

**“A Good Jew and a Good Citizen”: Rabbi James A. Wax, Jewish
Identity, and Social Action**

Cullen Robison Williams

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Advisor: Anthony Siracusa

On April 5, 1968, 300 ministers marched to Memphis' City Hall to confront Memphis Mayor Henry Loeb. Martin Luther King, Jr. had been assassinated at the Lorraine Motel the previous night while in town lending support to striking sanitation workers, and many among the ministerial class blamed Loeb's refusal to negotiate with the striking workers for King's death. The group of clergy who marched downtown to confront the Mayor the day after the assassination included members of both the primarily white Memphis Ministers Association (MMA) and the predominantly African-American Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance (IMA). Rabbi James A. Wax, the president of the MMA, was among those who chastised the mayor for his role in the strike. Wax told the Mayor:

We come here with a great deal of sadness and frankly also with a great deal of anger. What has happened in this city is the result of oppression and injustice, the inhumanity of man to man, and we have come to appeal to you for leadership in ending the situation. There are laws greater than the laws of Memphis and Tennessee and these are the laws of God. We fervently ask you not to hide any longer behind legal technicalities and slogans but to speak out at last in favor of human dignity.¹

Wax would later regard his statement as "needlessly emotional," but his earnestness exemplifies the righteous outrage among the clergy at the mayor's intransigence.²

Wax and the MMA had been involved with the strike since early February. The organization tried to facilitate negotiations between the strikers' negotiating body, the American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), and Mayor Loeb. The MMA also held meetings with the IMA to address the issue of racial discrimination that lay at the heart strike.³ However the long standing forces of machine politics, Jim Crow laws, and ongoing Civil Rights activism would impact the emergence

¹ *New York Times*, April 6, 1968.

² "Interview with Rabbi James Wax," 1968, Mississippi Valley Collection (McWhorter Library, Memphis, Tennessee)

³ For comprehensive looks into the Memphis Sanitation Strike, see Joan Turner Beifuss, *At the River I Stand* (Memphis, 1989) and Michael K. Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road* (New York, 2007).

and tragic trajectory of the strike more than the efforts of the MMA. Racial injustice had permeated life in Memphis since the Civil War, cultivating a civic atmosphere where wanton violence against black Memphians, rigid enforcement of Jim Crow laws, the economic disfranchisement of black Memphians and police brutality interfered with every aspect of black life in the city. The strike signaled black Memphians' refusal to remain silent about the city's lack of progress toward racial equality.⁴

As a "city of churches," religion – and in particular Christianity – has long played a significant role in the city's struggles for racial freedom and equality. Religious motivations drove both pro-slavery advocates and abolitionists alike in antebellum Memphis while segregationists and integrationists later used biblical sources to defend their respective positions on Jim Crow segregation. For some, the Bible provided evidence that African Americans were an inferior race worthy of slavery. They also suggested that races should not intermingle. For others, the Bible spoke of freedom from oppression and dignity as a child of God.⁵ Christian ministers like Martin Luther King, Jr. and James M. Lawson, Jr. placed religion at the heart of their crusade for civil rights, effectively joining religion and the struggle for civil rights in historical memory.

⁴ For history of race relations in Memphis, see Laurie B. Greene, *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill, 2007), Sherry L. Hoppe and Bruce W. Speck, *Maxine Smith's Unwilling Pupils: Lessons Learned in the Civil Rights Classroom* (Knoxville, 2007), and Sharon D. Wright, *Race, Power, and Political Emergence in Memphis* (New York, 2000).

⁵ For history of Christianity in regard to Memphis' civil rights struggle, see Nancy T. Ammerman, "The Civil Rights Movement and the Clergy in a Southern Community" *Sociological Analysis*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (Winter 1980), David L. Chappelle, "Religious Ideas of the Segregationists," *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (August, 1998) and "Religious Revivalism in the Civil Rights Movement," *African American Review*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (Winter 2002), Stephen R. Haynes, *The Last Segregated Hour: Memphis Kneel-ins and the Campaign for Southern Church Desegregation* (Oxford, 2012) and *Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery*, (Oxford, 2007), Mary K. Schueneman, "A Leavening Force: African American Women and Christian Mission in the Civil Rights Era," *Church History*, Vol. 81, No. 4 (December 2012), Gardiner H. Shattuck Jr., "Serving God in the World: Theology and Civil Rights Activism in the Episcopal Church, 1958-1973," *Anglican and Episcopal History*, Vol. 64, No. 3 (September, 1995), and David M. Tucker, *Black Pastors and Leaders* (Memphis, 1975).

But while Christianity has received ample recognition as a religious motivator for social action during the Civil Rights Movement, clergy from a variety of faith traditions engaged racial issues during the 1950s and 1960s. In particular, Judaism inspired significant leaders and forged important perspectives on the black freedom struggle.⁶ In Memphis, where the Jewish community faced less anti-Semitism than in other parts of the US South, Jews held positions as leaders in business, philanthropists, and political activists.⁷ This unique social context enabled the Rabbi James Wax to become a respected voice in the city, rising to Senior Rabbi at Temple Israel, exercising influence as a leader in ecumenical cooperation, and advocating for mental health and racial reconciliation. This paper will suggest that Wax's universalistic beliefs about the dignity of all humanity and perspective on struggle, derived from his particular understanding of the global Jewish experience and his social location as a Jewish American citizen, inspired him to strive for "liberty and justice ... for all people in our land, regardless of their creed or their color," but this ideal ultimately could not quell a paternalist streak within Wax and thus limited the impact of his advocacy and leadership within Memphis' civil rights struggle.⁸

“A Trip Down the Mississippi:” Wax’s Life Before His Tenure as Senior Rabbi At Temple Israel

⁶ Many scholars have extensively studied the influence of Christianity in the Modern Civil Rights Movement. I hope in this paper to use Rabbi James A. Wax as an example of Judaism's impact on the movement. For more on this subject see Hollace Ava Weiner, *The Quiet Voices: Southern Rabbis and Black Civil Rights, 1880s to 1990s*.

⁷ For history of the Jewish community in Memphis, see Selma S. Lewis, *A Biblical People in the Bible Belt: The Jewish Community of Memphis, Tennessee, 1840's-1960's* (Macon, 1998).

⁸ James A. Wax, "With Liberty and Justice for All," February 8, 1946, Rabbi James A. Wax Collection, Box 1, Folder 7, (Benjamin L. Hooks Central Library, Memphis, Tennessee).

James Aaron Wax was born on December 20th, 1912 in Herculaneum, Missouri. His parents, Morris and Rose Wax, immigrated to the United States in the early twentieth century in order to escape the pogroms of the Russian Empire. Wax attributed much of his early ideas about service and citizenship to his father.⁹ Morris Wax worked as a dry goods merchant in Herculaneum, and coming from the intensely anti-Semitic climate of Russia he saw America as a land of opportunity. Morris Wax served as a community leader on the local Board of Education, and some members of the town encouraged him to run for the Missouri State Legislature. But Morris Wax ultimately declined to run for political office. Nevertheless, his civic influence on James was strong. Wax said his father “used to hammer into [his] head two things... You’ve got to be a good Jew, and you’ve got to be a good citizen.”¹⁰ Morris Wax’s advice manifested itself in James Wax’s civic-minded conception of Judaism and likely influenced his later political activism.

The Wax family was the only Jewish family in Herculaneum, a unique context for the development of a young Jewish American. The family did not regularly attend worship services on the Sabbath, but they did travel to St. Louis to worship on Jewish holy days.¹¹ The absence of consistent Jewish ritual in Wax’s early life underwrote the social focus of his Judaism. Much later in his life, Wax would note: “I’m not great on ritual and ceremony ... I think worship service is important. But in all the years I was rabbi I never exhorted the congregation to attend services.”¹²

Despite a dearth of Jewish practice and tradition in his childhood, religion and in particular Christianity still played a prominent role in Wax’s adolescence. His success on

⁹ Joan Turner Beifuss, “Profile: Rabbi James Wax”, *Memphis Magazine*, February 1981, 39.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Helen G. Wax, “Remarks,” *Civil Rights and the Outspoken Rabbi—Views from the Homefront*, November 4, 2000.

¹² Beifus, “Profile,” 45

the high school debate team earned Wax invitations to speak at several Christian churches. These early encounters with Christian communities, in the words of historian Selma Lewis, led Wax to “always [feel] as one with the Christian people. [He made] no distinction between people by virtue of their religion.”¹³ This sense of brotherhood with the Christian community would become one of the defining qualities of Wax’s ministry.

After high school, Wax attended Washington University in St. Louis with the intention of becoming a lawyer. St. Louis offered much more in the way of Jewish community life than Herculaneum ever could, and Wax took advantage of these increased opportunities for Jewish fellowship. He began attending services at Congregation Temple Israel where he heard sermons from Rabbi Ferdinand Isserman. Rabbi Isserman, a Reformed Jewish Rabbi, consistently emphasized the importance of social action in Judaism, and Wax later attributed his personal inspiration to become a rabbi to Isserman’s belief that Jews have a responsibility to take an active role in civic life.¹⁴

As Wax developed a personal relationship with Rabbi Isserman, the senior Rabbi encouraged Wax to consider attending Hebrew Union College once he concluded his bachelor’s degree at Southeastern Missouri State University. But because of his limited exposure to a synagogue growing up in Herculaneum, Wax knew virtually no Hebrew – a significant obstacle for a young man interested in rabbinic ministry. Rabbi Isserman recommended that Wax spend a year taking Hebrew lessons from a tutor.¹⁵ Wax focused

¹³ Selma S. Lewis, “Rabbi James Wax Biography,” Selma S. Lewis Collection, Box 1, Folder 4, (Benjamin L. Hooks Central Library, Memphis, Tennessee).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Ferdinand Isserman to James A. Wax, June 18th, 1931.

intensely on his study of the language for the rest of 1931 and was successfully admitted to Hebrew Union College later that year.

While at Hebrew Union, Wax further developed his perspective on Judaism and citizenship. He wrote a paper for Dr. Julian Morgenstern's Bible class discussing the biblical prophet Amos, citing the prophet's penchant for social justice and emphasizing the relevance of Amos' message for the contemporary moment. "The modern religious leader will do well not to proclaim a doom," Wax wrote, "though it is inevitable unless the people return to the morality which Amos emphasized. It is incumbent upon religious leaders to point out the means by which the doom can be averted."¹⁶ Wax's rabbinic leadership, which can be characterized as a powerful optimism tempered by a clear understanding of existing social problems, remained consistent in the years after seminary. When asked about the state of race relations in Memphis after the Sanitation Strike of 1968, Wax said, "a Rabbi can't afford to be pessimistic. But I think the road ahead is long and difficult."¹⁷

As Wax progressed through the curriculum at Hebrew Union, he further explored the intersection of religion and social responsibility. For a social science class, Wax wrote papers on crime and penology, correlating statistics about crime and arrests with race. This academic work led Wax to uncover significantly higher rates of arrests within black communities than white communities, and proved central to Wax's knowledge of the African American community.¹⁸ For while Wax witnessed class-driven injustice in Herculaneum, he had little firsthand experience with people who experienced racial

¹⁶ James A. Wax, "The Message of Amos to His Time and Subsequent Ages", (No Date).

¹⁷ "Interview with Rabbi James Wax" Mississippi Valley Collection (McWherter Library, Memphis, Tennessee)

¹⁸ James A. Wax, "Crime and Penology," (No Date).

discrimination.¹⁹ Wax's training at Hebrew Union College offered the young rabbinic student a basic understanding of how race intersected with politics and social life in the US, and these early lessons would compel Wax to advocate for political and racial reform in Memphis during the 1950's and 1960's.

After his ordination at Hebrew Union College, Wax began work in 1942 as an associate Rabbi under senior Rabbi Samuel Thurman at St. Louis's United Hebrew Congregation . Wax's sermons at United Hebrew covered exegeses of biblical stories, examinations of Jewish identity, political commentary, and calls for social justice - topics he would revisit during his time in Memphis. Wax served at the synagogue for two years before moving to Glencoe, Illinois to serve at North Shore Congregation where he met Helen Goldstrom, the woman who became his wife.

After one year with the Illinois congregation, the newly married Wax moved back to St. Louis in 1946 for a brief period and resumed his role as an associate Rabbi for United Hebrew Congregation. During this time, president of the Hebrew Union College Dr. Julian Morgenstern recommended that Wax consider joining a Memphis synagogue. Wax wrote to Morgenstern on May 1, 1946 to say that "despite problems which existed before, and to a certain extent, exist now,"²⁰ he had chosen to accept a position at a congregation in Memphis - Temple Israel.²¹ In June of 1946, Temple Israel's Senior Rabbi H.W. Ettelson introduced Wax to the congregation that he served until his retirement in 1978.

¹⁹ Beifuss, "Profile," 40

²⁰ James Wax to Dr. Julian Morgenstern, May 1, 1946.

²¹ Wax does not explicitly state what problems existed with the congregation, but it can be inferred that he referred to the poor race relations that plagued Memphis at the time.

While Temple Israel welcomed the Wax family with open arms, Rabbi Wax immediately encountered the harsh realities of Jim Crow and racism in Memphis. In the summer of 1947, Wax met with a freshman history class from the historically black LeMoyne College.²² Despite a successful meet with Wax discussing the origins and principles of Judaism, the group ran into opposition from members of Temple Israel when they asked to attend a Sabbath service the following month.²³ Rabbis Wax and Ettelson asked the congregation for their opinions on the African American group attending a service, and the congregation would not allow it. Wax apologized to the class, expressing sincere embarrassment and writing “this is the first time I’ve had to say no in a matter of this nature.”²⁴ This incident revealed to Wax that segregation had established firm lines of division between black and white Memphians.

Wax soon found that racist attitudes did not exist simply in the minds of his parishioners: they had manifested themselves in nearly every aspect of the city’s economic, social and cultural life. Moreover, African Americans were completely locked out of political leadership in a city where more than a third of the population was black.²⁵ Wax saw how these laws and political structures functioned to humiliate African Americans in Memphis one afternoon while walking downtown. An African American man approached Wax and asked if he thought the man could enter a drug store to escape the heat and have a glass of water. Wax informed the man that the store’s “White Only” policy would bar him from entering.²⁶ Wax regretted how segregation dehumanized the

²² LeMoyne College was founded was founded in 1871 to educate freedmen. It operated as a historically black institution until its merger with Owen College in 1968.

²³ Freshman Group IV at LeMoyne College to James A. Wax, June 1947.

²⁴ James A. Wax to Freshman Group IV at LeMoyne College, June 9th, 1947.

²⁵ Michael K. Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers*, (Champaign, 1993), 16

²⁶ Beifuss, “Profile,” February 1981, 42

African American community in Memphis, but throughout his career in Memphis he avoided publicly confronting Jim Crow in favor of discretely altering the city's racial hierarchy through partnership with African American institutions and contact with powerful white elites.

Historians have documented the peculiar political and legal structure of mid-century Memphis, suggesting this unique context owed its existence to former mayor E.H. Crump. Crump only served as Mayor of Memphis from 1910 to 1915, but he hand-picked Memphis' elected officials until his death in 1954.²⁷ Crump's influence could be felt in many aspects of the city's life. "The good old days weren't that good," Wax remarked on Crump's bossism. "Black people didn't count at all; they just weren't part of it. Among the whites, people knew their place. And the upper class was probably very snobbish."²⁸ Crump crafted a political environment that stifled African American political involvement, and Wax understood that the political constraints on African American life in Memphis had to be removed before the city could address social and economic inequality.

In January of 1954, Wax rose to the rank of Senior Rabbi at Temple Israel. Within the year, the modern civil rights movement would be set in motion. On 17 May 1954, the United States Supreme Court ruled that segregation in public schools was illegal, and on December 1 1954 Rosa Parks would be arrested for refusing to give up her seat on a segregated Montgomery bus. Wax's ascent to Senior Rabbi at Temple Israel was concurrent with a revolutionary moment in the Black Freedom Struggle in the United States. As Senior Rabbi at Temple Israel, Wax fashioned himself as a civic leader who

²⁷ For a detailed analysis of Crump's machine politics see G. Wayne Dowdy, *Mayor Crump Don't Like It*, (Memphis, 2006).

²⁸ Beifus, "Profile," 42

could serve as an apt mediator between white and black leaders. But while Wax's ambition to break down the legal and political barriers to African American citizenship remained sincere, he unwittingly contributed to the division between black and white communities by refusing to relinquish authority to African American leaders.

“We Jews:” Wax’s Conception of Jewish Identity

Understanding James Wax's motivation to become an advocate for Memphis' African American community requires a full examination of his views on Jewishness. During his professional career as a Rabbi, Wax spoke frequently on the topics of Jewish identity, anti-Semitism, and proper Jewish living. Though he grew up as a part of the only Jewish family in his hometown, Jewish history always fascinated the young Wax. His dedicated study of the Jewish people acquainted him with the persecution Jews endured while his own experience growing up in a predominately protestant town fostered a strong sense of kinship with non-Jews. With a religious identity intrinsically linked to the pain of marginalization and oppression, Wax believed he could sympathize with African American struggles for freedom. Such sympathy manifested itself in Wax's sincere conviction that he could change the consciousness of white power structures and consequently address structural racism against African Americans.

Wax believed that Jewishness and the religion of Judaism could not be separated.²⁹ He cited historical conversions to Judaism as evidence that Jewishness could not simply be a racial identity, saying, “through the centuries, countless men and women have elected to become Jews and are regarded by the standards of Judaism, ancient and

²⁹ In Wax's sermon, “Portrait of a Jew” he challenges the claim that to be a Jew entails misfortune made in Albert Memmi's book of the same name. Memmi was an atheist, and Wax attributes his pessimistic outlook to his lack of faith.

modern, as one with the Jewish people.”³⁰ Wax’s used the idea that “the Jewish religion from its beginning evolved from the concept of one brotherhood for all peoples” to further support this view.³¹ As God remains open to all of his children, Wax believed, so Judaism should welcome people of all backgrounds. For Wax, anyone who lived according to Jewish moral and spiritual values could identify as a Jew.

Wax’s emphasis on the religious nature of Jewish identity meant he also maintained a deep aversion to treating Jewishness as a race. “The distinctive feature of the Jew,” Wax said, “is not the blood that flows through his veins, but the beliefs which he cherishes in his mind and in his heart.”³² Wax often noted that Adolph Hitler’s method for identifying Jews hinged on a person’s parentage. Wax therefore exercised caution in identifying Jewishness as a racial category and instead celebrated the common adherence to Jewish practice and thought as the uniting factor for Jewish identity. In a sermon given during the Second World War, Wax said, “We do not differ from our neighbors in physical appearance or intellectual acumen. We look like other people, we think like other people, we live like other people, we eat the same hunger and crave similar satisfactions. Our differences, therefore, are not physical but spiritual, not intellectual but moral.”³³

The holocaust may be the most tragic result of extreme anti-Semitic attitudes in history, but it does not encompass the totality of Jewish persecution. The book of Exodus in the Hebrew Bible illustrates the first literary iterations of what would become a

³⁰ James A. Wax, “Who is a Jew?,” October 2nd, 1959, Rabbi James A. Wax Collection, Box 1, Folder 21, (Benjamin L. Hooks Central Library, Memphis, Tennessee)

³¹ ³¹ Wax, “With Liberty and Justice for All,” February 8, 1946.

³² James A. Wax, “Race or Religion,” June 8th, 1963, Rabbi James A. Wax Collection, Box 2, Folder 1, (Benjamin L. Hooks Central Library, Memphis, Tennessee).

³³ James Wax, “Isn’t it a Pity He’s a Jew?,” November 12, 1942, Rabbi James A. Wax Collection, Box 1, Folder 3, (Benjamin L. Hooks Central Library, Memphis, Tennessee).

historical trend of anti-Semitism. Beginning with the saga of the Israelites' escape from bondage in Egypt, Jews endured many oppressive regimes across the world over the next thirty-five hundred years. The Roman Empire, Christian Crusaders, and Russian government all bear guilt for their often-violent oppression of Jewish peoples. Wax believed the struggle against such persecution was central to Judaism, claiming, "the principles of our faith, the laws of our people, the traditions of our religion all echo the Jews' hope for freedom."³⁴

A particularly significant obstacle for Jews in Wax's eyes was the anti-Semitism that developed from the New Testament's depiction of Jesus Christ's crucifixion. Wax had much respect for Christianity and cooperated with many Christian colleagues, but he fervently maintained that the Gospel of John's attribution of Jesus' death to Greco-Roman Jews directly fueled anti-Semitic sentiments that persisted in Western society for centuries.³⁵ On several occasions, he implored the Catholic Church to address this issue by releasing a statement denying the historicity of Jewish involvement in Christ's crucifixion and, indeed, after the Second Vatican Council the Catholic Church confirmed that the Jewish community should not be blamed for Jesus' death. Though such a declaration signaled significant progress in diminishing anti-Semitism, it could not fully eliminate Christian prejudice against Jews. Wax believed that true reconciliation between Christians and Jews could only come through exploring the commonalities between their faiths.

³⁴ James A. Wax, "The Jewish Passover and the Christian Easter," April 10, 1945, Rabbi James A. Wax Collection, Box 1, Folder 15, (Benjamin L. Hooks Central Library, Memphis, Tennessee).

³⁵ Wax, in several sermons, argued that Jews could not have killed Jesus. He cites Sanhedrin trial laws and ceremonial policies, noting their incongruence with the statements made in the Gospel of John's Passion story, as evidence. J. Kameron Carter makes the same argument in his book *Race: A Theological Account* (Oxford, 2008).

The persecution of Jews by Christians seemed ironic to Wax given the commitment to godly morality shared by each religion. Though he could not accept notions of Jesus' divinity, Wax genuinely respected Jesus and his teachings. Wax implored his congregation to "realize that Jesus lived, that he was in the tradition of Judaism, the he was a son of the synagogue."³⁶ He cites Jesus' observation of the Seder and extensive knowledge of the prophets as evidence of his commitment to the Jewish tradition. Wax argued that Jews could respect Jesus' teaching and therefore work alongside the followers of Jesus in their fight for "the abolition of poverty, of racism, [and] of war."³⁷ In spite of the prejudice toward Jews historically encouraged by Christianity, Wax believed the two religions' shared vision for the future would serve as the source of hope for the Jewish community to end Christian anti-Semitism through ecumenical cooperation.³⁸ This ecumenical vision also inspired his collaboration with African American ministers in Memphis.

Essential to Wax's understanding of Jewish survival and religious resilience in the face of anti-Semitism was his belief in Judaism's willingness to adapt. As a Reformed Jew, Wax firmly believed in the merits of reinterpreting traditional Jewish ideas. Wax did not see the Reform movement of Judaism as a deviation from tradition, but saw it instead as the next step for an ever-evolving religion. He believed that "the genius of Judaism ... is that it was always able to examine itself, to critically examine its own teachings and

³⁶ James A. Wax, "Should Jews Have a New Attitude Toward Jesus?," December 13, 1963, Rabbi James A. Wax Collection, Box 2, Folder 2, (Benjamin L. Hooks Central Library, Memphis, Tennessee).

³⁷ James A. Wax, "Where Judaism and Christianity Agree and Disagree," August 9, 1968, Rabbi James A. Wax Collection, Box 2, Folder 12, (Benjamin L. Hooks Central Library, Memphis, Tennessee).

³⁸ Though Wax mostly addresses the Catholic Church's need to address their role in the promotion of anti-Semitism, Protestants also encouraged anti-Semitism historically. Notably, Martin Luther called for the execution of Jews in his pamphlet, *The Jews and Their Lies*.

evaluate them in light of new conditions and new circumstances.”³⁹ Wax appreciated Judaism’s malleability, noting that “unlike earlier peoples, [Jews] do not accept the untenable theory and now disproved fact that Judaism was born on a particular day as a highly developed and mature religion.”⁴⁰ He rejected a static conception of divine revelation, instead recognizing the development of Jewish ideas and practices as a process. The social implications of Judaism that inspired Wax to become a rabbi necessitated that the religion remain relevant in every era, and to do that, it had to continually modify itself.

Wax held a deep reverence for the pain and oppression that Jews collectively experienced, but he also celebrated the privilege that Jews could enjoy in America. Raised by parents who had escaped the oppression of late nineteenth century Russia, Wax held the freedoms afforded to American Jews in high regard. Comparing the life Jews enjoyed in America to historically oppressed Jewish communities, Wax implored his congregation to “forget the ways of the ghetto [and] forget when we were oppressed without freedom; when we lived by the toleration of bigoted sovereigns, ect. [sic] We are living in a free land—in the greatest land in all the world.”⁴¹ For Wax, the freedom from persecution that Judaism promised could be found in America, and he believed American Jews to be the “most favored and most blessed of any Jews in the world at any time.”⁴²

Wax’s understanding of Judaism as a religion whose history was rife with hope amidst persecution compelled him to implore his parishioners to “be of those who are

³⁹ James A. Wax, “Judaism for the American Jew”, October 8, 1962, Rabbi James A. Wax Collection, Box 1, Folder 27, (Benjamin L. Hooks Central Library, Memphis, Tennessee).

⁴⁰ James A. Wax, “The Jew—Accepted or Rejected?”, September 18, 1944, Rabbi James A. Wax Collection, Box 1, Folder 5, (Benjamin L. Hooks Central Library, Memphis, Tennessee).

⁴¹ Wax, “Is There a Difference”, April 25, 1957.

⁴² James A. Wax, “What America Means to the Jew and What the Jew Means to America,” September 27th, 1954, Rabbi James A. Wax Collection, Box 1, Folder 15, (Benjamin L. Hooks Central Library, Memphis, Tennessee).

persecuted and not those that persecute.”⁴³ During his tenure at Temple Israel, Wax served on many committees dedicated to extending civil rights to African Americans and providing mental health facilities to those who needed them.⁴⁴ Notably, he also spoke in favor of women’s rabbinical ordination before any national Jewish organizations released statements in favor of the issue, affirming that women are “just as intelligent, just as capable [as men] in every way.”⁴⁵ Wax maintained a commitment to speak out against injustice whenever he found it, criticizing inaction and reminding his congregation “the men who have made history, the men who are responsible for the moral progress of mankind were not men who remained silent.”⁴⁶ Unfortunately, Wax’s understanding of social progress was conditioned by his social location as a white man in America, and this position removed him from the day-to-day experiences of African Americans in Memphis. This social distance effectively separated him from his African American counterparts on questions about how best to achieve racial integration.

Knowing that improving race relations would carry a personal component in addition to structural reform, Wax asserted that “the foundation upon which this new world must be built must be a spiritual foundation. Its cornerstone must be a religious cornerstone. Our whole society must be permeated with an atmosphere of religion.”⁴⁷

However, Wax did not mean that prayers alone could fix the societal problems of his

⁴³ Wax, “Isn’t it a Pity He’s a Jew?”, November 12, 1942

⁴⁴ Wax established himself as a vocal advocate for mental health in Memphis and in the state of Tennessee generally during his time as an assistant rabbi At Temple Israel. He played a vital role in organizing the Memphis Mental Health Organization and in creating mental health facilities in the city. Governor Frank Clement appointed Wax to the Tennessee Mental Health Commission in 1953.

⁴⁵ James A. Wax, “Should Women be Rabbis?,” June 8, 1956, Rabbi James A. Wax Collection, Box 1, Folder 17, (Benjamin L. Hooks Central Library, Memphis, Tennessee).

⁴⁶ James A. Wax, “The Trouble with Being Nice”, March 24th, 1968, Rabbi James A. Wax Collection, Box 2, Folder 11, (Benjamin L. Hooks Central Library, Memphis, Tennessee).

⁴⁷ James A. Wax, “The World We Want to Live In,” March 13, 1942, Rabbi James A. Wax Collection, Box 1, Folder 3, (Benjamin L. Hooks Central Library, Memphis, Tennessee).

time. He claimed, “in religion, the name of the game is morality.”⁴⁸ For Wax, this meant regard for one’s fellow human being should inform religious behavior – not personal piety. Wax urged religious peoples to “welcome all efforts to help men live better and more abundantly.”⁴⁹ He viewed humanity as executors of God’s will and argued that social injustices “[will not] be solved in the heavens,” but can instead “only be healed when men take the initiative and do that which is necessary to solve the problem.”⁵⁰ Wax had relatively little concern for the liturgical practices of Judaism and instead saw social action and responsible citizenship as the practical outcomes of morality and adherence to God’s will.⁵¹

At the center of Wax’s interpretation of Jewish identity were the dual understandings of the effects marginalization and oppression had on the Jewish community and the obligation Jew’s had to disrupt persecution of others. The relatively tolerant social climate for Jews in the United States privileged Wax with a position in which he could negotiate with the white-protestant power structure of the city of Memphis in the 1950’s and 1960’s, but his disconnection from the African American community ultimately compromised his ability to improve race relations in Memphis.

“The World We Want to Live In:” James Wax and Desegregation in Memphis

⁴⁸ *Commercial Appeal*, February 26, 1978.

⁴⁹ James A. Wax, “The Men and their Message,” May 24, 1956, Rabbi James A. Wax Collection, Box 1, Folder 17, (Benjamin L. Hooks Central Library, Memphis, Tennessee).

⁵⁰ James A. Wax, “Plagues—Ancient and Modern,” January 27, 1968, Rabbi James A. Wax Collection, Box 2, Folder 11, (Benjamin L. Hooks Central Library, Memphis, Tennessee); Wax, “The Trouble with Being Nice”, March 24, 1968.

⁵¹ In an interview with Charles Crawford of the Memphis State Department of Oral History on July 23rd, 1970, Wax was asked who he believed to be among the most civic-minded Jews in Memphis. He mentioned Myra Dreifus among others, noting that Dreifus rarely attended services at the synagogue. Despite this, he believed Dreifus’ activism came from her dedication to her religion.

In a time when African American leaders throughout the country fought for racial equality using direct action protest – often violating the law as an act of conscience - Rabbi James Wax preferred a different approach to achieving racial justice. A self-described “man of words,” Wax had faith that dialogue alone could effectively reconcile the differences of opposing viewpoints. Wax did not picket or protest, and with the exception of the march following King’s assassination, Wax never marched in the streets for racial equality. Taking his inspiration from the prophet Isaiah, Wax felt the most powerful force for change was for people to “come together in reason.”⁵² His role as an advocate for African American political, social, and economic equality largely reflected this ideology.⁵³

The concern for global issues Wax possessed deeply affected his opinions on domestic race relations. Having lived through two World Wars, Wax abhorred violence and maintained faith that humanity could achieve lasting peace.⁵⁴ He believed that “in Judaism as in the other great historic religions, there is no goal, no idea more highly prized than that of peace.”⁵⁵ Wax believed that peace between nation states could not exist, however, without peace within nation states. “If we don’t like the dark-skinned people here in Tennessee,” he said in a 1965 sermon, “what chance is there for world

⁵² “Interview with Rabbi James Wax,” 1968, Mississippi Valley Collection (McWherter Library, Memphis, Tennessee)

⁵³ Wax’s preference for negotiation established him as a “white moderate” in Memphis’ racial conversations, explaining some of the tension between Wax and some of the more militant Memphis African American leaders during the Sanitation Strike. In his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. says, “I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro’s great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen’s Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate.”

⁵⁴ Wax often emphasized that the Jewish conception of humanity differed from the Christian conception. In Christianity, humanity’s fallen nature ensures that Earthly perfection cannot be achieved. Judaism, on the other hand, emphasizes an individuals choice between good and evil, presenting the possibility of an Earthly paradise.

⁵⁵ James A. Wax, “The Quest for Peace—In Commemoration of the 20th Anniversary of the United Nations,” October 23, 1965, Rabbi James A. Wax Collection, Box 2, Folder 6, (Benjamin L. Hooks Central Library, Memphis, Tennessee).

peace when a large segment of the world population is not white.”⁵⁶ Wax had grand hopes for the world, but he knew that those hopes could only be realized through a series of smaller accomplishments.

Wax’s global ideology about race relations owed considerable influence to his belief in American exceptionalism and its relationship to the principles of Judaism. Wax regarded the Founding Fathers of the United States as extremely noble men with righteous ideals, and he strongly believed that democratic government could resolve racial inequities. Wax’s Jewish optimism, buoyed by his belief in the exceptional character of the United States, is evidenced in his 1954 claim that “the high place which Judaism assigns to man is the basic cornerstone of American democracy.”⁵⁷ But while Wax as a Jew enjoyed privileges he could not enjoy anywhere else in the world, he recognized even in 1946 that despite the official abolition of slavery per the 13th Amendment to the US Constitution, African Americans “remain[ed] enslaved economically, politically and socially.”⁵⁸

Believing collective racism to be the root cause of systemic oppression, Wax attempted to combat racism in his sermons through appeals to his congregation’s sense of morality. In his first year as Senior Rabbi, Wax told Temple Israel, “the Bible says ‘As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he.’ It is the attitudes of our minds and the feelings of our hearts that are responsible for much of the wrong in the world today.”⁵⁹ Wax implored the congregation to change their attitudes and embrace a mentality of empathy for persecuted people, saying “in our own time, six million of our people were murdered

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Wax, “What America Means to the Jew,” September 27, 1954.

⁵⁸ Wax, “With Liberty and Justice for All,” February 8, 1946.

⁵⁹ James A. Wax, “The Major Sins of Our Time”, October 6, 1954, Rabbi James A. Wax Collection, Box 1, Folder 15, (Benjamin L. Hooks Central Library, Memphis, Tennessee).

because of prejudice. It, therefore, should behoove us all the more to purge our souls of one of the major sins of our time.”⁶⁰ But it would take more than eloquent speeches to effectively combat the effects of racism in Memphis. Wax could address issues of personal prejudice in the community from the pulpit, but eliminating the deeply structural racism in Memphis required more than appeals to emotion, morality, or reason.

So in 1956, when the Greater Memphis Race Relations Committee (GMRRRC) was created in an attempt to address Memphis’ persistent racial inequality through an integrated task force of Memphis citizens, Wax elected to participate alongside other community leaders. The *Tri-State Defender*, one of Memphis’ African American news sources, voiced both support and concern for the organization given the presence of openly segregationist individuals on the committee.⁶¹ And, indeed, while the GMRRRC discussed desegregation of public transportation and recreational facilities, the committee made no significant progress towards desegregation during its three years of existence^{62,63}

In the summer of 1956, local attorney and GMRRRC committee member Lucius E. Burch wrote to several members of the committee and expressed his displeasure that some of the more conservative members of the group had dominated conversations.⁶⁴ Burch articulated a desire to form an organization of passionate individuals that would

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Tri-State Defender*, April 7, 1956.

⁶² Many of Memphis’ public facilities would not desegregate until the early 1960’s, and downtown businesses did not make much progress in integrating their workforce until the mid-1960’s. Police brutality also continued to plague the African American community. (See Greene, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*)

⁶³ Later in his life, Wax would recall the stagnation and overly conservative make-up of the group of the group, saying “[the committee] didn’t have the right people in it.” (Charles Crawford, “Interview with Rabbi James Wax,” *Memphis State Department of Oral History*, July 23, 1970, McWherter Library, Memphis Tennessee).

⁶⁴ For more information on Burch, see *Lucius: The Writings of Lucius Burch*, Cold River Studio Publishing, 2002.

argue “the liberal view” and accomplish more than the GMRRC ever could.⁶⁵ This group came to be known as the Memphis Committee on Community Relations (MCCR). The committee met for the first time on November 6th, 1958 and elected Burch as President and Wax as Secretary. The MCCR received its legal charter on January 26th, 1959.

The MCCR’s methodology reflected Wax’s preferred style of effecting change. Divided into five subcommittees, the MCCR focused on Public Transportation, Public Libraries, Education, Recreational Facilities, and Housing with each group conducting research on the method of desegregation pursued by other southern cities. The chair of each committee then wrote statements to deliver to Memphis city officials outlining the MCCR’s suggested course of action. Additionally, the organization helped to quietly enroll Memphis State’s University’s first eight African American students a few days earlier than the standard enrollment time in order to avoid a potentially violent encounter as other students enrolled in 1959. The MCCR’s careful approach to engaging in meaningful dialogue about race in the city led to integration. And while these efforts at integration were limited, the MCCR continued to champion their approach in subsequent years.

Still, the extent of racial inequality in Memphis - and within the MCCR – was vast. Wax and a group of four other men, including African American lawyer Russell Sugarmon, comprised the group’s nominating committee. While most nominees received support from nearly all committee members, Sugarmon’s nominations – which included Vasco Smith and A.W. Willis, Jr. among other vocal leaders from the African American community - stirred controversy. Despite having several African American committee

⁶⁵ Lucius E. Burch, Jr., to James A. Wax, May 28, 1956, Rabbi James A. Wax Collection, Box 5, Folder 7 (Benjamin L. Hooks Central Library, Memphis, Tennessee).

members, the MCCR was still a predominantly white organization deeply committed to the premise of gradual change. Several members of the committee saw Memphis' African American activists as too activist-oriented, and these committee members feared such leadership would disrupt the committee's moderate politics.⁶⁶

Memphis joined many southern cities in taking several significant steps towards desegregation in 1960. Thanks to the membership of Frank Ahlgren and Jack Goldsmith, head editors of *The Commercial Appeal* and *Memphis Press-Scimitar* respectively, the MCCR integrated private businesses without media coverage.⁶⁷ The committee's strategy consisted of sending white members of the group to the selected facilities to alert the owners or highest authority that African American members of the MCCR would arrive at the establishment at an agreed upon time, and the facility would treat the African American committee members as they would any of their white customers. These practices buttressed the victories achieved by non-violent demonstrators integrating downtown department stores.

All of Memphis' downtown businesses desegregated in November of 1961. In April of 1962, downtown restaurants were desegregated after a series of sit-in demonstrations. A.W. Willis, Jr. became the first African American since reconstruction to serve on the Tennessee General Assembly in 1964, and the Federal Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed discrimination based on race, color, sex, religion, or nationality. In 5 years, African Americans in Memphis had won several important victories and had been

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* Notably, Wax lent his support to Sugarmon's nominees and all of the candidates in question joined the committee. However, despite the addition of these members, the MCCR remained mostly white by a large margin. *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle* by Laurie B. Greene further explores the significance of the racial disproportion in the MCCR and criticizes the paternalistic implications of the racial diversity of the group.

⁶⁷ Beifuss, "Profile", February, 1981.

assisted - in part – by white allies like James Wax and the MCCR. Wax’s moderate approach to negotiating racial issues appeared to have successfully aided African Americans’ pushes for equality in Memphis, but his methodology would face a stiff challenge during the Memphis Sanitation Strike of 1968.

“In Favor of Human Dignity” - James Wax and the Memphis Sanitation Strike of 1968

In May of 1967, the Memphis Ministers Association (MMA) elected Wax as its President. A predominantly white organization, the association had only just begun to integrate when Wax was elected president. With a membership of more than one hundred ministers, just fifteen were African American. One such minister was the Reverend Henry Starks, who also served as the President of the African American Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance (IMA). Though the representation of races within the organization far and away favored white ministers, Wax took significant steps to address white dominance in Memphis and within the structure of the MMA.

With Rabbi Wax at the helm and African American Methodist minister James M. Lawson, Jr. serving as Vice President, the MMA began to embody a vision of ecumenical social justice. Expanding the association’s social action committee, Wax created a race relations committee co-chaired by the Reverend James Jordan and Father Nicholas Vieron. Under the leadership of these men, the MMA fit Wax’s conception of a group of men “who w[ould] realize that there are theological, religious differences between them, but [would] have the maturity and morality to respect those differences and join together

in that great social crusade to remove the evils from the world so that all men will be ... free to live as befits the children of God.”⁶⁸

Memphis Mayor Henry Loeb, however, would become one of the MMA’s biggest obstacles in their quest for social justice. Loeb was elected Mayor in 1967 despite fierce opposition from the African American community.⁶⁹ He was previously elected Mayor after running on a “white unity” platform in 1959, but resigned before completing his first term. Elected to his second term as mayor in 1967, Loeb would be the first to hold the position under the new city charter ushered in by the Program of Progress.⁷⁰ Loeb’s election stoked the flames of racial tensions in Memphis after a near race riot in the summer of 1967.⁷¹

Hoping to inspire goodwill between Memphians, the Race Relations committee of the MMA submitted “An Appeal to Conscience” to the *Commercial Appeal* in early February of 1968. The statement read:

As teachers of religion, we regard all problems of human relations as essentially moral in character. The relationship among individuals and among groups is primarily a matter of moral concern. Race relations, like all human relations, must be regulated, not by policies of secular agencies, but by principles of religion. Each human being bears the imprint of Divinity, and each soul possesses the potential quality of sanctity. We ask that the Memphis community look into their hearts and purge their souls of every vestige of prejudice and intolerance.⁷²

Father Vieron sent a copy of the statement and a letter to Mayor Loeb asking him to declare February 11 Race Relations Sunday, but Loeb delayed his response to Vieron’s

⁶⁸ Wax, “Where Judaism and Christianity Agree and Disagree,” August 9, 1968

⁶⁹ Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 153.

⁷⁰ Until 1968, a mayor and four commissioners constituted Memphis’s local government with no definitive separation between executive and legislative branches. To increase the potential for the local government to represent entirety of the population, a group of influential Memphians proposed the Program of Progress (POP). Members of the POP elected twenty-five individuals onto a board to compose the new city charter that outlined a new form government would consist of a mayor with executive power and a thirteen-person legislative council composed representatives from each of Memphis’ political districts. Rabbi James A. Wax Collection Box 5, Folder 8, (Benjamin L. Hooks Central Library, Memphis, Tennessee).

⁷¹ Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 153.

⁷² *Commercial Appeal*, February 4th, 1968.

request. On February 9, Loeb called Wax regarding the announcement and expressed his belief that the declaration would not reach a wide audience in the time before the proposed date. Wax left the conversation with the feeling that Loeb may have intentionally neglected Father Vieron's note out of racial prejudice.⁷³

Loeb and Wax had a personal relationship before the strike. Loeb's family had been long time congregants at Temple Israel, though Loeb had not attended a service at Temple Israel in the ten years since converting to Christianity. Indeed, Wax delivered the prayer at Loeb's second mayoral inauguration in January of 1968: "Grant we ask, O God, our leaders will always place human values above material considerations. May the welfare of all our people be their purpose and concern."⁷⁴ Ironically, Loeb's leadership did not reflect a commitment to the welfare of all Memphians but instead reflected a refusal to recognize the structural and racialized poverty reinforced by Memphis' policies towards African American sanitation workers.

In 1968, Memphis sanitation employees worked in nearly intolerable conditions for incredibly low wages and no benefits. Furthermore, the Memphis sanitation department promoted white men to supervisor positions with full pay regardless of weather conditions, while African American men had little hope of being promoted and could expect to be sent home without pay at the first sign of rain. The deaths of sanitation workers Echol Cole and Robert Walker due to faulty equipment ignited the workers collective outrage and compelled 1375 sanitation workers to walk off the job on February 11, 1968. The Memphis Sanitation Strike of 1968 would transcend labor relations and

⁷³ James A. Wax to Richard G. Hirsch, May 29, 1968, Rabbi James A. Wax Collection, Box 5, Folder 6 (Benjamin L. Hooks Central Library, Memphis, Tennessee).

⁷⁴ James A. Wax, "Prayer at Inauguration of Mayor Henry Loeb and Newly Formed City Council," January 1, 1968, Rabbi James A. Wax Collection, Box 5, Folder 6 (Benjamin L. Hooks Central Library, Memphis, Tennessee).

highlight the struggle of African Americans in Memphis to assert dignity and claim political power from a local government still deeply committed to white supremacy.

On February 16, five days into the strike, Wax received a call from an African American minister asking Wax to intervene in the labor conflict. Wax organized a meeting of the race relations committee of the MMA on the evening of 16 February and included a representative from the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), P.J. Ciampa. Always in favor of a healthy dialogue to resolve issues, Wax asked Ciampa to delay the strike for two to three weeks in order to negotiate with Loeb and the city council.⁷⁵ With Loeb insisting that the strikers had no legal right to walk out on their jobs and refusing to negotiate with the union and with Ciampa refusing to put the strike on hold, Wax found himself stymied.⁷⁶

Wax and the race relations committee met with Loeb the following day. Loeb maintained his position that the strike was illegal, but Wax convinced the mayor to meet with MMA and AFSCME at St. Mary's Episcopal Church in downtown Memphis. By moving the meeting from city hall to St. Mary's, Wax allowed the Mayor to treat the conversation as a casual discussion rather than a business meeting. It also allowed the MMA to be a participant in the dialogue rather than serving only as a convenor.⁷⁷ This enabled Wax the ability to appeal to both sides in an effort to maintain peace and progress through the discussion.

When all of the parties met at St. Mary's Episcopal Church the following day, AFSCME presented eight demands to the city for a discussion that began at 7PM. Mayor

⁷⁵ James A. Wax to Richard G. Hirsch, May 29, 1968, Rabbi James A. Wax Collection, Box 5, Folder 6 (Benjamin L. Hooks Central Library, Memphis, Tennessee).

⁷⁶ Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 154

⁷⁷ "Interview with Rabbi James Wax," 1968, Mississippi Valley Collection (McWherter Library, Memphis, Tennessee)

Loeb spoke only through Wax, reinforcing Wax's power and underlining Wax's moderate position.⁷⁸ Jerry Wurf, President of AFSCME, did not arrive at the meeting until midnight. When Wax again pushed for a delay of the strike and Wurf refused, the negotiations broke down. Despite finding agreement between the city and AFSCME on six of the eight demands, the city refused to allow union recognition and dues check off for the workers. The MMA could not persuade Loeb that the strike was legal, and the meeting revealed the futility of negotiation as a method for resolving the strike.⁷⁹

The MMA decided to arrange a meeting with the black ministers of the IMA to discuss a more effective plan of action. Wax, however, openly worried that meeting with the African American ministers would compromise the MMA's position as moderate mediators in the strike and potentially elicit a violent response from white Memphians. Until this point, Wax exercised good citizenship through a delicate balance of advocacy for marginalized groups and cordial relations with those who marginalized them – but Wax's nervousness about the racial tension permeating Memphis in February of 1968 compelled him to err on the side of caution rather than principle. Wax communicated his reluctance to IMA President Henry Starks.

In his note to Starks, Wax outlined a plan for the two men to meet and discuss the appointment of individual members to a joint committee to develop a plan of action. The meeting between the two groups of ministers never came to fruition, however, which Wax attributed to Starks' delayed response to his message and failure to appoint from the

⁷⁸ James A. Wax to Richard G. Hirsch, May 29, 1968, Rabbi James A. Wax Collection, Box 5, Folder 6 (Benjamin L. Hooks Central Library, Memphis, Tennessee).

⁷⁹ Loeb wrote to Wax and the Ministers Association on February 27th, thanking them for hosting the discussions between the city and AFSCME. The letter indicates the cordial nature of Wax and Loeb's relationship despite their disagreements at that point in time.

IMA.⁸⁰ Discouraged by the ineffectiveness of their efforts until that point, the MMA did little to actively involve itself in matters of the strike during the month of March.⁸¹ The strike itself, however, gained significant momentum during the month of March. Roy Wilkins, Bayard Rustin, and Martin Luther King, Jr. all spoke to the striking community in Memphis in late February and March, but King's call for a general strike particularly built on the tremendous collective enthusiasm in the striking community.⁸² With King's backing, the push to convince the city to meet the strikers' demands intensified.

The MMA held their regularly scheduled meeting on April 1 and requested a meeting with the IMA on April 3. The meeting with the IMA had no agreed upon agenda, and when Wax began the meeting at 2PM by asking what the men would like to discuss, one of the ministers interpreted Wax's question as an attempt to avoid discussion of the strike – and walked out of the meeting.⁸³ At 4PM, Wax had to leave the meeting to attend a prior commitment, prompting another minister from the IMA to call him a “coward.”⁸⁴ Wax would later remark in an interview that “[the MMA was] always very fearful that if we did not say exactly what the Negroes wanted us to say, we would be construed or regarded as their enemies.”⁸⁵ Wax's dialogue-focused approach to addressing racial issues could not produce significant results within the welter of Sanitaiton Strike and functioned instead to reinforce divisions between moderate white

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Wax explained in his Committee on Meaning interview that the Race Relations Committee of the MMA arranged an unsuccessful meeting with the Memphis City Council in mid-March to see if they could gain its support for the strikers.

⁸² Weather would postpone the March until March 28. On that day the march would turn violent and collapse, causing King to plan another march in Memphis. King would return to Memphis and give his “I Have Been to the Mountaintop” speech on April 3 in preparation for the second march.

⁸³ “Interview with Rabbi James Wax,” 1968, Mississippi Valley Collection (McWherter Library, Memphis, Tennessee)

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

leaders and the African American leaders committed to marching, pickets, and protest. After Wax left the meeting, the two groups agreed that the best course of action would be to march together to city hall to deliver a statement to the Mayor.

Before the march took place, however, King was shot at the Lorraine Motel at 6:01 p.m. on April 4. Though Wax had initially informed the MMA and IMA that he would not join them in their march to city hall due to doubts about the efficacy of the march, he ultimately decided to join the ministers the next morning out of respect for King. The group of about 300 clergymen marched from St. Mary's to city hall where Wax pleaded for the mayor to put divine morality before the laws of men.

That evening, Wax delivered a sermon reflecting on King's death. Disregarding his earlier reluctance to take a definitive stand in the strike, Wax spoke out against Loeb's racist policies. "A segregationist is a bigot," Wax preached. "A segregationist violates the laws of the Torah. A segregationist desecrates Judaism."⁸⁶ Wax believed King to be "a prophet like Amos and Isaiah and Jeremiah, a man who walked in the footsteps of Moses, and ... walked in the footsteps of Jesus."⁸⁷ He hoped King's message of acceptance would resonate with all people, and Wax criticized many white Memphians' reactions to King's death by pointing out that many whites in Memphis regretted the death only because it damaged Memphis' reputation. Wax hoped King's assassination would illuminate the realities of racism that persisted in Memphis.

The city finally settled the sanitation strike on April 16, 1968. Temple Israel remained supportive of the strike, with only three members leaving the congregation in response to Wax's involvement. However Wax's optimism about the future of race

⁸⁶ James A. Wax, "Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.," April 5th, 1968, Rabbi James A. Wax Collection, Box 2, Folder 11 (Benjamin L. Hooks Central Library, Memphis, Tennessee).

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

relations was dampened by the strike. He believed the strike served to recharge white prejudices and confirmed African Americans' "distrust" of "the white man. Even the white man committed to human dignity for all."⁸⁸ Wax claimed that "until the business and civic leaders of this community are prepared to sign their name to a statement that appears in the newspaper 'that we believe in the principle of human dignity and the right of everybody in the community to share in the community life,'"⁸⁹ the racial reconciliation of which he dreamed would continue to remain elusive."

"The Road Ahead:" Wax's Life After the Strike and Legacy

James Wax served as Senior Rabbi for Temple Israel for ten years following the Sanitation strike. During that time, he moved Temple Israel's campus farther east to make it more accessible to the congregation – a pattern that also followed white flight from the city in the wake of forced school bussing. Wax also received many awards honoring his service in the name of race relations. The Metropolitan Interfaith Association was founded soon after King's death and, many considered Wax's vision of ecumenical social justice an inspiration for the non-profit.⁹⁰ The *Memphis Commercial Appeal* remembered Wax in 1987 as "one of the pioneers in bringing together better relations between blacks and whites in the city of Memphis."⁹¹

Wax died on Tuesday, October 17th, 1989 at age 76. He suffered from a brain aneurism while delivering a sermon to the Beth El congregation of Helena, Arkansas for Yom Kippur. His final sermon dealt with how sin is manifest in modern social and

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ Selma Lewis, "Diversification and Unity", Metropolitan Interfaith Association, 1988, <http://www.mifa.org/diversificationandunity> (Accessed July 16th, 2015).

⁹¹ *Commercial Appeal*, October 18, 1987.

political structures, effectively denying basic rights to certain human beings. Noting the undeniable link between religion and morality, he told the Helena congregation “it’s morality to see that poor people, blacks, all people have an opportunity to have good healthcare.”⁹² Wax’s commitment to human rights never ceased, and his message of social justice has lived on at Temple Israel under the leadership of the two subsequent senior rabbis at the congregation, Rabbi Harry Danziger and Rabbi Micah Greenstein.

James A. Wax’s unique background as a Jew in Memphis afforded him with knowledge of marginalization and inculcated him with an earnest belief that he could change the power structure of Memphis through negotiation. Wax exemplified a class of white Memphians who sincerely believed in the dignity of all of humanity, but whose insistence on gradual change unfortunately stifled the efficacy more conspicuous African American led movements. Wax’s leadership coincided with a time when the power in civil rights movements began to shift from well-meaning moderate white advocates to more conspicuous African American leadership, and his hope to change the political structure of Memphis through dialogue failed to recognize the African American community’s continual and structural exclusion from that dialogue. Wax’s decisions to fight for racial equality through predominantly white moderate organizations kept him socially removed from the people he advocated for, and consequently, prevented Wax from establishing the racially harmonious society he envisioned.

⁹² *Ibid*