

TO BIRMINGHAM, AND BACK

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THERE WAS no special emphasis in the way that group of Jews murmured, sighed, chanted its way through the ancient benediction of "Blessed are You, O our eternal God, Who help a man walk uprightly," but perhaps there ought to have been. It was, to all appearances, a simple case of morning worship; the stylish dining room in which it took place presented a rather unremarkable setting for the occasion. But there were a few special factors involved. All of the worshippers were rabbis, nineteen of them precisely. The time was the last phase of the American Civil War, in May, 1963; the place Birmingham, Alabama. More accurately, it was in the restaurant of a Negro motel. Yawns and rubbed eyes betrayed the long journey and three hours' sleep that preceded that service. Nothing as yet indicated that the very place where the *Shaharit* was then in progress would be blown to smithereens by a bomb just a few days later. At core it was indeed a matter of affirming the duty of man to walk, in God's Name, uprightly.

Some sixteen hours earlier, we had been at the Rabbinical Assembly convention, in one of the hotels dotting the green Catskills. The discussion focused on some moral issues emerging from the Nazi holocaust. Instances were quoted, and motives analyzed, of righteous men and women who imperilled their own lives and those of their loved ones in order to rescue Jews from suffering or destruction. God knows, it is a topic fraught with much sentiment. Yet the real drama unfolded at the point when one rabbi swung the Assembly's attention from the past to the present, from what happened to our own brothers in Europe almost a generation ago to what was currently happening to Negroes in the United States. That very day, the front page of the newspapers showed police dogs let loose on peacefully demonstrating men and women in the South. Reports of the brutal use of high-pressure fire hoses and electric cattle-prods against praying school children aroused the conscience of millions. It was a relevant question indeed which demanded what a national gathering of religious leaders was prepared to do with regard to a burning ethical confrontation of here and now. And the people present responded with a touchingly unanimous generosity of spirit. Discussion continued throughout the rest of that session, right through the luncheon

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hour and into the afternoon. In the meanwhile, some members of the Assembly had established contact with Dr. Martin Luther King and asked how a group of rabbis may render assistance in the heroic struggle of the Negro people in Birmingham. The answer of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference was clear and simple: "Come."

Volunteers were asked for, and within a matter of minutes a number of hands were raised. The decision to send a delegation, not merely with the blessings of the Assembly but in its name, and entitled to speak and act on its behalf, was taken without a single dissenting voice. Furthermore, it was voted that the Assembly ask for subscriptions from its members in order to meet the expenses to be incurred in this project. Some of the most respected senior members of the Assembly spoke in full support of the decision. Just before sunset on that Tuesday the members of the delegation set out for Newark airport.

Who were the volunteers? Perhaps it is better to keep the report on the level of group decision and action, and thus avoid the mention of individual names. Most rabbis were around their early thirties (though two could easily have fathered the rest), the majority married, with children. In geographical distribution, they ranged from Texas to Nova Scotia, with the heaviest concentration from the northeastern seaboard; two rabbis were currently serving congregations in the South, one in Texas, the other in Tennessee. Of the others, several had spent years of either their childhood or of their former rabbinate in the South. Two rabbis had been jailed as Freedom Riders earlier; another had similar experience overseas. With the exception of three, all participants were natives of America. Several had served in the armed forces. Reconstructionists and rightists were both represented in the group. It was probably as fair a cross-section of the Assembly's membership and attitudes as any sample could have been. Astonishingly soon, this motley assortment of backgrounds and personalities blended into a unity.

As we boarded the plane, a strange introversion manifested itself in most of us. The first excitement of the decision, packing and the rush to make the plane now over, each man could retreat into his privacy and ponder the motives and implications of the process he had embarked upon. Some fell promptly asleep, others made vain attempts at reading. In fact, it was an earnest and painful searching of the soul that most of us undertook. How thoroughly had we thought through our determination to participate in this venture? Was it wholly for the sake of justice and decency that we were journeying—or was it, in part, admittedly or without our own knowing, a seeking for adventure, change, publicity, personal glory, that made us so willing to go? And what awaited us on the other end? Would there be violence, jail, and maybe worse? Had we a right to expose ourselves—and our dependents—to whatever risk may have been implicit in the undertaking? Did we, in some way, plan to act in a way that might cause harm to our own

Jewish brothers somewhere? Yes, there was doubt, and an uneasy measure of guilt, and a wavering amount of physical fear, and a large dose of bodily weariness in most of us. There was also a flexing of the muscles, both physical and moral ones, for the struggle ahead; a dizzy hoping joy of righteous and peaceful combat against evil. Beyond the drone of the engines and the desultory snatches of conversation, there was a throbbing, growing conclusion in most of us that whatever awaited us, and whatever may lurk in the unreachable recesses of our own human autonomy, it was good to have gone.

At two in the morning we landed in Birmingham. We were awaited by two groups at the airport; their presence alerted us to some dimensions of the situation in the town. There was a very large group from Dr. King's movement to greet us. Tired and, perhaps, scared as we were, the calm warm cordiality of the Negroes' welcome—most of them young, heartbreakingly young—awakened us sharply and with unexpected delight. It was only later that we were told that part of the reason for this sizeable welcoming committee was the possibility of violent assault by outraged segregationists, and the need for protection against such an attack. There was no suspicion, no sign of desperate reaching out for help, no fawning servile exaggeration of gratitude on these faces; only friendship, courage and pleasure. We might as well have been going to a party with old, loved friends. In a way, there was an anti-climax to our fearful expectations in this initial encounter.

It was the other delegation waiting for us which jolted us into an awareness of a tragic dilemma. Three men, a little further off, formed a cluster of visible strain, pained bafflement and hardly disguised anger. Before they identified themselves, we knew who they were. Somehow we had guessed that the representatives of the local Jewish community would come to the airport too. In fact, back at the Convention we had discussed the pros and cons of contacting the Birmingham Jewish leadership, if not to ask permission, then at least to inform them about our plans. It was, however, decided that it would be preferable not to take such steps. We did not wish to involve in any way a community against its wish or choice. While we did feel that willy-nilly, both in a political and in an ethical sense, the Jews of Birmingham were part of the picture, our own action had to be independent from the local Jewish attitudes. By contacting them beforehand, we would be putting them into a maybe tragic predicament: if we encouraged them to share in our own stand, we might force them into a position of some danger; if we elicited a response of disapproval, we would inevitably jeopardize the moral Jewish integrity of the community in that Southern town. Our consensus was that we represented the articulate conscience of American Conservative concern as well, brought to bear on a specific issue facing Man. We came as Jews, though not to Jews only, nor necessarily in behalf of Jews. The rabbi's duty is to speak *to* his congregation, not *for* them. He is a teacher,

not a spokesman. Whatever the views of the Birmingham Jewish community may have been, they could not alter the moral evaluation that the heritage of prophetic social righteousness made mandatory for the Jew. Yet when, still at the airport at Newark, we saw an early report of our mission in *The New York Times*, we knew that by the time of our arrival the Jewish community, and many others too, would be aware of our approach. Besides, the Rabbinical Assembly's decision had been announced at that evening's mass rallies in Birmingham, to the cheers of thousands.

The Jewish triumvirate asked for an interview. There was a typical altercation about the very place of the meeting. The hotel across the street was segregated; to avail ourselves of its facilities would have been a defeat of the very purpose which we came to support. And most of us were at the end of our endurance. So a two-man delegation from our group was entrusted with the task of meeting with the Jewish representatives. They were at it almost until dawn. The request put to our men was simple. It was bad enough that we came. Having come, we ought to return as fast as possible. And if that were too much, at least the rabbis ought to refrain from any dramatic participation in the integrationist non-violent movement. They must, for fear of persecution or outright massacre, of themselves or of the Jewish residents of the town, desist from demonstrating, even peacefully, from being jailed, from being identifiable as Jews at all.

The rest of us set out towards our temporary quarters. An ominous row of manned police cars lined up outside the airport, but there was no express action on their part. We were taken to the motel where most of us were assigned rooms; well, beds at any rate. Technically speaking, we were told, it was a breach of the law to accommodate white men in a colored motel, one, by the way, which was the center of Dr. King's movement and the negotiations underway. But there was simply no space left for three or four of our members. Their journey was an instructive illustration of the Birmingham mood. Hotel after hotel turned them away; some immediately sized up the situation, others yielded at first, and finding out that our escorts were Negroes, gave lame excuses and deplored their sudden inability to put up the newcomers. In the end these rabbis, too, were squeezed in with the rest at the Gaston Motel. Hardly a blink of sleep had passed before the disciples came to wake us: Rabbis, the time has come for the morning *Shema*.

Few religious occasions proved more impressive than that simple weekday morning worship. There was a new potency in almost every sacred phrase. "*Barkhu!*" enjoined not mere verbal profession but a challenge that concretely and perilously surrounded us there. "*Sim shalom*" spelled out Viet Nam and Guantanamo Bay but above all Birmingham, Alabama and Englewood, New Jersey. In the concluding brief *D'var Torah*, one of our more mature members gave a searingly passionate message. He quoted a Midrash about the putative age of Job. With devastating poignancy, the truth of it exploded

on us. There has never lived a Job unless he left a mark on the moral issue of his generation. Likewise, if today's Jew does not imprint an indelible ethical signature on the world, he might as well not have been born at all.

Then, with slowly accelerating rhythm, our Birmingham episode came into full swing. Reporters surrounded us, prying into our plans, motives, views. It was an early, and major triumph that we managed to impose upon ourselves a voluntary yet binding discipline. Hard as it was for human beings, and preachers especially, to restrict individual expression, we were willing to merge personal opinion in a framework of larger shared responsibility. Each decision and act of the group throughout our stay was the outcome of thorough discussion by all, and almost always unanimous. We had no leaders. We did, however, appoint two spokesmen—on the basis of their proven experience and familiarity in such matters—to express the conclusions of the group. The committee procedure may have been cumbersome and, at times, exasperating. But it was a shining instance of democracy in action. The reporters may have been disappointed a little by our unwillingness to peacock individually; most of them showed real admiration at the sense of collective judgment and restraint.

Martin Luther King had that day entered maybe the most crucial phase of his over a month long negotiations with local industrial and civic leaders. The day before had witnessed the most massive demonstrations by Negroes, the ugliest excesses by police and segregationist hoodlums. Yet, as an earnest of good will, Dr. King had called off, for the time being at least, public demonstrations for that day. These could, however, be resumed at any stage at which their usefulness would be felt. We were asked to hold ourselves in readiness for that eventuality. There was little visible action, but an immense amount of tension all around us. One of Dr. King's lieutenants gave us a prolonged and profound briefing on the latest developments as well as the long-term underlying issues at stake. Indeed, the caliber of the man himself was a revelation to most of us. Soft-spoken, cheerful yet serenely serious too, fully alive to the complexities of economic and social structure and quite movingly pious, patient, articulate, perceptive, the young man embodied in his person the very qualities which characterize the Negro freedom movement of both North and South in the 'sixties.

The picture that emerged was an intriguing one. The busy Southern steel city numbers over half a million persons in its orbit; roughly half white, half colored. The Jewish population represents approximately one per cent of the total. The so-called "power structure" is composed of two main segments. The "businessmen"—most of them Gentile—include the steel executives, bankers and insurance men. The "merchants"—owners of stores and department stores in downtown Birmingham—were predominantly Jews. The primary objective of the integrationist campaign was directed towards luncheon counters, fitting rooms and, most urgently, improved job opportunities. Nego-

tiating with Dr. King and his associates was a committee of "senior citizens," composed of leading figures from the "businessmen" segment of the white population. There was no direct communication with the city government as such: a regime whose transition towards what might (and again, might not) be a more liberal form was in the process of adjudication by the State Supreme Court in Montgomery. Eugene "Bull" Connor was the symbol of extreme white segregationist attitudes. As, among other offices he held, Chief of Police, the spectacular instances of brutality which had made headlines the world over were by and large his personal responsibility. As yet untested, hoped for by some and suspected by many others, Mayor-elect Boutwell's program stood in the offing. Our task, at that point (we were told) was the most difficult thing man can be asked to do: that is, to do nothing, to wait. Our coming was in itself a potent factor in the course of negotiations. It gave evidence of the burning involvement of multitudes outside the South in what is happening in Birmingham, a boost to Negro morale and a warning to the segregationists' obstinacy. It was a strong indication of dramatic roles that might be played unless a speedy and honorable settlement were worked out.

We forayed individually into what in fact was a besieged city. Barricades cordoned off sections of street and park. Double lines of police cars created metal walls in certain areas. Birmingham policemen paced with jittery alertness along the streets, in twos and threes. In larger clusters, Alabama State troopers, rushed to the town by Governor Wallace, congregated at the strategic corners, revolvers and ammunition belts no whit more ominous near their waist than the frown or grin of menace on the faces under the light blue helmets. Discreetly parked behind larger blocks, large police pick-up vans awaited new victims for the jails and sweat-boxes. Out of sight, but to be sensed very palpably indeed, dogs strained against the leash. White faces full of labored indifference and fear and loathing peered from sidewalks, and from the doors of stores and windows. Negro faces with—to us—less easily scrutable expressions, shone their amalgam of hope and dread, hostility and joy and pain and affection. In the hot, dusty midday of early summer, there quivered an undisguised violence and sly threat which somehow it was hard not to see as pointed at one's heart. Paranoid, perhaps, but overwhelmingly dizzying.

Returning to home base, we witnessed a press conference at which some youngsters, just bailed out of jail, described their experiences. It was not so much the ghastly horrors they described that impressed us as, rather, the invincible daring of these boys and girls. Almost shyly, with self-effacing modesty and courtesy, they described their capture and torments. Yet in their tone there was only a pity and love for their inquisitors at the police. We saw face to face and sensed heart to heart the spiritual reality on which the non-violent integrationist movement was based. It presented a formidable might

in the presence of which Bull Connor's bloody machinery of intimidation appeared pathetically, contemptibly impotent.

Much delayed, Dr. King and his fellow-leaders also appeared and spoke. With an almost stammering patience he answered questions and responded to challenges. Among other utterances, he expressed the gratitude and joy of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, at the arrival of nineteen Conservative rabbis in support of Negro rights and universal human dignities. But immediately after the conference, he had to go back and resume negotiations. We, the rabbis, were summoned to a very different type of meeting shortly afterwards. A high official of the Justice Department in Washington asked us to assemble in one of the rooms and there exchange ideas and information with him. Very bluntly, this amounted to a subtly veiled attempt at persuading us to refrain from in any way interfering with the "delicate balance" of the situation. It was in harmony with what seemed, in the Birmingham instance at least, the Administration's main ambition: to keep things quiet, hush up whatever adverse national or global criticism Birmingham may provoke, buy a little peace at the price of much justice. In the mood of mediator, the spokesman exhibited an attitude which seemed to indicate the need for mutual conciliation between equally poised adversaries rather than the triumph of right over wrong. He made much of the supposed peril our coming might create for our local Jewish brethren and their in any case uncomfortably hemmed-in position. Some of us accepted this evaluation as wholly correct; others considered it a piece of diplomatic doubletalk geared to the none too satisfactory objectives of the Administration in matters of civil rights in general and in Birmingham in particular. At any rate, much honest discussion and self-examination was prompted by this encounter.

It was only a few hours later, afternoon ripening towards sundown, that whatever doubts some of us had, vanished completely. We were taken to some of the mass rallies of the Negro integrationist movement. We had expected much; we found infinitely, triumphantly more.

A huge Baptist church, a simple but dignified wooden structure, was crowded to the rafters. Men, women, youngsters, dark faces glistening with the terrible heat, eyes bright and paper fans flicking, all of them wearing their very best clothes and an undescrivable expression, filled the furthest, dimmest corners, crowded along each wall, stood jammed in the gangways, literally hung from the galleries. But as we arrived, a path opened instantly and we were led to the pulpit. The song they had been singing did not stop, but we could see thousands of eyes turning curiously in our direction. When the song was over, the minister announced our identity. There was at first a murmur, then a silence, then an uproar of joy and welcome. More than anything else, we were humbled by the spiritual generosity of their immediate, unaffected response. It would have been natural enough for them to suspect a white face, any white face—to give it a stony toleration or a false fawning

greeting. What they gave instead was, simply, love. A direct, broad, crystal river of human kinship, shared aspirations and tremendous hopefulness.

Truly, the great surprise of our Birmingham venture came that evening, in that church. Somehow we had expected the extension and continuation of the still curious ominous waiting in the fearful streets. We thought it natural that people thus oppressed should be gritting their teeth in angry defiance or cowering with panic. We expected to see hatred, at least against the bullies, possibly aimed at ourselves too. Even if that had been meted out to us, it would have been worth accepting it: an act of atonement for America's collective white guilt. But nothing of the sort happened. There was song and laughter and prayer and love, instead. Such optimism as was to be felt in that church can be sensed at a birth, at a wedding, at a homecoming. They joked at their foes; sang out the ecstasy of true prayer; radiated love to each other, to ourselves, to man at large and God. A good-natured, gently defiant, awesomely courageous spirit pervaded the hall as a whole and each person in it. We were caught up in, swept away by, this exuberance. The lilt of a hymn—was it “Which side are you on, boy?”—pulsed in our veins too. As multitudes of men and women put their dollars in the collection plates, many of them unemployed, many of them present for some thirty consecutive nights, growingly joyous and sacrificial, we learned anew the meaning of giving, of wholeheartedness. Without doubt, we learned that evening that the most real beneficiaries of our trip to Birmingham were the nineteen of us. It did not, we trust, set out as a self-seeking venture, but it ended as a vastly enriching one. We found to our astonishment that what was going on in Birmingham, and is going on both South and North in the land in racial developments, is among the grandest thrusts of human history. We witnessed and, in a small way, participated in one of the happiest and most hopeful trends in America and humanity. Something was kindled anew in each one of us there; an atrophied, middle-class-drowned ability to be enflamed, rejuvenated itself splendidly. We caught ourselves laughing and singing and, beneath the tropical sweat of it all, trembling with happiness.

But we were not allowed merely to sit and enjoy it all. We were asked to participate in what, withal its informality, mirth and human exchange, remained at core a dignified act of worship. By a quick decision among ourselves, we decided to rotate the duties. Two rabbis made brief speeches, and what speeches they were! Scholarship, style, formal eloquence were light years away. But sheer prophetic inspiration and passionate intimacy shone like stars. One of our members, for many years a beloved leader of his congregation, later confessed that never has he reached so close to his own people as he did to these supposed strangers. Was it the occasion itself? Or the uninhibited response and interruption of “Amen” and “Halleluya” and “Yes, man!” and clapping and gurgling amusement? We spoke of Jewish historic experience and Jewish ethical concepts. Each time we mentioned that we were

not there on our own behalf alone but in the name of some eight hundred Conservative rabbis and, perhaps, a million and a half Jews, or five million, or thirteen million, or an eternity of Jewish truths. It was, we pointed out, the first time that a major religious denomination, as a responsible collective entity, decided to share in the struggle, and do so not through mere pious resolutions but by personal risk and presence. It made us sit up with a startled incredulity when we heard some of our less vocal members become uninhibitedly, shinningly eloquent, shedding our mock-Saxon reserve for a little honest Hebrew fervor. Later, one of our rabbis (it is they, the Negroes of Birmingham who called us "our rabbis," jealously, possessively, with an enchanting, unforgettable claim on us all) taught some Jewish songs. God knows, the usual tune of "*Hine Mah Tov*" is a shabby enough melody and the instructor's hoarse baritone did little to improve it, yet assuredly the roof and high heaven itself shuddered with delight when a thousand and many more hundred Negroes, and nineteen itinerant Jews, sang together in Hebrew about the goodness and loveliness of brothers who live together in unity. And "*Hevenu Shalom Alekhem*," yes, it is peace that we have brought unto you. Close to the brink of mawkish sentimentality, but not quite, still safely and sanely within the bounds of manly deep feeling, we joined arms and swayed and the tears lurked embarrassingly close under the eyelids of all. Later, when the roles reverted to normalcy and it was we, the guests, who learned our hosts' song, it was with an undividedly religious dedication that we chanted,

We will overcome,
 We will overcome,
 We will overcome one day—
 Deep in my heart
 I do believe
 We will overcome one day. . . .

a rousing, majestic, choking melody which must rank with *Az Yashir* and the *Star Spangled Banner* and the *Marseilles* as one of man's most profound outbursts of soul.

Drenched with perspiration and weak with too much love given and received, we elbowed our way into the cool brilliant Southern night. We had other assignments awaiting us. Our escorts drove us to another large church where a similar and yet totally different kind of gathering roared its joy at our advent. This time we were at a youth rally. The same inward power, the same discipline—but forged onto the golden substratum of youth: an even easier smile, softer features, louder laughter, more immediate affection yet. These were the kids who, overnight almost, have become the most exposed champions of their community's struggle. They stayed out of school, spent long patient hours in their churches, from early morning until late into the night, demonstrating when bidden, resisting all natural impulses of retalia-

tion and defense against dogs and fire hoses and police clubs and fists; it is they who paid the even harsher price of staying put and doing nothing, waiting, waiting for instructions that may delay for hours, for days on end; and now, and here, chanted and clapped and gazed with all the glory, melancholy and terrible joy of their young years in their eyes. Again we spoke, and sang and blushed and swallowed at the spontaneity of their reaction to us and at the heroism of their attitude towards their own predicament, infinitely hopeful in the long run, unutterably trying as far as the immediate tomorrow was concerned. Late, very late that night, we returned to the motel. Now we were silent. There was no need for words, no room for argument. Our coming had been vindicated beyond all our hopes.

But our long day was not permitted to end yet. We had word that the spokesmen of the local Jewish community wished to meet with us, this time not with a few representatives but with the whole group. Around midnight we were driven to a panelled law office in a deserted downtown office building. With elaborate courtesy, drinks ranging from Scotch to club soda were dispensed, some pleasant small talk dutifully enacted and then we came to the point. This time, it was sensed, a slightly more formal confrontation was to take place than on the previous night. Could it have been just one day ago? By now, we felt that aeons had passed since our arrival. Odd as it may be, it was the outside world that had assumed an air of unreality for many of us: Birmingham was the focus of our physical and moral universe. But then, this was more fact than illusion, for all that counts.

Stripping away the hulk of declamations, politeness and smiles, the message of the local Jewish community was an iteration of their initial demand. Our very coming had caused much harm already; let us not bring it to a boil by being seen in the streets as demonstrators. We were solemnly warned about the peril to our own lives. The number of dynamite sticks recently found under the Temple was solemnly adduced. How the forthcoming convention of the States' Rights Party and the as yet quiescent Klanners would wreak vengeance for our misdeeds on the heads of the local Jewish population was starkly portrayed. Also, we were assured of the liberal sentiments and behind-the-scenes commitment of Birmingham Jewry, as well as their efforts on behalf of human rights. Hints were dropped about the public recognition Robert Kennedy might flash our way if only we withdrew from the scene now and forever. They asked for an assurance that we would not demonstrate or, at least, that we would consult with them prior to any such rash action. What seemed to stun them most agonizingly was the realization that we were at the call of the Negro leadership rather than vice versa. It appeared to outrage the natural order of things, that hierarchy which is itself the target of the integration movement.

Neither they nor we presented anything really new. Yet the contact

itself was an undeniably aching one. All of us were aware of the predicament of Southern Jewry. We knew that they were a minority, none too popular with some white elements, precarious in its economy even if envily well-off in its "merchant" stratum; riddled with guilt and insecurity and the Southern white's general bewilderment. But it was impossible to forget that, sitting on the white side of the racial fence, privileged and comfortable, sharing the evanescent advantages of an antebellum society, the Birmingham Jew was squarely on the side of reaction, of what, in that great confrontation, is the side of wrong against right. Not that they are wicked people; their intelligence and generosity and emotional warmth are not to be doubted. In a way they too—like all white men in the South—are as much victims as the blacks, and in a moral and spiritual sense, their plight is worse. It was tempting to yield to their request, but we decided to stay. We owed it both to the Rabbinical Assembly which had sent us, and to our own human and Jewish and rabbinic convictions.

We saw human nature at its finest and at its shoddiest, on both sides of the conference table, that night. We saw a soul squirm and temporize. We saw tempers flare and manners wear thin at times. We caught ourselves in the role of self-righteous little angels on the one hand, and posturing as pompos *shtadlanim* on the other. But all along, unspoken but unmistakably felt, there was, on their side, an accusation, "Boychiks, we know you are right, but still, how could you do this to us, your brothers?" and on our part, an exalted silence, "Jews, dear scared little Yidden, how can you side with racism, with Hitler's heritage; and yet, and yet, you are our brothers, and we love you, we love you, forgive us, please."

The next day was, in a way, a re-enactment and a broadening and a deepening of what had taken place on the first. Now when we walked the city streets, there was recognition where we went. We were strangers no longer. In one restaurant, a man sidled up to one of our members and murmured: "I wish they'd lynch you, you . . ." and the eyes of many others widened or narrowed in hidden admiration or half-restrained hatred. Negroes came up to us, defying the trigger-happy men in uniform patrolling the streets, shook our hands and murmured, "God bless you," and "Rabbi, good to have you here" and "Gee, man, that was some speech you made." Clusters of young people, high school or college age girls and boys, breathtakingly graceful or gawky in a lovely sort of way, would form a circle to sing a hymn or improvise a chant or tell a yarn, and a rabbi or two, straying in that direction, would be sucked up into the gay human vortex and whirled round and round with questions and jokes and half-uttered dreams. Skullcaps became prized trophies of young Negroes; in exchange, a crop of "I believe in human dignity" buttons sprouted on the lapels of a dozen rabbis. We were their own; we belonged. The two Protestant ministers who came, on their own

steam (chaplains of Yale and Williams)—marvelous human beings and outstanding religious luminaries both—somehow became a frill, a minor appendage on this phalanx of Jews. We came en masse, and officially on behalf of many, many more . . . our place in the town, and in the people's heart, was qualitatively as well as numerically of a different order entirely.

Negotiations were still continuing, and so our own pent-up position went on unchanged—that is, with mounting impatience. It was Thursday: tomorrow night we ought really to be home, back in our congregations, preaching, officiating. Where will we be? In jail? Or perhaps, like that poor mailman who had been shot to death by a sniper only a few days ago, dead and buried. Or pacing up and down in the room of the motel, still waiting, as we had promised to wait, until Dr. King releases us of our promise to assist? Some of us had called home to tell our presidents, our wives, or secretaries, to make arrangements for substitution this Sabbath; perhaps several Sabbaths. Yes, some were worried—and with reason enough—about mounting bills. At least one of our number admitted to have penned a Bar Mitzvah speech on the air journey between Newark and Atlanta, and to have mailed it, just in case, you know. It shamed us to think that we were restless on the second full day while Negro adults and children had been showing this unbelievable endurance well into the second month already.

But they, too, at this point, were showing signs of wear. After the climactic heroism of children marching into jail, it was hard to keep hundreds of others sitting calmly in the pews. We saw the astonishing strategy with which their instructors explained step by step what would be done if the police stopped them, if, that is, Dr. King asked them to march again. "If"—the "if" was becoming unendurable, more demanding than a request for pain or servitude or death itself. Strained, tensing up, they nonetheless obeyed, and would go on obeying, as long as the leadership chose to have it that way. And on the sidelines, watching, snickering, growling, the extremists of both sides waited too. The lynch mob which, for reasons of its own, was biding its time; and the less disciplined groups within the Negro community, still unconvinced of the usefulness of King's Gandhian principles, rejecting authority and leadership other than a potential militant, violent type, fingering its sheath knives in deep pockets of cloth and soul. Withal the at-homeness, the total assurance of our right and duty to be where we were, we could not help sensing the ripples of exasperation all around us and within us as well. Hour after hour came bulletins that negotiations were approaching a satisfactory conclusion. It was too good to be true: people hoped, rejoiced, and doubted and were a little deflated. The mood of crisis is a habit-forming addiction. Seeing your dream come true still kills the dream—and you resent its demise.

Mid-afternoon came the news of a settlement; and instantly in its wake, the incomprehensible report of the new arrest and jailing of Dr. King. Plainly,

this was an attempt at foiling whatever outcome the negotiations had. King's associates worked heroically to hold back the tide of ugly resentment; a few hours later, bail was raised and King once again released. A new press conference; not yet daring to pronounce victory, or even a definite peace treaty, but enough to indicate that it was just around the corner.

It was at that stage that Martin Luther King spoke with our group. We gathered in his almost monastically simple rooms at our own motel. When he came in, we saw a very tired young man. At arm's-length he looked younger, leaner, shorter, much more vulnerable than at some distance or in his public image. There was great weariness and something close to physical pain on his lips. But his smile was warm and wholly sincere all the same. As though he had no other worry in the world, he contemplated and answered our questions, endured the speech-makings that a few of us, humanly enough, found it impossible to resist, indulging, communed with a half a dozen urgent phone calls and personal callers. We must have spent about one hour with Dr. King. In his halting little speech, he expressed the deep appreciation of his movement for the assistance we had given him in his efforts. He spoke of his disappointment in so-called white liberals and their temporizing, also in the failure of most of the clergy to take an unequivocal stand on the side of racial equality and integration. With an effortless naturalness, he quoted Martin Buber and the Hebrew Bible; and when, at our request, he led us in a parting prayer, there was a sacred stillness in the air and in the marrow of us all which reminded many of us of the majesty of *Neilah*. We felt humbled and cleansed and depleted and fortified all at once. A handshake and a momentary linking of glances, man to man, and he was gone, back to his mountain of duties.

As far as we could see it, our sojourn in Birmingham was drawing to its end. But not quite yet. The agreement between King and the "senior citizens" was important, but not in any way binding on the official government of either city or state. There might be a repudiation of the terms and a consequent scrapping of all the work so far accomplished, only to be started patiently—or maybe not so patiently, and God have mercy on us then!—all over again. It did not seem likely; it was possible, though. Relief mingled with regret and a queasy unease in the nineteen of us. We wanted to go home, get back to security and tell our people the splendor of this experience. But we also wanted to stay and share in the result of this noble work of King and his movement. Besides, we remembered that it was not quite completed yet, not quite, and maybe never would be.

The mood at that night's rallies was one of triumph. The battle was won; the sacrifices had been worthwhile. Again we were taken to the church rallies. The same things were done, but in the framework of this day's events they assumed a new hue and flavor and tang. "We will overcome" seemed

to sound like "We have overcome, see?" There was a relaxation, and a tiny fear that refused to let all guards down, to celebrate prematurely. What seemed most worrying was the absence of Dr. King himself from the rallies. His brother was there, and Dr. Abernathy, and the Reverend Shuttlesworth, and Steele, and Billips. But not Martin Luther King, the leader. What did that signify? "He is very tired," came the official report. But it somehow felt wrong. On the night of victory the victor must be present, even if half dead. Dark doubt hovered in the midst of us all. King had told us that we were, as far as he could see, released, able to go home. But the qualification "as far as he could see" was pregnant with potentialities. So it was not all over, not wholly gained as yet. Much later that night, indirectly, we were informed that King sent his greetings and repeated gratitude and his decision that we may return. Yet the offer we had made and reaffirmed that, at his call in case of need, we would return, and bring more friends and supporters with us, was something that neither he nor we forgot.

Adult rally, youth rally, speeches, songs, farewells . . . and then, subdued before the necessity of parting, we sipped last cups of coffee and ladled ice cream, scribbled addresses in notebooks, cracked jokes to cover up sadness, packing bags in silence, checking on tickets. Suddenly it bore down on us that in this tiny spell of time, a mere two days and scrappy ends of two more, something vastly significant happened to us all: not so much done *by* us as done *to* us. We had come into hissing distance of the grand sweep of history itself, of the immortal battle between good and evil. We had made friends whom, even if we never meet them again, we shall never forget. Bonds had been forged between each of us, overriding differences of taste, temper and theology, which can never be obliterated, and with some Negro men and women and boys and girls—their names already fade from memory, but not their faces, not their unique individual miraculous essence, ever. In unexpected ways, we feel we have been truer sons of Israel, and of America, by virtue of this brief visit.

Perhaps the way we sang "We shall overcome" at the airport, late Thursday night—no, early Friday morning, dear God, *Erev Shabbat* already, and no sermon to speak of!—seemed embarrassing to some. If emotion makes you shy, it sure was that. In the poor immunity of the airport (interstate transport and its regulations declared it interracial, unlike the rest of Birmingham, so this particular breach of etiquette was no transgression of the law, for a change), some three dozen of us in all, nineteen rabbis and some Negro men and women, linked arms and sang. We did not dare to look at one another this time; we stared inward, grateful, humble and wondering. And then the circle broke up. Half an hour later we were on the plane, home-bound. Before we dozed off, we murmured some jokes about the Birmingham publicity posters that we had seen at the airport. "Welcome to Birming-

ham . . . the city with a heart . . .” Just think of Bull Connor! But then again, in a very different, unintended way, it was perfectly true.

A new, strange phase of the episode began at the point where most of us had believed it would end. The sequel, uniform in some ways, widely varied in others, is a story by itself. Congregations, individuals, as well as the larger community responded after several archetypes.

In some congregations, a veritable hero's welcome awaited members of the group. Some communities literally rose to their feet at the entrance of their rabbi. In several congregations formal votes of support or congratulation were passed by the officers. During and after the Birmingham trip, most if not all local newspapers carried articles about, and subsequently interviews with, the returning rabbi. The tone was one of admiration and pride which both reflected and enhanced the congregation's own response. If the paper said it was fine for the rabbi to go, why, it surely must be so.

Also, a new sense of urgency and strength was added to local efforts towards the broadening of civil rights. It was at last understood that if it is a rabbi's task to journey South for the affirmation of human rights, it is no less important for him to fight for, and for his friends to support, integrated housing and job opportunities in northern cities and suburbs as well. As one of the men pointed out, there emerged a new appreciation of the role of the rabbi as a moral guide, both in preachment and personal example.

Beyond the congregation itself, the broader Jewish and Gentile community, white and colored alike, responded widely to the participation of a local rabbi in the collective journey. White Protestant and, at times, Catholic leaders have written or called or publicly spoken to commend the Jews' action. Editorials have appeared which commended the courage of the gesture. Negro church leaders expressed admiration and gratitude. A large volume of correspondence continues to reach participants. There is a sprinkling of crank mail and hate letters. "Nigger lovers, wait we'll get you" and "Why don't you go back to Palestine?" and "Why not teach the Bible to your members instead of . . ." and so forth. But outnumbering by far any such missives, letters of warm delight and more formal acknowledgement. The strange category of "Rabbi, I never go to synagogue, and it is a big story why, yet I cannot let this event go by without . . ." and "Bravo" and "I wish my own Rabbi . . ." and their ilk. Cautiously, members of congregations have been asking about the wisdom of imperilling Southern Jewish brothers for fancy moral ideals, while others shake you by the hand with long soulful gazes. In many places, committees have been formed on this stimulus, or dormant organizations reactivated, so as to lend support, either nationally or locally, to racial decency. Contributions have been sent to several integrationist organizations. Invitations to speak at churches and rallies and other platforms have swelled the mail of nineteen rabbis.

When one of the members of our group returned to his pulpit in Texas, there was a favorable balance of opposition and acceptance. A vastly accelerated local program of development can be traced directly to the rabbi's participation in the venture. Tennessee, however, represented a sadder story. When that rabbi returned to his pulpit, he found out that the local paper had carried the story of his presence as a protester in Birmingham, and the upsurge of hatred and threat presented an ordeal compared to which the episode in Birmingham itself, for him, was a mild little prelude. Obscene telephone calls came by day and night. Letters of abuse poured into his mail. Members of his congregation expressed disapproval. Following some exceptionally menacing hints, he sent his wife and children to a northern town, literally into exile, for a while; he himself changed his location nightly so as to elude the venom of his pursuers. Jewish circles treated him as an outcast. They looked past him, avoided him, and when they spoke to him, it was from a distance and with a meticulous blindness to the Birmingham trip as if it were a shameful lapse from morality. Until, that is, at a televised interview, Christian clergymen began to praise the valor of his ethical stand. The general tide then turned. From many sides, Gentile admiration was now showered at him. After the Christians' expression of respect, slowly Jews too began to look at him with new eyes. After the swing-back of the pendulum, he belatedly found himself lionized.

There have been still wider repercussions of, and reactions towards, the trip of the nineteen rabbis to Birmingham. The Jewish press itself has been fairly divided in its attitude. The *National Jewish Post* has featured the Birmingham Jewish leadership's pained disapproval of the "irresponsible, intoxicated" rabbinic act. On the other hand, an editorial in a leading Chicago journal pinned a fine medal on the Assembly and the pilgrims for their behavior. By and large, Southerners and sensation mongers condemned the action, Northern and more mature publications approved it. Likewise, rabbis themselves showed variance in their attitude to their itinerant colleagues-in-the-cloth. In at least one place, the local Reform congregation gave a glowing, generous congratulation to the local Conservative spiritual leader in its printed Bulletin. It has been rumored that elsewhere some rabbis, disgruntled at the fuss that has been lavished on their journeying confreres, have been muttering or publicly elocuting about irresponsibility or publicity-hunting. Curiously enough, at the Seminary itself, dissent has been heard as well. While the large majority of faculty and students regard the Birmingham trip as a great ethical affirmation, at least one member of the faculty—a junior one indeed—has pronounced the gesture "an immoral act" with some heat.

The matter was discussed at the National Community Relations Advisory Council too, which decided to treat the matter with genteel ladylike discretion. The content of its cable to the White House would not be divulged. The Council showed a neat and instructive division of American

Jewish opinion. Some organizations demanded instant and strong and, if need be, unilateral Jewish endorsement. Others said it may only be done if safely cushioned by Protestant and Catholic fellow-sentiments. Yet others assured everybody of their admiration and sympathy and deplored, with heart-breaking earnestness, that in view of their dependence on the goodwill of a sizeable Southern constituency of their own, they of course can take no strong action.

What, if any effect the decision and the action had on larger national policy making, is difficult to assess of course. Not that a deed's effectiveness is in any way the gauge of its ethical worth; to think that is the great heresy of pragmatic morality. Yet it is interesting to explore that question, all the same. And if the columnist of the highly respected *Reporter* magazine may be trusted, it was indeed the prospect of a phalanx of nineteen rabbis marching into Birmingham jail that was deemed a greater burden than America's international reputation could at this stage bear and which caused the reappraisal of Washington attitudes that may well have led to the solution of the problem in that city. To oversimplify the matter, yet not beyond the valid bounds of factuality, one may put it this way: the United States depends for triumphing, or even holding its own, in the global East-West tension, on the goodwill it can marshal among the Afro-Asian nations. The image presented by a Birmingham may irreparably mar the trust we still, shakily, enjoy abroad. In contributing to the moral solution of Birmingham, or its future equivalents, a handful of human beings may indeed leave their worthy mark. Who is more called upon than Jews, God's chosen, and among them rabbis, the chosen people's chosen ones, to fulfill that holy task?