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The Jewish Legacy of “Bombingham”: Exploring the Causes and Consequences of the Attempted Bombing of Temple Beth-El in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1958

by

Margaret Norman and Melissa Young *

On the morning of April 28, 1958, around 11:30 A.M., eighteen-year-old James Pruitt was walking on the sidewalk beside Temple Beth-El in Birmingham, Alabama, when he spotted what he later described as a “blue Army bag.” He approached it for a closer look and noticed the zipper was open a quarter of an inch, so he picked up a stick to explore it carefully. Pruitt used caution with the mysterious package for a reason. He had been working at the Conservative synagogue for only seven months and worried about what he might find and how to report it. As an African American, he was also aware of the bombings and attempted bombings that had targeted the Black community since 1946. The extensive damage done by radical segregationists in Black neighborhoods intensified racial tensions and debates about housing shortages. The bombs, however, were usually well outside of Temple Beth-El’s Five Points neighborhood. They often targeted Black residents who moved to the edges of neighborhoods zoned as white, particularly in North Smithfield near Center Street, an area known as “Dynamite Hill.”¹

Pruitt’s decision not to touch the bag proved to be correct. After prodding it with the stick, he made out the words “high explosives,” which discouraged him from further exploration. Police who arrived on the scene later noted it contained a homemade bomb composed of fifty-four sticks of dynamite. Two black spots and a burned match on the concrete next to the window indicated the place that the bomb’s two fuses

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had gone out before they had detonated. Similar to those dots on the sidewalk, the attempted bombing of Temple Beth-El serves as marker of past events for Birmingham's Jewish community, which continues to search for the causes and consequences of Pruitt's discovery. In the immediate aftermath of the event, the city's residents responded to the bomb scare in many ways. Despite the unsuccessful nature of the bombing, the effect of those reactions rippled out, impacting the way that different members of the community felt about Birmingham's growing freedom movement. A "spectrum of response," reflecting the often fluid and nonbinary reactions of individuals who responded to what was occurring around them, helps us conceptualize the impact of the attempted bombing during the civil rights movement.²

The absence of collective closure due to the botched police investigation that followed also generated multifaceted concepts of the incident's meaning in the Jewish community and sparked a longstanding desire to record, contextualize, and remember it. Beyond the mid-twentieth century, historians associated with Temple Beth-El have collected stories

Temple Beth-El, Birmingham, Alabama.
(Flickr user *Dystopos*, Creative Commons.)

about the event, created a public project that explores topics related to it, and called for historical remembrance of the site through a state-sponsored marker. With the help of local scholars during the first few decades of the twenty-first century, congregants have written articles about the event and helped create audio tours, panel discussions, and presentations that connect to the incident and Birmingham's wide-ranging Jewish and civil rights histories. These delayed reactions shed light on the way that local Jewish residents collectively recall and utilize the memory of the attempted bombing and other events related to mid-twentieth-century calls for equality. Additionally, Jewish residents and scholars have repeatedly grappled with where the attempted bombing fits in local and national histories and among similar attacks on southern Jewish institutions in 1957 and 1958. While those contexts should not be neglected, they frequently polarize Jewish reactions to calls for Black rights and fail to see them as dynamic, offering only a partial analysis of the impact of the Beth-El event, which affected Birmingham's public memory and local Jewish calls for action and changed over time.

Birmingham and Calls for Integration: The Local Context

The attempted bombing of Temple Beth-El was not immediately reported to the police department due to circumstances well beyond the control of the man who found the dynamite. As soon as Pruitt realized the blue bag held an undetonated bomb, he immediately went to Temple Beth-El's office to report it to Harry Horwitz, the synagogue's chief administrator. Horwitz, however, was on a lunch break, and the young custodian did not want to discuss his find with the secretary on duty or call the police department himself. Instead, Pruitt waited patiently for a senior official with whom to speak. Although he did not explain why he made that choice when police questioned him a few hours later, his actions are easy to understand. Domestic terrorism thrived in Birmingham in 1958. Although little federal action supported the Supreme Court's landmark decision on *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* in 1954, the judicial position threatened white supremacists as much as it encouraged Black Americans. Retaliation for pushback against debilitating laws and customs resulted in bombs, physical attacks, and other forms of racial violence that became even more common than previously on the city, state, and national levels.³

Black activists increased long-standing calls for legislation that would guarantee their civil and social rights. In 1956, when Alabama's attorney general, John Patterson, banned the NAACP, Birmingham's Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth and other African American ministers formed the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR), an organization that some Black professionals considered too militant or aggressive. Their worries about the hazards of Shuttlesworth's actions were justified when a mob of Klansmen attacked his friend, Lamar Weaver, on March 6, 1957, for greeting him and his wife Ruby as they tried to desegregate the local train depot's "whites-only" waiting room. Undeterred by the dangers his work posed, Shuttlesworth continued to press for integration. In early September, President Dwight D. Eisenhower used federal troops to block Arkansas governor Orval Faubus's attempt to prevent Black students from attending Little Rock High. Six days later on September 9, Shuttlesworth tried to enroll his daughters in Birmingham's all-white Phillips High School, where a white mob carrying bicycle chains and baseball bats viciously beat him. That same day Eisenhower signed

the Civil Rights Act of 1957, new legislation that established a civil rights section of the Justice Department that could intervene in local or state affairs if it saw fit. Large-scale protests in Alabama, including the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955 and 1956, added to pressure on Birmingham's segregationists arising from the national government and from grassroots activists. In response, white radicals not only attacked activists like Shuttlesworth but bolstered the networks they had used to resist change for decades.⁴

Added to direct conflicts between these varied groups were tensions among the city's African Americans and Jews. According to scholars like Karen Brodtkin, Eric Goldstein, and David Schraub, most American Jews' multifaceted identities include an element that encourages other social actors to recognize them as white, which can simultaneously deflect and magnify antisemitism. Such binary racial categorization is problematic, however, since the challenges local Jewish residents faced as an ethnic and religious minority were undeniable. Still, antisemitism and anti-Black racism weighed on different scales. Jewish residents received the economic, political, and social benefits that came with whiteness, using them to obtain advantageous positions in the city's history and civic-commercial circles even while their position on the color line remained debated and vulnerable. In many ways, they differed little from their counterparts in other American cities in the wake of calls for integration in the 1950s and 1960s, but Birmingham's emotionally packed, racially polarized environment made speaking out dangerous for both groups. For Jews, it also increased prior concerns about antisemitic and anticommunist rhetoric, which became more aggressive as the freedom movement progressed.⁵

Pruitt's hesitation to discuss Temple Beth-El's undetonated bomb with either the city's police department or a female staff member exemplified inherent anxieties in the Black community. White officers frequently accused or attacked young men like him for crimes they did not commit, and personal accounts of the violence that African Americans experienced in custody remained common throughout the South. In 1957, Birmingham's Black community petitioned the city to hire Black police officers through six clergymen who spoke on their behalf, including O. H. Gray, whose son had been severely beaten after failing to pay a fine, and Shuttlesworth, who stated that white policemen "unnecessarily challenged, [shook] down, slapped about, and threatened" their youth. Shuttles-

worth's appeals to the city were not new. In 1955, shortly after the death of Emmett Till, he and other Black ministers had been dismissed for submitting similar concerns. Whether Till's death or the need to circumvent an extensive conversation with a white woman were motivating factors in Pruitt's delay are unclear, but their unconscious power should be recognized. The acquittal of the white men who killed Till was heavily publicized, and his murder served as a cultural trauma for thousands of African Americans coming of age during the 1950s and 1960s since it fulfilled an expectation of legally sanctioned violence for petty or even nonexistent crimes. When Pruitt found the homemade bomb at Temple Beth-El, he, like Till, identified as a Black teenager in what was generally considered a white social environment.⁶

Pruitt may also have been wary of the Jewish community's reaction, unsure of the blame he might receive for the device or where his superiors' loyalties lay in battles for integration. In a discussion about the "interplay between Whiteness and Jewishness," David Schraub states that the internal struggles Jews faced with constructions of race frequently went unnoticed in the eyes of African Americans, a factor particularly true amid the violence Black families experienced during the twentieth-century freedom movement. This does not discount the rampant antisemitism that existed simultaneously, but it would likewise fail to dismiss any misgivings Pruitt might have had about his employers. Like elsewhere in the South, few Birmingham Jews publicly defended Black rights during the 1950s, even if they sympathized privately with calls for desegregation. Their reasoning was wide-ranging but supports historian Clive Webb's theory that many felt the only way to "ensure their own protection was to provide tacit support for the status quo." As Webb notes, however, "a conspicuous minority" willingly risked their physical and economic security. These individuals included progressive lawyers like Birmingham's Abe Berkowitz, who had counted Black laborers among his clients since the 1930s and condemned the Ku Klux Klan's intimidation tactics after World War II, for which he received threatening phone calls. According to Berkowitz, at least an equal number of the city's Jews "had all the habits, prejudices of [racist] white people" and, like them, used derogatory terms when referring to African Americans.⁷

Differing levels of discrimination also added to strains between Jewish and Black residents in the postwar period. Jews remained barred from

exclusive white social spaces such as country clubs, and, like their Catholic counterparts, understood the tenuous nature of their white privileges, especially as challenges to white benefits increased. Author T. K. Thorne points out, for example, that Rabbi Milton Grafman could not buy a home in a prestigious white neighborhood in 1958, the year of Beth-El's attempted bombing. The seller rejected his offer because the rabbi was Jewish, a circumstance documented as far west as California and as far north as Michigan, despite a 1948 U.S. Supreme Court ruling that limited state- or locally sponsored real estate covenants.⁸ Unsurprisingly, much stricter conditions existed for the city's African Americans. Between 1944 and 1951, the city's segregation ordinances were revised to ensure de facto segregation. Updates made it explicitly illegal not only for Black and white residents to marry or live in the same neighborhoods but also to eat, drink, engage in sports or other forms of recreation, attend public performances, sit in waiting rooms, or travel together. The police and white vigilantes severely punished violators through physical attacks and the dynamiting of at least nine Black homes and churches from 1949 to 1957. Challenges to white neighborhoods resulted in similar incidents throughout the South, where bombs destroyed recently purchased Black homes in states like Georgia, North Carolina, and Kentucky.⁹

Community Response and Cold-War Antisemitism

The delay that occurred as a result of the timing and context of the attempted bombing at Temple Beth-El did little to sway its leaders' response to the threat. At 12:50 P.M., they called in Pruitt's discovery of the makeshift bomb, although who made the call is unclear from police or synagogue records. Officer W. D. Haynie and Deputy Fire Marshall W. E. Berry arrived to disarm the device, since it was technically active even though it had not detonated. Haynie and Berry carefully removed the caps that had been inserted in the middle of the dynamite and secured to the bomb's two fuses, which had been taped together with cellophane and made with orange wax. The FBI agents who later examined the fuses determined they were made by Clover Leaf and had originally been twenty to twenty-one feet long. Police Chief Jamie Moore, who followed the investigation closely, subsequently noted that one fuse had gone out approximately 4½ to 5½ feet from the first cap while the other had "burned to a closer point," although the exact distance was

indeterminable. Rumors and local legend hold that it went out less than a minute—maybe even seconds—before it was set to explode.¹⁰

According to Thorne, the attempted bombing “shook” everyone in Birmingham’s Jewish community, a small minority within the general population. A wave of dynamitings and attempted dynamitings targeting Jewish institutions was sweeping cities throughout the South, which made Beth-El’s bomb scare especially disconcerting. Although smaller incidents were documented earlier in the decade, this particular series began on November 11, 1957, with an undetonated bomb at a synagogue in Charlotte, North Carolina, also named Beth-El. The incident in Charlotte played out much in the same way. Eddie Edwards, an African American employee, found an aluminum cylinder leaning against a rear wall. The homemade bomb it contained was much smaller than the one in Birmingham since it had only six—rather than fifty-four—sticks of dynamite, but its fuses had likewise burned out before they detonated. Before April, when Pruitt found the bomb in Birmingham, another faulty fuse had spared Gastonia’s Temple Emanuel, and successful bombs in Miami and Nashville had severely damaged an Orthodox school and a Jewish community center respectively. Other bombings in this wave included a Jewish community center in Jacksonville, Florida, on the same day as the Birmingham threat, and the destruction of part of The Temple in Atlanta six months later.¹¹

Historian Melissa Fay Greene observes that Jewish buildings like these accounted for ten percent of the bombs that went off in the United States between 1954 and 1959, but many of them lacked clear motivation. With the exception of Rabbi Jacob Rothschild in Atlanta, most individuals connected to the targets did not publicly support African American calls for desegregation, including Temple Beth-El’s leaders in Birmingham. Berkowitz and the Jewish segregationists he described serve as oppositional examples of white allies or enemies, but most Jewish residents’ reactions to the freedom movement ranged from silence and ambivalence to gradualism and “quiet activism,” positions that historians P. Allen Krause and Mark Bauman identify as common among 75 percent of southern Jews at the time. Reform rabbi Milton Grafman became an important member of the city’s interracial coalitions later in his career, but in the 1950s and 1960s, he was still navigating his feelings and position in local Black rights and negotiations. Grafman followed in the footsteps of a long line of southern rabbis including David Marx and Max Heller, who

Rabbi Milton Grafman with Mrs. Frank Wise and her daughter, Susan, at the unveiling of his portrait at Temple Emanu-El, Birmingham, AL, March 1965.

(Photo by John Farmer, Birmingham News. Courtesy of the Alabama Department of Archives and History, donated by Alabama Media Group.)

followed their sense of morality and defended African American causes in the early twentieth century. Like many American Jews who never challenged Jim Crow laws, however, Grafman vacillated between a passionate objection to the injustices he witnessed and his faith in slow-moving courts, interfaith committees, and the federal government. He generally worked "behind the scenes" but was unafraid to take a public stand against discrimination and received just as many harassing phone calls as Berkowitz, even before Birmingham's attempted bombing.¹²

Other rabbis in the city behaved even more cautiously than Grafman. From 1954 to 1958, the four who served the Orthodox community at Kneseth Israel remained silent for undisclosed reasons, as did Temple Beth-El's rabbi, Abraham Mesch. Perhaps they represent the American Jews who believed antisemitism was declining after World War II and feared that speaking out would ensure its increase. Mesch also embodied the group-based identity politics that became popular in the 1970s and beyond. A Polish immigrant originally based in New Orleans, Mesch was a well-respected, recognizable Jewish leader in the city before his premature death in December 1962 and was neither unsympathetic to local African Americans' concerns nor disconnected from the general community. Mesch belonged to the National Conference of Christians and Jews and the Birmingham Ministers Council but was less active in both organizations than Grafman. Instead of participating in other forms of community building, Mesch focused more on Zionism and Jewish education, supporting his congregants' cultural connections through local and national Jewish organizations, traditions, and charities.¹³

Mesch's avoidance of civil rights issues and Grafman's limited comments about racial discrimination reinforced local Jews' anxieties. Some people feared that Temple Emanu-El, the city's Reform synagogue, would be next. They became even jumpier when police officers making a

Rabbi Abraham Mesch.
(*Courtesy of Temple Beth-El,*
Birmingham.)

routine check on the synagogue found one of Beth-El's rear doors ajar in the middle of the night in early May, a little over two weeks after the bomb had been left in the window. Working together, police and synagogue officials concluded that the incident had likely occurred because someone had left the door unlocked accidentally, but the event unraveled many community members' already frayed nerves.¹⁴

Congregants and other Jewish residents also wondered why the synagogue was targeted. According to Greene, Webb, and other scholars, the answer to their question lies in a particular form of American antisemitism that was tailored to resist multiculturalism and integration during the 1950s and beyond. White supremacists' blending of anti-Black, anti-Jewish, and anticommunist tropes had a long history, predating *Brown v. Board of Education* and the Cold War, but an amalgamation of hate created a shift in American antisemitism that increased its postwar appeal. Spawned from worries over progressive liberalism and the first Red Scare in the 1910s, the language attached to this rhetoric gradually increased among segregationists as the twentieth century progressed. During the Great Depression, conservative white Democrats and Republicans used it to resist the Popular Front's calls for economic and racial equality and the inclusion of Jewish intellectuals in President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal administration. According to historian Elizabeth Gillespie McRae, the blended prejudice obtained even more power between 1940 and 1953, when the America First Committee and Daughters of the American Revolution used it to battle what they perceived as the "invisible" threat that internationalism posed to Christianity and "American" society. Despite the equally noticeable merging of Judeo-Christian culture during World War II, both the Double V campaign and the United States' participation in the United Nations strengthened white radicals' link between "Communist Jews" and calls for Black equality. As global support for human rights and decolonization rose, so too did white segregationists' inability to demean, control, or attack people of color, intensifying this Cold War brand of antisemitism. White nationalism also provided an impetus for its spread during Harry Truman's presidency since the "new" ideology allegedly safeguarded the democracy that American soldiers (conceived solely as white) had died to protect during the 1940s.¹⁵

American Jewish leaders perceived the postwar change on national and local levels, but with mixed responses. Many desired to support an

international fight against genocide in the wake of the Holocaust but concurrently sought to navigate what emerged as a highly charged anticommunist environment. Consequently, they often downplayed the proliferation of anti-Black and anti-Jewish sentiment in the name of loyalty and patriotism. In 1948, for example, the Jewish Telegraphic Agency highlighted the rampant spread of American antisemitism with a headline that noted an *increase* in “anti-Jewish prejudice.” Citing a national survey sponsored by the Anti-Defamation League, the report began with an emphasis on Americans’ tendency to “overwhelmingly” reject “professional anti-Semites” and “organized antisemitic activities.” The rest of the article seemed to contradict this bright news, however, since other forms of religious discrimination remained and “the public [also] exhibited a disturbing lack of insight into and unthinking acceptance of the activities of less overt bigots who, under cloaks of respectability, spread hatred of Jews.”¹⁶

According to George Kellman, director of the investigative division of the American Jewish Committee (AJComm), negative literature also increased in volume. Paramilitary organizations like the Ku Klux Klan experienced a growth in membership, and the Christian Anti-Jewish Party, established in 1945, soon morphed into the National States Rights Party. In a study he conducted between 1953 and 1954, Kellman declared that “bigots” continued to brand Jews “as conspiratorial agents for the Soviet Union” and claimed that the “Soviet Union was merely the instrumentality of a ‘Zionist’ clique.” Atlanta FBI agents confirmed Kellman’s conclusions with pamphlets they collected from 1953 to 1956. According to the Christian Anti-Jewish Party, there would be no “Negro problem” without the Jews, who promoted the “mongrelizing” of American life. One newsletter claimed Jews founded and ran the Communist Party and controlled “all three of the major TV networks” so they could induce “race-mixing.” In a nation that continued to reel from McCarthyism and the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, these were dangerous accusations. Minor offenses against Jews increased, involving dynamite scares in states like Florida as early as 1951. Local and national Jewish leaders blamed them on extremists, avoiding the publicity that drew attention to the perpetrators or the communities they targeted.¹⁷

Birmingham’s Jewish professionals became wary of this Cold War brand of antisemitism long before the Jewish Telegraphic Agency article

or Kellman's study. In 1936, the Klan viciously attacked Jewish labor leader Joe Gelders for his defense of political prisoners and his suspected membership in the Communist Party, which he and the Jewish community tried to hide from the public. The attacks did not stop Gelders from supporting controversial causes. Two years later, as a member of the Southern Conference on Human Welfare, Gelders participated in an interracial meeting that hosted First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, who—with the power of her husband's administration behind her—refused to submit to Eugene "Bull" Connor and other city officials' attempt to enforce segregated seating.¹⁸

Although many Birmingham Jews recall experiencing little to no antisemitism during the 1950s, they frequently noted microaggressions that sought to marginalize Jews as a group. Scholars and student interns in the Beth-El Civil Rights Experience, a community-driven project designed to record and learn from events like the attempted bombing, have researched the response of Jewish residents to calls for Black civil and social rights between 1954 and 1968, including oral testimony that noted this "mild" form of antisemitism. Several of the men and women interviewed felt they were accepted and well-liked by their non-Jewish neighbors in the 1950s and 1960s. For the most part, they—like their counterparts across the country—enjoyed what historian Marc Dollinger calls "the privileges of inclusion in the white middle class." Regardless, they also remembered that a latent antisemitism lay under the surface, as it did elsewhere. The observations of Faye Kimerling, who was twelve when Beth-El's attempted bombing occurred, typifies their impressions. In 2021, she recalled, "I thought antisemitism was part of life where I was living, even if it didn't hit me all the time."¹⁹

In 1957, after *Brown v. Board of Education* and the Montgomery Bus Boycott, some of the city's Jewish leaders were sympathetic to calls for Black civil rights, but others declined to publicly support them or the civil rights work of national organizations like the AJComm. After attending a two-day meeting held at Birmingham's Temple Emanu-El in early February, Atlanta's AJComm field agent, Sam Lubin, reported that the large turnout encouraged him, and he believed that many local leaders would cooperate with an "intensive membership drive." He and Bob Hughes, the executive director of the Alabama Council on Human Relations, noted that several Jews were "dues paying members" of the organization, which

openly campaigned for interracial dialogue and activities. They discussed a prominent theme among “reputable [white] businessmen” who felt “violence and tension around the race situation . . . seriously hampered the South’s economic development.” The men concluded, however, that progress “would be difficult” since it would be identified as coming from the “Northern press” and was usually vehemently denied by southern leadership. Lubin also recorded Jewish leaders’ anxieties about the volatile environment in the city and state, which were related to bombings that had occurred in Montgomery even though buses were no longer segregated and temperamental KKK leader Asa Carter, they hoped, would soon “move on to another community to carry on his work.”²⁰

Many Jewish residents had mixed feelings about the possibility of change due to local politics and the justice system. Some felt Carter would be discredited for shooting another Klansmen but had little faith that the seven men accused of committing the Montgomery bombings would be convicted. Others saw reform in the work of public safety commissioner Robert Lindbergh, a moderate politician who occupied the position from 1954 to 1957. Even though he was a segregationist, Lindbergh assured the cochair of Birmingham’s AJComm chapter, Robert Loeb, that he would “crack down strongly on all acts of violence,” since he believed “Hooded Sheet Wearers” were “a bunch of cowards.” According to Lubin, Loeb expressed skepticism about local calls for desegregation, however, stating that he believed the bus lines would “probably fold up financially” and that he could not foresee the city’s grammar schools integrating within the next thirty to forty years. A year later, when segregationist Bull Connor regained the position he had lost to Lindbergh, change seemed even less probable.²¹

Since fears of antisemitic outbreaks had been prevalent for years, Temple Beth-El’s board members put additional safety measures in place to protect congregants almost immediately after they heard about the undetonated bomb in 1958. President Max Kimerling called an emergency meeting for 8:00 P.M. the evening it was discovered for “the express purpose of discussing and analyzing the problems growing out of the [situation].” According to the notes of secretary Karl Friedman, the group explored “many phases” of the topic. They quickly passed motions to provide additional lighting and an armed guard for the main and education buildings but decided against interrupting the activities of the synagogue

*Max Kimerling,
president, Temple Beth-El.
(Courtesy of Temple Beth-El,
Birmingham.)*

and its schools to send a visible message of strength and solidarity to the rest of Birmingham's population. Faye Kimerling, Max's niece, remembered that the congregation and other Birmingham Jews were committed to what she called "our way of life," so they continued to practice their faith as they always had—"nobody stopped going to services."²²

The board also established a reward committee under the supervision of Max Kimerling, Dr. Arnold Royal, and Barney Copeland. It was charged with publicizing any money gathered from the congregation that might generate "information leading to the apprehension and conviction of the party or parties responsible." Board members then turned their attention to establishing a unified front among Birmingham's Jews and instructed President Kimerling to consult with "all other [local] Jewish organizations" to coordinate "publicity, press releases, and public relations." They gave him the ability to appoint another committee, which would "take immediate measures to constitute or reactivate the Jewish Community Council (JCC) in Birmingham," something they wished "to remain vibrant and active at all times and not just in a moment of crisis." Motivated by the attempted bombing and the city's instability during the twentieth-century freedom movement, the revived JCC became an

important community relations tool in the years to come. Four years later, its 1962 constitution formally declared its intention "to preserve and promote good relations" between the general community and the Jewish population. It followed a pattern seen in cities across the South, becoming a vital institutional mechanism for addressing issues that ranged from civil rights and antisemitism to the state of Israel.²³

Other actions included a directive to reevaluate and update the synagogue's insurance policies, indicating that the board took the bomb threat seriously despite the calm demeanor they and Rabbi Mesch presented to city officials, their non-Jewish neighbors, and fellow congregants. In Beth-El's next bulletin, Mesch openly thanked those who sent letters and offered not just "expressions of sympathy, understanding, and concern" but also donations to add to the growing reward. He called local law enforcement's dedication to solving the crime "most heartening" and labeled the attempted bombing "a cowardly and reprehensible act of intimidation [that] stirred every right-thinking and fair-minded person everywhere."²⁴

In the bulletin, Mesch also captured the general non-Jewish public's response to the attempted bombing: "[It] elicited a sense [of] indignation throughout Birmingham." According to the *Birmingham News*, white residents and law enforcement agents were "shocked and incensed" when they heard of the synagogue's narrow escape from destruction. Newspaper editorials labeled it "barbaric madness" that shook the "peace of the entire community" and stated that such acts would "simply not be tolerated." Commissioner Connor, who had loose personal and professional ties to some Jewish community leaders, began the non-Jewish reward movement that Mesch mentioned in the bulletin, pledging its first one hundred dollars via the newspapers. By May 13, that reward had risen to fifteen thousand dollars, boosted by donations from the Young Men's Business Club, the State of Alabama, and the Birmingham Ministerial Association. Labor and religious organizations with strong connections to local Jews also took pains to condemn the act in local papers. Mine and steel workers and the dean of Birmingham's ministers, Dr. John Buchanan, publicly expressed their support for Temple Beth-El. Unitarian Reverend Albert Hobart contacted Mesch personally, pledging a "better understanding between Christians and Jews" and hoping for an "end to religious, social and racial enmities."²⁵

The Failure of Police Investigation: Truth, Conspiracy, or Entrapment?

The population's response to Temple Beth-El's attempted bombing stood in stark contrast to attacks on the city's African Americans, who rarely received such sympathy and support even for the actual destruction of their homes and churches. As Mesch noted, Birmingham's police department also spent a great deal of time focusing on the synagogue's bomb scare, a marked difference from the way they investigated comparable incidents in the Black community. Connor gave the search for the perpetrator special weight. Confident in his position in Birmingham's government despite political setbacks, the public safety commissioner had no problem with racial extremists committing violence that he knew about or sanctioned. He felt indignantly offended, however, by what he perceived as an unapproved attack on a white religious institution. The targeting of an inhabited building already carried a possible death penalty in Alabama during the 1950s, but after the Beth-El incident, Connor told reporters that he intended to ask state legislators to impose the same punishment on anyone convicted of dynamiting unoccupied structures like homes, churches, or schools.²⁶

Police Chief Moore was also concerned about the attack but arguably for different reasons. Moore may be viewed as someone who felt caught in the middle of a situation out of his control. Certainly not an outspoken advocate of Black rights, he was still known to be on friendly terms with Fred Shuttlesworth and, like Connor, was unhappy that local domestic terror not only continued but increased under his watch.²⁷ Moore's actions suggest that he may have been among the minority of local professionals who questioned the agendas of the stubborn three-man commission running the city. Regardless of how they personally felt about integration, their response to the freedom movement was to reject an uncompromising approach to segregation because they believed it hurt Birmingham's image, population, and financial prospects.²⁸

Moore did not take part in unsuccessful attempts to impeach Connor for police misconduct and brutality, but he refused to become one of Connor's minions, unlike many other officers on the payroll. After twenty years on the force, he had received his promotion not from Connor but from Robert Lindbergh, the public safety commissioner whom Jewish civic leaders praised in 1957. Determined to combat the heavily publicized

*Birmingham Police Chief Jamie Moore
and Police Commissioner Robert
Lindbergh (Birmingham News,
November 29, 1956. Newspapers.com.)*

corruption in a police department Connor had controlled for decades, Lindbergh appointed Moore just before he vacated the position. Since the new chief could not be easily controlled, Connor tried to fire him as soon as he regained office. Accusations of Moore's impropriety fell flat, however, so Connor had to settle for keeping tabs on him through a network of faithful officers. Detective Tom Cook fell into that category, serving Connor with frequent updates on investigations and information about white supremacists. Simultaneously, Connor also reputedly directed Cook to encourage Klansmen to intimidate integrationists and note their movements.²⁹

Moore assigned the Temple Beth-El case to a team of officers that investigated Birmingham's bombings before and after the attempt to destroy the synagogue. Captain G. L. Pattie, who had previously served as chief and worked closely with Lindbergh to hold officers accountable for beating Black suspects in 1955, led the team. Tom Cook—Connor's "eyes and ears" at the station—Sergeant Joe Lindsey, and Detective V. T. Hart assisted him. Their cases included the bombs that went off at Shuttlesworth's Bethel Baptist Church in December 1956 and June 1958 and the tragic destruction of 16th Street Baptist Church in 1963. Unlike other bombings against Black residents, these incidents were high-profile cases that attracted substantial attention in the local and national press, and the leads the team uncovered while investigating Temple Beth-El and Bethel Baptist's second bombing soon generated a common suspect.³⁰

The search began with the composition of the homemade bomb left at the synagogue and the contents of the blue duffle bag in which it was found. According to historian Michael Belknap, the Kennedy-Ervin "bombing bill" — making it a federal crime to import or transport explosives for illegal use — did not pass until the following year, but regional and national pressures for federal legislation and cooperation were already increasing. Like many southern politicians and investigators, Connor believed the Temple Beth-El bomb threat was the work of interstate conspirators and appealed to the FBI for assistance. When he was refused due to lack of federal jurisdiction (the Eisenhower administration's favorite excuse), more than one congressman proposed removing the constraint, easing access to the FBI's labs and the sharing of information. Moore gave the two pieces of cardboard discovered at the scene to federal agents and, within a few days, he received a report that the bottom piece contained six "latent fingerprints" that were "readable." Meanwhile, Lindsey and Cook identified the dynamite brand used in the bomb as an "an Atlas product" that was 60 percent Giant Gelatin.³¹

The detectives' attempts to trace the dynamite's source to someone who might have purchased or stolen it resulted in dozens of letters and phone calls to dealers throughout the South. They discovered how easy dynamite was to sell, steal, or carry across state lines but became frustrated when they failed to identify a clear link to any construction site or distributor in Alabama. This reinforced city officials' claim — widely believed and repeated by many white southerners, including some local Jews — that outside agitators shouldered responsibility for what they saw as Birmingham's "troubles," a euphemism for violence against Black Americans and white integrationists. Acting on similar assumptions, Moore's team spent three days checking the rosters of airlines and car rental agencies for additional clues. Although they searched dozens of lists for out-of-state suspects in other prominent cases, none of the information they collected resulted in significant new information.³²

The detectives' work with federal agents neither supported nor countered any of their suppositions. The FBI returned the physical evidence and confirmed information Birmingham detectives had already gathered: the dynamite was made in Connecticut, "widely used," and available "from many explosive dealers." One foot of the two fuses took

approximately forty-four seconds to burn, but the FBI had no idea what caused them to stop when they did. Additional debris in the canvas bag included a piece of brown yarn, a clump of green cotton fibers, small wood chips to pack the dynamite, and fragments of brown hair from a "member of the Caucasian race." Unfortunately, none of this material proved helpful. The fingerprints on the cardboard remained unidentified, and the hairs did not contain "sufficient individual characteristics" to provide additional leads.³³

On May 5, four days after Moore received the FBI report, he got an encouraging phone call from W. V. Collins, the manager of the Atlas Powder Company in Knoxville, Tennessee. Responding to a letter Birmingham police sent regarding his company's dynamite, Collins said that a state investigator had already contacted him about the same topic and noted the similarities between Beth-El's case and a bomb threat at Temple Emanuel in Gastonia, North Carolina. At the latter, thirty sticks of dynamite were found in a suitcase on February 9, and the fuse attached to that homemade bomb had burnt out within 1½ inches of detonation. Collins affirmed doubts that the dynamite could be traced. Atlas did not have a distributor in Alabama, but construction companies and second-hand dealers purchased and transported dynamite throughout the South. Although fifty-four sticks represented almost half a case, even a carload of Atlas dynamite could be easily stolen from a building site. Given the circumstances, Collins did not want Moore to make his information public, but he suggested that the police look for someone "seeking publicity." Unlike the defective fuse in Gastonia, which had just been wrapped around the dynamite, the fuses in Birmingham's bomb were attached to caps, making "it a rare occasion" for them to fail.³⁴

The revelation of stolen dynamite was new but something Birmingham's investigating officers already suspected, and this was not the first—nor the last—time that Moore would hear someone link his city's attempted bombing to those at other Jewish institutions. In this way, radical segregationists' connection between Jews, communism, and integration worked against them. According to Clive Webb, national Jewish organizations called for a federally sponsored, interstate investigation, which several non-Jewish politicians and religious groups supported, including the AJComm, Alabama governor "Big Jim" Folsom, and Connor. On April 29, only one day after the dynamite was reported at Beth-El, Connor

informed journalists of his "interstate conspiracy" theory, one shared by the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith.³⁵

By the time Moore spoke to Collins, the FBI had joined southern officials in a collective effort to stamp out the targeting of Jewish institutions, which included the formation of the Southern Conference on Bombing (SCB). Birmingham's detectives were already working with their Jacksonville counterparts to extend their cases' connections and evidence, collaborating with a network of individuals investigating Jewish buildings targeted in the previous six months. Through their SCB colleagues, including Gastonia Detective Roy Smith and Jacksonville Mayor Hayden Burns, they learned that two of the six bombs placed at other Jewish buildings had also failed to explode and that the undetonated bomb placed at North Carolina's Beth-El was composed of the same type of dynamite with similar caps and connecting fuses. Despite the "few scraps of dynamite wrappings" left at the Florida site, investigators "felt certain" that the Beth-El and Jacksonville bombs were supposed to go off simultaneously since it appeared the bombs in Nashville and Miami had been set that way on March 16.³⁶

Connor also repeatedly drew attention away from the possibility of local suspects, blaming the incidents on "the work of some outside group." He was hardly alone in his assumptions. In addition to southern journalists and other law enforcement officers, several national Jewish leaders believed a few "crackpots" or members of the "lunatic fringe" bore responsibility for the threat to Beth-El and other southern Jewish institutions, including AJComm president Dr. Joachim Prinz and the Anti-Defamation League's civil rights director, Arnold Foster. Birmingham reporter Clancy Lake's article, published three days after Beth-El's attempted dynamiting, reinforced these sentiments and encouraged the popular belief that the bomb's fuses "burned out just short of the blasting point," an oft-cited item in modern recollections of the incident. Despite the lack of concrete evidence for his statement, the theory helps community storytellers make sense of a violent event that did not occur and helps them ponder why their synagogue escaped the fate of other congregations.³⁷

The police soon received a key lead in the case, one that seemed more promising than anything Collins, the FBI, or their colleagues in the SCB could tell them. Behind closed doors it bound the synagogue's case to the

Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth.
(Library of Congress.)

devastation caused during the second dynamiting of Shuttlesworth's Bethel Baptist Church on the city's north side. Bethel Baptist's first bomb destroyed the parsonage and threatened Shuttlesworth's life and family. Like the vicious beating he received in 1956, however, it did little to stop the reverend's activism. On June 29, 1958, within months of the Temple Beth-El incident, Will Hail (one of the church's volunteer guards) found sixteen sticks of dynamite in a white paint bucket next to the sanctuary. Hail quickly moved the bucket away from the building, but the bomb went off anyway, shattering some of the church's windows.³⁸

Detectives soon became convinced that Jesse Benjamin (J. B.) Stoner had ordered the bombs at the synagogue and church. Stoner was an unstable individual whom the police and FBI already followed closely. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, he helped found the Christian Anti-Jewish Party, which had connections to individuals who happily supported their beliefs through acts of domestic terrorism. Stoner pronounced Jewish men and women "enemies of the white race" and charged mysterious Jews with running the NAACP and instigating *Brown v. Board of Education*.³⁹

The lead that caused Birmingham detectives to take a closer look at Stoner came on May 8, a little over a week after the synagogue's attempted bombing and three days after W. V. Collins's phone call. The tip

came from one of Connor's regular informants, William Hugh Morris, a man often known as "Mr. X" in official police reports. An experienced member of the Klan who helped expose its "Dixiecrat phase" in the late 1940s, Morris named Stoner as the mastermind behind the dynamite found at Beth-El and at Jewish institutions in Florida and North Carolina. Morris expressed fear that he would be killed if anyone found out that he was talking to the police but implied he would come forward because he disagreed with Stoner's form of bigotry. Preferring to direct his animosity solely towards Black Americans, Morris was unmoved by Stoner's ravings about Jews or their synagogues, which Stoner referred to as "pigpens."⁴⁰

Morris's tip piqued Connor and his officers' interest. They began to focus on his claim that the fuses attached to Beth-El's undetonated dynamite had been purposely "doctored." The next day Connor sent Cook to Atlanta to check the informant's information and dig up what he could about Stoner and any men working with him.⁴¹ On May 12, the Monday after Morris spoke to Connor, Lindsey met with local explosives expert Dennis Plan to test his statements. The detective asked Plan to determine what might have caused the fuses to falter. They then began a series of tests on fuses like those found in the blue satchel. Plan started by making pinpoints in their powder channels and adding water, which caused the fuses to burn out at the first puncture mark. He then bent some fuses and loosened their external fabric, which also caused them to fail. When the same tests were repeated on several fuses with the same results, the two

*Jesse Benjamin (J. B.) Stoner,
c. 1965. (Courtesy of the Alabama
Department of Archives
and History.)*

men concluded that the fuses must have been “tampered with” before being lit. Many residents still speculate that they went out because of the previous night’s rain, but Plan’s tests on the replicas suggest that someone would have had to compromise them first regardless of the rain.⁴²

Unfortunately, little remained to corroborate Plan’s conclusions due to the damage the actual fuses sustained through the bomb’s official disarming and the inconclusive FBI tests. That did not seem to matter to Lindsey and his fellow detectives, who became convinced that the dynamite was placed at the synagogue to frighten people rather than destroy the building. Inspiration for the tests was connected to Morris, the informant who was an opinionated bigot and their primary suspect’s acquaintance, but no one ever found another logical explanation for the fuses’ failure, and the evidence seemed to match his testimony.⁴³

The Confederate Underground, a clandestine society that declared responsibility for dynamiting Black and Jewish institutions in Miami and Jacksonville, soon provided an additional link. Lindsey and Cook interviewed several employees of the Exchange Security Bank on May 5, three days before Connor first met with Morris. More than one interviewee noted that a white man came into the bank acting oddly only four days before the Temple Beth-El incident. Wearing a plaid shirt and carrying a brown leather briefcase, the man asked whether Orman Summerville, a local attorney, was “Jewish or Gentile.” Stating that he “wanted to talk confidential,” he introduced himself as “Chapman or Chadwick” to C. J. Waldrop, the bank’s assistant vice president, and informed Waldrop that he was “working with the Confederate Underground” and was “checking on Jews and Niggers,” implying he either thought of them as equal threats or believed they worked together.⁴⁴

In a follow-up meeting with Connor on June 16, Morris connected Stoner to the same group, which he referred to as the “Confederate Union.” He portrayed Stoner as the interstate organization’s leader and stated its members were committed to dynamiting or physically harming anyone who stood in the way of segregation, including federal judges and jurors. He then helped Connor and his detectives carry out a sting operation that introduced Stoner to Captain Pattie and Detective Cook. Posing as local steelworkers “Ted Cook” and “G. L. Edwards,” they told Stoner that they could introduce him to wealthy segregationists willing to pay a lot of money for intimidation. During one of their

meetings, Stoner assured the undercover officers that he had "a small group of men who were dedicated to the cause" whom he identified as the Confederate Underground. He stated they were willing to "bomb a house or church" or commit other acts of violence—something the detectives took to mean murder—and implied they had already done so on his orders.⁴⁵

Despite Stoner's bravado or Morris's beliefs, the Confederate Underground was much less organized or powerful than either of them suggested. Sometimes described as a "catch all" term for an imagined alliance, the group connected radical segregationists who loosely linked their actions through a commitment to their southern identities and myths of the Lost Cause. Still, some unity within the loose association existed, and its threat cannot be easily dismissed. Like many Cold War hate groups, people who related themselves to the Confederate Underground frequently blended anticommunism with racism and antisemitism. They generated publicity through specific acts of terrorism, gave outrageous aliases, and read from prepared statements. On April 28, individuals claiming to be members called at least three people in Jacksonville to take credit for bombs at the Jewish center and an African American school. One caller stated, "All integration must stop. Jews will not be allowed in Florida, except at Miami Beach," and "Jews outside of Miami will die." Roughly a month later, a man called the St. Louis Jewish Community Center and claimed to be part of the group as well. He warned "the same thing could happen [there] that happened in Nashville," connecting the threat to a bomb on March 16 that destroyed the entrance to another Jewish building and blew out the windows of nearby houses.⁴⁶

Stoner and the group were further linked in June, when the Confederate Underground resurfaced in Birmingham after the second bombing of Bethel Baptist Church. A man declaring that he was "General Forrest of the Confederate Underground" called the police shortly after dynamite went off. (Nathan Bedford Forrest had led the first Ku Klux Klan established after the Civil War.) According to Juanita Parker, the complaint clerk on duty, the man took responsibility for the bombing in the name of the group and identified the church as "the Center for Communist integration in the South." That theme was repeated in October, when fifty sticks of dynamite exploded at The Temple in Atlanta at 3:37 A.M. There, the Confederate Underground again announced its responsibility for the

destruction, which blew apart the Temple's side wall, shattered the windows in a neighboring apartment building, and shook people out of their beds. A call placed in the Atlanta bombing's aftermath included additional threats that suggested future targets would be any nightclub that failed to fire its Black employees and "all Communist organizations."⁴⁷

When undercover agents Pattie and Cook accompanied Morris to one of several meetings with Stoner, they attempted to bait him with antisemitic comments and stated they did not want any "duds" like those that had been found at Temple Beth-El. Stoner replied that the "duds" might have been the result of the Jews' attempt to raise money to build a new "church." The statement simultaneously puzzled detectives and demonstrated that Stoner—who trusted few people—impulsively fell back on a common defense of segregationist terrorists, blaming victims who sought to gain sympathy for inciting or committing the threats or violence that white supremacists performed. Simultaneously, Stoner could not resist hinting that he was indeed responsible for the attack. According to Pattie's report, Stoner mentioned that the undetonated synagogue bomb had consisted of fifty-four sticks of dynamite, which he noted would have done considerable damage had it exploded. Stoner also repeated long-standing antisemitic tropes related to Jewish social and economic exploitation. He told detectives that "the Negroes wouldn't steal if the Jew pawnbrokers did not buy the stolen goods" and blamed Black activism not only on African American leaders like Shuttlesworth but also on Jewish funding and encouragement, noting that this had caused "a great deal of trouble" in Birmingham.⁴⁸

Cook and Pattie felt confident that Stoner acted as the "kingpin" behind Jewish attacks throughout the South as Morris claimed, but neither Stoner nor anyone else was ever charged with Temple Beth-El's attempted bombing. It may seem surprising that such an unapologetically violent individual was able to avoid prosecution for the incidents, especially given his damning testimony and his connection to other acts of domestic terrorism. In 1958, Stoner had been a lawyer for six years and was well skilled at his craft, which he employed when he became the attorney of James Earl Ray, Martin Luther King's assassin, eleven years later. He combined his knowledge of the law with his paranoia and was able to escape punishment for decades. He also took extensive precautions before he spoke

to anyone and knew the FBI and several state police departments watched him and recorded his calls. Stoner carefully constructed alibis for the times when segregationist protests, bombings, and physical attacks were scheduled and frequently recruited younger and more aggressive individuals to commit the crimes he sponsored.⁴⁹ When The Temple was bombed in Atlanta, Stoner made sure he was seen in Chattanooga, for example, and when he met with Cook and Pattie, he refused to enter the hotel room where they had previously met and talked, preferring Morris's Studebaker, which he considered less likely to be wiretapped.⁵⁰

Moreover, Connor and his detectives' sting operation was poorly planned and operated. Because they underestimated Stoner's greed and capacity for violence, they failed to recognize that offering him money to bomb a high-profile target like Shuttlesworth's church would result in him committing the crime before they could arrange their first "down payment" and a subsequent arrest. Officers' highly flawed interactions with Stoner could be labeled "spontaneously creative" at best and "irresponsible" or "extralegal" at worst, which resulted in a botched investigation of both crimes that was covered up for decades. This caused local prosecutors to view police actions as entrapment and Connor to back away from making their findings public. Although ultimately unsuccessful, Stoner even tried to use the circumstances to claim he had been coerced when he was finally indicted in 1977 for the 1958 Bethel Baptist Church bombing. Convicted in 1980, he ultimately served less than half of his ten-year sentence.⁵¹

The Aftermath

Birmingham's inclusion in the series of attacks on southern Jewish institutions in the late 1950s exerted a strong impact on the Jewish men and women who live there. Its reach has extended from the immediate aftermath of the attempted bombing of Temple Beth-El to pivotal years in the freedom movement and beyond. In the 1950s and 1960s, Jewish community members reacted in a variety of ways to the attempted bombing and to calls for Black equality, creating a spectrum of response: no involvement and silence on one end, aggressive advocacy on the other, and gradualism in between. Drawing from the work of scholars like Mary Dudziak, Glenn Eskew, Clive Webb, Jeanne Theoharis, and Marc Dollinger, the spectrum enables current researchers and community members

to frame discussions about the period, analyze how local Jews felt about the attempted bombing, and explore how it impacted Birmingham's Jewish residents, leaders, and negotiators as calls for civil and human rights increased. The spectrum approach provides an effective tool of historical analysis since it leaves room for diverse actions and change over time, recognizing that people do not always operate in binary, static, or clearly defined spaces. Residents' actions and motivations can thus be related not only to their fears and complex identities as Jews but also to their perceptions of the mid-twentieth century civil rights movement and external events including, but not limited to, the attempted bombing of Temple Beth-El. Current community members also fall on this spectrum, responding to information about the past and contemporary calls for civil and social justice in a variety of ways.

The legacy of Beth-El's bomb threat began shortly after it occurred, a period crucial to the local and national civil rights movement. Between 1960 and 1965, Black students led Birmingham's first sit-ins, and a group of white professionals attempted to reform the city's segregationist government and oust Bull Connor. Jewish department store owners faced boycotts and protests for failing to integrate. When they tried to relax the city's segregation laws, these business leaders received threatening phone calls from white customers and reprimands from Connor, who fined them thousands of dollars for "building-code violations." In 1963, Fred Shuttlesworth finally convinced the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) to join local activists, resulting in the Birmingham campaign and Martin Luther King's arrest. Temple Beth-El's attempted

bombing was just one of many events that sparked various responses. Some Jewish residents, scared by the synagogue's brush with destruction, retreated into complete silence as civil rights activities and violent forms of resistance rose. Others felt resentment toward Black activists, believing their work had amplified white supremacists' focus on the Jewish community. Fear or bitterness moved these individuals further toward silence in 1960, when *New York Times* reporter Harrison Salisbury claimed that two teenagers were arrested for parking a hearse filled with dynamite behind Temple Beth-El. While Birmingham journalists denied the presence of the explosives, local authorities did not refute the antisemitic literature that the teenagers carried nor the words of Beth-El's Black security guard, who stated the boys told him that they intended to blow up the synagogue.⁵²

These events only reinforced the feelings of Jewish residents who were already segregationists, but many moved back and forth along a dynamic spectrum of action and inaction as they reacted to incidents in the city and the nation. Like Jewish men and women in other southern cities, some began to empathize with African Americans and quietly signed petitions, worked to keep public schools open, and performed other small acts of support. Lawyers like Abe Berkowitz and clergy members like Milton Grafman, who were already working with African American leaders, became more convinced of the need for change. A handful of previously inactive residents gained inspiration to become active for the very first time. A few were pushed toward more visible forms of advocacy by the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in September 1963, which particularly affected women like Gertrude Goldstein, who attended interracial meetings and spoke publicly about social inequalities.⁵³

As the twentieth century progressed, Jewish responses to Temple Beth-El's attempted bombing continued. A small group of congregants and grassroots historians gathered and extended stories of the threat to their community, drawing their conclusions and perceptions from newspaper and archival records, first-hand experiences, and the words of people they knew. They kept the incident sacred through their recollections and added a Jewish lens to the recording of its history, generating an initial context for the city's collective memory. Their efforts have resulted in extensive documentation, including the work of local authors and historians like T. K. Thorne and Sol Kimerling. In 2013, publications

edited and sponsored by Birmingham residents, including *Weld* magazine's series "No More Bull" and *Southern Jewish Life's* "Not Just Black and White: Civil Rights and the Jewish Community," featured the incident.⁵⁴

Interest in the topic reaches into the present, building on existing narratives with the work of professional scholars and newly recorded perceptions of Jewish and African American residents. In 2022, the attempted bombing was permanently commemorated through a historical marker, serving as the foundation of the community-based Beth-El Civil Rights Experience (BCRE). Working with trained historians and non-Jewish community partners, Jewish residents utilize this project as a vehicle to examine and reflect upon overlaps in Birmingham's Jewish and civil rights histories. Through private and state-sponsored grants and their fundraising efforts, they have supported workshops and presentations, an audio tour, public and university courses, and a ten-minute documentary film about the 1958 bomb threat. The remembrance of Birmingham's Jewish past, whether flattering or unflattering, has thus become a way to inspire and inform tolerance and cooperation in the future. Suzanne Bearman, a college student during the 1960s and a member of the BCRE's advisory committee, "got involved" because she wanted "to make sure [the project] was telling the truth about what we did in the sixties, because I don't think we did enough." She represents Jewish residents who see the project as part of their ongoing commitment to principles of *tikkun olam* and the pursuit of justice in the city.⁵⁵

Local Jews do not recall or ascribe meaning to the civil rights movement monolithically, however, so the research that drives the project has also faced challenges. Previous accounts of the attempted bombing and other important events in the city tend to focus on the minority of individuals who built reputations as allies, excluding those who fell on other points of the spectrum. Reliable evidence for Jewish men and women who failed to act or whose actions were "quiet" is scarce, and current residents who remember the era were often children or teenagers sheltered from the violence and hatred that accompanied white resistance. Project historians have sought to balance their respect for individual contributions with an acknowledgment that the intersection of Jewish and civil rights histories, similar to the history of the twentieth-century freedom movement as a whole, is complex. Rarely composed of heroes and villains, it is a story of

Temple Beth-El Historical Marker.
(Courtesy of Temple Beth-El, Birmingham.)

complex actors attempting to make sense of their world during a time of immense change.⁵⁶

Moreover, the attempted bombing was not a successful attack, making it an antisemitic threat that was not fully realized. This lack of closure is one of the factors that drives the story forward, providing opportunities for the local community to repeatedly reexamine and question the incident and its meaning. Although the dynamite failed to explode in 1958, its discovery is wedged into the Jewish community's collective memory. Moreover, the unresolved nature of the botched police investigation, which failed to prosecute J. B. Stoner or anyone else for the act, led the community to contemplate how to memorialize something that did not happen, creating space for expanding interpretations of the event's significance and the definition of domestic terrorism. During a volatile era in a city known as "Bombingham," when physical assault and destruction were very real possibilities, Beth-El's undetonated bomb sent a message, highlighting the precarious position of the city's Jews in a racially

polarized and unforgiving environment. It intensified residents' awareness of the latent prejudice that existed in the city while simultaneously assuring them that non-Jewish civic leaders and police officers would support them when they were targeted. The bomb's placement and the connection that white supremacists drew between Jews, communists, and calls for Black equality demonstrated that Birmingham's Jews, like their counterparts in other southern cities, experienced many of the privileges of whiteness while still possessing a contested and fragile racial identity.

The Temple Beth-El incident is only one piece of the puzzle and not the only event necessary to understand how Jewish men and women responded to the freedom movement, but it illuminates the complex dynamics that motivated individuals to advocate for others. Studies of the incident and its processing continue to serve as an example of how a single community's memory of a difficult history can create an ever-changing form of sacred memory that motivate Jewish community members to cooperate, learn, and grow.

NOTES

¹ Birmingham Police Department Surveillance Files, 1947–1980, File #1125.1.47, Department of Archives and Manuscripts, Birmingham Public Library (hereafter cited as BPL Surveillance Files); “Connor Asks Death Penalty in Church, School Bombings,” *Birmingham Post-Herald*, April 29, 1958; Glenn T. Eskew, *But for Birmingham: The Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights Struggle* (Chapel Hill, 1997), 53.

² BPL Surveillance Files; Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 53; “Connor Asks Death Penalty.”

³ “Connor Asks Death Penalty”; BPL Surveillance Files; Elizabeth Gillespie McRae, *Mothers of Massive Resistance: White Women and the Politics of White Supremacy* (Oxford, UK, 2018), 179–81.

⁴ Marjorie L. White and Andrew M. Manis, eds., *Birmingham Revolutionaries: The Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth and the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights* (Macon, GA, 2000), 34–40, 60; “Leaders Hit Injustices On Montgomery City Bus Lines,” *Alabama Tribune*, December 16, 1955.

⁵ David Schraub, “White Jews: An Intersectional Approach,” *AJS Review: The Journal of the Association for Jewish Studies* 43 (November 2019): 407; Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks & What That Says About Race* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1998), 1–2; Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton, 2006); 17–18; McRae, *Mothers of Massive Resistance*, 179–89.

⁶ BPL Surveillance Files; “Stop ‘Police Brutality’ Negroes Ask Lindbergh,” *Birmingham Post-Herald*, February 7, 1957; Fred Shuttlesworth quoted in Andrew M. Manis, *A Fire You Can’t Put Out: The Civil Rights Life of Birmingham’s Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth* (Tuscaloosa,

1999), 177; Angela Onwuachi-Willig, "The Trauma of the Routine: Lessons on Cultural Trauma from the Emmett Till Verdict," *Sociological Theory* 34 (2016): 337–38.

⁷ Schraub, "White Jews," 406; Clive Webb, *Fight Against Fear: Southern Jews & Black Civil Rights* (Athens, GA, 2003), 219; Abe Berkowitz, interview conducted by Ed Goldberg, Memory Bank Project, Birmingham Jewish Federation, April 14, 1985, 27, Alabama Holocaust Education Center Archives and Special Collections, Birmingham.

⁸ *Shelley v. Kraemer* (1948) limited "racial discrimination" in state or locally supported real estate covenants, but exclusionary practices against people of color, Catholics, Jews, and other minority groups remained prevalent throughout the country in the mid- to late 1950s and 1960s. Consequently, ghettos in inner cities continued to flourish throughout the nation. Fights became most intense after the passage of civil rights laws and were often enforced through carefully worded advertisements, agents' unwritten agreements, ambiguous "board approvals," or last-minute requirements for large down payments and would only increase with white flight into various suburbs during these and the decades that followed. Mary Ellen Stratthaus, "Flaw in the Jewel: Housing Discrimination in La Jolla, California," *American Jewish History* 84 (September 1996): 189–99; Reynolds Farley, Sheldon Danziger, and Harry J. Holzer, *Detroit Divided: A Volume in the Multi-City Study of Urban Inequality* (New York, 2000), 159; Jeffrey D. Gonda, *Unjust Deeds: The Restrictive Covenant Cases and the Making of the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill, 2015), 1–3.

⁹ T.K. Thorne, *Behind the Magic Curtain: Secrets, Spies, and Unsung White Allies of Birmingham's Civil Rights Days* (New York, 2021), 76, 145; Birmingham's Racial Segregation Ordinances, May 1951, Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, Birmingham; Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 60–61, 79, 82; "New Interest Aroused in Louisville Bombing," *Alabama Tribune*, April 13, 1956; "Four Men Held in Connection with Home Bombings," *Alabama Tribune*, October, 16, 1953; "Scare Bombings and Klan Floggings Go Unsolved," *Alabama Tribune*, January 25, 1952.

¹⁰ BPL Surveillance Files.

¹¹ Thorne, *Behind the Magic Curtain*, 55–56; Webb, *Fight Against Fear*, 56–57.

¹² Melissa Faye Greene, *The Temple Bombing* (Boston, 1996), 6; Mark K. Bauman and Berkeley Kalin, eds., *The Quiet Voices: Southern Rabbis and Black Civil Rights, 1880s to 1990s* (Tuscaloosa, 1997), 4–5, 171; P. Allen Krause, *To Stand Aside or To Stand Alone: Southern Reform Rabbis and the Civil Rights Movement*, ed. Mark K. Bauman with Stephen Krause (Tuscaloosa, 2016), 236–37.

¹³ "Rabbi A.J. Mesch Dies Unexpectedly," *Birmingham Post Herald*, December 19, 1962; Memorial Service Program, Temple Beth-El, Birmingham, January 23, 1963, 5. For more on how the growth of identity politics led to "more defined ethno-racial factions," see Marc Dollinger, *Black Power, Jewish Politics: Reinventing the Alliance in the 1960s* (Waltham, MA, 2018).

¹⁴ "Temple Beth-El door found open by officers," *Birmingham News*, May 14, 1958.

¹⁵ Greene, *Temple Bombing*, 4–7; Webb, *Fight Against Fear*, 56–58; McRae, *Mothers of Massive Resistance*, 138–39, 153, 155–63.

¹⁶ "Decrease in Anti-Jewish Prejudice in the United States Reported in Nation-Wide Survey" and "Jewish Organizations Urge United Nations Parley to Outlaw Racial Propaganda," Jewish Telegraph Agency, March 28, 1948.

¹⁷ George Kellman, "Anti-Jewish Agitation," *American Jewish Year Book* 56 (New York, 1955), 221; Ernie Lazar FOIA Collection, FBI-Atlanta, 100-4976, Internet Archive, accessed June 15, 2023, <https://archive.org/details/ChristianAntiJewishPartyJ.B.StonerAtlanta1004976/page/n23/mode/2up>; Webb, *Fight Against Fear*, 58.

¹⁸ "Police Here Join State Patrol in Probe of Beating," *Birmingham News*, September 25, 1938; "Housing Experts to Gather Here: Southern Problems To Come Before Parley Nov 20–23," *Birmingham News*, Sept 27, 1938; "Lifting of City's Race Bar Asked at Conference," *Birmingham News*, November 22, 1938.

¹⁹ Dollinger, *Black Power, Jewish Politics*, 30–31; Faye Kimerling, Temple Beth-El interview for TravelStorys walking tour, May 29, 2021, Temple Beth-El Papers, Birmingham.

²⁰ Sam Lubin to A. Harold Murray, February 7, 1957, Report of Field Trip to Birmingham and Montgomery, AJComm, Research of Kaye Nail/Personal Papers, Birmingham.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Temple Beth-El Board Minutes, April 28, 1958, Temple Beth El Papers, Birmingham; Faye Kimerling interview.

²³ Temple Beth-El Board Minutes, April 28, 1958; Mark H. Elovitz, Research Material on Birmingham Jewish History and Constitution of Jewish Community Council of Birmingham, May 1962, AR1758, Milton Grafman Papers 1907–1995, Department of Archives and Manuscripts, Birmingham Public Library, Birmingham.

²⁴ Bulletin, May 2–3, 1958, Temple Beth-El Papers, Temple Beth-El, Birmingham.

²⁵ Bulletin, May 2–3, 1958, Temple Beth-El Papers; "Public is urged to raise big reward in bomb try," *Birmingham News*, April 29, 1958; "Bomb Try at Temple is Deep Shock," *Birmingham News*, April 29, 1958; "Gifts by Christians urged in bombing," *Birmingham News*, May 3, 1958; "YMBC opposes tax cut as 'cure' for business dip," *Birmingham News*, May 6, 1958; "Eloquent Denunciation of Bombings," *Birmingham News*, May 6, 1958; "Catholic layman fire blast at bombing attack," *Birmingham News*, May 8, 1958.

²⁶ "Connor Asks Death Penalty," *Birmingham Post-Herald*, April 29, 1958.

²⁷ Although Moore's first concern was always protecting and improving the image of the police department, he frequently sought to deescalate racial tensions instead of heightening them, as Connor did. He also served as a negotiator, trying to balance the safety of Rev. Shuttlesworth and other activists and his role as a defender of the social order of his era. He refused to back Connor during the Freedom Rider controversy, for example, and arrested the students involved for their own protection, allowing Shuttlesworth to go with them to jail when the pastor insisted that he do so. Jane Aldridge, "Reversal Sought By Shuttlesworth," *Birmingham Post-Herald*, January 9, 1962.

²⁸ Thorne, *Behind the Magic Curtain*, 68–69.

²⁹ *Ibid.*; "Warrants sworn out for Connor, woman companion," *Birmingham News*, December 26, 1951; William A. Nunnelley, *Bull Connor* (Tuscaloosa, 1991), 63–64; "Charges Filed Against 5 Detectives By Personnel Board," *Birmingham Post-Herald*, January 10, 1953; Clancy Lake, "Lindbergh outlines sweeping police reshuffle," *Birmingham News*, November 2, 1953; "Review of '55 – Blasts, fire, takes lives," *Birmingham News*, January 12, 1956.

³⁰ Detective L.J. Wilson assisted early in the Beth-El case as well, but he does not appear as much in the reports related to it or the other cases mentioned here. Wilson did, however,

investigate the airline and car rental rosters mentioned in the next paragraphs. BPL Surveillance Files.

³¹ BPL Surveillance Files; Michael R. Belknap, *Federal Law and Southern Order: Racial Violence and Constitutional Conflict in the Post-Brown South* (Athens, GA, 1995), 53–58; "Aid of FBI Is Sought In Dynamitings Probe," *Birmingham Post-Herald*, May 1, 1958.

³² BPL Surveillance Files.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*; Hearings before Subcommittee No. 3 of the U.S. Congress, Committee on the Judiciary, House of Representatives, 86th Congress, First Session Serial No. 2, on HR 6742, 4958, 3216, 2269 (May 8–11, 1959), 84.

³⁵ Webb, *Fight Against Fear*, 57–59; "Bomb Case May Have Florida Link," *Birmingham News*, April 29, 1958; Clancy Lake, "Phantom Callers Claim Big Organization—Segregation terrorist group believed to be planting bombs," *Birmingham News*, May 1, 1958; Belknap, *Federal Law and Southern Order*, 55.

³⁶ Webb, *Fight Against Fear*, 57; BPL Surveillance Files; Lake, "Phantom Callers"; "Police have fingerprints in temple bomb case," *Birmingham News*, May 3, 1958; "Jacksonville policemen confer here on bombing," *Birmingham News*, May 29, 1958,

³⁷ Lake, "Phantom Callers"; Webb, *Fight Against Fear*, 59.

³⁸ Susan Cianci Salvatore, National Historic Landmarks Survey (Bethel Baptist Church), U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, July 27, 2006; "Birmingham Negro Church Bombed Again," *Montgomery Advertiser*, June 30, 1958.

³⁹ Michael Newton, *The National States Rights Party: A History* (Jefferson, NC, 2017), 28–31.

⁴⁰ Diane McWhorter, *Carry Me Home: The Climactic Battle of the Civil Rights Revolution* (New York, 2001), 132; BPL Surveillance Files.

⁴¹ Although at least one woman was named in relation to Stoner's inner circle, detectives tended to ignore her or any other woman's role in their investigations of the bombings noted in this paper.

⁴² McWhorter, *Carry Me Home*, 132; BPL Surveillance Files.

⁴³ McWhorter, *Carry Me Home*, 132; BPL Surveillance Files. The overnight rain theory is presented by Thorne in *Behind the Magic Curtain*, 75, and is frequently repeated in verbal accounts of the Beth-El bombing. However, the FBI's tests on the fuses that were gathered from the scene could neither prove nor disprove Plan's theory.

⁴⁴ BPL Surveillance Files.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ John M. Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag: America's Most Embattled Emblem* (Cambridge, MA, 2005), 142; BPL Surveillance Files; Lake, "Segregation terror group believed to be planting bombs," *Birmingham News*, May 1, 1958.

⁴⁷ Coski, *Confederate Battle Flag*, 142; BPL Surveillance Files; Greene, *Temple Bombing*, 1–11.

⁴⁸ BPL Surveillance Files.

⁴⁹ The NRSP, for example, organized and trained Birmingham teenagers to harass African Americans who attempted to desegregate schools and department stores.

⁵⁰ Stuart Wexler and Larry Hancock, *The Awful Grace of God: Religious Terrorism, White Supremacy, and the Unsolved Murder of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Berkeley, CA, 2012); Clive Webb,

Rabble Rousers: The American Far Right in the Civil Rights Era (Athens, GA, 2011), 181; Newton, *National States Rights Party*, 53–56.

⁵¹ Jon Bixby, “Stoner convicted in bomb case,” *Atlanta Constitution*, May 15, 1980; Nick Patterson, “Bomber J.B. Stoner leaving prison after 3½ years,” *Birmingham Post-Herald*, November 5, 1986.

⁵² Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 148–49, 166–67, 194–96, 210–12, 291; “An editorial—The Salisbury case,” *Birmingham News*, May 8, 1960.

⁵³ Kaye Nail, “Birmingham’s Jewish Women and Social Reform, 1880–1980,” (master’s thesis, University of Alabama at Birmingham, 2010), 33–35. For more information about Jewish forms of advocacy in other southern cities, see Webb, *Fight Against Fear* and Raymond A. Mohl, *South of the South: Jewish Activists and the Civil Rights Movement in Miami, 1945–1960* (Gainesville, FL, 2004).

⁵⁴ Solomon P. Kimerling’s article “54 Sticks of Dynamite: The Bomb at Temple Beth-El” was published in *Weld* magazine’s 2013 series “No More Bull.” *Weld* is no longer an active journal, but the series is digitally archived on Temple Beth-El’s website, accessed February 23, 2023, <https://templebeth-el.net/education/no-more-bull>. “‘Our Mockingbird’ screening marks civil rights anniversaries,” *Not Just Black and White: Civil Rights and the Jewish Community*, *Southern Jewish Life*, April 2013, accessed May 24, 2023, <https://sjlmag.com/2013/01/01/not-just-black-and-white-civil-rights-and-the-jewish-community-special-series>; Thorne, *Behind the Magic Curtain*, 73–79.

⁵⁵ “Beth-El Civil Rights Experience,” last modified September 2022, <https://templebeth-el.net/education/beth-el-civil-rights-experience>, accessed May 8, 2023; Suzanne Bearman, *In Solidarity: The Beth-El Civil Rights Experience*, dir. Tyler Jones, 1504 Productions, 2023. A review of the Beth-El Civil Rights Experience appears in this volume.

⁵⁶ For more on local Jewish memory and the civil rights movement see Margaret Norman, “Convergences: Remembering and Recounting the Civil Rights Movement Through the Story of Nineteen Rabbis in Birmingham, Alabama, 1963” (master’s thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2022), accessed May 8, 2023, <https://cdr.lib.unc.edu/concern/dissertations/ff365g164>.