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Mark K. Bauman, *Editor*

Rachel Heimovics Braun, *Managing Editor*

Dana M. Greene, *Book Review Editor*

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“The Law of Life is the Law of Service”:  
Rabbi Ira Sanders and the Quest for  
Racial and Social Justice in Arkansas, 1926–1963

by

James L. Moses

In 1963, after thirty-seven remarkable years in the pulpit of Little Rock’s Temple B’nai Israel, Rabbi Ira E. Sanders retired. His career spanned the traumas of the Great Depression, World War II, and the wrenching social and racial struggles of the 1950s and 1960s. Upon his retirement, the *Arkansas Gazette* stated what Arkansans familiar with Dr. Sanders already knew: “Long before most of us understood even the full meaning of terms such as social justice and human dignity, Rabbi Sanders had begun to translate these ideas into action.”<sup>1</sup> He had a lifelong commitment to social justice in its broadest construction and was particularly committed to African American equality. An agent of change during an era of tremendous change, Sanders brought to Arkansas a desire to make a difference in his community. From the mid-1920s, Sanders emerged as a key figure in the evolution of attitudes and institutions related to social and racial justice in Arkansas, providing key leadership in times of crisis and calm.

The topic of southern Jews and civil rights is a burgeoning field of historical inquiry, and the study of southern rabbis in particular has produced thoughtful and insightful works.<sup>2</sup> Yet detailed analyses of Ira Sanders are conspicuously absent. He is mentioned often, but never scrutinized.<sup>3</sup> This work seeks to redress that oversight. It is my contention that Sanders is one of the more significant figures among southern rabbis in the twentieth century as illustrated by his many contributions. His work for

social and racial justice had a deep and abiding impact on the history of Arkansas.

### *Early Life*

Ira Sanders was born in Rich Hill, Missouri, on May 6, 1894. The town of Rich Hill, Sanders later wrote, was terribly misnamed. Nobody was rich, and there were no hills; "Poor Prairie" was more appropriate.<sup>4</sup> Influenced by a desire to help others and by his mother, Pauline, a "deeply-religious woman" whose "one aim in life was to have one of her four sons enter the rabbinate," Ira knew by the age of nine that he wanted to be a rabbi.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, as a child Ira practiced his "sermons" on his younger brother Gus by locking him in their bedroom and forcing him to listen until he had finished his discourse.<sup>6</sup> After the family moved to Kansas City, Ira's mother tried to facilitate her son's desire to be a rabbi by arranging Hebrew lessons for him with a local Orthodox rabbi who was known to offer them. For some reason, the rabbi scoffed at Ira's ambitions, telling him to forget the rabbinate and become a shoemaker. Pauline related the story to their rabbi, Dr. Harry Mayer, who said, "You go back and tell that rabbi that *he* should be the shoemaker. Ira will be a rabbi."<sup>7</sup> Mayer had come to Congregation B'nai Jehudah in Kansas City, Missouri, after having served as rabbi of Little Rock's Temple B'nai Israel from 1897 to 1899. Mayer, who confirmed Sanders, arranged lessons for him with a man named Meyer Goldberg, who became something of a mentor to the youngster. Sanders pursued his dream through his years in the Kansas City public schools and in Cincinnati, where he arrived in 1911. He graduated with a B.A. from the University of Cincinnati in 1918, and received rabbinic ordination from the Hebrew Union College the following year. He cited HUC President Kaufmann Kohler, "foremost theologian of his day," among several other instructors and their emphasis on the traditions of prophetic Judaism as great influences on his later life.<sup>8</sup>

After ordination, Sanders took his initial position as rabbi at Congregation Keneseth Israel in Allentown, Pennsylvania. While there, he founded the Jewish Community Center and was very active on behalf of Keren Hayesod, the Palestine Foundation

*Rabbi Ira Sanders, c. 1965.*

*(Courtesy of Ira Sanders Papers/UALR Archives & Spec. Coll. Little Rock.)*

Fund, established in 1921 to encourage and support Jewish life in the Holy Land. Sanders considered himself a Zionist who, a close colleague recalls, "early on understood the need for a sanctuary for the European Jews, and he fought for it."<sup>9</sup>

During his tenure in Allentown, Sanders met Selma Loeb, a graduate of Wellesley College who also hailed from Rich Hill, Missouri. It was love at first sight and Ira fell for Selma hard. Recalls Sanders: "I always felt that was just so much foolishness, that nobody could fall in love at first sight, that you have to learn to know a person before you can actually learn to love them."<sup>10</sup> His experience in meeting Selma Loeb proved him wrong. He proposed in June 1921 (she would not allow him to kiss her until he did), and they were married in Philadelphia on March 21, 1922.

Two years later, they left Allentown when Rabbi Sanders assumed the position of associate rabbi at one of New York City's larger Reform synagogues, Temple Israel, then on Ninety-First Street in Manhattan. Rabbi Maurice Harris had invited Sanders to take the position, most likely based on Sanders's role in creating a synagogue center in Allentown. Temple Israel had recently built such a center for study and recreation in Manhattan. Nearly one thousand people attended services for Sanders's installation on September 24, 1924. Sanders's initial sermon was a sign of things to come: "The Law of Life is the Law of Service," in which he exhorted "high-minded men to don the armor of Elijah and wear that mantle of service."<sup>11</sup> This sentiment became his credo.

Sanders stayed in New York only two years, but for him it was an active if not altogether satisfying time. He attended Columbia University and earned a master's degree in social work,<sup>12</sup> studying with such luminaries as philosopher and educator John Dewey and working with social work pioneer Lillian Wald, who championed public health nursing and housing reform, among other accomplishments, and who, in 1895, had founded the famed Henry Street Settlement in New York City.<sup>13</sup>

In New York Sanders began developing a style of sermonizing that he used the rest of his life, a style that congregants and listeners either greatly admired or disliked. The *Arkansas Gazette* approvingly termed his speaking voice "persuasively mellow,"



coming in “assured, authoritative tones,” whereas others termed it “over the top,” a very formal, verbose style of speaking, almost like an actor on the Shakespearean stage.<sup>14</sup> Consider this early example: “The Jewish problem in America,” he pronounced during an April 1925 sermon, “can be solved by the corralling of our educational forces. No people is [*sic*] so ignorant of its life-forces as are we Jews; we must re-establish ourselves upon our ancient patrimony-religious education.”<sup>15</sup> As he got older, he improved, but always remained an orator in the classic nineteenth-century sense. His pulpit offerings were well-crafted performances admired by most but occasionally found by some to be off-putting. He spoke precisely, almost too formally, like the intellectual he was, but he had a career-long tendency to overdo it. Although very brave in many ways, there was a measure of insecurity to Ira Sanders.<sup>16</sup> He could be distant, and his stentorian speaking style may have aided in creating an appearance of aloofness that perhaps shielded him somewhat from others. He thought of himself as learned and scholarly, and wanted others to do so as well. To some degree, he wanted to impress his audience. The academic delivery of his sermons, punctuated as they were with big words and formal structure, helped to mold and create that impression on his audiences.

Aside from the work he did in the community, where he “found his greatest source of satisfaction,” Sanders did not like living in New York City. “I felt that I was just a very, very unimportant individual in a very large, surging amalgam of individuals and institutions.”<sup>17</sup> As a somewhat sensitive man who enjoyed attention, he craved a smaller setting where he could make a more significant impact. Dissatisfied with his career at Temple Israel, in 1925 and 1926 Sanders weighed offers from the largest Reform congregation in Arkansas. Temple B’nai Israel was situated in Little Rock, a smaller city more to his liking where his abilities and interests as a social worker could be exercised to their fullest; where his level of educational attainment, academic style, and bearing would set him apart more so than in New York; where, by being the only Reform rabbi in the entire city, he would be “in the center of things,” and where, due to these factors, his

personal insecurities would be ameliorated.<sup>18</sup> Sanders seriously considered a move to Little Rock.<sup>19</sup>

*Coming to Little Rock*

Although the Jewish presence in central Arkansas dates to 1838, Little Rock's Temple B'nai Israel was not established until November 1866, immediately after the Civil War.<sup>20</sup> Morris Navra served as its first president, and the sixty-six member congregation retained Samuel Peck as its first rabbi. Lay leaders like Navra, Phillip Pfeifer, and Phillip Ottenheimer, and families including Lasker, Menkus, Kempner, Cohn, Ehrenberg, Levy, and Samuels, whose descendants remain part of Temple B'nai Israel, were critical in its founding.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Rabbi Harry Mayer, who would later confirm young Ira Sanders, left Little Rock for Missouri. Rabbi Louis Wolsey assumed the pulpit in 1899 and remained eight years, to be followed by Louis Witt (1907–1919), James Heller (1920), and Emmanuel Jack (1921–1925). In 1925 Maurice L. Altheimer served as temple president.<sup>21</sup> At that time, the congregation and its leaders were for the most part business owners and retailers, solidly middle- to upper-middle-class, and respected members of the Little Rock business and retail community. Altheimer, for example, was the president of Twin City Bank in North Little Rock, while Leo Pfeifer owned Pfeifer's Department Store. With the departure of Emmanuel Jack, the board set out to hire a new rabbi.

The Temple board sent Maurice Altheimer and Leo Pfeifer as delegates to New York to see and hear Rabbi Sanders in action. Little Rock knew of Sanders through their former rabbi, Harry Mayer, one of Sanders's mentors in Kansas City. Actually, this was the Little Rock congregation's second attempt to secure Sanders. Altheimer contacted Sanders the previous year inquiring as to his interest in the Little Rock pulpit, but Sanders had not been interested. Another year in New York, however, had altered Sanders's position. Unbeknownst to Sanders, Altheimer and Pfeifer sat attentively in Temple Israel as Sanders, with his usual formality and flourish, delivered a sermon seemingly tailor-made

*Rabbi Harry H. Mayer and Rabbi Louis Wolsey,  
mentors to the young Ira Sanders.*

*(Photo from Ira E. Sanders and Elijah E. Palnick, eds.,*

*One Hundred Years: Congregation B'nai Israel [Little Rock, 1966.]*)

for the southern visitors, titled "Why the North and the South Should Meet." Altheimer and Pfeifer, as well as the rest of the board, wanted Sanders badly, if for no other reason than they were tired of searching for a rabbi to replace Rabbi Jack. Sanders hailed from the general region, and his style, scholarly bearing, and the erudition he seemed to radiate were added bonuses.<sup>22</sup> They arranged for Sanders to visit Little Rock in June 1926 to be interviewed by the search committee and deliver a sermon, the same one on sectional reconciliation that Altheimer and Pfeifer had heard and enjoyed on their New York visit. The committee then met and unanimously voted to offer Sanders the position.<sup>23</sup> But Sanders was uncertain of his desire to leave New York. Had he given Temple Israel enough time as its associate rabbi?

The committee sensed his indecision.<sup>24</sup> In an attempt to make plain their sincere desire to secure Sanders's services, search committee member Preston Pfeifer sent Sanders a telegram assuring him that "you will be received with much gratification as Little Rock is certainly anxiously awaiting spiritual leadership."<sup>25</sup>

In addition, after Sanders left Little Rock, the board asked Rabbi Louis Wolsey, a former Little Rock rabbi who was serving as the rabbi at Philadelphia's Congregation Rodeph Shalom, to take on the task of convincing Sanders to accept the offer. Wolsey met Sanders at a Philadelphia restaurant, telling him of the opportunities and challenges that a southern rabbinate and a smaller congregation presented. The opportunity to be an agent of change in Little Rock appealed to Sanders, who relented, agreeing with Wolsey that Little Rock "offered a challenge older communities did not have."<sup>26</sup>

Sanders returned to Arkansas on September 1, 1926. "I suppose," he later recalled, "[it was] the hottest day I've ever experienced."<sup>27</sup> Greeted with oppressive ninety-nine degree heat and humidity, he immediately had buyer's remorse. Staring out the window of his Hotel Lafayette room at the town below, Sanders was singularly unimpressed. "It looks like a prairie," he thought dejectedly. "I've been sold a bill of goods. I'm going home." Persuasive conversations with members of his new congregation as well as pangs from his own conscience convinced him to stay.<sup>28</sup> The thirty-two-year-old Sanders preached his inaugural sermon later that month. As in New York, this first sermon signaled to the congregation their new rabbi's priorities: "The Law of Life is the Law of Service."<sup>29</sup>

Almost immediately one of those challenges of which Wolsey had spoken presented itself in an incident that both outraged and inspired Sanders and, in the process, moved his entire career along its eventual path. Sanders did not own a car when he came to Little Rock so he rode the electric streetcar to the Temple. On one of his first such occasions, he boarded the trolley and moved toward the back. He found the signs designating "colored" section for seating "appalling," but he was more naïve than bold in his choice of seating.<sup>30</sup> The conductor watched with a disapproving eye as Sanders took a seat beside an African American gentleman. The conductor immediately came to the rear of the car and told Sanders that he must be new in town. "You know, here in the South the coloreds and the whites do not sit together," said the conductor. "Will you kindly come up to the front?" The rabbi

stared up at the conductor, but he had not set out that morning to commit an act of civil disobedience. Nonetheless this experience, indeed the whole notion of segregated facilities, was an assault on Sanders's sensibilities, his notions of fairness and equality. He did not want to move. "Why do you object to my sitting in the back?" challenged Sanders. "This is a free country—can't a person ride where he pleases?"<sup>31</sup> Unmoved, the conductor continued pressing the point, making it clear that he would not allow Sanders to keep his seat in the "colored section." Voices were raised, and the situation became heated and confrontational. Sanders, seething with righteous indignation, restrained himself and complied. But the indignity, both to him but particularly to the unknown man sitting next to him, had been done. He scrapped the sermon he had planned for that Friday evening and instead spoke on "The Jim Crow Law." Before his new southern congregation, Sanders scathingly denounced racial discrimination and predicted the demise of Jim Crow within twenty-five years. Such laws, he said, are "obsolete" and would be "almost forgotten" by that time. Any law that robs individuals of their dignity and their freedom had to go.<sup>32</sup>

Sanders's sermons on racial and social justice, of which "The Jim Crow Law" was the first of many, met with no real congregational resistance, but rather with general approval.<sup>33</sup> The rabbi and his new congregation struck chords of affinity early on. Like the Little Rock community in general, the congregation was moderate on issues of race, and within the walls of the Temple, they could feel free to nod approvingly at the rabbi's words and voice progressive opinions. Nonetheless, like Jews in other southern communities, publicly most remained cautious because of their standing in the community as businessmen and retail merchants. Sanders was not one to lead marches, but rather to lead by education, example, and influence. The pulpit was his place to persuade and educate, and in his sermons he tended to integrate themes near and dear to him: service to God and community; the basic and essential equality of all people; and engaging the community by being civically involved. His sermons were given additional gravity and authority by his use of language and style

of speaking, which reflected a depth of intellect respected by the congregation.

Ira Sanders was very much a classical Reform rabbi, which was what this classically Reform congregation wanted. There would be no or almost no Hebrew during services, and confirmation replaced bar mitzvah. The congregation was content with Sanders's personal advocacy of Zionism so long as it did not emanate from the pulpit. Zionism was then a point of contention at Temple B'nai Israel, to the point where it was suggested a separate congregation of those opposed to the creation of a Jewish state be established—to which Sanders sternly replied “over my dead body.”<sup>34</sup> This was evidently the only point of contention between the congregation and its rabbi. “People left the congregation over that,” recalls Elijah E. Palnick, Sanders's successor.<sup>35</sup>

Sanders's conception of the ideal rabbi was centered in the classical Reform tradition as reflected in the Pittsburgh Platform, drawn up in 1885 in a conference called by one of his Hebrew Union College mentors, Kaufmann Kohler. The planks of the Pittsburgh Platform became the tenets of modern Reform Judaism in its rejection of outmoded practices and its embrace of “the struggle for truth, justice, and righteousness in modern society.”<sup>36</sup> The tenets of modern Judaism conveniently married with the concepts of the social worker in Sanders, making the profession of Reform rabbi an ideal vehicle for him.<sup>37</sup>

Sanders's deep and abiding interest in racial and social justice had other sources as well. As a boy growing up in the schools of Kansas City and Cincinnati, he (in his words) “had gone to school with all peoples. I also had done graduate work [in New York] with all peoples, and I felt that they were all one.”<sup>38</sup> One of the factors that motivated him to become a rabbi in the first place was his interest, even as a child, “in the promotion of good will between peoples.”<sup>39</sup> His study of sociology and social work also was motivated in part by his desire to make a difference in the world. He embraced the Jewish concept of *tikun olam*, which teaches that people bear the responsibility for working towards a just and equitable society. Finally, Sanders's study of the biblical prophets, particularly Isaiah, “who railed against the

injustices of his day," also factored into his life of social activism.<sup>40</sup> He was not alone. Many Reform rabbis of his generation, North and South, also had abiding interests in social and community activism.<sup>41</sup>

Little Rock provided fertile ground for Sanders's mission of social justice and racial equality, and he had much to do given its relative dearth of social service institutions. Almost immediately upon his arrival in Arkansas, Sanders became a very active member of civic and other community organizations. He founded the Temple's Men's Club, one of his proudest achievements. The club's first event was a 1930 debate between Sanders and famed attorney and atheist Clarence Darrow on the topic "Is Man Immortal?" The exchange resulted in much positive newspaper coverage for the rabbi as well as respect and admiration from Arkansas's Christian community for his eloquent defense of an afterlife (the local consensus was that the rabbi had badly "beaten" Darrow in the debate, which was held in the packed Central High School auditorium). This was Sanders's first large-scale introduction to Christian Arkansas, and he was a hit. The Men's Club brought such other luminaries to Little Rock as historian Will Durant and broadcaster H. V. Kaltenborn. Sanders also served on the board of the public library, presided over the Council of Social Agencies (1927–1929), served on the board of trustees as well as the executive board of the Arkansas Tuberculosis Association (1927 forward), and from 1926 joined (and frequently addressed) the Little Rock Rotary Club.<sup>42</sup> He became involved in many different aspects of Little Rock civic life from the beginning, establishing himself as a force for good. His relationship with the Little Rock Christian community would pay dividends in later years when the rabbi championed more controversial causes.

Perhaps his most significant contribution in the first years in Little Rock was his establishment of a school of social work. Sanders "realized how important it was for the community of Little Rock—Arkansas also—to have trained social workers," and so he set forth to create such a school.<sup>43</sup> He asked Charles Wickard of the Little Rock Community Chest to proffer funds, and the board "unanimously made an appropriation to start the school." The

Little Rock School of Social Work, operating under the auspices of the University of Arkansas, opened its doors on October 7, 1927 in the YWCA building at Fourth and Scott streets. Sanders served as program director and professor, and corralled key city leaders including school superintendent R. C. Hall and Southern Methodist Bishop H. A. Boaz to serve on the board. Dr. Frank Vinsonhaler, dean of the Arkansas School of Medicine, served as president. The school offered junior and senior level courses such as social psychology, family casework, and social research, some of which Sanders taught. Tuition was ten dollars per year.<sup>44</sup>

The Little Rock School of Social Work opened with an initial enrollment of sixty students, including two African American women. After the inaugural meeting, a contingent of three white students approached the rabbi: "You know, Dr. Sanders, in the South the Negroes and the whites do not go to school together, and we very much object to having any of these [black] women who are with us to be in our school."<sup>45</sup> Again, Sanders found himself face-to-face with the question of race, segregation, and equal treatment. Somewhat irate, he quietly and determinedly told the group "of course the first lesson we must learn in life is the lesson of understanding, to know how the other person feels before we can do any kind of work in life." Sanders stated that the women had qualifications equal to their own or to any of the others, and certainly as great a need. "If fifty-eight students do not care to attend the school, they certainly are at liberty to leave, but these two women—those two will remain."<sup>46</sup>

Having taken his stand for integration, his concern shifted to the real possibility of having only two students the next morning. To his pleasant surprise, attendance did not discernibly decline. But it was not to be: the University of Arkansas, under whose name and supervision the school operated, intervened by refusing to allow integrated classes, despite the rabbi's wishes. Sanders operated the school until the economic stresses of the Great Depression forced its closure in 1932.<sup>47</sup> The school graduated an initial class of some forty social workers, all white.

The rabbi found other ways to pursue social justice in Arkansas. In 1931 Sanders helped found the Arkansas Eugenics



Association (AEA), later known as Planned Parenthood of Arkansas, an organization dedicated to providing services and information about birth control and contraception to poor Arkansas women and, as an advocate of family planning, to help combat poverty during the Depression. Many women during the Depression feared sexual intimacy lest a child be born that could not be adequately cared for. Smaller families meant fewer mouths to feed, and birth control information was the key to smaller families.

Margaret Sanger contacted Sanders and Second Presbyterian Church minister Hay Watson Smith, asking for help in organizing the first birth control association in Arkansas.<sup>48</sup> AEA founders included Sanders, Hilda Cornish, a volunteer social worker and reformer who in 1930 had met and formed a friendship with birth control advocate Sanger, Hay Watson Smith, Darmon A. Rhinehart, president of the Arkansas Medical Society, attorney Graham R. Hall, and Dr. Homer Scott, chief of staff of Arkansas Children's Hospital. The group, recalled Sanders, purposefully avoided the term "birth control" in the name of the organization in order to escape obvious association with Sanger's controversial movement. It supported her ideas and efforts, but those ideas had met with considerable opposition in the local community. "It was suggested," remembers Sanders, "that because the movement might evoke criticism on the part of the rather orthodox and staid community, that we call it the Arkansas Eugenics Association on the grounds that nobody would object to being well-born."<sup>49</sup> The AEA was successful in providing contraception and advice statewide through medical units for women who could not afford to see private physicians. In 1937 the AEA began providing services and information to black women as well. By 1940 "many medical units across the state included birth control services." Accordingly, the AEA altered its mission and provided only referrals and education. AEA became Arkansas Planned Parenthood in 1942.<sup>50</sup>

In 1932, concurrent with these and other efforts and at the request of Little Rock mayor Horace Knowlton, Sanders organized the Pulaski County Welfare Commission, a local predecessor of the Works Progress Administration (WPA). In the absence of

federal aid before the New Deal, this local organization gained national attention for the role it played in helping Pulaski County handle its welfare problems during the Depression. In April 1932 the Little Rock City Council adopted Sanders's proposal that a "voluntary tax" of ten cents per month be added to each electric, gas, telephone, and water utility bill for one calendar year in order to raise relief funds. Sanders estimated the plan would raise about five thousand dollars per month for the year it was collected, and the utilities agreed to collect the tax at no cost to the city.<sup>51</sup> The response from the community was overwhelming, and largely because of Sanders's efforts, relief became available for those in need.

From 1927 through 1934 Sanders also served on the board of the Family Welfare Agency of Little Rock, which provided local poor relief. However, he was bothered by the blatant, racially based inequities of the system. Black families were badly disadvantaged because they received a disproportionately small percentage of the relief funds. Sanders recalled that "they were always giving ten cents on the dollar to the black family and to the white family they'd usually give around ninety percent." He confronted the other members of the board and stated that "the stomachs of the black people were just as important as the stomachs of the white." He saw no reason for the monies to be distributed so inequitably. "They're both human beings," he implored, "and they both deserve fifty cents on the dollar." Moral suasion, however, failed. Sanders followed up with an economic argument: "Do you not realize that if you give the black man the same amount of money you give the white man, your community will benefit economically? The black man will spend as the white man does." This argument seemed more palatable to the board, and through Sanders's effort the payments, though never truly equalized, were made more equitable.<sup>52</sup> With seemingly boundless energy coupled with a deep desire to make a difference in his adopted community, Sanders also pressed other organizations such as the American Legion into increased service for poor relief.<sup>53</sup> Other rabbis in the South were involved in similar activities for racial and social justice, though not to Sanders's degree. Rabbi

Jacob Kaplan of Miami and Rabbi Julius Mark of Nashville, for example, were instrumental in convening the progressive Southern Conference on Human Welfare, which met during November 1938 in Birmingham.<sup>54</sup>

In 1937 Sanders became a founder and president of the Urban League of Greater Little Rock “to fight for the equality of this community’s black citizens” who as a class “were not being given their just due.”<sup>55</sup> He had difficulty procuring other whites to serve with him on the board, managing to convince only two. The situation remained that way for more than twenty-five years, he recalled, “when it [then] became fashionable for the white citizens of the community to be a part of the board.” His purpose in helping create and promote the Urban League was what he termed “basic: the creation of a climate between the two groups through education and understanding.”<sup>56</sup>

For Sanders, the pursuit of social justice through activities such as those outlined above gave a rabbinate its real meaning. Imbued from childhood with a keen sense of empathy and sense of morality, Sanders believed that the effective rabbi “sees his reward *only* in the changed attitudes and social activism in behalf of just and righteous causes.”<sup>57</sup> Here lies the key to understanding Rabbi Sanders’s constant activism throughout his tenure in the Little Rock community on behalf of the disadvantaged, the poor, the sick, and those who suffered under segregation and unequal treatment: his deeply-felt belief that impacting his society through changing people’s attitudes and through working for just causes served not merely as a yardstick for success, but *the* yardstick for success—the primary, if not sole, indication that he was fulfilling his rabbinical calling. If, as Sanders believed, the rabbi “sees his reward *ONLY* in changed attitudes” and in the pursuit of social justice, then his work in the community provided him that reward. It fulfilled him and was the source of his professional satisfaction. The law of life, after all, was the law of service.

The quest for social and racial justice in the community and the personal fulfillment he derived from that quest marked all aspects of Sanders’s life. He frequently talked about these issues to his family, his congregation, and to civic and community groups

in numerous settings and situations. When in 1951 the University of Arkansas conferred on him an honorary doctorate, the citation singled out for merit his work in the field of racial justice: "You have worked consistently for the betterment of race relations. You have striven long and hard to better the conditions of all our people and to promote understanding of race relationships."<sup>58</sup> When three years later, Hebrew Union College bestowed on Sanders an honorary doctor of divinity degree, HUC president Nelson Glueck emphasized Sanders's "dedicated work in the furtherance of better race relations. Your consecrated efforts have made you a symbol of the truth and of the dignity and the nobility of the faith which you have so brilliantly preached."<sup>59</sup>

The local community recognized Sanders's efforts as well. "There is a gentleman," the *Arkansas Gazette* opined in 1950, "whose good works come to our attention ever so often. They come without benefit of a publicity chairman or a photographer—which is unusual in our existence. He is Dr. Ira Sanders. . . . Somehow, his spirit of brotherhood pervades the area of our community with which we have to deal more than any person we can think of at the moment."<sup>60</sup> In February 1951, in observance of National Brotherhood Week, the Little Rock Rotary Club honored Sanders for his twenty-five years of service and community contributions. When Sanders spoke at the ceremony, he stressed themes of racial equality, couched in non-confrontational and religious terms he believed would find greater acceptance: "All that is non-conformist and all that is *democratic* has gone into the makings of this America," he said. "There is one law for the strong and weak, the rich and poor, alien and citizen, all races and creeds. It is important," he continued, "that we reaffirm the rights of man under God. We are responsible for the welfare of others, although this age seems to reject this principle. Many nations reject brotherhood for a blown-up racial philosophy. . . . In such a world America must reaffirm the principles of brotherhood." He drew a distinction between the concepts of racial tolerance and racial acceptance: "We must not say 'tolerance,' looking down from superior heights. . . . We must remind ourselves that brotherhood means for us to *accept* the wide differences in humanity and ask

*Celebrating his honorary degree with others at Hebrew Union College,  
Cincinnati, March 27, 1954. Sanders is third from the right.  
(Courtesy of Ira Sanders Papers/UALR Archives & Spec. Coll. Little Rock.)*

ourselves if we are always right and the others are always wrong."<sup>61</sup> Of course, Ira Sanders could not know the future but, on the cusp of the civil rights movement, he was laying the groundwork for the white community to accept the changes to come. His messages of racial equality, suffused with widely accepted Judeo-Christian principles, cloaked in dearly-held traditional democratic ideals, referencing the principles of Americanism cherished by southerners, and delivered with unassailable logic, were designed to change attitudes and to create an atmosphere wherein change could occur peacefully and with general acceptance.

*The Civil Rights Movement*

Of the many causes for social justice Sanders championed, and of the many fights he quietly or publicly waged on behalf of others, no cause seemed more just and righteous to him than the fight for racial equality that raged across the South and the nation during the mid-twentieth century. His belief in the basic and essential equality of all people was grounded in his upbringing, the tenets of Judaism, and his own empathy for the plight of others. "I have always been a champion of the dignity of man. To me the thing that counts most is your character," Sanders later said. "That's been my philosophy through the years. I've always championed the cause of those who are entitled to the same privileges of living as I am entitled to, and that in the sight of God, and certainly in the sight of our fellow man, we're all equal."<sup>62</sup> The cause of justice and fair play, he wrote, "flamed in my heart" like "burning fire shut up in [my] bones."<sup>63</sup> He dedicated himself to furthering that cause. Indeed, few southern rabbis matched the activism and determination of Ira Sanders in fighting Jim Crow.

Being an outspoken Jew in favor of civil rights carried with it a large measure of risk. The fact that most southern Jews were retail merchants made them particularly sensitive to majority public opinion, more so than other members of the community. Their livelihoods depended in large measure upon community good will. Jews feared community reprisals; that is, if an individual member of the Jewish community held an unpopular opinion, the fear was that the entire Jewish community might be targeted for retribution.<sup>64</sup>

The hostile reaction on the part of many southern whites to the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* school desegregation decision created deep-seated concerns for southern Jews, many of whom feared an erosion of their standing and relationship with the white Christian South. Would those white southern Christians who opposed integration see their Jewish neighbors primarily as white, like themselves, or primarily as Jews, like African Americans, a distinct "other" among them?<sup>65</sup> Anger and resentment about the "Jewish position" on the "race issue" could easily spill over into increased overt acts of antisemitism; and indeed, that is what

occurred. From November 1957 through October 1958, eight southern synagogues were bombed, some in areas of outspoken Jewish support for civil rights, and others in areas where Jews had remained relatively silent.<sup>66</sup> Southern Jews also frequently feared for themselves when northern Jewish civil rights workers came to their area to work in the movement, potentially endangering the local Jewish community. Locals often implored them to “please, do not endanger us, do not get our synagogue bombed.”<sup>67</sup>

A sharp rise in antisemitic literature in the early fifties sought to draw a link between black civil rights and an imagined Jewish-Communist-Zionist conspiracy. Indeed, many white obstructionists trumpeted just such a connection, viewing the civil rights movement through the lens of cold war paranoia as nothing more than a Communist-directed plot against the United States. The segregationist Capitol Citizen’s Council of Little Rock employed this very tactic against Sanders and Temple B’nai Israel.<sup>68</sup> Louisiana judge Leander Perez provides a vivid example of the tactic, and is typical of how the antisemitic argument intersected with the segregationist argument. Perez labeled the *Brown* decision “Communist trash” and saw the civil rights movement as a Zionist-Communist conspiracy to force miscegenation in order to “breed an America too lazy and weak” to resist the encroachment of international Communism. American Jews, insisted Judge Perez, were the link between the Kremlin and the movement.<sup>69</sup> Perez is admittedly an extreme example of a view nevertheless held by many southerners, either as genuine belief, but more likely as an exigency to maintain the racial hierarchy as it existed and halt the advance of black rights by tying the movement to the near-universally dreaded specter of Communism.

Well before the *Brown* decision, Sanders had taken a public stand for racial justice. He did not fear his photo or his comments appearing in the newspapers. His 1951 speech to the Little Rock Rotary Club, which was largely reproduced in the *Arkansas Gazette*, warned that “flouting moral law brings disaster.” No class should dominate another, nor should inequality be manifest in the law. He stressed not toleration, which implies hierarchy, but racial acceptance and equality. Before *Brown*, he was moving minds on

the race issue and inspiring people to action. After *Brown*, which Sanders approvingly said caused "the greatest social upheaval in the 20th century, unquestionably," he redoubled his efforts, arguing that "if we deny human rights, you might as well not live because everybody has a right under the sun." Such rights were "necessary for the preservation of the *human* race."<sup>70</sup> He spoke before the Rotary Club again in November 1954 in the wake of the uproar over *Brown*, on the topic of race and racial equality. Little Rock school board member Louise McLean commended Sanders on his address, saying she was "particularly conscious at this time of the very few persons courageous enough to speak the truth. I would be very proud," she concluded, "if any spokesman for the church with which I am affiliated had the brains and the fortitude to make such a talk in this, our 'Bible Belt.' Count me in the camp of followers of liberal intelligent leadership like yours."<sup>71</sup>

The response of southern Reform rabbis to combating Jim Crow in the post World War II South was fairly uniform across the region, with perhaps greater trepidation in the Deep South, especially in Alabama and Mississippi, than in the Upper South or Midwestern border states such as Arkansas. A rabbi's or a congregation's level of support or non-support for civil rights, though, did not seem to correlate with incidents of antisemitic violence. According to a 1958-1959 study by Albert Vorspan, chair of the Commission on Social Action of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC), the national Reform umbrella organization, almost all southern Reform rabbis took pro-civil rights postures to varying degrees of intensity. Few were constrained by their boards, as "most rabbis will not stand for a controlled pulpit."<sup>72</sup> However, the acts and threats of violence against Jewish communities, wrote Vorspan, "reveal a crazy-quilt pattern," not at all reflecting the level of Jewish pro-civil rights activity. An outspoken rabbi in Mississippi, for example, was not threatened, but "a synagogue in Jacksonville, Florida, in which there had never even been a discussion of the segregation issue, was ripped by a bomb." Two North Carolina synagogues were bombed, though they "played no role" in desegregation issues, while vocal civil rights advocate Rabbi William Silverman's



Nashville, Tennessee, synagogue was not. The attacks seemed more related to the segregationists' latent antisemitism and the atmosphere of defiance of law that bred violence than to the actions of local Jews.<sup>73</sup>

Like Sanders, many southern Reform rabbis in the 1950s and early 1960s worked for social and racial justice, advocating different strategies for success and working in sometimes radically different environments: William Silverman of Nashville, Emmet Frank of Alexandria, Perry Nussbaum of Jackson, Charles Mantinband of Hattiesburg, Jacob Rothschild of Atlanta, and Sanders of Little Rock, among others, all took similar public stands for civil rights.<sup>74</sup> In Jackson, Mississippi, Nussbaum faced a much more hostile environment than did Sanders: a "steady diet of viciousness and vituperation" met largely by a local clergy offering either support for segregation or, at best, "silent acquiescence," and a legislature "churning out laws guaranteed to insure the purity of the white race." In such a severe environment, Nussbaum was more publicly cautious than some of his contemporaries, but that did not prevent both Temple Beth Israel as well as his home from being bombed only months apart in 1967 by segregationists. Nussbaum believed southern rabbis needed help in the form of interfaith cooperation: "If there were some public Christian leadership [in Jackson], even toward moderation," he wrote, "this would have been a different report."<sup>75</sup>

Atlanta's Jacob Rothschild also emphasized such cooperation. "I do not believe that the rabbi in today's South will serve any good purpose in leading crusades;" rather, "let him labor alongside others of like mind and dedicated purpose."<sup>76</sup> Like Sanders, Rothschild spoke in a variety of settings in Atlanta regarding integration and racial justice. Active in a number of civic organizations, he used his skills as a public speaker to great effect.<sup>77</sup> On October 12, 1958, Rothschild's synagogue was bombed and partially destroyed, the fifth such incident in the South in an eight-month span.<sup>78</sup>

In Hattiesburg, Mississippi, Charles Mantinband had difficulties with his congregation board, who told him "in no uncertain terms that they would prefer their rabbi remained silent,

if not neutral, on the segregation issue." Mantinband told the board it was impossible for him to concur. He and his board found it possible to coexist because "we agree in principle, if not in method."<sup>79</sup>

Sanders faced few of these obstacles for several reasons. He lived and worked in a moderate city. He had labored for thirty years to build alliances and establish his presence in the community as a social worker and civic father (as well as rabbi of the largest Arkansas congregation). Sanders had "practically no one in the congregation protesting" his activism.<sup>80</sup> He had the backing of his congregation board, and he had significant interfaith cooperation and leadership from both Protestant and Catholic clergy. Sanders shared certain traits with another southern colleague, Virginia rabbi Emmet Frank, most widely known for his vociferous assaults on segregation and one of its champions, the powerful Senator Harry Byrd.<sup>81</sup> In 1957 Rabbi Sanders would mount a verbal assault of his own on the politicians of Arkansas.

Sanders's boldest stance for social and racial justice came with the Little Rock Central High School crisis of 1957-1958. The actions at the beginning of that school year garnered international attention, and Sanders provided key, dramatic leadership on behalf of desegregation. In early 1957 the Arkansas state legislature was poised to vote on four proposals designed to frustrate and impede the Supreme Court's desegregation orders handed down in the *Brown* decisions of 1954 and 1955. Introduced by state representative Lucien Rogers, House Bill 322 would allow for the creation of a "state sovereignty commission," ostensibly protecting Arkansas against encroachments by the federal government. House Bill 323 would allow parents to keep their children out of integrated schools. House Bill 324 would force "certain organizations," i.e. the NAACP, to register with the state. The NAACP would therefore be forced to divulge the names and addresses of its membership, making them vulnerable to segregationist retribution. House Bill 325 would provide state legal assistance to any and all Arkansas school districts for the purpose of retaining lawyers to fight the integration order.<sup>82</sup> These four measures taken together would erect a formidable barrier against desegregation in

*Governor Sidney S. McMath (seated) signing a bill, June 1950.  
The governor is flanked by representatives of Little Rock clergy:  
Left to Right: Rev. James Workman, Monsignor John Healey,  
Rev. Marion Boggs, Rev. William Oglesby,  
Rabbi Ira Sanders, Dan Lichtenberger.  
(Courtesy of Ira Sanders Papers/UALR Archives & Spec. Coll. Little Rock.)*

Arkansas. The house adopted all four measures without debate and with only one dissenting vote. Public furor over the house's rapid adoption of the bills, particularly among religious groups, forced the state senate to approve, but only by a margin of one vote, a public hearing.<sup>83</sup> Sanders determined to speak at that session in opposition to the measures.

The public hearing convened on the evening of February 18, 1957. Sanders was joined by ministers and pastors from Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Catholic churches from around the state.<sup>84</sup> Although not necessarily acquainted with each other, the

religious leaders were united in their opposition to the anti-integration bills. Sanders ignored the advice of several friends who asked him not to speak lest his life be in jeopardy. The evening, Sanders recalled, "was so intense. The chambers were jammed with all sorts of people, a tremendous crowd."<sup>85</sup> In fact, over nine hundred people had packed into the senate chambers to hear the speeches. When his turn came, Sanders took his position behind the rostrum. With eyes fixed on the senators and in bold and resonant voice, the rabbi used all the moral suasion at his command in an attempt to kill the four measures. Hecklers and taunters frequently interrupted his address, but Sanders was determined to make his points. He had crafted a careful yet powerful message tailor-made for the overwhelmingly Christian audience of lawmakers before him. Accordingly, his address stressed three areas: the moral, "Christian" aspect of racial justice; the "pocketbook" issues related to the loss of business and tax revenues should the state be perceived as taking steps backward; and the legal aspects of federalism and state acquiescence to the Supreme Court, and to the Constitution and federal law in general.

"Our nation," he said, "must be based on liberty and justice for all peoples," whose contributions to "the cultural pluralism of our land" have been great. The "dignity of the individual," said Sanders, "must never be destroyed by granting the state those powers which would deny anyone the liberty and the freedom guaranteed by the Constitution." The four anti-integration measures, he stated, were "all concerned with the thought of circumventing the highest legal authority of our land. They will never stand the test of time, for higher than the legal law of the land stands this moral law of God. It operates slowly, but surely, and in the end justice will prevail." Like the prophet Isaiah he had so diligently studied, Sanders portended an ominous future for his fellow Arkansans should the legislature choose this path.

Sanders noted the recent passage of a package of tax and other incentives designed to lure businesses to Arkansas. "If the measures which deny America's traditional guarantees of individual freedom and liberty are allowed to pass, the state you and I

love will lose first an increased economy coming from new industries, and secondly it will be held morally in just opprobrium before the country." Sanders knew that the financial consequences of the loss of investments and tax revenues in Arkansas might register with those unmoved by his moral and legal arguments.

Finally, aware that he was addressing an almost universally Christian audience, Sanders explained, "When Jesus died on the cross he repeated those immortal words 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.'" Rousing himself to his full oratorical glory, the rabbi then thundered, "Legislators! May future generations reading the statute books of Arkansas NOT be compelled to say these words of you." He then implored the legislature to defeat the measures, and, in doing so, "the God of all men will bless your handiwork."<sup>86</sup> During the cacophony of applause and cheers mixed with jeers and heckling accompanying his conclusion, Sanders was asked to leave the chambers. The reason, he later stated, was "the fear that somebody might assassinate me."<sup>87</sup>

Courageous though his efforts had been, Sanders's plea fell on deaf ears. On February 26, 1957, Governor Orval Faubus, a previous racial moderate who had cynically used hard-core segregationism as an issue to gain the governor's mansion, signed the four measures into law with little fanfare, stating that "the laws would not jeopardize the rights of anyone." Three of the measures had so-called "emergency clauses" attached to them, making them effective immediately. The fourth, the State Sovereignty Commission, became effective after ninety days.<sup>88</sup>

Sanders's speech elicited many responses. Former governor Sidney S. McMath, a progressive Democrat who served in the statehouse from 1949 to 1953 (and afterward one of the nation's top trial attorneys), commended Sanders's address in opposition to "these means of infringement upon basic constitutional rights."<sup>89</sup> McMath had won the governorship in 1949 riding a wave of postwar reform in the South, had helped integrate the University of Arkansas medical school, and supported federal antilynching legislation as well as elimination of the Arkansas poll tax. A racial progressive, he was defeated in a bid for a third term

in 1954 by Orval Faubus.<sup>90</sup> "Your statement was clear, convincing, and courageous," he wrote Sanders.

The Reverend Charles C. Walker, minister of Little Rock's First Congregational Church, called the speech "great" and "courageous." It was "scholarly and truthfully put. Ever since I have been located here," wrote Walker, "you have been assiduously working toward a more humane approach for all our citizens." Sanders's courage and determination to stand publicly for civil rights, Walker told his associate, "has helped me to encourage others to 'stand up and be counted.'" <sup>91</sup> The rabbi's stand before the legislature had set an example others would emulate in taking their own stand for equality.

### *The Central High Crisis*

Sanders's bold speech before the legislature, of course, prevented neither the passage of the anti-integration bills, nor the violence and disruption to come. That violent opposition was in many ways unexpected. On the issue of civil rights, Little Rock was a moderate city unlike Birmingham or Montgomery. It boasted a moderate mayor, a progressive newspaper, the *Gazette*, under the editorship of Harry Ashmore, a moderate congressman in Brooks Hays, and a governor, Orval Faubus, not (yet) known for race-baiting.<sup>92</sup> The state and its capital city had already made many advances toward integration without major incident, as related proudly by the Little Rock Council on Education's 1952 report: the University of Arkansas had "opened its doors," and other campuses were in the process of doing so; the Little Rock public library quietly desegregated, "no segregation was practiced at the opening of the first Little Rock Community Center, all major department stores [many Jewish-owned] have removed drinking fountain segregation signs, and the Rock Island RR has abolished segregation on its trains. All this," the report concluded, "seems to indicate the increasing understanding of Arkansas for peaceful and gradual solution of the problems of segregation."<sup>93</sup>

The passage of the bills, coupled with the key factor—Orval Faubus's fateful and cynical political calculation that a staunch segregationist stood a better chance of election in 1958 than a

moderate—set the stage for the events of autumn 1957 at Central High School. The story is often told and well chronicled. Nine young people, set to be the first African American students at Little Rock's Central High School, suddenly found themselves at the center of a crisis of international scope. Governor Faubus, making good on his campaign promise to enforce segregation, dispatched the Arkansas National Guard to block the entrance of the nine students into the school in a clear and very public challenge to the authority of the U.S. Supreme Court. President Dwight Eisenhower, himself no advocate of the *Brown* desegregation decision, was forced into action by Faubus's flouting of federal law. Eisenhower met with the governor, who assured him that no escalation of violence would occur. Faubus then removed the guard, leaving the nine children essentially defenseless against an angry, rapidly growing mob that shouted obscenities and hurled racial epithets. It was more than the Little Rock police could handle. National and international press covered the shocking images of September 23, with its scenes of intimidation and violence against black children, reporters, and bystanders alike. Eisenhower, in defense of federalism and Supreme Court authority but also fearing a tarnishing of America's international image in the charged cold war atmosphere of the time, federalized the Arkansas National Guard and sent elements of the 101st Airborne division to Little Rock to protect the children and escort them to classes. It was a question of federal versus state authority, and the outcome was not in doubt. It nevertheless left the Little Rock community badly torn.

Few Jewish children actually attended Central High. Most Jewish teens in the Little Rock community attended Hall High School because they lived in the suburbs, particularly in an area known as the Heights. Only six Jewish students attended Central High out of a total enrollment of around two thousand.<sup>94</sup> Despite that fact, Little Rock Jews, particularly Jewish women, played a pivotal role in the crisis. Following Governor Faubus's order closing the schools rather than desegregating for the 1958 year, a group of women founded the Women's Emergency Committee to Open Our Schools (WEC). The committee, consisting of about one thousand women, played a pivotal role in the effort to reopen the

schools on a desegregated basis. Jewish women, including Josephine Menkus, Jane Mendel, Carolyn Tenenbaum, Rosa Lasker, and Alice Back, provided key leadership. Most significant was Irene Samuel, the non-Jewish wife of Dr. John Samuel, a Jewish Little Rock physician who had opened his practice to African Americans and suffered because of it.<sup>95</sup> Rabbi Sanders's wife, Selma, also played a role in the organization.

President Eisenhower suggested that Little Rock clergy aid in ameliorating the Central High crisis. On October 4, 1957, Rabbi Sanders along with Methodist bishop Paul E. Martin, Congressman Brooks Hays, who was president of the Southern Baptist Convention, Dr. Marion Boggs of Little Rock's Second Presbyterian Church, Methodist minister Dr. Aubrey Dalton, Dr. Dunbar Ogden, president of the Little Rock Ministerial Alliance (of which Sanders was a member), and Episcopal bishop Robert R. Brown, whom Eisenhower had initially contacted, drew up a proposal for a "ministry of reconciliation" to assist the community in coming together in the wake of the crisis. The group set aside Saturday, October 12, 1957, as a day for meetings, which were held in eighty-five different houses of worship in the Greater Little Rock area. Those in attendance were led by their clergy in common recitation of a six-point prayer for "forgiveness for having left undone the things that ought to have been done; the support and preservation of law and order; the leaders of the community, state, and nation; the youth in the schools of the community; the casting out of rancor and prejudice in favor of understanding and compassion; and resistance against unthinking agitators."<sup>96</sup>

At Temple B'nai Israel, Sanders added specific points about race and equality to the generic common prayer to better hammer home the message: "for that blessed day when all peoples and all races shall live side by side in tranquility and in good will; to remove hatred and malice from the hearts of those who would destroy the right of Thy creatures; and to show them that men of all colors are Thy children, each a pattern to help establish the whole vast fabric of society in which all men shall dwell in unity and accord."<sup>97</sup> More than eight thousand people attended the eighty-five meetings. Governor Faubus was not among them.



The previous evening, thirty-five independent Baptist ministers hosted a community gathering of about 660 segregationists opposed to the ideals of the “ministry of reconciliation,” offering up prayers for a different kind of solution, imploring the Almighty to “have the Negro pupils go back to the all-Negro high school.”<sup>98</sup> The fact that liberals and moderates who favored desegregation outnumbered the segregationists at these meetings by better than ten to one offered hope for the situation in Arkansas.

There was remarkable support from Sanders’s congregation and colleagues regarding his activities in the “ministry of reconciliation” and in his activities within the community on behalf of racial justice in general. An indication of that support can be seen in the five hundred mostly Jewish participants of the day’s activities at the Temple, representing substantially more attendees than a typical Friday or Saturday, indeed than at any other time except the High Holy Days. Rabbi Eugene Blachschleger of Montgomery’s Temple Beth Or offered Sanders support, stating that he understood “your position and anxiety” having gone through similar community traumas the previous year.<sup>99</sup> Of his own congregation, Sanders told the *Jewish Daily Forward* that he “was unaware of any” dissent regarding his civil rights activism; but had there been any, he said, it would not have influenced him. “How can a Jew be a segregationist?” he asked rhetorically. “Didn’t we suffer enough from restrictive measures for the Jews?”<sup>100</sup> Congregational support at least in part allowed Sanders to play the role he did in the quest for racial and social justice.

About 1,400 Jews lived in Little Rock in 1957–1958, constituting about one percent of the city’s overall population. Though small in number, they wielded significant civic and economic influence. Gus Blass owned the largest store in the city; Henry Spitzberg was one of its leading attorneys; Louis Rosen was president of the Rotary Club.<sup>101</sup> Some of the most prominent businessmen in Little Rock were Jewish, and four Jewish families in particular—Pfeifer, Blass, Kempner, and Cohn—were “associated with large, prestigious department stores.” Garment manufacturers Gus and Leonard Ottenheimer had built an industrial complex in Little Rock in 1955. Sam Peck was a respected

hotel owner, while Julius Tenenbaum and Sol Alman ran substantial scrap and metal companies.<sup>102</sup>

The Jewish economic presence in Little Rock was substantial, but, as importantly, it was well-integrated into the larger community and had been for decades. Abe Tenenbaum established his company in 1890. The Gus Blass Company originated in 1867. James Kempner, son of company founder Ike Kempner, founded the Little Rock Urban Progress Association as well as “participating in several business and civic organizations.”<sup>103</sup> These are a few of numerous examples. The Jewish community for the most part had deep and substantial roots in the secular community, which offered them a degree of insulation. Nevertheless, Jewish-owned retail businesses suffered as a result of the segregationist Capitol Citizen’s Council’s boycott of the pro-civil rights *Arkansas Gazette* and all businesses that continued to advertise in it. Newspaper sales fell by over twenty thousand, which translated into fewer readers of department store ads and additional business falloff.<sup>104</sup> Of course, violence did accompany the events of September 1957, but it was localized around the school. Jewish businesses were not targeted, and normalcy for downtown and suburban businesses was quickly restored.<sup>105</sup> All of which is not to state that serious threats were not made specifically against the Jews of Little Rock as a result of Sanders’s activism. Like other southern cities with synagogues in the 1950s, the Temple received a bomb threat.

On Thursday, October 16, 1958, the FBI informed Sanders, as well as Rabbi Irwin Groner of Little Rock’s Orthodox Congregation Agudath Achim, that a bomb threat had been made by segregationists against both the Temple and the Orthodox synagogue. While Sanders had been very active in civil rights, Groner had not. This made no difference; in Little Rock as in other southern communities, the level of actual engagement of specific rabbis or congregations in civil rights activities did not determine who was and who was not bombed or threatened with bombing. It was, instead, a non-specific targeting of the entire Jewish community as retribution for the actions of certain members of that community.<sup>106</sup>

Temple president Henry J. Spitzberg presided over a special meeting of the boards of the Temple and Agudath Achim that convened at noon on Friday, October 17 to discuss the threat. Both rabbis were present. Groner had phoned the Anti-Defamation League for any further information on the threat, and the ADL told Groner of a "threat that the Atlanta Temple was [to be] the last to be bombed unoccupied."<sup>107</sup> After stepping up security at the facilities, the board voted to have Shabbat services as usual that evening, stating "we could not allow any group of fanatics to rout the Jewish people from their places of worship."<sup>108</sup> Board member Selwyn Loeb made the motion that services be held as usual, and Dr. Jerome Levy then called for a second meeting to be held the next day, Saturday, October 18, to consider the question of whether or not to hold Sunday school as usual. Friday night services passed without incident, and Sanders and the board met the next day to decide on several matters pertaining to the Temple's security, which included improving outside lighting, hiring security guards, and establishing a committee to deal exclusively with "future problems or threats."<sup>109</sup> Sunday school went forward as usual with no disruption, although only a few parents braved the threat. No one on the board suggested reining in Sanders, and no one suggested that he lower his community profile regarding civil rights. Henry Spitzberg and the rest of the board exhibited courage and leadership as they stood squarely behind their rabbi throughout the period of the Central High crisis.

On October 21 the board met for a third time to discuss security issues. The board provided for the hiring of a nightly security guard and noted that the Little Rock police were keeping the Temple, located downtown at the corner of Capitol and Broadway, under close, around-the-clock surveillance. Sanders suggested that "a committee of fathers [of religious school children] be constituted to guard the buildings between 9 am and noon each Sunday while Sunday school was in session." The motion passed. The board then agreed that fire drills and other evacuation plans be developed, and the grounds committee proposed that "all shrubbery be thinned out" to deprive potential bombers of cover. The board also acted on the previous meeting's

resolution to establish a security committee by creating an “emergency committee” of board members Myron Lasker, Harry Pfeifer, Jr., Arnold Mayersohn, M. A. Safferstone, and Jerome S. Levy to deal exclusively with those needs. Finally, Sanders proposed that no public mention be made of any of these contingencies for increased security because, as the rabbi put it, “the bleating of the lamb excites the tiger.”<sup>110</sup> For that reason, the threats and any mention of the board’s plans were omitted from the Temple’s weekly newsletter, *The Temple Chronicle*.

By the following month, the fear of bombings had waned, and the board rescinded some of the security measures implemented the month before and imposed others. The floodlights that had been erected outside the Temple each night were discontinued, but the board voted to brick up a stairwell on the Capitol Avenue side of the building. The board also agreed to provide security any time meetings were held in the Temple.<sup>111</sup>

As with other contemporary southern rabbis, Sanders’s civil rights activism had frightening and potentially disastrous results. Although, unlike Rabbi Rothschild’s Atlanta Temple, B’nai Israel avoided destruction, it endured more threats both during and after the crisis. In his report to the congregation made during the Temple’s 1959 annual meeting, Sanders praised his congregation for its support during the Central High crisis and through the threats of bombings. The members “conducted themselves with calmness, resoluteness, and courage in a most laudatory manner. Despite threats to our Temple by sinister forces from without,” Sanders reported with pride, “we conducted all of our activities with unsuspected fervor and dignity.” He praised those in the congregation “who joined with the right-thinking leaders of our community to restore stability and normalcy,” and noted that his congregation, made of “sturdier stuff than to let intimidation or fear frighten us,” had persevered by defiantly holding services and other events “several times under the threat of bombs.”<sup>112</sup>

Even given the threats made by extremists, Sanders and his colleague Rabbi Groner of Congregation Agudath Achim agreed that the overall relationship between Little Rock Jews and non-Jews during and immediately following the Central High crisis

*Temple B'nai Israel, at Capitol and Broadway c. 1900.  
The congregation's third house of worship was dedicated May 9, 1897.  
The congregation moved out in 1975. The building has been demolished.  
(Courtesy of National Museum of American Jewish History, Philadelphia.)*

“could not conceivably be better or friendlier,” a sentiment shared by many local Jewish businessmen as well.<sup>113</sup> By 1957 Sanders was so well-established as a community leader that in some ways his Jewishness was secondary in the public mind to his civic-mindedness. He was, and had been since 1926, an established, respected, and well-liked community leader in the same vein as high-profile Protestant or Catholic religious leaders in the city. The threats by extremists, rather than marginalizing or silencing the local Jewish community, had the effect of drawing the congregation more tightly around its rabbi and making the community more intolerant of antisemitic or racist extremism lest their municipal image be further tarnished. Ironically, the radical antisemitic threats of a few lessened whatever softer antisemitism may have existed in the community as a whole, as Arkansas liberals and moderates effectively “circled the wagons” to maintain the state’s relatively moderate position on civil rights.

Although the Jews of Little Rock never adopted any official Jewish position on school integration, Sanders, as “one of the leading figures in the campaign to adhere to and enforce the law of the land,”<sup>114</sup> was seen as the *de facto* Jewish spokesman on these issues. Because his position did not appreciably differ from any number of other religious liberals or moderates, because his style of leadership was to provide an example of working for racial justice from within the system through established (or by establishing) civic and community organizations like the Rotarians or the Urban League, because he sought to educate from the already-established position of moral and religious community leader (rather than lead street demonstrations or employ other kinds of confrontational direct action tactics), and finally because Little Rock was—despite the momentous exception of Faubus and the Central High debacle—a moderate environment for civil rights quite different from Birmingham or Montgomery or even Atlanta, Sanders was not seen as an interloper, and therefore the Jewish community did not suffer appreciable consequences as a result of his activism.

*Making a Difference, 1959–1963 and Beyond*

During the events of 1957–1958, Sanders's work on behalf of social justice was a source of pride for Reform Jews and Jewish organizations, and he received encouragement from colleagues around the country. Such organizations as the UAHC offered key support. Chairman Cyrus Gordon, on behalf of the Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism, commended Sanders's "strong leadership" in the community, calling it "the only bright spot in the Little Rock situation." He asked Sanders to forward his views on desegregation "for the benefit of those [southern rabbis] who will be confronting similar situations."<sup>115</sup> Gordon wanted to hold Sanders's work out as an example for others to emulate.

The Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), the American Jewish Congress (AJCong), and the New York Association of Reform Rabbis (ARR-NY) also offered support and encouragement. "The Jewish community," wrote AJCong regional director Richard Cohen, "should be proud of the public position you took in your testimony on the four bills and in the essentially moral position you took." Likewise, the ARR-NY leadership rallied behind Sanders, "confident that you will bring to this problem the ethical and moral insights of Judaism and that you will labor zealously for its just and moral solution."<sup>116</sup>

Perhaps the most significant message came from Rabbi Maurice Eisendrath, the president of the UAHC. Eisendrath wired Sanders shortly after the start of the 1957 school year congratulating him on "your splendid leadership in mobilizing the religious community of Little Rock to take concerted moves towards the removal of strife." Eisendrath told Sanders that he intended to hold the Little Rock rabbi up as a role model, an example for the entire UAHC membership to emulate in order "to urge efforts similar to yours in communities throughout the nation, both North and South." Eisendrath thanked Sanders on behalf of the UAHC member congregations for "your vivid demonstration of the need to apply today's mandates to [the] realm of social action."<sup>117</sup> Clearly, Sanders's work in Little Rock was having a national as well as local impact.

Through the remaining five years of his Little Rock rabbinate, Sanders continued making the case for racial and social justice. He seldom missed an opportunity to interject messages of equality and fairness in any of his public addresses and frequently made them the centerpiece of his sermons. In November 1961, for example, Sanders offered an invocation at the ceremonial laying of the cornerstone for the new federal building in downtown Little Rock. "As we meet to lay the cornerstone," he prayed it would be built upon the foundations of "justice and freedom under law. May we never forget that when our human statutes fail to implement Thy divine rule of liberty and equality for all, we cannot find favor in Thy sight."<sup>118</sup>

Ira Sanders retired on August 31, 1963, after forty years as a rabbi, thirty-seven of which were in Arkansas. His retirement was cause for reflection in Little Rock as the *Arkansas Gazette* pondered the retirement of this "moving force in community affairs." Although retired, the *Gazette* opined, "It is good to know that Little Rock is not going to lose the benefits of his keen and lively mind and his social vision."<sup>119</sup> He remained an active advocate for social justice. He served on the boards of the Arkansas Association for Mental Health, the Arkansas Lighthouse for the Blind (Sanders was blind the last five years of his life), and a trustee for the Little Rock Public Library, the first local organization with which he became involved when he arrived in September 1926.<sup>120</sup>

In February 1968 the Arkansas region of the National Conference of Christians and Jews announced the selection of the rabbi as the recipient of its Brotherhood and Humanitarian Award. The award was presented in Little Rock at a May 27 dinner attended by more than one thousand people of all religious and social backgrounds, in recognition of all Sanders had done in Arkansas for the cause of brotherhood.<sup>121</sup> "I have great hope for the future of the world" even in the midst of the turmoil of 1968, he said. Social and racial justice remained the key. "The future of the nations rests not in black power or white power, but on cultural pluralism." Governor Winthrop Rockefeller added his congratulations for Sanders's "43 years of unremitting work for social reform in Little Rock."<sup>122</sup>



Still the community activist at age seventy-three, Sanders was unhappy with the nation's priorities: "I want to see less money spent on going to the moon and on the senseless Vietnam War and more being spent for the eradication of poverty, crime, and other maladjustments of society which produce an Oswald who kills a president of the United States."<sup>123</sup> The Presbyterian minister who closed the gathering offered the simplest of benedictions, summing up the feelings of many as he "gave thanks to God for seeing to it that Dr. Sanders had come to Arkansas to live."<sup>124</sup>

In 1963 Rabbi Sanders was succeeded in the Temple B'nai Israel pulpit by 28-year-old Rabbi Elijah E. "Zeke" Palnick. A civil rights activist in his own right, Palnick had played a role in the desegregation of the University of Alabama and continued, indeed, expanded on, Sanders's tradition of community activism, leading and participating in direct action campaigns and marches.<sup>125</sup> "Ira fought for the things he believed in," and Palnick built on that tradition, using the pulpit to persuade on the issue of civil rights, "probably too much," he later recalled. Palnick loved and admired Sanders, who remained in the Temple as rabbi emeritus. He saw himself very much in the Sanders mode, and although Zeke Palnick was forty years Sanders's junior, "I don't think," he said, "there was an iota of difference in the way we thought about the great social issues"<sup>126</sup> Palnick reflects a generational shift in southern Jewish civil rights leadership toward more direct action campaigns, a shift that mirrors the overall evolution of the civil rights movement in general.

Sanders died on April 8, 1985, at the age of ninety. As a testament to his remarkable life, in 1986 the *Arkansas Democrat* honored him as a part of the Arkansas sesquicentennial celebration known as Project Pride, which celebrated the accomplishments of Arkansans who had made significant community, state, or national contributions over the state's 150-year history. The article, indeed, his legacy, was simply headlined "Rabbi Sanders Sought Rights for Minorities."<sup>127</sup> It was a fitting tribute for a rabbi who in 1977 had summed up his career thusly: "The part of my ministry which has appealed to me the most, of course, has been my stand on integration."<sup>128</sup>

There is no better summation of Rabbi Ira Sanders's philosophy than the following excerpt from one of his most eloquent sermons. It was delivered to his congregation in the immediate aftermath of the Central High affair.

In the Jewish tradition man is called the co-worker and partner of God in the creation of a better world. Judaism insists that we must apply constantly the sharp, ethical insights of the Prophets to the specific social problems of our generation. We do this through social action. We must battle against those conditions of inequality that deny any man his inalienable rights of free opportunity to education or economic security or civil liberties. We must fight those infringements of civil rights that deny *any* citizen of this land due regard for his civil liberties. We must carry on the battle for FEPC, for fair employment practices, for the opportunity of a man to get a job without preference or discrimination shown because of race or color or creed. We must carry on the torch that has been lighted by the United States Supreme Court for desegregation. We must stand firm for legal rights and see to it that there is no second-class citizenship in the United States.

Such a program translates our faith into concrete social action. . . . Such a program of social action works for the economic welfare of the entire country. Such a program seeks to avoid those tensions in areas of social distress that breed anti-Semitism. Such a program of social action upholds and defends and furthers democracy. Jewish religious bodies, and certainly members of Reform temples, have a deep responsibility to seek to strengthen democracy and the ideals of justice. . . . We must bridge the gap between concession and commitment, between word and deed, by working for the establishment of a greater share of social justice to all.<sup>129</sup>

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## NOTES

This paper is based on a presentation to the Southern Jewish Historical Society annual conference, Little Rock, Arkansas, November 11, 2006. My sincere thanks to Flora Sanders for sharing stories of her father with me, to Carolyn LeMaster for use of her voluminous files on Arkansas Jewry, to Mark Bauman and the *SJH* anonymous readers for their invaluable commentary on an earlier version of this paper, and to *SJH* managing editor Rachel Heimovics Braun for her gracious and skillful editing of this work.

<sup>1</sup> "Rabbi Sanders' Service," [Little Rock] *Arkansas Gazette*, June 9, 1963.

<sup>2</sup> See for example Clive Webb, *Fight Against Fear: Southern Jews and Black Civil Rights* (Athens, GA, 2001); Mark K. Bauman and Berkley Kalin, eds., *The Quiet Voices: Southern Rabbis and Black Civil Rights, 1880s to 1990s* (Tuscaloosa, 1997); Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton, 2006); Cheryl L. Greenberg, *Troubling the Waters: Black-Jewish Relations in the American Century* (Princeton, 2006); V. P. Franklin, et al, eds., *African Americans and Jews in the Twentieth Century: Studies in Convergence and Conflict* (Columbia, SC, 1998); Seth Forman, "The Unbearable Whiteness of Being Jewish: Desegregation in the South and the Crisis of Jewish Liberalism," *American Jewish History* 85 (1997): 121-142; Leonard Dinnerstein and Mary Dale Palsson, eds., *Jews in the South* (Baton Rouge, 1973); Dinnerstein, "Southern Jewry and the Desegregation Crisis, 1954-1970," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 62 (March 1973): 231-241; P. Allen Krause, "Rabbis and Negro Rights in the South, 1954-1967," *American Jewish Archives* 21 (April 1969): 20-47; on Jews in Arkansas, see Carolyn LeMaster, *A Corner of the Tapestry: A History of the Jewish Experience in Arkansas, 1820s to 1990s* (Fayetteville, AR, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> LeMaster, Webb, Bauman, and others do address Sanders's work, but only as a small part of larger studies.

<sup>4</sup> Late in life, Sanders began, but never finished, a memoir, "The Journal of a Southern Rabbi," Temple B'nai Israel archives, box 1, Little Rock, Arkansas (hereafter cited as Sanders Journal), quote on p. 12; see also Ira E. Sanders and Elijah E. Palnick, eds., *One Hundred Years: Congregation B'nai Israel* (Little Rock, 1966), 67-68, for vital statistics regarding Sanders's early life and career.

<sup>5</sup> Sanders Journal, 17. Sanders later said, "I especially became interested [as a child] in the promotion of good will between peoples and felt I could serve better in that capacity as a rabbi." Ira Sanders Oral History transcript, interview conducted January 18, 1978, University of Arkansas, Little Rock (UALR) archives, Oral History Collection, Little Rock, Arkansas [hereafter ISOH transcript (1978)], 15.

<sup>6</sup> Sanders Journal, 19.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 19-20.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 27-28.

<sup>9</sup> Rabbi Elijah E. "Zeke" Palnick, interview conducted by the author, November 16, 2004, Little Rock. Palnick, who died in 2005, succeeded Sanders at Temple B'nai Israel in Little Rock, serving from 1963 to 1986. During almost all that time, Sanders served as Rabbi

Emeritus and had an office alongside Palnick's. Palnick considered Sanders a mentor and dear friend.

<sup>10</sup> Ira Sanders Oral History transcript, interview conducted December 5, 1977, UALR archives, Oral History Collection, Little Rock, Arkansas [hereafter ISOH transcript (1977)], 3.

<sup>11</sup> Sanders, "The Law of Life is the Law of Service," sermon, September 24, 1924, reprinted in Sanders Journal, 40-40A. (Sanders added his New York sermons to the journal as inserts, which he labeled alphabetically following page 40.)

<sup>12</sup> Sanders had begun his work at Columbia while still in Allentown, traveling to New York once a week for classes.

<sup>13</sup> See "Women of Valor," Jewish Women's Archive, <http://www.jwa.org/exhibits/wov/wald/lwbio.html> (accessed: May 11, 2007).

<sup>14</sup> Carroll McGaughey, "Rabbi Ira Sanders—Logic and Persuasion," *Arkansas Gazette*, February 21, 1954; Flora Sanders interview conducted by the author, May 22, 2007, Little Rock.

<sup>15</sup> Sanders, "Haman Alive," sermon, April 2, 1925, reprinted in Sanders Journal, 40CC. The journal itself is an example of Rabbi Sanders's penchant for overly formal language, making it essentially unpublishable, sometimes ponderous, and often difficult to read.

<sup>16</sup> Flora Sanders interview, May 22, 2007.

<sup>17</sup> ISOH transcript (1977), 5-6.

<sup>18</sup> Flora Sanders telephone interview conducted by the author, November 6, 2004; Flora Sanders interview, May 22, 2007.

<sup>19</sup> Flora Sanders interview, May 22, 2007. Another big factor in Sanders's decision regarding Little Rock was the fact that Selma Sanders disliked living in New York, decrying its "lack of community warmth." See Erwin McDonald, "When the Rabbi Came, He Came to Stay," [Little Rock] *Arkansas Democrat*, May 11, 1974.

<sup>20</sup> See Carolyn LeMaster, *Corner of the Tapestry*.

<sup>21</sup> Temple B'nai Israel's history is outlined in Sanders and Palnick, eds., *One Hundred Years*, 17-50.

<sup>22</sup> McDonald, "He Came to Stay."

<sup>23</sup> ISOH transcript (1977), 6.

<sup>24</sup> Sanders Journal, 34.

<sup>25</sup> Preston Pfeifer telegram to Ira Sanders, June 12, 1926, Rabbi Ira E. Sanders Papers, Ottenheimer Library Archives and Special Collections, University of Arkansas at Little Rock, box 1, file 1—General Correspondence (hereafter cited as Sanders Papers, UALR).

<sup>26</sup> *Arkansas Gazette*, June 8, 1963.

<sup>27</sup> ISOH transcript (1977), 6.

<sup>28</sup> ISOH transcript (1978), 10; Sanders and Palnick, eds., *One Hundred Years*, 67; *Arkansas Gazette*, June 21, 1951; McGaughey, "Rabbi Sanders—Logic and Persuasion." Flora Sanders also commented on her father's initial belief that coming to Little Rock "was a big mistake."

<sup>29</sup> McDonald, "He Came to Stay."

<sup>30</sup> Flora Sanders telephone interview conducted by the author, October 27, 2006.

<sup>31</sup> ISOH transcript (1977), 12-13.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*; see also *Arkansas Gazette*, May 11, 1974.

<sup>33</sup> The author has not found any significant dissent from or controversy regarding the rabbi's progressivism on race from within the congregation—nothing brought up during board meetings, nor anything found in private correspondence. If such dissent was occurring, it seems to have been on the part of relatively few and kept private.

<sup>34</sup> LeMaster, *Corner of the Tapestry*, 64.

<sup>35</sup> Palnick interview.

<sup>36</sup> Full text of the platform is in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, s.v. "Pittsburgh Platform," cited in Paul Johnson, *A History of the Jews* (New York, 1987), 370.

<sup>37</sup> The Pittsburgh Platform called also for the rejection of Zionism, a tenet Sanders did not embrace. He remained a Zionist his entire life.

<sup>38</sup> ISOH transcript (1977), 17.

<sup>39</sup> ISOH transcript (1978), 15.

<sup>40</sup> Sanders's quote in *Arkansas Gazette*, June 8, 1963.

<sup>41</sup> Rabbi David Marx of Atlanta is a good example and provides a nice comparison. See Mark K. Bauman and Arnold Shankman, "The Rabbi as Ethnic Broker: The Case of David Marx," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 2 (Spring 1983): 51–68; George R. Wilkes, "Rabbi Dr. David Marx and the Unity Club: Organized Jewish-Christian Dialogue, Liberalism, and Religious Diversity in Early Twentieth-Century Atlanta," *Southern Jewish History* 9 (2006): 35–68.

<sup>42</sup> Sanders and Palnick, eds., *One Hundred Years*, 67.

<sup>43</sup> ISOH transcript (1977), 7–8.

<sup>44</sup> Flyer announcing the opening of the Little Rock School of Social Work, Rabbi Ira Sanders Papers, box 1, Temple B'nai Israel Archives, Little Rock, Arkansas (hereafter cited as Sanders Papers, Temple); Sanders Journal, 38.

<sup>45</sup> ISOH transcript (1977), 10; McGaughey, "Rabbi Ira Sanders—Logic and Persuasion;" LeMaster, *Corner of the Tapestry*, 64.

<sup>46</sup> ISOH transcript (1977), 10; *Arkansas Democrat*, May 11, 1974.

<sup>47</sup> Sanders, speech before the annual meeting of the Arkansas chapter of the National Association of Social Workers, March 21, 1964, Little Rock, Arkansas, in Sanders Papers, Temple, box 2, "Sermons and Addresses"; McGaughey, "Rabbi Ira Sanders—Logic and Persuasion." In his unpublished memoir, written (and dictated once he lost his eyesight) at the end of his long life, Sanders relates a happier, if also fictional ending. His proud recollection in the journal is that the two African American women stayed, and that he therefore operated the first integrated school in Arkansas. He did, but only for one day.

<sup>48</sup> ISOH transcript (1978), 1–2.

<sup>49</sup> See Marianne Leung, *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*, s.v. "Hilda Cornish," <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=1625> (accessed: November 8, 2006.) Early twentieth century "eugenics" was also ominously involved in limiting the births of "undesirables" through forced sterilizations and surgical sterilizations performed on poor and black women without their knowledge or consent. The AEA was

not part of this, borrowing the name “eugenics” only to make their organization palatable to the community.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Unidentified newspaper clipping, “10-Cent Utility Bill Tax Voted for Relief,” reporting an Associated Press story, dateline May 1, 1932, Sanders Papers, Temple, box 1.

<sup>52</sup> ISOH transcript (1977), 15–16; Sanders Journal, 40.

<sup>53</sup> For example, see *Arkansas Gazette*, December 14, 1934.

<sup>54</sup> John Egerton, *Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South* (New York, 1994), 187–188.

<sup>55</sup> Sanders Journal, 58–59.

<sup>56</sup> *Arkansas Democrat*, February 19, 1986; Sanders Journal, 58–59.

<sup>57</sup> Sanders Journal, 59 (emphasis added).

<sup>58</sup> Reprinted in Sanders and Palnick, eds., *One Hundred Years*, 68.

<sup>59</sup> Nelson Glueck to Ira Sanders, February 22, 1954, Sanders Papers, Temple, box 1.

<sup>60</sup> “Brotherhood,” *Arkansas Gazette*, February 28, 1950, in Sanders Papers, UALR, box 2.

<sup>61</sup> “Live by Moral Principles for Brotherhood, Rabbi Advises,” *Arkansas Gazette*, February 23, 1951.

<sup>62</sup> ISOH transcript (1977), 13.

<sup>63</sup> Sanders Journal, 58.

<sup>64</sup> Dinnerstein, “Southern Jewry and the Desegregation Crisis,” 233.

<sup>65</sup> The fact that “Jewish ‘otherness’ might easily become an issue” was a fear for many southern Jews. Mary Stanton, “At One with the Majority,” *Southern Jewish History* 9 (2006): 176. Stanton’s article discusses the Jews of Montgomery, Alabama, as an example.

<sup>66</sup> Dinnerstein, “Southern Jewry,” 234.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 235.

<sup>68</sup> Webb, *Fight Against Fear*, 153.

<sup>69</sup> The best analysis of this phenomenon is Jeff Woods, *Black Struggle, Red Scare: Segregation and Anti-Communism in the South, 1948–1968* (Baton Rouge, 2004), quote on p. 56; for more on Perez, see Glen Jeansonne, *Leander Perez: Boss of the Delta* (Lafayette, LA, 1995), esp. 226–228.

<sup>70</sup> ISOH transcript (1978), 13–14.

<sup>71</sup> Louise McLean to Ira Sanders, November 19, 1954, in the private files of Carolyn LeMaster, “LR–Sanders,” Little Rock, Arkansas (hereafter LeMaster files). My sincere thanks to LeMaster for lending me her entire file collection of newspaper clippings, private correspondence, and other documents related to Sanders.

<sup>72</sup> Albert Vorspan, “The Dilemma of the Southern Jew,” *The Reconstructionist* 24 (January 9, 1959): 6–9.

<sup>73</sup> Vorspan, “Dilemma,” 7–8. For the 1958 Atlanta Temple bombing see Melissa Fay Greene, *The Temple Bombing* (Reading, MA, 1996).

<sup>74</sup> The essential work is Bauman and Kalin, eds., *Quiet Voices*, which contains studies of Sanders’s contemporaries, including rabbis Mantinband, Nussbaum, and Rothschild as

well as Morris Newfield and Milton Grafman of Birmingham, David Jacobson of San Antonio, Sidney Wolf of Corpus Christi, and James Wax of Memphis, among others.

<sup>75</sup> Perry E. Nussbaum, Charles Mantinband, and Jacob M. Rothschild, "The Southern Rabbi Faces the Problem of Desegregation," *CCAR Journal* 3 (June 1956): 1; Webb, *Fight Against Fear*, 185–188. See also Gary Phillip Zola, "What Price, Amos? Perry Nussbaum's Career in Jackson, Mississippi," in *Quiet Voices*, ed. Bauman and Kalin, 230–257.

<sup>76</sup> Nussbaum, et al, "Southern Rabbi Faces Desegregation," 6.

<sup>77</sup> Webb, *Fight Against Fear*, 182.

<sup>78</sup> Krause, "Rabbis and Negro Rights in the South," 371–374; also see Greene, *The Temple Bombing*.

<sup>79</sup> Nussbaum, et al, "Southern Rabbi Faces Desegregation," 4; Clive Webb, "Big Struggle in a Small Town: Charles Mantinband of Hattiesburg, Mississippi," in *Quiet Voices*, ed. Bauman and Kalin, 223–224.

<sup>80</sup> Rabbi Sanders quoted in Webb, *Fight Against Fear*, 198.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 182–183.

<sup>82</sup> *Arkansas Gazette*, February 27, 1957; Webb, *Fight Against Fear*, 174; Ben F. Johnson, *Arkansas in Modern America, 1930–1999* (Fayetteville, 2000), 136–137.

<sup>83</sup> LeMaster, "The Arkansas Story," in *Quiet Voices*, ed. Bauman and Kalin, 106.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> ISOH transcript (1977), 18.

<sup>86</sup> Sanders's speech before the Arkansas state legislature, February 18, 1957, Little Rock, Arkansas, in Sanders Papers, Temple, box 1; see also Webb, *Fight Against Fear*, 175.

<sup>87</sup> ISOH transcript (1977), 18.

<sup>88</sup> *Arkansas Gazette*, February 27, 1957.

<sup>89</sup> Sidney S. McMath to Ira Sanders, February 19, 1957, LeMaster files, "LR—Rabbi Sanders, Integration Crisis."

<sup>90</sup> Sidney S. McMath, *Promises Kept* (Fayetteville, 2003); C. Fred Williams, *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*, s.v. "Sidney S. McMath," [http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?search=1&entry\\_ID=51](http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?search=1&entry_ID=51) (accessed: May 6, 2007). In 1954, Faubus was still considered a moderate. He adopted an obstructionist pose for the 1958 reelection campaign in order to tap into growing segregationist resistance.

<sup>91</sup> Charles C. Walker to Ira Sanders, February 27, 1957, LeMaster files, "LR—Rabbi Sanders, Integration Crisis."

<sup>92</sup> Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality, 1954–1992* (rev. ed., New York, 1993), 28–29.

<sup>93</sup> Little Rock Council on Education Report, 1952, in *A Documentary History of Arkansas*, ed. C. Fred Williams et al (Fayetteville, AR, 1984), 238–239.

<sup>94</sup> Shimon Weber, "How has the School Conflict Affected the Jews of Little Rock?" *Jewish Daily Forward*, October 19, 1957.

<sup>95</sup> LeMaster, *Corner of the Tapestry*, 376–377. For the work of this group see Sara Alderman Murphy, *Breaking the Silence: Little Rock's Women's Emergency Committee to Open Our*

*Schools, 1958–1963* (Fayetteville, AR, 1997); Lorraine Gates, “Power from the Pedestal: The Women’s Emergency Committee and the Little Rock School Crisis,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 55 (Spring 1996): 26–57.

<sup>96</sup> “Little Rock Asks Divine Aid on Bias,” *New York Herald Tribune*, October 13, 1957; “5000 Pray Over Crisis,” *Arkansas Democrat*, October 13, 1957.

<sup>97</sup> “Little Rock Asks Divine Aid,” *New York Herald Tribune*.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.* In 1958, Little Rock had over two hundred houses of worship and a population of about 110,000, twenty-five percent of whom were African American. Sixty churches in the Little Rock area were all-black, twenty of which participated in the “ministry of reconciliation.”

<sup>99</sup> Eugene Blachschleger to Sanders, October 2, 1957, LeMaster files, “LR—Rabbi Sanders.”

<sup>100</sup> Weber, *Jewish Daily Forward*.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> LeMaster, *Corner of the Tapestry*, 379–380, 394.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 381.

<sup>104</sup> Webb, *Fight Against Fear*, 151–152, 155.

<sup>105</sup> Weber, *Jewish Daily Forward*.

<sup>106</sup> Little Rock is an excellent example of the point made by Dinnerstein (“Southern Jewry,” 234) that actual Jewish involvement in civil rights activities did not necessarily correlate with synagogue bombings or bomb threats. Threatening synagogues was a way to send a general message to the Jewish community.

<sup>107</sup> Minutes, Temple B’nai Israel Board of Trustees, “Special Called Meeting,” October 17, 1958, Board Meeting minutes 1958, Temple Archives.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> Board meeting minutes, October 21, 1958, Temple Archives.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, November 18, 1958.

<sup>112</sup> Ira Sanders, “1959 Annual Report,” January 25, 1960, Sanders Papers, Temple, box 2, “Services and Addresses.”

<sup>113</sup> Weber, *Jewish Daily Forward*.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> I. Cyrus Gordon to Ira Sanders, October 27, 1957, LeMaster files, “LR—Rabbi Sanders, Integration Crisis.”

<sup>116</sup> Richard Cohen to Ira Sanders, September 25, 1957; Jacob K. Shankman, President, ARR-NY, to Sanders, October 11, 1957, both LeMaster files, “LR—Rabbi Sanders, Integration Crisis.”

<sup>117</sup> Rabbi Maurice N. Eisendrath telegram to Ira Sanders, October 4, 1957, Sanders Papers, Temple, box 2. The UAHC has since been renamed the Union of Reform Judaism (URJ).

<sup>118</sup> Sanders Papers, UALR, box 1, file 3 “Sermons and Addresses.”

<sup>119</sup> “Rabbi Sanders’ Service,” *Arkansas Gazette*, June 9, 1963.



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<sup>120</sup> Sanders and Palnick, eds., *One Hundred Years*, 67.

<sup>121</sup> *Arkansas Gazette*, February 18, 1968; May 28, 1968.

<sup>122</sup> Winthrop Rockefeller telegram to Ira Sanders, May 24, 1968, LeMaster files, "Correspondence."

<sup>123</sup> *Arkansas Gazette*, May 28, 1968.

<sup>124</sup> "The Influential Rabbi," *Arkansas Democrat*, May 29, 1968, Sanders Papers, Temple, box 1.

<sup>125</sup> LeMaster, "The Arkansas Story," in *Quiet Voices*, ed. Bauman and Kalin, 112-117 (although Palnick was not a "quiet voice"). Palnick's tenure, like this article, will be part of the larger study.

<sup>126</sup> Palnick interview.

<sup>127</sup> "Rabbi Sanders Sought Rights for Minorities," *Arkansas Democrat*, February 19, 1986.

<sup>128</sup> ISOH transcript (1977), 17.

<sup>129</sup> Sanders, sermon of January 10, 1959, Sanders Papers, UALR, box 1 file 3, "Sermons and Addresses."