

In 1963 I was one of nineteen rabbis delegated to go to Birmingham, to march with Martin Luther King during those days of fire hoses and attack dogs.

Most of us were ambivalent about race. We had similar northern, "lily-white," Jewish middle-class backgrounds. Though affirming that everyone was God's creation, the only Blacks I knew were Wilhelmina the maid who raised me and the men who washed my father's car. Negroes were abstractions,

I had been in Birmingham for half an hour when I experienced an infinitesimal part of what it meant to be black in America in 1963. I was denied lodging, not because the hotels were full.

Arriving at 5:30 A.M. we were taken to the black owned A.O.Gaston Motel which had room for fifteen. The four from Connecticut were to go elsewhere. Rejected at two hotels that had space, we persevered and sent Rabbi Stanley Kessler with his Anglo-Saxon good looks, to register at another hotel. He returned saying that we had rooms. Then the reservations clerk came running- "I'm terribly sorry, but those rooms are reserved for a late flight. I won't be able to have you tonight." (It was Birmingham 1963-There were no late flights!) Our hosts offered that there was no point looking further - word was out that northern rabbis had come to town to support the blacks. No one would dare put us up for the night.

"Come back to our motel. We'll see what we can do."

On the positive side, the reaction when we filed into a black church was awesome. Everyone stood, applauded, shouted and reached out to touch us. "God bless you. God bless you for coming" There wasn't a dry eye among us when the congregation improvised a verse for "We Shall Overcome," which began- "The rabbis are with us."

Birmingham changed me, profoundly altering my ethical and emotional being. A theoretical position became real. Negroes became fully human. Living within a Negro community we encountered; a bright youngster whose ambition was to be a secretary - her sense of reality told her that

a Negro could hope for nothing higher; a Negro dentist telling us about the problems of voter registration; a college student involved in the demonstrations who witnessed a neighbor lynched outside her window; a youngster asking, "Are all Jews rabbis?" For the first time I was led by Negroes. They were in charge, providing instructions, direction and leadership. These were not the maids and car washers of my youth. I knew why we had come and why we would go again. Negroes became real, their lives and challenges became real.

Because I am a rabbi, when I went, my congregation went with me-some willingly, some not willingly, but everyone went.

Like it or not, the rabbi is a symbol of what ought to be important. When he succeeds in resolving his own ambivalence on an issue of crucial importance, the "ought" implicit in his communal existence becomes clearer and a little more imperative.

Word count: 500