Rabbi James Wax, President of Memphis Ministers Association, 1968

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This is William Seider and Selma Lewis interviewing Rabbi Wax of Temple Israel, Memphis.

William Seider: Rabbi Wax, could you give us as a starter, a biography of your life? Interests and so forth, how you happened to choose to fall into this particular profession and field?

Rabbi Wax: Yes, sir. Well, I've been a rabbi for 27 years, 22 of which were spent in Memphis. I became a rabbi because I was concerned with the social message of Judaism, which I believed as a young man and still believe is most relevant to the solution of our social problems. In the 22 years that I've been in Memphis, I have been active in many organizations, always religiously motivated. I have believed and still believe in the phrase and in the concept of Albert Schweitzer, "reverence for life," and this has been my motivation and "reverence for life" means to be concerned with the conditions under which people live.

I have been active in the Ministers Association for a number of years, and last year I was chosen as the president, which was a great tribute not to me, but to the members of the association, since I was the only Jewish person in the organization, and it demonstrated their broad-mindedness, their willingness to overlook denominational barriers. The Ministers Association is essentially Christian, and yet they chose me, and as I say, it was a greater compliment to the men than it was to me. After being chosen president in May of 1967, I appointed a committee, which had not existed previously, namely a committee on race relations. It had been for a number of years a committee on social action, and that committee was strengthened. The committee on social action was strengthened and concerned itself with several matters that were not of a racial character, but the race relations committee headed by Nicholas Vieron of the Greek Orthodox Church, was a new committee, and we have this past year concerned ourselves very much with the so-called race problem.

Our Ministers Association has a membership of about 110 men, and I would estimate that about 15 are Negro. Every minister in the city is eligible for membership. So, it has been an integrated organization for some a few years. It has in it Catholics and protestants, and of course as I said, I'm the only Jewish person. About last December I had proposed to the race relations committee that we issue a statement in the form of a paid advertisement in the two Memphis newspapers, and that we solicit the funds to do this. The race relations committee was most enthusiastic, as was the membership as a whole, and we raised $1500, of which one-third was contributed by the members of the association, about $1000 from leading business and professional people in the city, most of whom were white. I think it is important to say that in the solicitation they saw a copy of the statement that would appear in the paper. They were told that their names as donors would not appear. Some of the leading citizens responded very quickly, and some did not respond. The statement, "The Appeal to Conscience," appeared on the Saturday and Sunday preceding race relations Sunday in February. There was really no

great adverse criticism to this statement. We thought there might be a stronger criticism than there was, but it evoked, relatively speaking, a rather minor negative response. We were gratified the statement had been sent out over the news wires throughout the country. The superintendent of schools in Buffalo, New York, had given this statement, a copy of it to each principal in the school and the leading clergy in his city, and we were very gratified. Now I mention this, this is the first public statement of this sort that had ever been made by the ministers in this city, and as I said earlier, our concern with the race question was quite deep.

Regarding the sanitation strike, which began on February 12, I believe, we were not involved in it at the beginning, and had no intentions of being. It wasn't until Friday, February 16, that I received a call from a Negro minister and asked if there was something that we could, that is we -- some of us in the Ministers Association could do, to help resolve the conflict. We appointed, or I appointed a committee of some six or seven ministers, most of whom were white, and we decided that we would try to do what we could to settle the strike. Accordingly, we called on the union leaders on Friday night the 16th at about 10:00 following the Sabbath services. We called on the union leaders at the Peabody Hotel. Mr. Ciampa, I think that's the pronunciation, was the spokesman for the union leaders, I was the spokesman for our group. It was a friendly meeting. At one point in the conversation, I had asked Mr. Ciampa if they could defer the strike in the light of the statements made by the officials of the city government, they would not… they regarded it as illegal and would not go into any discussions about it. I used the word "defer" because I know it's impossible and would have been impossible for them to call off the strike. I had proposed a deferment of about 3 weeks, during which meaningful negotiations could be carried on. Mr. Ciampa replied that he couldn't do it, and he explained why he couldn't. He said if we defer the strike now, remove ourselves so to speak from the picture, another group will come in and take our place, which might be tougher to deal with than we are. Well, we accepted his statement. Of course there was no deferment of the strike.

Mr. Ciampa said that he would be glad to meet with the city officials under the auspices of the Ministers Association at any time and place that could be agreed upon. Mr. Frank McRae, district superintendent of the Methodist Church and a close, personal, and long-time friend of Mayor Loeb, had made contact with the mayor early Saturday morning, and he had agreed to meet with the mayor at 9:00 to see if he would be willing to enter into any discussions with the union. The mayor was late arriving, and so we postponed our Monday morning until Saturday afternoon at about 3:00. In talking with the mayor, told him that we had been to see the labor leaders the night before, and what we had in mind. He made it very clear that his position, I do not remember the details of his position, remained the same, but that he would be willing to come to some meeting that we might sponsor. And here I have to explain. The Ministers Association did not serve as mediators. This is an important word. For us to have served as mediators would have meant that the city could not participate because they regarded the strike as illegal, and when you have mediators in the technical sense, you are engaged in official discussions.

And so I proposed that we refer to ourselves as the hosts who are bringing these two sides together for the purposes of conversation, and the mayor agreed to that, and we set the time of the meeting for Sunday, February 18 at 7:00 in the basement of St. Mary's Cathedral. The mayor would be free to bring such people as he wanted with him, and the labor leaders would likewise bring whomever they chose. The mayor did insist, though we were not enthusiastic about the idea, that the news media be present. He was adamant on this position. In fact he would not come to any meeting if the news media were not present, and accordingly the news media was informed that this meeting would take place. After our conversation with Mayor Loeb I had sent a telegram, identical telegram to Mr. Ciampa and Mayor Loeb inviting them in a sort of formal way to come to St. Mary's church fro the meeting on Sunday evening. At the meeting, the news media was there -- local news media was there in full number. There were about five or six ministers and I presided. Now one of the reasons, too, that we preferred to be referred to as hosts and not as mediators, not only to get the consent of the mayor, but as long as we were hosts and the meeting was not technically an official one, we would have the right to participate in discussions. This was an important point. The meeting began and Mr. Loeb would not talk to the members of the union, except through me as the person who was presiding. Any question addressed to the mayor, the mayor would answer through me, and this went on. The meeting began at 7:00 and went on for some few hours. The agenda, which we followed consisted of the eight points outlined by the labor union in their demands. I had made one thing clear at the beginning, that we would discuss the simpler issues first, and try to reach a consensus or an agreement on the easier parts of the conflict, and then proceed on to the more difficult and both sides concurred. There seemed to be a possibility of working out the matter of compensation. As for myself, I made it very clear to the labor leaders that from what knowledge I had, the city was in a bad way financially. I pointed out to him that I had by chance been at the Board of Education and spoke with Mr. Stembert about different things, in the course of which Mr. Stembert said the request of the board of education for additional funds would surpass any money that the city could legally provide if they raised the tax to the maximum legal limit. This point I think was taken seriously by the labor group because they realize that I was certainly not anti-labor, and perhaps even pro-labor. Certain points that had been resolved, the easier points, at about 11:00 we had one of our recesses, which lasted longer than usual. The labor leaders had gone to the Peabody to meet with Mr. Wurf, the international president of the union, who had just come in from Washington. They were to brief Mr. Wurf on the status here, and what had transpired. At about midnight, Mr. Wurf came to the meeting with the other labor leaders, and we resumed our discussions. It seemed to me that we had made considerable progress in our conversations. After Mr. Wurf arrived, Mr. Loeb would talk to him, but he would not talk to Mr. Ciampa. In any event, at that point, after Mr. Wurf was here, he did all of the talking, or almost all of the talking for the union. There was, I believe, an understanding on compensation. There was some question about the health program, the policies that were carried on the employees concerning health, the matter of vacations, and the like. At my suggestion, Mr. is it Bernard? The man in charge of these matters at the city hall…the planning committee, I do not remember his name. In any event, the man in charge of the employment practices and procedures was called down to the meeting so that we could iron out the question of vacations, health insurance, and the like. He came and explained

this to the union, and these matters were resolved.

Of the eight points Mr. Wurf had changed one point a little, but it didn't amount to too much. Almost everything was agreed to as I recall it, except two main points, one was recognition of the union, and secondly was the matter of deductions for union dues. There was a great deal of haggling about the matter of recognizing the union. There was no agreement on that point. With regard to union dues, Mr. Wurf, whom incidentally I had asked him to defer the strike for the sake of the record, I think this ought to be clear that I had asked him to defer the strike so the pressure would be a little less and they could carry on the conversations, but he said it was out of the question. But getting matter of the deduct for union dues, Mr. Wurf said he had never encountered a situation where a city refused, or a municipality or any political entity refused to deduct the union dues from the employees' salary. Well this, at about 4:00 in the morning is when we were reaching this point, and Mr. Wurf said, "I will make a suggestion that I have never made before, namely that I will deduct the dues through the credit union." To those of us in the clergy, this seemed like an excellent idea. We recessed the meeting, and the ministers present were most pleased by this compromise. It seemed that the city could thereby save its face and the union collect its dues. It looked like a good out. And, then, we talked to the city officials and told them that we thought this was a good way to obviate the problem. The city still would not be deducting dues, but on the other hand the union could receive its money. Again, the mayor and his associates refused to accept this proposal.

We talked until 5:00 in the morning, after having started at 7:00 in the evening, and it was then apparent that we could not go any further than we did, even though I believe that very great progress had been made in that all-night session. We decided to meet again the following day at the First Methodist Church at 2:00 or 3:00 in the afternoon; I believe it was 2:00. Both sides were again represented. That session, which I had to leave at 4:00, the two hours from 2:00 to 4:00 were devoted to the two most difficult questions, recognition of the union, and the matter of deducting the union dues. Nothing was accomplished at that session. Since I was leaving town for about two weeks to go to Florida, I had asked Dean Dimmick to serve as the chairman at the subsequent meetings that would be held, though he was not vice president I did designate him to represent our group, and do whatever he thought was desirable. Some three or four meetings were held after our meeting on February 19, at which time Dean Dimmick presided, and was in charge, but it was very obvious, it is very obvious that these two main points, recognition of the union, and the deducts -- these issues were not resolved, and of course the strike continued.

At our minister's meeting on March 4, we reported to the entire membership of the Ministers Association how we became involved in the strike, and tried to describe some of the things that we tried to do, and what happened. At this minister's meeting, the suggestion was made by some of the ministers that we of the Memphis Ministers Association meet with the interdenominational alliance of pastors, which consists only of Negro ministers; that by our group meeting with the all-Negro group we might be able to work together and see what we could do about solving the problem of the strike. The

suggestion was put in the form of a motion and adopted, though I was not in favor of this idea. I felt that meeting with the Negro ministers at that time, who had been receiving considerable publicity in the city, most of which was not good, would weaken whatever influence we in the white Ministers Association could have had. To have met seemed to me to have been identified with their cause in such way that people would lose what little faith they had in us as far as objectivity goes. And so I did not carry out, as president of the organization, the intent of the resolution, and we did not meet with them.

On Monday, April 1, we had another monthly minister's meeting. The situation in the city had grown much more tense. I was criticized by some of the Negro ministers for not having called a meeting to meet with the Negro ministers. The responsibility was not entirely my own. At the March meeting it was understood that if we were to meet with the Negro ministers, first there would be a committee on agenda from each group. I accordingly appointed a committee on agenda. The president of the Negro Ministers Association, a very fine, a Reverend, Mr. Starks, delayed in some time one in responding to the invitation that had been adopted, and secondly he did not appoint a committee on agenda. The only matter of concern was the solution of the sanitation strike. But nonetheless we did not have this meeting with the Negro Ministers Association, and I reported this at the meeting on April 1. At that time I had proposed what I phrased a summit conference, at which time there would be a meeting, probably unpublicized. To this meeting would be invited Bishop Durick of the Catholic Church, Bishop Vandross of the Episcopal Church, Bishop Finger of Nashville of the Methodist Church, and the senior minister of each respective denomination in the area. In addition to the clergy would be about 100 of the leading citizens of Memphis. No place had been designated, but I would have hoped that the meeting could have, had it been worked out, would have been held at Southwestern, without any benefit of publicity. And I thought that by having the leading religious leaders there confronting the leading citizens of the community, perhaps we could persuade them to pursue what we regarded a moral line in search of justice. The idea was accepted, but there was no opportunity to follow through. As I'd said some minutes ago, the situation in the city was getting more critical, and there was a feeling that we should have a meeting with the Negro ministers within the next couple of days; and, accordingly a special meeting of the ministers was called for Wednesday afternoon at 2:30 at St. Mary's Cathedral. Negro Ministers Association, the Interdenominational Alliance, they invited their members. There may well have been over 100 or 150 ministers present. I presided at this meeting, and I made it clear at the very outset that we had no agenda. They could discuss either the specific issue of the sanitation strike, or to discuss other matters of far range concern. It made no difference to me what the agenda would be, it was their meeting and I would go along.

The opening statement, which I had made, I thought was a fair statement, and I acted in complete innocence, as we had no agenda, and I wasn't trying to avoid the sanitation strike or a discussion of it, I just didn't know what the men wanted to talk about. Whereupon one of the Negro ministers, who is head of the poverty program, his name escapes at the moment. I believe his name is Taylor, at the minimum wage group. I think it's a branch of the Methodist Church, became very incensed and construed my remarks as being, since the choice was given, that I wasn't attaching enough importance

to the sanitation strike, and as far as he was concerned, that they were ready to adjourn the meeting, and a motion had been made to adjourn the meeting even before it began. I thought Mr. Taylor's remarks, I'm not certain of the name Taylor, were irrational and not sensible, and of course the motion to adjourn, though he and some of his colleagues proceeded to leave the building, that motion was not passed and he remained, and I made it very clear I didn't say we would not discuss the sanitation strike, that it would be -- if they wanted to discuss it was fine. Whereupon some discussions were held. Unfortunately, I had to leave the meeting at 4:00 to go to Lepanto, Arkansas to speak at a church. I was very much insulted by one or two of the Negro ministers when I left the church, the cathedral, and the one called me a coward, thinking that I was walking out on the discussions. Now, after the meeting, which lasted I think until 6:00, again Dean Dimmick presided, or perhaps it was Father Vieron who presided the closing portion of the meeting. They adopted a resolution for us to meet with the Negro ministers the following morning on Thursday the 4th, and also they had adopted a resolution that they would march, by they I mean the ministers, would march from St. Mary's Cathedral to the city hall to call on the mayor. I was informed of this when we returned home from Lepanto about 12:00 by Dean Dimmick, who knew from private conversations that I had no desire to participate in a march, and I would not march, and secondly I could see no purpose in calling on the mayor at this point.

We appeared, many of us from our association at a Negro church, the name of which I no longer remember, and met with a number of the Negro ministers. I was called upon as president of our organization to sit at the front of the sanctuary and to make a statement, and I said to these men I would not take part in the march. The association has the right to do what it wants, but I did not feel obligated to do that, and secondly, I feel being a pragmatist, that calling upon the mayor would be futile. And I had appointed, accordingly appointed Dr. Allridge, the assistant pastor of Idlewild to work with the Negro ministers in formulating a statement to be presented to the mayor, and since I would not be in the march or take or appear in the mayor's office, then he would be the spokesman for our group. It was not -- some of the Negro ministers did not take keenly to my idea of not participating in the march or appearing before the mayor. I also, and I think it's important to interject here another statement that I had made, I told the Negro ministers that many of us who were white found it very difficult to communicate with the Negro leaders. That we were not at ease in our conversations, that we were always fearful if we didn't say exactly what the Negros wanted us to say that we would be construed or regarded as their enemies, that we just were not at ease, that in a conversation that's meaningful, people should be free to express themselves and not feel compelled to agree. Some Negro ministers I don't think liked this statement, on the other hand it was apparent to me that some had never thought of this before. Well that meeting adjourned. Not too much transpired that I haven't mentioned, and it was not until after Martin Luther King had been assassinated that I changed my mind, and decided that I would participate in the demonstration and appear before the mayor. It was announced in the newspaper, the Friday morning newspaper, that all ministers were asked to attend the service, the memorial service at St. Mary's cathedral. The service was really not under anybody's auspices, it was only that Dean Dimmick had taken the initiative, and that was fine. A very large number of ministers came to this service,

which I think began at 10:00 in the cathedral. There were ministers who do not even belong to our association who were in attendance. It was a brief, 30-minute service, presided over by Dean Dimmick, Jim Lawson, and two or three others took part in the ritual. After the service was concluded in the cathedral, we adjourned to another room on the cathedral premises, and there Dr. Allridge read the statement, which he and representatives of the Negro clergy had prepared. It was unanimously adopted.

After that, a statement, which was the only purpose of our getting together, we proceeded to march to city hall, and there Dr. Allridge read the statement representing both groups of ministers. I had made my statement, which I'll admit was needlessly emotional. It should have been more restrained, but the circumstances were such that I couldn't do differently. And then the Reverend Mr. Starks made a brief statement. One or two others spoke, but they were not authorized to speak in so far as our plans were concerned. It was only Dr. Allridge who read the prepared statement, I had made one, and Mr. Starks. We did not expect, under the circumstances, any response from the mayor. As far as I was concerned, to have expected the mayor to respond would have been unfair of us. The mayor could not at that time make any statement, and he is not to be criticized because he did not make a statement at that time.

Now, at this point too, I think I should back up in terms of time and side, that some of us in the Ministers Association had felt during this interval of the strike that no progress or as much progress could be made, the mayor having his point of view. Accordingly, on March 15, I had invited 7 or 8 ministers to come here to my office at the temple and propose to them that since the mayor from what we understood was not going to change his mind, perhaps we could work on the members of the city council to exert their legal and moral influence to bring about a resolution of the conflict. The idea was accepted by these seven or eight ministers, whom I had invited. It was our opinion, having heard it from other knowledgeable people that the city council had the authority to intervene. We agreed that the idea was a good idea of trying to call in private upon certain members of the city council, and accordingly we set up teams of three, who would call on a particular member of the city council. Not all members were to be contacted. For example, it would have been a waste of time to consult with the Negro members. We knew that their votes were in. I believe there was also -- I can't remember the name now. I remember the city council had taken a forthright position…

Selma Lewis: Jerry Blanchard?

Rabbi Wax: Jerry Blanchard…there was no purpose in calling on him. One or two men we felt were so adamant in their position it would be a waste of time. As for myself, I called Mrs. Awsumb, whose district I happen to live, and asked her to meet with me and two other ministers. She agreed to do that, and we had a meeting in my home on Sunday afternoon, March 17. The two other ministers in addition to myself were Reverend Mr. Brooks Ramsey of Second Baptist Church and Father Vieron of the Greek Orthodox Church. We talked, I believe for about an hour and a half. We used every argument that we could. We brought up every reason we thought valid or cogent, why Mrs. Awsumb should exercise her legal influence as a member of the council, get the

council involved and resolve the conflict.

Mrs. Awsumb listened attentively, but when it was all -- the conversation was about to draw to a conclusion, she told us that her position was the same, that she did not feel that she could become involved in it, and she did not think that the city should recognize a union, and that terminated the conversation without any resolves. Two or three days later, we had a meeting with Mr. Downing Pryor. And this meeting I believe was attended by Dean Dimmick, Father Joseph Eckelkamp, and myself. We found Mr. Pryor sympathetic, much more so than Mrs. Awsumb. And he would, I believe, have gone along if we could have secured other votes in the city council. This is my interpretation of the conversation. My interpretation may be incorrect, but he was very eager to have this matter settled. From his office we called, or I called on behalf of the group, Mr. Louis Donelson, and asked if some of us could meet with him later that night. He said he'd be glad to meet with us, but unless we had any new ideas, as far as the solution of this problem was concerned, he could see no purpose in it. He'd be glad to see us. Well, we had no new ideas, and therefore that meeting never occurred.

Two or three teams of three of the ministers had called on different members of the council. I am not certain of just who the council members were who were visited by the ministers. My recollection is that Mr. Hyman had indicated a positive interest in the matter, and a willingness to go along. But, as the record shows, the city council did not do anything, it left it in the hands of the mayor. And thus, nothing was -- no progress had been made, and then came the tragedy of Martin Luther King's assassination, and our subsequent visit to the mayor's office. The reaction to my confrontation with the mayor was intense and extreme, and from all segments of society, including threats on my life. There were countless phone calls. Some people identified themselves, some did not. Some were restrained, some were most abusive. Received a large number of letters, some signed and some anonymous. Some (muffled) reasonableness, and others were sheer hate letters. I have a feeling that some of the letters came from a particular segment in the community, identified with the Wallace for President movement. One man who spoke to me most abusively and in obscene language, a Mr. Bloomer, I have learned subsequently is the chief representative of the Wallace for President me movement here in Memphis. Then I received a letter, which was stamped Wallace in '68, and I think there were others from that same group. I do not know the exact details of the final agreement between the city and the union, so I can't speak precisely, but it is my impression that the city gained nothing financially by deferring or refusing to settle the issue before. As a matter of fact, the city was put to a great expense; according to one newspaper item it cost the city about a half-million dollars in overtime for police and fire protection. It's my opinion from a financial point of view, we're not speaking now of moral or any other, but sheer dollars and cents, the city would have been financially better off to have agreed to settle the strike when the ministers served as hosts back in February, February the 18th.

It is clear to me that the mayor did have very wide support among the people in the city. People from the lower economic segment, as well as the more affluent people who live out in East Memphis. There can be no question that the mayor had the support of the

people. My contention in appearing before the mayor was that do God's laws, observe God's laws before man-made laws, which has never been quite understood, but justice in my opinion comes first, and I -- so it is true that technically perhaps the city couldn't engage in conversations with the union. But that's not the way you solve a human problem. Ask yourself, is it moral, are you getting anywhere in an ethical way. And, this is not understood very widely. I had known from a good many years of involvement in race relations, that there was a racist feeling in the community. I had no idea of its scope or its intensity. Let's pause for a minute. I've done an awful lot of talking. I bet I've talked for over (pause in dictation).

William Seider: Rabbi Wax, could you give us an idea of the reason for this lack of communication between Mayor Loeb and Ciampa, why he was willing to talk through Wurf, but not through Ciampa?

Rabbi Wax: I am not entirely sure of the answers. I think there are two reasons why he wouldn't speak with Ciampa. One was that Mr. Ciampa had literally insulted the mayor by abusive and vile language, and the mayor being a human being had a natural reaction against talking to a man who talked to him in that way. Secondly, the mayor felt constrained at this point to have conversations with any labor leader, because the strike he said, according to his legal counsel, was an illegal strike, and he should not participate in a discussion. Of course since I pointed out earlier that our discussions at the cathedral were really discussion and not a meeting of an informal character, I think the mayor felt that he could have a conversation or dialogue with Mr. Wurf, since it was not a formal meeting. We were just hosts, as I had said earlier, but I think there was the personal element, which is indeed understandable, and I had a feeling that in the setting, as we had created the setting, we that were ministers, that Mr. Loeb felt that he could talk to Mr. Wurf.

William Seider: Do you have a question Selma?

Selma Lewis: Go head.

William Seider: Well, I have another one, and then you can do yours, how's that? Do you feel that the -- you mentioned earlier the difficulty of communication between the Negro and the white ministers, which I am sure is representative of all people -- do you feel that this has improved any at all, or if this tension is still there? This dubiousness and…

Rabbi Wax: It is still very difficult to communicate, to have conversations, frank and candid conversations with Negro leaders. The Negros are motivated by feeling, which one can certainly understand, but I am not sure that all of the feelings are necessarily rational or make sense. I, in my own way of thinking, like to proceed along logical lines, specific lines, and ask now just what specific things do you want, not just a protest, which is negative out of which some good may come, but also you have to have a specific program. And this I have found difficult to say we want 1, 2, 3, 4. It isn't enough to say we want to abolish poverty. Everybody wants to abolish poverty. But we have to

be mature enough to realize that this can't be done over night. I have said to one or two Negros in private I think they have -- I may be in error here -- no sense of what might be termed public relations, needlessly antagonizing the white community; and I must say too, and I have mentioned this to some Negro leaders, I think it would be helpful to their cause if their Negro leadership, and their Negro Ministers Association here would come out in a forthright statement condemning looting and destruction of property. But, they do not issue such statement. They do not quite understand, what I guess might be called a sophisticated concept of public relations. But getting back to the original question -- as earnest and sincere as you try to be in sharing their concern and their legitimate aspirations, it is still difficult to talk with Negro leaders, as far as I am concerned, either the clergy or labor leaders.

William Seider: Well, what, if anything, can be done to bring about a harmonious communication, a contact, you know, a level of it to be non-emotional without this inner intensity?

Rabbi Wax: It is very difficult to answer this question. The truth of the matter is, the Negro distrusts the white man. Even the white man who is genuinely and sincerely committed to human concept, the ideal of human dignity for all, he still does not somehow trust him. I think that this distrust can be explained and be understood, but the fact remains that there is still this distrust. I would move on from answering your question to a more general statement of how I think race relations can be improved, and I will give an analogy of what I have in mind. If I come and say to you, "Bill, will you loan me $25?" You loan me the $25. But you still are not willing to walk down the street with me. Now getting all of these jobs, which is wonderful and basic and essential is very good, providing recreational opportunities is very good. All of these efforts are to be commended, but 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 -- until they do that, the Negro is going to remain distrustful. What's happening to him now, or what's being done now, is analogous to you loaning me the $25, but not walking down the street. To me the statement is in a sense equal to that walking along the street together. Let the white leadership -- I'm not entirely certain who constitutes the white leadership -- put their names to a document in the same way that some men had the courage to sign the Declaration of Independence. If that would appear in the newspaper, and some of the leading citizens had attached their names endorsing these sentiments of human dignity, and the right of everybody to live a full life, that would make an impression on the Negro people of this city. But if everything has to be done sub rosa, behind closed doors, and that's how we worked in this city for a long time. It worked well, but it's reached the point where you can't continue operating behind closed doors. Until that time comes, I don't think that the Negro mood will change too much. Now, I have been talking along these lines for a couple of years to different people, but of course it's obvious nothing happened. The Chamber of Commerce did issue a statement a few weeks ago that appeared in the newspapers, not as a paid statement, as a news item, expressing some of these sentiments. I think it's very interesting that in Jackson, Mississippi there was a statement. I received it only the other

day, signed by 100 or so people. It did not include the businesspeople who were afraid to sign it, even though the statement didn't go as far as I think it should have gone, but the fact remains that if in Jackson, Mississippi such statement could be issued, then I think it could be done here, ought to be done here. When you stand up and say that the Negro people have rights, everybody has rights, we don't need to spell them out because we know what we are talking about, then I think the Negro people might be impressed. This will do, in my opinion, a considerable amount of good in promoting better race relations.

William Seider: Well, do you think that the Negro feels that this is something that can and will come about in this immediate generation, or that they are of the feeling and thought that this may take more than one generation?

Rabbi Wax: The Negros are thinking of now. What they intelligent, responsible, mature Negro people feel I don't know, but certainly their leaders as they speak are talking about now. We have to understand that even the Negros who before were moderate, are no longer moderate. It's been 14 years since the Supreme Court handed down its celebrated decision regarding school desegregation, and the fact remains there has been only token desegregation or integration. And, wherever they look, well on one hand you can say in our community a great deal of progress has been made. On the other hand you can say not too much has been made.

I think what has changed the mood, even of the moderate Negros, was the assassination of Martin Luther King. We have to understand that Martin Luther King was for the Negro what Moses was for the Jews. He was their leader, their emancipator, the one man who could somehow inspire confidence and hope. Now it's true that within the last year or so of his leadership there may have been those who questioned the effectiveness of his approach, but the overwhelming number of Negros felt that their foremost leader had been struck down, and I think this was one of the main reasons why the Negro attitude has changed in recent weeks.

Selma Lewis: Rabbi Wax, to backtrack a little bit.

Rabbi Wax: Yes.

Selma Lewis: Did you feel that the union came into Memphis at the request of the workers, or did you feel that as has been suggested in some quarters that they were the people who stirred up the "trouble?"

Rabbi Wax: My impression is that the, and this I cannot verify what I say, and I don't want to do anybody an injustice. I have a feeling that the strike was called by local leaders. I think the local representative of the union they had is a Mr. Jones. Without too much, if any, consultation with Mr. Wurf. Mr. Wurf and I in a conversation during that long night in one of the recess periods, said that he really had no business being in Memphis, that he was still tied up in New York where their sanitation had not been settled, and they were having difficulty in Honolulu, I believe it was, and that he… The

impression I get from this conversation is that he would rather that the strike not have occurred, at least at this time. I have a feeling, too, and it's only a feeling that I cannot verify, that Mr. Wurf and his associates in Washington were unaware of the racial aspect of this conflict. Just why the strike was called precisely when it was called, of course I will never know, but I do have, as I say, the feeling, and I want to underscore this, that Mr. Wurf would probably hoped it wouldn't have been at the time that it was. Because he said to me, "I should be in New York."

Selma Lewis: Was the racial aspect of the strike something that was apparent to you from the beginning, or fairly soon? Or was this something that came later?

Rabbi Wax: Well, I don't know the motives for calling the strike, the real motives. Those beyond the quest of recognition, and better working conditions, and so on. If there were other motives involved, but to me it was apparent after a few days, that though this was a so-called labor dispute, it also had a strong racial character to it. Now what other motives, and I want to be fair, there were if any, I don't know.

Selma Lewis: Do you feel that the council members and the mayor understood the racial implications of the strike from the beginning?

Rabbi Wax: I am not sure that the mayor, and I do not mean to be disrespectful or unfair to him, really comprehended the potential danger. I might say referring to myself, that during our all night session at the cathedral I made an impassioned plea that the strike be settled because I did anticipate trouble. And I went so far as to say that I thought there would be members of the Klan and the White Citizens Council move in from the surrounding communities if the strike persisted much longer. I had no basis for that statement, it was only an apprehension that I had. And of course I had no idea what would develop -- nobody did. But I and I think some of the other ministers spoke up and pointed out the potential danger. Now, I do not know that the mayor really realized, and I don't want to be unfair, but I'm not sure that he really realized the potential danger here.

William Seider: Why do you feel, or do you have any idea why the council was reluctant to enter into settlement, of entering into working with the mayor towards the settlement of the strike.

Rabbi Wax: I think one of the reasons, there are probably a number of reasons I do not know them all -- I think one of the reasons was that the members of the council wanted to have a harmonious relationship with the mayor. This was, after all, a new form of government. Some of the members of the council I knew had served as I had served on the pop committee that created this new form of government, and I think they were quite anxious that there be no rift between the mayor and the council. I think this was an important factor. Certainly among some of the members of the council. Then I think there were perhaps two or three, I won't mention names, and I'm not even certain, who really didn't care because they had strong racial feelings and were most reactionary as regards to any recognition of a labor union.

William Seider: Well, in other words, at this point they were putting their feeling of a necessity for harmony with the mayor above the social problem that was involved?

Rabbi Wax: I'm afraid that's correct, yes. I think this is correct.

Selma Lewis: Rabbi Wax, you indicated that you yourself had a change of attitude after the assassination, or am I incorrect?

Rabbi Wax: A change of attitude, by that I mean -- no I guess I used the wrong phrase. You quoted me correctly, but I didn't express myself well. I went to the service at the cathedral, took part in the march, and appeared before the mayor as a tribute to Martin Luther King. That was my reason for going. At that point I didn't think that anything we could say to the mayor would have been effective in changing his mind. But, I felt -- I don't want it to sound the way it's going to sound…I felt I was very proper in walking with Mr. Starks.

William Seider: Were you approached, as far as being requested to participate in any of these marches?

Rabbi Wax: Well, many people were. I did not participate. I don't criticize those who take part in these demonstrations at all, but I did not because temperamentally I don't happen to feel this is the way problems are solved. Maybe I'm wrong, but I just think you, like Isaiah said, "Come and let us reason together." You sit down in a room and work out problems, that's the way I think they should be solved. One, that's a positive way of doing it, and secondly you don't irritate that way. That was my only reason, but I certainly do not criticize those who took part.

Selma Lewis: In the attitudes that have been expressed, and that you have heard many of since the assassination, do you feel there have been any significant changes by the white community in favor of brotherhood of races?

Rabbi Wax: Not really. In the first place, we have to admit what I think is a fact, terrible fact that there are people in our community who do not regret the death of Martin Luther King. They resent all the trouble that it's caused. Then you have those people in the community who are concerned about our community image. This was bad that it happened in Memphis, not that it happened, but that it happened in Memphis. From what I gather, and I really don't know any more than the next person, is that there has been a hardening of attitude on both sides. I have heard this from some people who are more or less in a position to know you can never measure attitudes, but there's a lot of resentment, and these resentments are going to continue.

I will give you an example. Each of us who own a home will have to pay according to the last figure, $2.50 a month for the garbage collection. Well, people are going to attach this every time they pay that $2.50, they'll think back to the sanitation strike, forgetting that picking up the garbage is very important, and the people who do that work ought to be paid an adequate and decent wage, but the point I want to make is that there

will be resentment on that score. The feelings as I see it are deep, and they are intense, and there is a great deal of hostility in these feelings. There has been regression in terms of the attitudes of the people

Selma Lewis: You are very pessimistic.

Rabbi Wax: Well, I will tell you, a rabbi can't afford to be pessimistic, but I think the road ahead is long and difficult. I don't mean to preach, but I still get back to what I said a few minutes ago. Until so-called leaders of the community are willing to say, black and white, that we believe everybody has an equal chance, we are not going to really make notable progress in race relations.

Selma Lewis: Rabbi Wax, do you feel that Memphis is extremely different than the rest of the country? Of course the implications of the assassination point to Memphis, but I mean the effect of the assassination -- do you think this is, that Memphis indicates something about the rest of the country, or do you think we are somehow different?

Rabbi Wax: It's very hard to answer that question. The white people in this community, many, maybe even most, never really appreciated Dr. King. They saw him as a troublemaker, as a man who provoked trouble, have no understanding of the concept of nonviolence. They do not understand that here was an educated man, author of some good books. They do not understand that this man had been invited to give the commencement address at Harvard University, and that he had received many significant honors. In plain language, they failed to appreciate the man. Now, I do think that in other places Dr. King is more appreciated than he was here. But I really don't know enough about other places. I'm not sure I know enough about this place to make a comparison.

William Seider: Rabbi Wax, concerning the abusive and obscene phone calls that you received, were these people members of your congregation, as well as of out? Now, I am not talking -- I realize anyone in public is (muffled), but I'm talking about any abusive type (muffled).

Rabbi Wax: Actually it's a great tribute to the congregation. I received relatively few letters from members of the congregation. I believe that three members had resigned, though I am told that they have subsequently reinstated their membership. I might say that one member of our congregation called me and said that he and a group of men would put up all the money that the temple might lose by virtue of resignations over my participation. My position was never in jeopardy. I was called by the *New York Times*. There was a rumor that I might be fired. This was never the situation. The leaders of the congregation, not just the board but the leaders stepped in very quickly, and they had a meeting of the executive committee on Sunday, April 7; no, it was April 14, and the decision was made that whether they agreed or disagreed with me, that the matter was not to be discussed at any board meeting, and I'm going to write a full report to the American Jewish Archives dealing with this aspect. The leadership of this congregation acted in a most proper manner. That does not mean that all of them concurred, or approved, but I

will say, too, it's easy to talk and think about the negative, the criticism. There were countless letters, some from our congregation, and many phone calls, commending me. I mention this not braggingly, but commending me for what I have done. The people called on me at home, realized I was taking a real beating, and said, don't worry, you have nothing to worry about, you'll survive all of this. But people I didn't know were my friends really -- some of them came through in a manner I (muffled) gave it any thought. So there was a bright side to this, and people were anxious that we go out here and there. So I might forget the trouble and to express their friendship. But I would have nothing but praise for the congregation. Of course there were some who were resenting. A few wrote me some bitter letters in the congregation, but the overwhelming majority did not share that attitude as far as I know.

William Seider: I have but one more question, and that is, when you first heard of the assassination, did you talk to any people who had not heard of it, and had given them that news? And if you had, what did they (muffled)?

Rabbi Wax: No, I did not. We were at a dinner party at the Dreyfus home (muffled) when it was announced that he had died. We had heard before we left our house to go over to the Dreyfus's that he had been shot. But after it was announced that he had died and the curfew was to go into effect immediately, Mrs. Dreyfus was very, very gracious, she gave the guests the food and we went home. It was a memorable night. Mrs. Dreyfus was extremely gracious, and everybody understood of course. After we got home, whatever time it was, I didn't make any phone calls to anybody. I think the press may have called me for a statement, which was not used, which doesn't mean anything. After all, there were more important people to quote. And there were calls I think from some ministers and the like, but I called -- everybody with whom I talked that night knew about it, and the only people whom I saw for the next day or so were the sympathetic group, the clergy and so on.

William Seider: Thank you very much, Rabbi Wax.

Rabbi Wax: Well, it's always easy to talk about yourself.

END OF RECORDING