

SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORY

Journal of the Southern Jewish Historical Society

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2021
Volume 24



Southern Jewish History

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Articles appearing in *Southern Jewish History* are abstracted and/or indexed in *Historical Abstracts*; *America: History and Life*; *Index to Jewish Periodicals*; *Journal of American History*; *Journal of Southern History*; RAMBI-National Library of Israel; Immigration and Ethnic History Society *Newsletter*; and the *Berman Jewish Policy Archive* (www.bjpa.org).

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Film Reviews

Reawakening. Directed and produced by Alexandra K. Horowitz. Voices Storytelling and Media, 2019. 8 minutes.

Alexandra K. Horowitz, the founder and executive producer of Voices Storytelling and Media, produced *Reawakening* in 2019. A grant from the Southern Jewish Historical Society (SJHS) partially funded the production, and it was first shown at the 2019 SJHS conference in Charlottesville, Virginia. Since then, there have been numerous showings (many of them now virtual) and discussions in all parts of the country. They include Jewish film festivals in Spokane, Minneapolis–St. Paul, and San Diego and public appearances to discuss the film in multiple American cities. (See <https://www.voicesstorytelling.com/about>).

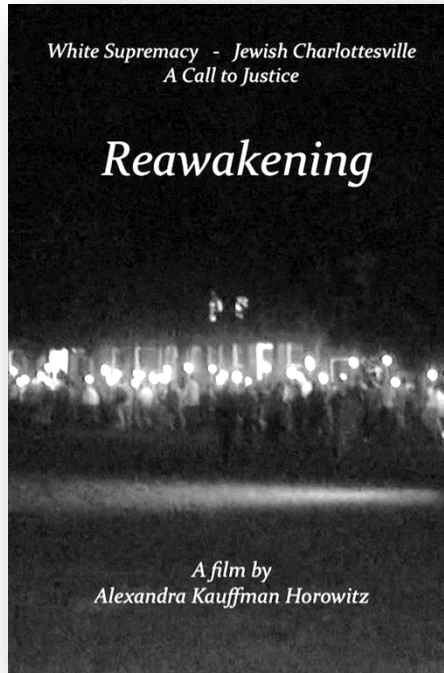
Reawakening centers on Charlottesville, Virginia, the Unite the Right rally of August 2017, and the response of members of Charlottesville's Jewish community. This very short (eight-minute) film packs a punch. It focuses on community members' reactions to the antisemitism they witnessed, to larger issues of Jewish resistance in history, to the responses of African American colleagues in town, and to the knowledge, responsibility, and learning that grew out of those dark days.

Many, although not all, of the interviews are drawn from the larger Charlottesville Jewish Oral History project. I have been the director of that project, and, with the permission of those interviewed, I agreed to let Alexandra Horowitz have access to the materials. The scope of the oral history project covers far more than the UTR rally. Horowitz's use was narrowly focused on the response of Charlottesvilleans to the shock,

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trauma, and understanding that ensued from the events of August 2017. She also interviewed both rabbis of the city's only synagogue, Congregation Beth Israel. Both have invested themselves in Charlottesville's community organizations fighting for racial justice.

At the beginning of the film, Horowitz shows the chilling footage and sounds of the neo-Nazi white supremacists who descended on Charlottesville sowing hatred and violence. Those scenes are interspersed with the reactions of four individuals: two of them are more active members of the community, two are less so. One of those four is a Holocaust survivor (since deceased), and another is a man who had not been involved Jewishly. All interviewees comment on how disconcerting it was to realize the prevalence of antisemitism. But their reactions, and those of others interviewed, lead to a common conclusion: If "they" are going to hate us, "we" are going to stand up. Standing up means learning more about one's self-identity, becoming more knowledgeable, becoming more present. It



means resistance, as our sages tell us through the holidays of Purim and Passover. It means fighting back. Such responses have not always been Jewish responses in American history—it takes a certain amount of self-confidence to respond that way. And that, in part, is due to the leadership from within the community, as Horowitz shows very poignantly.

Reawakening foregrounds the voices of Rabbi Gutherz and Rabbi Schmelkin to broaden the scope of the film from individual responses of Jews to community awareness about larger issues of racial justice. As Charlottesville's African American community responded to the UTR rally with claims that this felt so familiar (in contrast to the Jewish responses), it led the Jewish community to reexamine its awareness of systemic racism. It meant that this small Jewish community felt a responsibility to face up to history, to explore how to be engaged in closing the existing racial gap, and to commit to ongoing conversation and action.

The message of this film is powerful. It calls attention to the best of Jewish sensibilities—the need for *tikun olam*—for repair of the world. Horowitz has masterfully created a short and focused film to raise consciousness about ways to combat hate speech and hate crime. The film suggests a proactive, community-oriented approach that allows minorities (whether religious, ethnic, or racial) to work together in defense of all.

Religious and cultural institutions across America should use this film broadly to spark conversation on issues of social and racial justice. From high school classes to adult education gatherings, this film will provoke meaningful discussion about the responsibilities of Jews nationally to help heal our country. In the process, we will also be combating white supremacy and antisemitism.

Alexandra Horowitz can be reached at alex@voicesstorytelling.com if communities are interested in viewing her film or having her engage in a broader discussion.

Phyllis K. Leffler, University of Virginia
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Atlanta: The City Too Busy To Wait. Directed by Adam Hirsch, Jason Ross, and Gabby Spatt, independent release, 2021. 59 minutes.

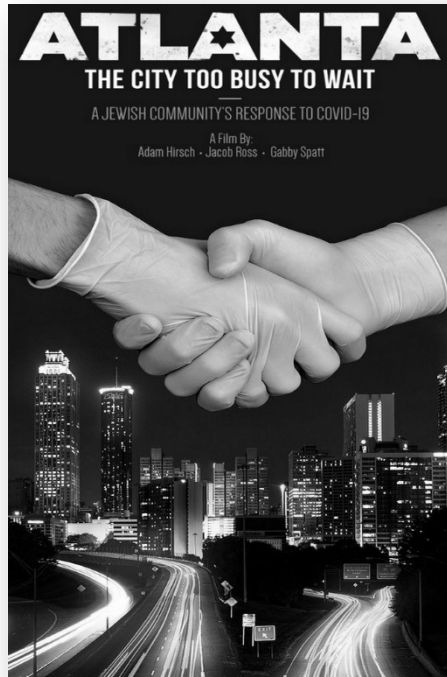
Atlanta: The City Too Busy to Wait chronicles the response of the Atlanta Jewish community to the COVID-19 pandemic. The film, which received a Southern Jewish Historical Society project completion grant, describes how Atlanta's Jewish institutions and many in the city's Jewish leadership quickly pivoted to a virtual environment beginning just before the Passover holiday in mid-March 2020. It premiered and was a featured selection at the 2021 Atlanta Jewish Film Festival.

Interspersed in the production are comments by many of the spiritual leaders of Atlanta's religious institutions and executives of important community organizations such as the philanthropic Jewish Federation of Greater Atlanta and the Jewish Family and Career Services, which provided counseling, charitable social welfare aid, and food assistance to those in need. These organizations, along with the southeast regional office of the American Jewish Committee in Atlanta, quickly acted as resources on matters of community concern as well as liaising between the Jewish and other communities in the region.

Also highlighted are the efforts of individuals, particularly in the Jewish community concentrated in the neighborhood along Atlanta's La Vista Road near Emory University adjacent to several Orthodox synagogues. Because Jewish law forbids the use of technology on Shabbat and religious holidays, these traditional communities had to find other unique ways to stay connected.

As its title implies, the documentary energetically attempts to portray the Atlanta Jewish community as a resourceful and positive force that mobilized quickly during the pandemic to recreate a sense of community. Many were impacted by the considerable psychological challenges presented by physical isolation and economic change that accompanied the worldwide pandemic. The Jewish community did not escape these challenges and worked tirelessly to help those in need.

As the community's undertaker describes it, at one point the Atlanta Jewish community was losing as many as a half dozen residents to the disease each week. The community food bank at the Jewish Family and Career Services during the year quadrupled the amount of food it



provided from about 50 thousand pounds in 2019 to 250 thousand pounds in 2020. Psychological counselors at the agency wrestled with full appointment books.

While the community and its leaders were challenged, the documentary attempts to make the point that life went on with its usual urgency. The title of the film, *Atlanta: A City Too Busy To Wait* is a play on words taken from the slogan, “Atlanta: The City Too Busy To Hate,” that politicians and business leaders in Atlanta adopted during the civil rights era of the 1960s and 1970s. It signified that Atlanta was a better choice for national companies considering a regional or national office in the racially divided South.

The film’s focus shifts halfway through production to the civil unrest and social justice protests that occurred during the pandemic. It touches on Atlanta’s history of civil rights activism and Black-Jewish relations

past, present, and future. Just as they have done so often in the past, many in Atlanta's Jewish community banded together to support marginalized communities that experienced injustice.

Although the film covers a lot of territory, it fails to mention the 2020 campaign for the United States Senate. A look at the 2020 election, particularly the narrow victories of Jon Ossoff, Georgia's first Jewish senator, and Raphael Warnock, Georgia's first Black senator, would have added more depth to the film. It is possible that bypassing the role that politics played during a highly partisan election year was an editorial decision by the filmmakers to enhance the film's appeal to a wider audience.

Overall, the film does a capable job of capturing the Atlanta Jewish community's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. As the filmmakers point out at the beginning of the film, it will be a significant resource for future generations looking for local insight into a pivotal moment in history. The Jewish Federation of Greater Atlanta supported the film, and it is the first project to be aided by the Atlanta Jewish Film Festival's newly created Filmmaker Fund.

Bob Bahr, The Center for Media and the Moving Image, Atlanta.

The reviewer can be reached at www.facebook.com/CMMImage.