited The Temple in Atlanta last spring. The building is as beautiful as ever. The community is proud of the legacy of its rabbi who moved forward in the cause of justice. It has learned that the true strength and beauty of a sacred community lies in the hearts of its people, in their willingness to live according to their values.

The story of the Temple bombing is a story of a human being rising to answer a call. In every story such as this, there are moments of doubt and moments of fear. There are moments when those who hear the call feel too broken for the task. The way ahead may not seem clear.

This coming February, a group from Temple Israel will embark on a civil rights pilgrimage, a sacred journey. We will visit the places where key events of the civil rights movement

⁷ [The Temple Bombing](#)

⁸ Ibid.

unfolded: Atlanta, Birmingham, Montgomery, Selma, Memphis. We will hear from those who were part of the great struggle for justice. We will bear witness to their cause, which is our cause as well.

In walking the path of those who came before us, those who struggled for justice in their own time, perhaps we can better understand our own time. Perhaps we can better understand the injustices of our own day. Perhaps we can better understand the choices that confront us in the still, small hours of the night. And perhaps we can attune ourselves to the Voice that urges us on.