The Rabbi With the Southern Twang

True Stories From a Life of Leadership

Within the Orthodox Jewish Congregations of the South



Rabbi Seymour Atlas

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PREFACE

Many years have passed since I along with my beloved late wife Beverly, *olov hashalom*, talked about my writing a book of my experiences as an Orthodox rabbi in various communities in the South. Beverly and I both hoped to bring out the beneficial and unique aspects of these experiences, so that these experiences are not forgotten in the modern era where there is so much less tension and hardship.

When I finally decided to tackle the challenge of putting my life's experiences to paper, I knew that it was a great task and would require some additional help. I had lost the most reliable source I had when my beloved wife was taken from me, and this void has never been filled.

I started my writings and use of a tape recorder in Hollywood, Florida, but continued while on one of my trips to Israel, where I wrote and dictated into the late hours of the night and the early hours of the morning. Once I completed my notes and my tapes, I needed someone to type them up and help me arrange the book. I was very fortunate in having the kind and lovely Susan Grossman offer her services in typing my notes—which helped me tremendously towards the finalization of the project. The next to offer her services was my dear niece, Michelle Dimont of Boca Raton, Florida, who took the notes that Susan had typed, and was the first to assemble the book and suggest a title for it—"The Rabbi With the Southern Twang"—which I loved and have never changed.

As I discussed my venture with others, I had a remarkable young lady offer her assistance for the remaining work neces-

sary to expand some of the sections of the book, and complete the project. How fortunate and blessed I was when Brenda Bryn came aboard with her expertise and the experience that I needed, and she has worked with me on this book for the many months it took until completion.

I also wish to acknowledge the input and suggestions of my lovely children, my late sister Louise *olov hashalom*, my sister-in-law Barbara Atlas, Andrew Zablotsky for helping to scan all the photographs, Dr. Jeffrey Dach for the cover photograph, and all my friends that have expressed their best wishes and encouragement throughout this endeavor.

To all of you and to all of them, I say thank you very much.

Rabbi Seymour Atlas
January 2007

CHAPTER 1

FAMILY AND CHILDHOOD

I was a pulpit rabbi for Orthodox Jewish Southern congregations for 46 years, and during that time collected many interesting and fascinating stories. There are many things that I am sure other rabbis have not experienced or had the opportunity to even know existed.

To begin with, Jews of today might be surprised that an Orthodox rabbi would have his roots in the South. But the truth was there were a lot of immigrants who came over from Europe just before and after the First World War and settled in the South. My father was one of them.

When the Jews came over from Europe, the HIAS (the Hebrew Immigration Aid Society that brought them over) gave them a piece of land to start off—an acre or two. It didn't cost them anything. HIAS got the land by fundraising—they'd say that they had ten families and needed ten acres of land. So they raised enough money to buy it—it might have been owned by the city or state. It may have been only $2-3/acre. It was very cheap back then. And they would say, "Now this is your land. You're on your own, you have to make your own living. You can open a little merchant store, you can plant cotton or soybeans, you can plant anything you want. It's up to you." And the Jews who escaped pogroms and came after the

First World War were very successful, because in Europe they had been slave labor to the dictators. They knew how to plant and plow the land from Europe. (Later, when the Holocaust survivors came to New Jersey, for instance, they were chicken farmers. They knew that as well from Europe.) HIAS placed all of these people. There were other organizations besides HIAS too. They did not want all of the Jews to congregate in the North. So they placed them in different states—some in Texas, Mississippi, Tennessee—they would spread the Jews throughout the country. They would place maybe 10,000 in New York, 5,000 in Galveston, another 5,000 in Memphis. Once they got settled, the Jews themselves started migrating. They decided what climate they liked.

Many of the new Jewish immigrants became peddlers. They started off buying some goods from a non-Jew with money, and go from one town to another selling plates or dishes, and then go back and get more. It was the peddlers who started opening little stores, little merchandise places, and they worked step by step until they got into the department stores. And this is how the department stores originated. Montgomery Ward, Macy's, and others all originated just from these little peddlers.

While my mother was born in Brooklyn, my father came to this country in 1908 from Bialystock. He was a rabbi from a rabbinical family that had produced 6 generations of rabbis. Although HIAS brought him here, he was turned over to another organization when he arrived because he was a rabbi (there were special organizations to place rabbis), and given $3 to get started. Then they said, "You're on your own." And that's how my family ended up in Greenwood, Mississippi. My father was the rabbi, *chazan* (cantor), and *shochet* (ritual slaughterer) for the community of Greenwood. I was born on March 19, 1922 in a nearby city called Greenville, MS. I was the second



My paternal grandparents, Rabbi Leib and Yetta Atlas from Bialystock



My father, Rabbi Elias Atlas



My mother, Laura Atlas



My parents at their wedding, 1908



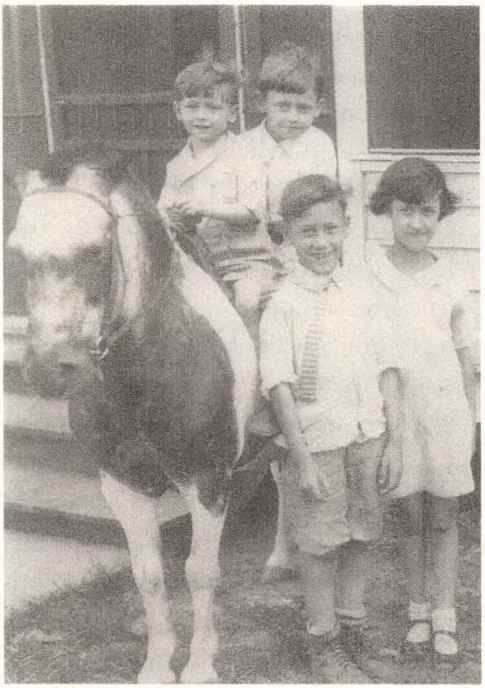
Family portrait: Rabbi Elias Atlas, Laura Atlas, sister Judith, myself, brother Raphael

child in the family after my sister Judith (born in 1920). Brothers Raphael and Harry followed in 1924 and 1925 respectively, and finally, our baby sister Louise was born in 1929.

Greenville, where I was born, was known as the Queen City of the Delta. It is a beautiful city. It's 120 miles south of Memphis. Greenwood was known for cotton and corn. There was long staple cotton and short staple cotton, and both would be shipped over to England, the main cotton market at that time. I used to go out and help pick cotton—go out in the fields, pick a few bolls of cotton for fun. The pickers would get paid 50 cents for 100 pounds of cotton. That might take them two or three days. At the end of the season, they'd add up all those fifty cents—they made so much, but they owed so much. They never got out of debt. This was also in Alabama and Louisiana, but mainly in Mississippi. The cotton is still there today, but today they have cotton-picking machines.

As a young child brought up during the time of the Depression, first in Mississippi and later in Shreveport, LA, where I had my major public school education, I saw many types of Judaism. It was practiced very differently from what is practiced today. In addition, being in the South, there were many problems with the Ku Klux Klan and anti-Semitism generally, but we fought through all of this. I remember being in kindergarten, on a sliding board, with a boy in front of me, when the bell rang. I said to the boy, "The bell rang, we have to get to class." And he turned to me and said, "Shut up, you damn Jew." Just like that. I looked at him, and told him, "You call me that again, and I'll throw you off this sliding board." He said, "I dare you, you damn Jew." So I grabbed his arm, and threw him to the ground. I was called into the office, and they wanted to expel me. The principal was anti-Semitic. I was not expelled, but was allowed to stay in school. This kid and I were

enemies for years. (Later on, in my first position in Greenwood, Mississippi, I happened to walk into an auto-supply store, and this kid was the manager of this store, and we became good friends. He became very respectful, and very nice.)



The Atlas clan: Harry and Raphael (on the horse), myself and Judith (standing)

In 1927 in Greenville, we experienced something just like what happened in New Orleans with Hurricane Katrina, when the levees broke. The levee is a barrier between the water and the town. It could be man-made or natural. It happened to be cement in Greenville. People could drive up on it. In 1927, the Mississippi and the Missouri Rivers came together and flood-

ed. The levee broke right in half, and all of the water gushed out into our town. In three days, everything was covered. These were no two-story houses. There were only one-story houses and single bungalows, and they were completely covered. You didn't see anything but water. When the levee first broke, a whistle blew, and everyone had to evacuate. We immediately got into our car, and drove twelve miles to Leland, Mississippi. There, the National Guard had put up a barrier, to stop the water from going any further. My father had a Model T Ford, and it couldn't get across that barrier. So some of the men lifted the car up, and we were off to higher ground. The sand bags held back the water from the town for a while, to give the people a chance to get out. I myself was quite a daredevil, and with a bunch of kids, started running all over the sandbags. But then I slipped off of a sandbag, into the Mississippi River, and everyone was screaming because I couldn't swim. Luckily, they fished me out of the water together with the catfish. This was a very frightening moment for me.

The next day, Leland, Mississippi flooded. We were staying in an old hotel there. People were sleeping everywhere, and rats were crawling all over. The National Guard came with three gasoline boats to evacuate the women and children. Two of the boats turned over, and all of the people drowned (including many Jewish people). The water was so deep, it covered the houses. People could not see the top of their houses, and the boats ran right into the houses. The boat we were on was lucky, thank G-d, and we got out, and they took us to Memphis, Tennessee. From there, we took the train to New York where our grandparents were. On the train, the only thing they had to eat was cold, black coffee and cold bacon—take it or leave it. We were starving to death, so we took whatever we could get. So we ate bacon (I don't really remember what it tasted like),

and we survived. We were taken on the train from Memphis to Grand Central Station in New York. My father, the rabbi, said that when you're trying to save your life, you're allowed to do anything.

In 1932, my family moved to Shreveport, where my father became the rabbi of the *shul*, or synagogue, there. As a kid, I would go into the storage room in his synagogue where there were old *tallisim*, or prayer shawls, and prayer books. I remember very vividly how I would take out an old *tallis* and carry it home with me. I would go into my bedroom, stand in front of the mirror with the *tallis* and a big *yarmulke*, or skullcap, and pretend I was the rabbi. My mother, may she rest in peace, saw what I was doing and would say with admiration, "You have your mind made up, though you're such a young child, that you want to be a rabbi." I would say, "Yes, Mama, that is what I would like to do, and I hope that I will be able to carry it through."

This dream took hold in 1937 when I left Shreveport to attend Yeshiva Mesifta Torah Vodaath in Brooklyn, New York to learn and study for many years until I would get my *smicha*, or ordination to become a rabbi. Even on the way up North, on the train, I encountered anti-Semitism. This was the time of segregation between the whites and the blacks, so I don't have to tell you that it was a very rough situation then. When I arrived in New York for the Yeshiva, the first thing that struck me was how there was a mixture of people on the train, white and black together, something I had never experienced in the South. This was a culture shock for me.

When I was in my first year in Yeshiva Torah Vodaath in New York, I realized immediately that I was different from the New York boys. The New York Yeshiva boys wouldn't dare look at girls. However, they knew that I was from the South,

and if I saw a girl, I'd say "How do you do? How are you?" One day, I happened to talk to the dean's daughter. The rabbis were outraged. Rabbi Mendelovich said, "Don't you know that you don't speak to girls?" But I said, "I'm from the South, and we speak to everybody." When Rabbi Mendelovich asked me, "What do you do if you're walking on the street, and you see a girl? I said, "Rabbi Mendelovich, if I'm walking, and I see her, if she's pretty, I'll talk to her." I was always very honest.

One of the things that was required of all the Yeshiva boys at Torah Vodaath was that they go to the *Mikvah*, or ritual bath, once a week. One Friday I was there, and I went under the water a little bit, and I felt something—it felt like straw. I didn't know what it was. I couldn't see. So I held onto it, and pulled it up, and it was the beard of an old man. I felt so ridiculous, and he was screaming "*Gevalt*, *Gevalt*!" He wanted to kill me. So, I let loose of his beard, jumped out of the *mikvah*, put on my clothes real quick, and ran out. That was the last time I went to that *mikvah*.

While I was in Torah Vodaath, it was my good fortune to have had the pleasure and opportunity to meet Rabbi David Leibowitz, may he rest in peace, the dean and founder of the Chofetz Chaim Yeshiva on 9th Street in Brooklyn (which was only 2 blocks away from Torah Vodaath). Rabbi Leibowitz and I became very close, like a father and son. I was invited to his home many times, and we would engage in many conversations and have a wonderful time discussing Talmud or other Biblical topics.

Rabbi Leibowitz invited me to learn at Chofetz Chaim, and I readily accepted. I made many new friends there, including Rabbi Leibowitz' son—Rabbi Chenoch—who is the present dean of Chofetz Chaim in Kew Garden Hills, in New York.

The way of learning in Chofetz Chaim was different than the way of learning in Torah Vodaath. In Torah Vodaath there were separate classes with a rabbi as a teacher, whereas Chofetz Chaim had all students assembled in one large study hall, and each student had a partner to learn with and the rabbi in charge would be available to answer any questions or explain whatever was necessary. We were all good friends in Chofetz Chaim, and have remained so throughout the years.

With everything I went through in my life, my wife Beverly was always my backbone. There were a lot of difficulties, but Beverly had a very positive attitude in everything. Beverly Dimont came over in 1939 from Europe. I met her father first. He was in Shreveport, traveling through with another rabbi, during the war. They were there to get affidavits to bring the whole family over from Europe. They were told to come to the South, and that they could get affidavits from some of the Jewish people there. Beverly's father asked me if I was married. When I said no, he asked another rabbi to give me Beverly's name and address. So I wrote her a letter, in which I said, "I was given your name, and I am writing a letter, but I'm not interested in only writing, but something more serious. If you're interested, then answer my letter. If you're not, then forget it." Well, about a month later, I got a letter from her, and we started corresponding. We wrote in English—she had learned English in Lithuania and spoke it well. We corresponded for 9 months, and I still had never met her. I said, I'm going to make a trip to meet her. I wrote to her and told her I was coming to New York.

But I had to go through New Orleans in those days. When I got there, a friend of mine who was in medical school at Tulane, took me out for a drink. When I got back to my hotel, I told them to wake me at 7:00 a.m. because I had to take a train. When I got up, it was 12 o'clock, and I had missed

my train. They said, "Well, we kept calling and calling, but you didn't answer." The next train was at night. So I went to the waiting room of the train station. The man sitting next to me asked me where I was going, and I told him that I was going to New York. He said that he was going there too, and that it was his birthday. "Would you join me for a drink," he asked. "There's a speakeasy around the corner." I said, "Sir, I don't drink." "Would you just go with me then?" he asked. I had nothing to do the whole day, so I went with him to the speakeasy. I'd never been in a speakeasy before. They have the curtains drawn, so no one can see what's going on. I went in with this guy, he had a drink, and when we were on the way out, there was a stud poker game going on behind a curtain. He said, "Would you mind if I play a hand of poker?" I said, "Do what you want." So he said, "Would you wait for me?" And I said, "Sure." So he sat down, and I waited for him. A minute later he asksed me, "Would you mind taking my hand? I have to go to the men's room." I said, "But I don't know anything about poker." He said, "Don't worry. It's my birthday. Whatever happens, happens." Well, I was very gullible, so I sat down and started to play. And the guy never came back. Meanwhile, I had four aces, which looked to me like a pretty good hand. Someone bet, so I bet. They doubled, so I doubled. But I kept thinking, "What was I getting myself into?" So I took my cards, set them on the table, and I said, "I don't know anything about this. I'm through." Well, there were four men at the table, each of them pulled out a gun, laid it on the table, and then said, "You got us into this, you're going to get us out." I said, "I'm waiting for that other man." But he never showed up. So they searched me, and took everything I had except my train ticket to New York. I didn't have a penny to my name. And of course, the man who had gotten me into this was a con

man. I didn't know anything about such things, coming from the Yeshiva. All I could do was to go to the station, and wait for my train. It came that night, and I road 36 hours to New York. I didn't sleep a wink because I didn't know what I would do when I got to the station. Beverly lived in Brooklyn. I didn't even have a cent to take a subway.



On a cruise around the Statue of Liberty, 1943

When I got to New York, the first thing I did was go to the water fountain to get a drink. I was so thirsty. I decided to take a cab to my aunt's house, hoping that she would be home and pay for the cab. Luckily, she was home, and I ran up, she gave me the money—it was mazeldik! I called Beverly and told her what had happened, and she couldn't believe it. My aunt gave me some more money, and I went to her house. And who should open the door? The man who gave me Beverly's address in the first place: her father. So that was the beginning of our courtship. It was November of 1942. Afterwards, Beverly came down to meet my family, and we got married in January of 1943.



Our wedding, 1943

As the years in Yeshiva went by, I learned to be a *shochet* and I got *smicha*. Then I came back to Shreveport, and applied for my first position as rabbi, with the approval of my wife, Beverly, may she rest in peace. We knew the Kaplans, very fine friends of ours in Alexandria, LA, and they wanted me to come in for an interview on *Succos*, the Jewish holiday, the Feast of Tabernacles. We went to Alexandria, and Myer Kaplan, told me, "We want you to speak in *shul* and we really want you to give a wonderful speech, because we would like you to be our rabbi." I was thrilled at the thought of my first opportunity to apply for a pulpit position. I had no idea then how difficult it would be. Alexandria was a small town where the Reform and Orthodox Jews were like one big family. When they heard there was going to be a guest rabbi in *shul*, they were very excited. Well, the Reform rabbi, a very fine outstanding young man and speaker, was in the audience and when I went up to speak, I looked at him and the audience and suddenly became stricken with a bad case of stage fright. I could not even open my mouth. I didn't know what to say. My words left me and I was so embarrassed that I just looked at the audience, said "Good Yom Tov," and sat down. That was my entire speech. I came home very disappointed, as was my wife, Beverly. This unpleasant experience lingered with me for a very long time, and I was very sad how this had come about in front of my many friends.

CHAPTER 2

GREENWOOD, MISSISSIPPI 1943-1946



Ahavas Reyim Synagogue in Greenwood

I thought about Greenwood, Mississippi, my home, where I knew everybody. There, I was not at all embarrassed so I told my wife, Beverly, "We're going to Greenwood." I then contacted some of the people I knew there and they invited me to

come speak and interview for a rabbinical position. I made up my mind that no matter what happened, I was not going to get stage fright again. And, I didn't—I gave a beautiful sermon. The people could not get over it. Immediately, I was elected rabbi. And I would be the rabbi in that community, my first rabbinical position, for approximately three years.

On *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*, I had to *daven* (lead prayers), blow *shofar* (a Ram's horn used on *Rosh Hashanah*), read the Torah, and give the sermons and sell the *aliyahs* (when a man is called up to the Torah) in Yiddish, because most of the people were Yiddish-speaking. I was, as we say, "*V'hol mah ha minim sh-hu*," I was everything wrapped up in one. During my sermon on *Rosh Hashanah*, I happened to mention segregation, anti-Semitism and the Ku Klux Klan. And I mentioned the names of two of the most outrageous anti-Semites at that particular time. After services, the president and officers of the *shul* came to me and said, "Rabbi, let us give you a little advice. You should never say anything bad about these men anymore." I asked, "Why not?" They responded, "If you say something against them, and we lose out, you will also lose out, because we won't be able to pay your salary, we won't be able to do anything." The reason for this was that these two anti-Semites happened to be the financial backers of the cotton and corn crops upon which my members were dependent. So from then on, I learned that there are certain times when you have to keep your mouth shut, even when it comes to anti-Semitism—and other issues, like the way the Jewish merchants treated the poor black farmers in the South.

We lived approximately 10 miles from the small town of Ittabena. Being in a small community like Greenwood, there was nothing to do on a Saturday night, so we would take a walk from Greenwood to Ittabena and visit our members. They

were merchants. They would sell to the farmers and furnish them with things. We would walk into their stores and reminisce until 12–1 o'clock in the morning, and then they would give us a ride home. During this time we came into one of the stores of one of our members, and one of the farmers—a black man—walked in. "Mr. Jake," he said, "I need a good suit for Sunday—my wife wants me to buy a nice suit for church." Jake said, "No problem. I have a good suit for you." So the man tried on the coat, and Jake said, "Look in the mirror. It fits you fine." "How you like it Mr. Jake? I think it's mighty pretty." So Jake said, "It's just what you need." The man asked to try on the pants, and again Jake said, "They fit you fine." Now the man didn't know what Mr. Jake was doing. He was standing behind the black man, holding the seam of the coat and pants, making them look like they "fit fine." The man paid his money and went home, but then came back an hour or so later, saying: "Mr. Jake, my wife says she don't like this suit. It don't fit me." But now Jake said, "What do you mean it don't fit you? You tried it on and it fit perfect." "Yes, sir," the black man said, " I don't know what happened. But it don't fit at home. I don't want it." "Well, I don't have any other suits," Jake said, "so you're gonna have to take it." But the poor farmer didn't know what was going on. He trusted Jake, and he got stuck with the suit. And this was happening constantly. The merchants would exploit these people because they were farmers. They didn't know anything except how to pick cotton and corn. And we witnessed this and it broke our hearts to see how black people were treated in those days. It was before integration, and they were like slaves to their masters. We didn't say a word at that time, because Jake was the boss. They called him "Master Jake," or "Pa Jake." But it hurt us, and when we visited Jake later on a Sunday, I would mention "It's a shame about these fellas,"

and Jake would say: "What do you want us to do? He needed a suit, and he got a suit." "But it's too big," I said. And Jake said, "Well, who cares? No one pays attention to the style."

There was another incident, where the same thing happened. And this time, it was not one of Jake's good customers. This time Jake said, "That's not the suit I sold you." And the man said, "Yes, sir, this is the suit you sold me." And Jake looked at the label and said, "Oh no, I don't handle this kind. You must have bought it someplace else." There were six or seven merchants lined up down the street. Jake told the man, "You just don't remember which one of us sold it to you. You go see another one." Jake wouldn't take it back or give him another suit, or his money. He completely ignored the man, acting like he didn't know anything about it. Jake was European, and his wife was European and could hardly speak English, but he learned from the other merchants how to treat these black farmers. They were like a union. Each one knew that if some poor farmer came in to exchange something, tell him to go to the next guy. The blacks would have to go through six or eight of them. "You must have bought it out of town," they would say. No one would admit it was their fault. This is how the Jewish people treated these black people. I'm not talking about the non-Jews. I know for a fact how the Jews exploited these people. People who have not seen this do not understand black anti-Semitism. They say, "Why do they hate us? We're so good to them." They were good to an extent, but not as good as they should have been. You'd think with what the Jews went through in Europe, how they suffered with the Czar, and all the dictatorships, you'd think that they'd be a little more lenient and compassionate when they came to this country, but they were not. They just transferred their hatred to someone else over here. And you just don't treat people like that. My father

was from Europe, but I was not brought up that way. For us, a human being is a human being. G-d loves us all. He doesn't look at color, at size, or shape, or fat, or skinny. We believe G-d loves everybody equally. And if G-d can do it, we can also do it.

These same Jewish merchants had a piece of land, and they would have black farmers raising their cotton, corn, and soybeans. The merchants built little shacks on the land. The black farmers would get married and have children, and then each one would have their little shack to live in on the land. They were told, "Now you work my land, and at the end of the year, whatever we make we're going to divide it equally." Meanwhile, the little store would furnish merchandise to the farmers. Their children needed shoes, the parents needed clothes, food, coal, and oil, and the merchant had a book in which he would write down their purchases on credit. The farmers could neither read nor write, and had to accept the merchant's accounting. At the end of the year, the cotton started coming in and was picked. The boss would say: "Come on over and let's see how we did. Oh boy, we made ten thousand dollars this year on the crop. Very good work. You did a lot of work. Now, let's see what you owe me. Well you bought so many pairs of shoes, you bought this, you bought that, and then he started adding up the figure and it's $12,000, but we only made $10,000—$5,000 for you and $5,000 for me. Well, I'm going to tell you what I'm going to do. I know you. I'm going to take the $5000 off the $12,000, and you only owe me $7,000. And we'll carry that over until next year. And by next year, if you need anything, I'll furnish it to you." But he never gave the farmer a penny. This "sharecropper" would still be indebted to the owner of the land, and the owner would never clear out the sharecropper. So he always owed him something. And the next year, it was the

same thing. Maybe with $10,000, maybe $12,000. You still owe me. He would deduct again, saying, "Don't worry. I'll take care of you again next year. I'll take care of your children, and I'll just carry this balance over, because I know you don't have the money." This would go on and on with the sharecroppers throughout the years, not just in Mississippi, but throughout the South. You'd be taken care of, but at the end of the season, when they brought the crop in, you made a lot of money, but you always owed more than you made. This was the philosophy of the South; this was the way they lived. It was slave labor, all the way down the line. But at the time, no one thought things would ever change.

One interesting thing about Mississippi at that time, was that it was a dry state. No liquor allowed. Now we needed wine for Kiddush, so there was a special permit I would get as the rabbi to be able to buy wine for the congregation. My predecessor did the same thing. Everyone wanted wine, and he was making a fortune. One day he was driving down the road in Mississippi, and his car turned over and all these cases of wine fell out all over the street, and he was in hot water. Even religious guys, if they could exploit the law, get around the law, they would. So this is what went on in Mississippi. But, you know, Mississippi isn't dry today.

One of my duties, something I was not too familiar with when I first came to Greenwood, was the *Chevra Kadisha,* or Jewish burial society. The rabbi in a small community in the South had to take part in every little thing. Well, there happened to be one of the members in my *shul* who was sick, and he called me and he said, "Rabbi Atlas, I want you to promise me that if anything happens to me, I want you to be with the *Chevra Kadisha* to see that everything is done *al pi halacha*, or done by Jewish law." I said, "Fine, I'll be with the *Chevra*

Kadisha." I assumed they knew what they were doing and I would watch. As I was standing there, they were preparing everything, doing the *tahara*, or washing of the body during the preparations for burial, etc., and one of the deceased man's business competitors, who was also on the *Chevra Kadisha*, turned him over to wash and pour the water over his body, patted him on his back and said, "I got you this time, my friend." Well, when I heard that, I was flabbergasted! Here I was a young man—I had never been with the *Chevra Kadisha* — and to see the frivolity that went on in a place as sacred as this, I didn't know what to think or say. But, this is what happened and I was very saddened.

The man died in August and the funeral was on a Sunday. He was a past president of the *shul* and they brought the body into the *shul* for the service. From two to three blocks away, you could detect the odor because of the heat, as there was no air conditioning in those days. They used ice, but it didn't help. We got closer to the *shul* and the *shul* was packed. The same man from the *Chevra Kadisha* who made the comment was standing at the door, as he was one of the outstanding members of the *shul*. As I approached and we could detect the odor, he turned to me and said, "You see, Rabbi, *ala tzadikkim, stinkin'*." This meant that all righteous people smell! This was the frivolity that they used in those days. Thank G-d this only happened this one time that I know of. I certainly hope that it never happened again.

While I was in Greenwood, I had to supplement my income by selling kosher meat, doing some *shechting* (I was also a *shochet*), and selling *matzah*, wine and Passover items. (The closest place to Greenwood for kosher items at that time was Memphis, Tennessee, which was 120 miles away. There was nothing available in Greenwood.) My salary from the *shul* in

Greenwood was itself very minimal, because the *shul* membership of about 75 people were mostly European and did not believe in paying a rabbi a living wage. They still subscribed to the philosophy of the old country, and wanted to pay the rabbi a "European wage" (eggs, chickens, etc.). So I had to make do from other things, like selling wine, *matzahs*, Passover products and meats. But luckily, I knew how to do many things, so it wasn't such a bad deal, and actually, my "side" jobs turned out to be fairly profitable in those days. In fact, my income from these activities was even more than my salary. It would have been difficult to make ends meet without this extra income.

During my position in Greenwood, the Second World War was going on. There was a tradition in the American army that the servicemen, the plain soldiers, the sergeants and the first class corporals, were not allowed to mingle with the commissioned officers such as lieutenants and captains. When Pesach came around we always had 20 or 30 people at our table. We had no children, just the two of us, and there was a large group of soldiers from New York, and from other places up North, very Orthodox boys who transferred to the South. They'd never been to the South, especially Mississippi. They were stationed at Grenada Air Force Base, which was approximately 40 miles from Greenwood. We invited these soldiers to come for Pesach and to have the Seder with us. Well, it was illegal for them to sit together or to fraternize. They couldn't even speak to each other. So we had to have different groups, the commissioned officers in one room and the non-commissioned or plain soldiers in the other room. This is how our Pesach and other gatherings went on. Even any time in *shul*, they could not mix; they could not talk to one another. They had to be completely separated. Thank G-d this rule does not exist today. There is more contact

between men and women in the armed forces, and they can fraternize easily.

It happened one night that a religious young man, a serviceman from New York, called me on the phone and said he would like to get married. He wanted to come and see me. So I made an appointment with him. He came with his fiancée, and we made up that the following Saturday night, *motzei Shabbos*, after *Shabbos* ended, I would perform the wedding in the *shul*. I informed the congregation and the officers of the Sisterhood and they prepared a very beautiful buffet for after the wedding Saturday night and the whole *shul* was going to come and make this young man and his bride feel at home. It was to be a beautiful wedding with everything possible in order to make them welcome in our community. Being that it was wartime, everyone was very anxious to accommodate the soldiers and help them in every way.

We called the wedding for eight o'clock Saturday night because it was the wintertime and the days were short. Everyone arrived at the shul *motzei Shabbos* at eight o'clock sharp. The *shul* was packed with all the people. At eight thirty we were still waiting, but still there was no bride or groom. At nine o'clock, still no one showed. We waited until midnight and then we went home. We were all very disappointed and quite concerned. We felt something bad had happened because the couple were most anxious to have an Orthodox wedding. They were religious people.

At about two o'clock in the morning, the phone rang, and it was the young man. He was very upset. He had failed to salute a 2nd Lieutenant, which was a great, horrible crime, and he was restricted to the base and could not get off. But now he was getting a cab and he was going to crawl under the fence, and he was going to meet his fiancée and they were going to

come to the *shul* if I would perform the wedding. Well, I told him, at two o'clock in the morning, it would be very difficult. I couldn't possibly get people out, but he begged me because they'd have no other chance. So I said, "Okay, you come on, and I'll get two witnesses so I'll be able to perform the wedding." I was hesitant to call anyone at that hour, but this was wartime and we had to extend ourselves for the Jewish soldiers when they needed us.

It was pouring cats and dogs. I had the two witnesses, and the couple arrived. I gave them the *chuppah kiddushim*, or part of the religious wedding ceremony, and when I got through I said, "Now, you may kiss your bride." The groom said, "Rabbi, I have no time for that." And with that he ran right off the pulpit dragging his bride into a waiting cab and they went right back to the air base. So this was just one of those very interesting things that happened during the Second World War. But, I'm happy to say the couple were very happily married and they had children later on. So, I was happy that I had something to do with this. A few years later, I met them in New York and thank G-d they and their lovely children were doing well.

Now there was another situation, where I had a young man come to me who wanted to get married and I told him I could not marry him. I needed some proof that he was Jewish, or that the bride was Jewish. Well, he was, but she wasn't. In those days, even if you weren't Orthodox, you wanted an Orthodox rabbi to perform the wedding so that your offspring would be accepted. But I wouldn't budge, so the couple went to a Reform rabbi and the wedding took place. That was unusual for the time, because Reform rabbis were not really performing weddings. But it was wartime, and soldiers wanted to get married before they went overseas. The war brought many changes.

There also happened to be another incident of a young man, a colonel, who called me to get married and he brought his fiancée over and I met her and we had planned the wedding for a week or two later. Soon after, I received a call from another officer who said, "Rabbi Atlas, I want to make you aware that this colonel is marrying out of his religion. She is not Jewish." I said, "How can you say that?" He said, "I'm telling you, she is not Jewish." So, I said, "Thank you very much." I called the colonel and said, "I'd like to see you."

The colonel came over and I said, "I was informed that your fiancée is not Jewish. Is that true?" He said, "Yes, Rabbi. That is true. My grandfather is a very Orthodox rabbi, well known, very well respected, and if he knew I married a non-Jewish girl it would kill him. I'm willing to pay you whatever it takes." I said, "I appreciate that, but there is no money that will change my mind. I will not marry a Jew to a non-Jew." He pleaded, "Rabbi, I will offer you anything." He offered me up to $10,000 if I would please solemnize the wedding so that he could show his grandfather that he had a Jewish *ketubah*, or Jewish marriage certificate, and that he was married *al pi halachah,* or according to Jewish law. I wouldn't do it and to this day I think of how many rabbis were probably taken in in those days since $10,000 or even $5,000 was a lot of money, especially during the Depression.

Another very interesting happening in Greenwood, when we first came there, was that one of the elderly women felt that she knew more than the rabbis. One day she said, "Do you have *smicha*?" And I said, "Yes." "Well, I would like to see them to make sure." I said, "Fine." When I came home I told Beverly, *olov hashalom*, or may she rest in peace, "I'm going to have some fun. I'm going to see how much the woman really knows. I'm going to take her my *ketubah*, and see what she

says." Beverly said, "Oh, don't do that. You might be embarrassed. If she can recognize it, how will you feel?" I said, "Well, I can easily say, 'Oh, I made a mistake. I took out the wrong paper, but I'll bring it to you tomorrow.'"

Well, I took the *ketubah* and I told her, "Would you like to see my *smicha*?" She said, "Oh, yes." I gave it to her. She looked. It was all in Hebrew. She looked and looked, and then said, "Oh, this is the most beautiful *smicha* I've ever seen! I'm going to tell my son, the president of the *shul*, that you have the best *smicha* I have ever seen, and I want to congratulate you on this." Well, you can imagine how humorous this was to us. But it shows you the type of people in those days that we had to deal with. (This woman was from Europe and since she spoke Yiddish, she assumed she was more learned than rabbis or *shochets* if they could not speak Yiddish. But of course, I did speak Yiddish.)

There was one *Shabbos* afternoon that due to the rain and flooding that we had, the Jewish cemetery was overflowing and all the coffins had risen out of the graves and were floating around in the cemetery like boats. We had to do something about it. Of course, it was *Shabbos* and there was very little we could do, but we waited until after *Shabbos*, and the next day we hired quite a few men and went out to the cemetery. We had to reinsert all of the coffins in the graves and then they took other coffins and filled them up with rocks and stones and put them on top of the original coffins to weigh them down and keep them from floating up again. This was a very unusual, yet tragic situation but there was quite a floody season at that particular time, and right or wrong the cemetery wasn't fixed. Although this was something that had never been seen before, now the cemetery is on higher ground so that this will never happen again.

Since Memphis was the closest Jewish community to Greenwood at the time, Beverly *olov hashalom*, and I would get in the car on a Sunday or during the week and drive 120 miles (gasoline was less than 5 cents/gallon) to Memphis to visit the kosher delicatessen, or the kosher meat market, to buy food, and to have a corned beef sandwich. We missed so much being away from that so we would spend the whole day in Memphis and we would meet a lot of our friends and have a good time and then we would return back to Greenwood with all of our kosher supplies.

Services were conducted throughout the year in Greenwood. In the summer, we had Hebrew school, and then we would let the kids go into the *shul*'s *mikvah* to swim. Because there was no swimming pool around they used the *mikvah* as a swimming pool. After their swimming, we had a good time. We would go outside. We had picnic tables set up and we would buy half a dozen large watermelons and split them in quarters and everybody would sit around and have a watermelon party. The *mikvah* swimming and the watermelon parties were the highlights of the Hebrew school in the summer. Of course there was no air conditioning and the heat was terrific. But this was a way of cooling off. Everyone had a hand fan passed out by the funeral homes, and this kept us cool on the hottest days. But back then, no one seemed to mind the heat as we do today.

On *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*, we hired a *chazan* who came from a different town. He was a very nice middle-aged man, and he did a beautiful job. He appeared to be very religious and therefore we invited him to eat and sleep in our home. When *Yom Kippur* was over, we broke the fast together. The man sat at our table, took off his *yarmulke*, and didn't wash or *bentch* (say the blessing after eating a meal). So I asked him,

"What happened? Where is your *yarmulke*?" He said, "Rabbi Atlas, I was paid to be the *chazan* for *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*, but *Yom Kippur* is over. I don't have to be religious anymore. I was paid to be religious on those days, but in reality, I'm not religious." This was quite a shock to see a man give up his religion right when *Yom Kippur* was over just because he wasn't going to be paid for it anymore. Well, this was part of my experience in my first position. You know, sometimes you get a man who you think is going to be observant and in reality he is not. This was the only time I had a non-religious cantor, and I regret that this happened.

Another incident that happened one *Yom Kippur* in Greenwood occurred during the selling of the *aliyahs*. They always sold the *aliyahs* in those days to make money for the *shul*. One of the big Jewish plantation owners paid $100 for an *aliyah* and that was a tremendous amount of money at that time, during the Second World War. When the man came up to the *bimah*, he asked me: "Rabbi, what do I do?" So, I told him, "You make a *brocha*." He said, "Rabbi, I only know one *brocha*." When I asked him, "Which one?" he said: "*Hamotzei*." I figured that if he was giving $100 to the shul, he could make whatever *brocha* he wanted. So I told him: "Make *Hamotzei*"—which he did, and was quite proud. Although it surprised some people, I was proud as well that I had made him feel so good, while also raising $100 for the *shul*. After that, I told the man the real prayer and he repeated it after me, and we were both happy.

There were no houses to be had in Greenwood at that time since it was the middle of the Second World War. So Beverly and I had to rent a room—that's all we had, one room across from the *shul*. There was no kitchen. It was just a plain bedroom. We would have salami, which we brought from Memphis, and

we would eat with one of the members of the *shul* who kept kosher on *Shabbos* and *Yom Tov* (the Jewish holidays). But most of our meals were in that one room and we enjoyed just salami sandwiches and we got used to that. To this present day I enjoy having a salami sandwich.



House across the street from Ahavas Reyim. Beverly and I rented the front room on the right as you walk in, from the Orlansky family

Once we moved into our house, a rabbi from Israel came to visit us. He was collecting money and made a nice few dollars, and there was only one place that he could eat and that was in our home. As he was leaving Greenwood, to travel to Clarksdale, Mississippi, another town 50 miles away, to take up some more collections, we asked him if he'd like to take a lunch with him since there was nothing kosher there. "We'll make you some sandwiches," we told him. So he asked in Yiddish, "Is the bread *untegeshmert* (which means was there lard on the

bread)?" He was very, very observant. And we said, "Of course not! You know that. Had you thought that, you wouldn't have eaten it to begin with." Well, we made him sandwiches and he took off for Clarksdale, Mississippi. Four or five hours later, I got a call from the police in Clarksdale. "Rabbi, do you know Rabbi so-and-so?" I said, "Yes, I do. Why?" They answered, "Well, we have him in jail." I said, "Well, what is he doing there? What did the man do? What crime?" They said, "Well, we caught him in a motel with a black woman. And you know by the laws of Mississippi, we have the law of segregation. And this is illegal and we had to arrest the man." Our first thought was that he was so concerned that the bread we'd given him not be made with lard, and yet here he'd committed a crime, which he didn't seem too concerned about. So I had to go to Clarksdale to bail the man out. It was the most embarrassing situation, something I never expected to happen to such a man. Again, this was a shameful experience that not too many rabbis have come across, and thank G-d it never happened again.

While I was living in Greenwood, the principal of the public school (the school that I attended as a child) knocked on the door of our home one day and asked Beverly, *olov hashalom,* if this is where Rabbi Atlas lives. She said, "Yes." The principal said, "I'd like to see him." Beverly asked, "What is the reason?" The principal said, "Well, I was a classmate of his in school way back when we were kids and he was always fighting with the boys. I always thought he would end up in prison, but instead I see he has become a rabbi." Well, I did fight. I had a lot going on because of anti-Semitism and I had to protect myself, and they knew I would not take it from anybody. (In those days, if you didn't fight and protect yourself, you would have suffered greatly and would not have survived the anti-Semitism.) When

the principal met me, she was very happy to see that I had turned out better than she thought I would.

One of the trying situations I had in Greenwood during the Second World War was when one of my members had a son who had volunteered for the Army Air Force. He was a gunner on a bomber plane and *Erev Yom Kippur* while we were all in *shul* the father received notice that his son was missing in action. I need not tell you how distraught the whole congregation was and we were all praying for his welfare. After *Yom Kippur*, a man, another collector, traveled through town and heard the situation. He said to the congregant, the father of the missing boy, "You know if you give me X amount of dollars, I will say a special prayer and your son will be returned safely. There will be no problem." Of course, the father wanted to kill this man for even saying such a thing. How could he think he'd say a special prayer for some money and that would bring him back? But they would do anything in those days to make a dollar. Unfortunately, this young man was never found. He was shot down over Japan. It was very sad. But the situation turned out that the collector had to leave town never to come back to Greenwood as no one had any feelings for him, and would never give him any help or donations for the institution he represented (which was himself!)

During the time I was in Greenwood, I applied to the Masonic Lodge as a member. When someone applies to be a member of a Lodge, a committee makes a thorough investigation of his moral character as well as any "ills" in his past. One of my members, a dear friend of mine, was jealous because I had given my application to someone else to submit, and he said that because of that he would blackball me as a member so that I would not be accepted in the Lodge. Some of the non-Jewish members of the Lodge who knew me became

aware of this and threatened my member with bodily harm if he blackballed me. (It was rough in those days!) Ultimately, I was admitted and became very active in the Masonic Lodge as well as in Scottish Rite and the Shriners for many years. And this particular member and I later became good friends again.



Induction ceremony for Scottish Rite, at which I was the orator (1946). I am fourth from the left, in the first row standing.

Things went well for us in Greenwood until a particular incident. Another synagogue member and close friend of mine had a son and I went to the *bris*, or circumcision, though I was not the *mohel*, or the one who performs the *bris*. The *mohel* was brought in from Memphis. The *bris* was on a Friday and the baby was in the hospital. At that time we had no *minyan*, or group of 10 men needed for prayer services, on *Shabbos* be-

cause there weren't enough people unless there was a *yahrzeit*, or the commemoration of a loved one's death. Beverly and I were eating *Shabbos* lunch. The father of the baby came in and he said, "Rabbi, would you please go with the *mohel* to the hospital to check on the baby?" I said, "I'll be very happy to." He said, "Are you ready?" I answered, "Well, I just made *kiddush* (the blessing over wine); I just washed, and as soon as I get through eating..." He said, "No, I don't want you to wait, I want you to go right now." I said, "But you see, I'm in the middle of *Shabbos*; I'm eating. After we eat and *bentch*..." In an angry tone, he said, "No, if you don't go right now, you can forget it." And he stomped out of the house. I felt badly that he was upset but I could not see any purpose in rushing out to go to the hospital. They had had plenty of time.

Well, I was not to hear the end of this. On the following Sunday there was a board meeting of the congregation to discuss my meager salary of $160 a month. In order to pay bills and support my family I needed to make more money and so I asked the *shul* to raise my salary to $200, which was quite a bit of money back then. Well, this young man, the father of the baby in the hospital, happened to also be the treasurer of the *shul* and his brother-in-law happened to be the president. I always insisted that I must attend every board meeting. If anyone wanted to talk badly about me, I wanted to be there to defend myself. I do not believe that a rabbi should make himself absent from these types of meetings. So I went to this meeting to discuss my salary. The board members said I had asked for this increase and everybody was in favor of it. Suddenly, the father of the baby stood up and said, "If you give Rabbi Atlas this raise, I resign as a member of this *shul*. He wouldn't go when I asked him to go to check on my son." With that he sat down and I stood up. I said, "Gentlemen, you know in Mississippi

you don't find Jewish people under the bushes or all around. It's hard to find too many Jews, but maybe you can find many rabbis. Therefore, I submit my resignation as rabbi, and you must keep this man as a member of the *shul.* And, I thank you, I've enjoyed being your rabbi." With that, I walked out of the *shul.*

Well, you can imagine the turmoil that took place. Everyone said, "Rabbi, don't do it, you're making a mistake." I said, "I'm sorry that he is more important to you than I am." I came home and told my wife, "Well, I'm without a job. I'm one of the unemployed." I told her what happened. She said, "We'll find something." I said, "I'm sure. I'm not worried." My wife, Beverly, was my support at all times, and very positive, always encouraging me when necessary.

CHAPTER 3

MONTGOMERY, ALABAMA 1946-1956

I wasn't unemployed for long. I happened to open up the *Jewish Post and Opinion*, and saw an ad for a rabbi and *shochet* in the town of Montgomery, Alabama. Since I happened to be both, I picked up the phone and called. I spoke to the president of the *shul*, who said, "When can you come in for an interview?" I said, "I'll come next *Shabbos*." We drove to Montgomery, which was 300 miles away. We were there for the next Shabbos, and spent the week in Montgomery. Without hesitation they offered me the position. The job wasn't a $200 a month position, but rather $600 a month! So you see, *Hashem*, G-d, was with me, and everything worked out beautifully. Beverly and I were both very happy and looked forward to the move from Mississippi to Alabama.

The president of my new *shul* in Montgomery was a second-hand furniture maker. When we first arrived, we rented an apartment from him and he furnished the apartment because we had no furniture at that time. One day he came in and said, "I just sold the couch." So he would take the couch out and he'd say, "I'll bring you another one tomorrow." The next day he'd come back and say, "I just sold the dining room table,"

and he'd take that out too. This went on for about six or seven months. Every day he would take one piece of furniture out and bring another piece in. But he was a man with a heart of gold. He would do anything for anybody. He was always jolly and loved to sing Yiddish songs. And we were very, very fond of him. But he thought he was doing us a favor by changing the furniture from day to day. It was right after the War and there wasn't too much you could do about this. There were no homes available, so we had to be satisfied with rentals until we could better ourselves. Nevertheless, we were very happy.

Montgomery marked the beginning of my active rabbinate in large communities, and I faced a number of challenges right from the start. I had to fight tooth and nail for separation of men and women with a *mechitza*. There was a balcony, and I had a job to keep people separated. But this was back in the '40s and '50s. It was not like it is today. The members were not as religious as they are today. Regardless, I enjoyed this community very much. I was there for 10 years, from 1946 to 1956. No rabbi prior to me had ever stayed for so long, and nobody has since.

However, there were many "incidents" in Montgomery. First of all, we needed a kosher butcher because the *shochet* had recently died. Members wanted a nonreligious member of the *shul* to be the kosher butcher, but he was not *Shomer Shabbos*, or keeper of the Sabbath, didn't keep kosher and had intermarriages in his family. Well, I was at the board meeting, and I told them, "I'm awfully sorry but I will not permit this individual to be the kosher butcher. It is against all *halacha* (Jewish law)." Well, the president became very angry and started screaming, "Rabbi, every time we come up with an idea you throw cold water on it! And this is what we want." And he let me have it in an unkindly manner. And, so, I stood up and I addressed

him, "Mr. President, let me explain one thing to you. I can do what you can do, but you can't do what I can do. You're a businessman and I can be a businessman. But, I'm a rabbi and you cannot be a rabbi. This is my ruling and this is the way it will be regardless of what you want. My ruling is final." I need not tell you of the reaction and turmoil this left, and the meeting was adjourned.

The next day it was all over town that Rabbi Atlas spoke back to this individual who was a very, very rich man, and a very, very hard man, so much so that his father who was president before him had slapped my predecessor, a good friend of mine, on the pulpit in *shul Erev Yom Kippur* because he did not like his sermon. People were afraid that I would get into fistfights with him, too, but of course there was no such thing. This was one of the incidents that I went through.

We still needed a *shochet*, though, since I would not permit this nonreligious man to open a kosher market. It was at the end of the War and in New York they had an organization for the displaced European Jews. I called the rabbi in charge, Rabbi Trainen, in New York. I knew him and told him we need a *shochet* and a butcher. We wanted to have a butcher that could also operate a kosher market (in those days the *shochet* would run the kosher market). So he said they had one man who would fit all our needs. "He's a *Talmud chacham*; he's an educated man. He knows how to learn. He's a good *shochet*, a man with a full-grown beard, very *frum*, and he will fit your bill of sale," he told me. I asked that he come down to Montgomery for an interview. We arranged the time he was to arrive and that I would meet him.

I went down to the train station to meet him. And I waited. All the passengers got off. I didn't see anybody with a beard. I became very disappointed. As I walked, I noticed some little

man had opened his suitcase and was throwing papers back and forth and seemed to be talking to himself in Yiddish. So I walked over to him and listened for a moment and asked, "Are you Reverend Merenstein?" "Yo, yo, yo," "Yes, yes, yes," he said. But he continued to rattle his papers. I said, "Well, I'm Rabbi Atlas. I came to pick you up." Of course I spoke to him in Yiddish. So he stopped for a minute and said he was looking for his papers, his letters of recommendation, etc., and he couldn't find them. I said, "Well, don't worry. I'll take you to my house, you'll open your suitcase, I'm sure you will find them. By the way, they told me you had a beard. What happened? You're clean shaven." I would soon learn his story. But first, when we got to my house, he said, "Oh, I don't feel good." I said, "What's wrong?" He didn't know. He just didn't feel good. Something was wrong. I said, "Well you know, you're in America, and in America we have all kinds of 'quick fix' medicine. Makes you feel good in a moment." He said, "What have you got?" I said, "I'll be glad to give it to you." So I went and got a couple of Bayer aspirin. He didn't know what that was. I gave him the Bayer aspirin. He swallowed them. As soon as he swallowed them, he said, "That is a miracle drug. I feel fine. Now, what kind of medicine is that? I'll have to buy some." I said, "Don't worry. You'll learn about the medicine in America. America is the best country in the world and we have every kind of *refuah* (healing), every kind of medication needed for whatever may bother you."

Now his story spilled out. He and his wife were in Penn Station in New York when he went into the men's room. (His wife remained seated outside). While he was in the men's room, a man spoke to him. He could see he was Jewish, and said, "Where are you going?" He answered, "Montgomery, Alabama." He said, "You're going to Montgomery, Alabama

with a beard? Have you ever heard of the Ku Klux Klan?" He said, "No." "Well, the Ku Klux Klan is a big anti-Semitic organization. They see you with the beard, they'll kill you." So, the *shochet* got frightened. He had this kosher powder that they put on the face to take off the hairs. He put that all over, got rid of his whole beard, and burnt his whole face up. He came back out and he sat down right next to his wife and started talking. Well, she looked at him and said, "Get away from me! Get away from me!" She didn't know that this was her husband! So this is how he came without a beard. We hired him and he was well accepted.

And he was my *shochet*, and a very good *shochet*. And he also came as a butcher. Well, when I discussed everything with him and brought it up to the congregation, they accepted him. Now the *shul* had a butcher shop, a kosher market. And he was doing the slaughtering. I was going to the slaughterhouse with him to see that he knew what he was doing and then they were going to get the meat, and he was going to handle the meat and sell it to the members. Well, it turned out that he didn't know anything about being a butcher, because to him, a *katzveh,* a butcher, in Europe skinned the animals, took the skin off of the cow, but he had no idea how to cut meat for a roast, steak, chop. Well, here I'd told the congregation what I'd gone through to finally get them a *shochet*, since I objected to the one they wanted. Now I felt sorry for the congregation, and I felt sorry for him.

But I happened to have learned every aspect of the rabbinate, including *shechita* (kosher butchering) and everything else along these lines. So I spoke to the man and said, "I'll tell you what. Don't say anything to anybody. When you get the meat in the market, I'll show you what to do and how to *treiba*, or take out the veins of the animal, and make everything kosher.

You'll pull the shades down at night. I'll go in with you after dark, and I'll show you how to cut the meat and display it. When the customers come in the morning, everything will be on trays and ready to sell. Don't tell them who did it or who showed you. No one will ever know the difference." I worked with him for six months until he knew exactly what he was doing and no one ever knew that he came there not knowing anything about being a butcher. I felt good that I brought a man, a religious man, that could become a kosher butcher for the community of Montgomery, and to me this was a *mitzvah*, or good deed, that I cherished.

This same young man, our new butcher, did not know too much about the American way. He had just come out of the concentration camp. He was in slave labor in Europe. But he was a great blessing to our community. We enjoyed him very much and he was a big *Talmud chacham*. He was a beautiful *baal korei* (prayer leader), and he *davened* nicely, but unfortunately, he never had any children. We became very friendly with him and his wife, and we were like their adopted children, or adopted brother and sister. Until this present time, I am very friendly with his widow after over 50 years that we know one another.

One of the incidents that occurred during that time had to do with the mothers that believed in a philosophy that you don't ever correct a child. If you correct the child, you can "frustrate" the child. The child should have the free will to do whatever he would like to do. Well, personally, I didn't go for this, but I had a member, a doctor, who had very, very fine children. I happened to be at her house one day as I was invited for lunch. Later, I had a wedding so I was all dressed up in my white linen suit. Her child was sitting right next to me. In the middle of the meal, he took a glass of iced tea, stood up on his

chair and poured it all over me, from the top of my head down all over me. I was soaking wet. His mother didn't say a word to the child. She said, "Rabbi, you have to let a child express himself." I was ready to express myself, but I held back. Later on, a few weeks later, in this same home, we had a sisterhood meeting in their living room. The same little child walked in front of all the ladies with his little potty. He sat down and did his business. And that was it. His mother said, "Now, Rabbi, this is a child that has to express himself." Well, this was the philosophy of some people in those days. But, thank G-d, today I believe that things have changed.

Another very important incident happened one night when Beverly *olov hashalom* was with the women at a meeting, and I was home by myself. I heard a knock at the front door, and went to see who was out there. There were two detectives. I opened the door and let them come in. I said, "Yes, can I help you?" "Do you know (they gave me a man's name) Mr. So and So?" I said, "No, but I've spoken to him on the phone." They said, "Well, he just came in to town. We were on the same plane and we were following him and he will be calling you very shortly and we'd like to listen in on the conversation. Would you let us do that?" I was flabbergasted. I said, "Explain to me what's going on." Meanwhile, I called Beverly to come home. I didn't know what the situation was. But before I explain to you what they did, let me explain the situation that had happened.

I had several members in my congregation who were barren. They had no children, and they couldn't have children. And, they wanted to know if I could help them adopt children. Well, I had no way of knowing about adoption. I didn't get involved in that. But one of the members of my congregation, a European couple, had adopted a little girl. And the husband came over to me and said, "If you want, I'll put you in touch

with someone that you can maybe get some help in adopting children." He gave me a name of a man. I contacted him in New York and I explained who gave me his name, and I said, "Can you do anything about this situation?" He said, "Well, I'll see what I can do. I don't guarantee anything, but it's a very difficult situation. Give me some time." I said, "Fine."

Well, it wasn't too long after that that he called me; he said he had a little boy who was going to be up for adoption if I would be interested. So I contacted a family, and they said, yes, they would be very interested. He said, "Of course, you know there's an expense involved, the hospital, the doctors, etc., and the fee would be $2500." So, I checked back with the family and they said, "That's fine." Well, they adopted that child, and then he asked me if there were any others he could help to adopt. So this is what the situation was.

When these detectives came to the house they said this particular man had just left New York and they'd been following him, but he didn't know who they were or that they would be here. Sure enough the phone rang, and I had two phones in the house so they asked me if this was the man to give them a signal and they'd pick up the other phone. Well, it was the man, and they picked up the phone. And so he began talking to me about everything under the sun, not mentioning the child, and then he said, "By the way, I have a bundle that I can get to you. When would you like to have it delivered?" I said, "A bundle?" He said, "Well, you know what I mean." Then I realized what he was talking about. So, I made up with him, and said, "Fine, we'll see in 3, 4 or 5 months," and that was the end of the conversation.

The detectives told me what the situation was. This man, a Jewish man in New York, had a baby farm in the Catskill Mountains. He had young girls that he put on the farm. He

would get them pregnant by bringing young men to get them pregnant. And they would sell these children for $2500 a child. I'd never heard of such a horrible thing. So they said, "Would you be willing to come to New York to testify?" I said, "Not really. I wouldn't care to. I don't want to." They said, "Well you know if you won't, we can have you subpoenaed." Well, I didn't want any subpoena and I didn't want to go to New York. But, I finally relented, and I said, "Okay, I'll be glad to go and tell you what I know," because I thought this was a horrible situation and I didn't want my name to be ruined over this.

They bought me the tickets. I made reservations. I flew to New York. I told my congregation. They were very upset. They were afraid I'd get in trouble, get them in trouble. When I got off the plane in New York, these two detectives met me and they took me to see the District Attorney, Ed Silver, a very nice man. He was one of the original founders of the Young Israel, very Orthodox, very nice, and very friendly. And he said, "Rabbi Atlas, there is going to be a Grand Jury convening and we would like for you to appear before the Grand Jury and tell them what you know." I said, "Fine. What shall I tell them?" He said, "Well, tell them about this man calling you and how you got involved with him." I said, "Fine."

A few days later, I went to the Grand Jury and they interrogated me and I told them exactly as I'm telling you now what the situation was. They were ready to dismiss me, but there happened to be a black man on that Grand Jury, and he didn't want them to dismiss me. He knew I was from the South and he didn't like me because he thought as a white man I caused his people too much trouble, and he was very anti-Semitic. I was afraid I was going to be stuck there. But the District Attorney and the rest of the Grand Jury told him I had given my testimony and I could leave.

Well, I did leave and this man was arrested some years later. I understand he got quite a strict sentence and was jailed for a long time, but he claimed he was in the washing machine business and he was selling washing machines over the country. Well, this was one of the most important incidents that happened in Montgomery, and I was so thankful that I did not get involved in it, because it could have been very dangerous at that particular time.

But, this was the time when a lot of the young men came back from the Second World War and got married. Their wives couldn't have children for one reason or the other, and they were all trying to get adopted children. So, the situation there got me involved, but thank G-d it turned out beautifully.

My *shul* was across the street from a very large drugstore. And every year, the owner of the drugstore, a non-Jew, would call me and say, "Rabbi, when do you have that big holiday?" I would say, "Which holiday?" And he'd say, "The big holiday you have for a whole day. That's my biggest day of the year." Then I realized he was talking about *Yom Kippur*. He told me that he did more business that day than any other day of the year because the people would go in there since he had a little luncheonette and coffee shop, and they supported him on *Yom Kippur*.

One day, on *Rosh Hashanah*, I was walking home from *shul* and I got hit by a car, and I was in a lot of pain. The people helped me up and they wanted to take me to the hospital and I wouldn't go. I went home and called the doctor, and the doctor happened to be the president of the *shul*. He came over right away and told me I had to have an X-ray. Sure enough, my left arm was broken.

Well, this caused a lot of difficulty because in Montgomery, as rabbi, I not only had to *daven*, but also blow *shofar*, read

Torah, etc. I did everything. So on *Rosh Hashanah* I had to hold the *shofar*, but I couldn't hold it, because my arm was in such pain, and it was in a sling. So the doctor wanted to give me a shot so I wouldn't have any pain, and I would be able to hold the *shofar*.

Well, there was no alcohol in the *shul*. The doctor didn't have a medical kit, so he asked, "Is there a bottle of schnapps or whiskey here?" I knew there had to be because we used it for *kiddush*. So he took the whiskey and rubbed my arm and sterilized it with whiskey, and he gave me an injection so I wouldn't feel the pain as I lifted my arm to blow the *shofar*.

I got through, but then I collapsed. I was in such pain I couldn't take it, and I was sick for several days after that. But I felt I had a duty, and I had to go ahead and do what I had to do, and I never thought too much about myself. I felt the congregation came first. That was my philosophy all my life.

In Montgomery, I had a beautiful afternoon Hebrew school. It grew in leaps and bounds, and we even had a school bus. We bought the bus—and had a very fine driver—to pick the children up and take them home because they were scattered all over the town. The Hebrew school was very good, and we had many *bar mitzvah*s (in those days there were no *bat mitzvah*s). And the children learned from scratch. Even though there was no yeshiva with a day school since the Hebrew school was only an afternoon school, the children all learned how to *layn* (read the Torah), how to *daven Musaf*, and pray just like they do today. But, that was because I insisted, because I wanted them to know even though they did not go to yeshiva.

The community was a very nice community. Although there were very few *Shomer Shabbos* people, there were a couple of older people from Europe who kept kosher homes. They

were very traditional with the holidays, keeping everything that we keep today.

I had one member that had 12 children. And for 20 years, the husband and wife did not speak to one another. They each had their own bedrooms. They were European people and very stubborn people. I lived about a mile and a half from their home. When the man got sick, they would call me every day, Friday night especially, to come over to the house, since he wanted to say *Viduy* ("Confession"). I had to walk through the worst neighborhoods Friday nights, and I would get there and say *Viduy* with him. I thought, "Well, the next day he'll be gone," but the following Friday night it would happen again. This went on for a long time. Well, when he died, his wife being in another bedroom was also ill, such that she did not even know that her husband had died.

One day in our Sunday School, I was speaking to the children in the assembly, and I was talking about *kashrus*. I said, "The most important thing is that we do not eat pork." After Sunday School, everyone went home. Later, I received a phone call from one of my members. She said, "Rabbi, don't you ever talk to my children about not eating pork anymore!" I said, "Why not? What's wrong? You know we're not allowed to eat pork." She said, " Yes, I know, but in my home, every Sunday morning we have bacon and eggs, and my children are crazy about it, and I have no intention of stopping it. So I want you to know don't ever talk to my children about that—you can talk to the others, but not to my children."

Well, it so happened that the woman's father was a very good friend of mine, and he was a vice-president of the *shul*. He wasn't *Shomer Shabbos*, but he kept a kosher home and he was traditional as he could be. But his daughter did not want me to speak to her children about *kashrus* anymore! This was

the average type person in Alabama at that time. Of course, we had older ones who were *frum*, or religious, younger ones who couldn't care less, and those who just came out of the army who cared even less, and this happened to be one of those couples.

We were invited over to the home of one of my members on a Sunday afternoon for a little party. We went and had a very nice time. We were very friendly with these people. But then Monday I received a call from the FBI. "Rabbi Atlas, did you go to such and such a home yesterday for a party?" I said, "Yes, I did." "Do you know what kind of party it was?" I said, "Yes. It was just a get together. We had a good time. There was refreshments and talking." They said, "That's all you know?" I said, "That's all we did." "Do you know it was a Communist party?" I said, "What?!" He said, "You didn't know it was a Communist party?" I said, "Didn't know anything about that." I said, "By the way, how do you know I went there?" "Well, we were across the street in a house. We had our cameras aimed at that home and we have pictures of everybody who went in and left. And we want you to know that you were involved in a Communist party. That's what this was all about."

Well, I didn't know anything about it, of course. The FBI didn't do anything to me because I was an innocent bystander so to speak, but it was a party where this man, a member of the *shul*, ended up being a card-carrying Communist. He came to *shul* regularly. He was there not only for holidays, but *Shabbosim* as well, even though he was a Communist. And he was holding parties and getting all his friends involved. How many he got involved, how many knew about what was going on, I don't know, but at least I did attend one Communist party (albeit without knowing so).

In my early years as rabbi in Montgomery, I had a *gabbai*, or prayer leader, who was a very good friend (even though he also

happened to be a Communist). He always used to stand at the Torah as I would *layn,* or read the Torah. On *Rosh Hashanah*, he would go out. He was a heavy smoker, and he'd smoke a cigarette, and he'd come back in and stand next to me while I was *layning*. He would blow the smoke right in my face so that I should see that he was smoking. Well, that was *Rosh Hashanah*, but he also did the same thing on a *Shabbos* or *Yom Kippur*. But, thank G-d, we didn't have him up there too long.

But he was a nice guy, despite being an atheist and Communist. He always told me when he died, he wanted to make sure I'd make the *Chevra Kadisha* bury him face down so all of his friends could pass by him and show their respect. This is how he felt about religion. He had a very nice wife, who was very sweet. He was also very kind, very nice, but you can see what kind of religious person he was and how it was in those days.

While I was in Montgomery, we lost our first child, a stillborn. And one of my members came to me, a good friend of ours, and she said, "Rabbi, you're a rabbi. You're supposed to be above the average person. How could G-d do something like that and yet you can still believe in a G-d that would take your baby from you? I don't see how anybody could believe in G-d once this happened." Beverly and I were very distraught of course and very hurt that she made this remark to us. I remember telling her, "You know, Miriam, if you have faith in G-d, and if you believe and practice what you believe, if G-d does something like this, evidently there's a purpose, but I can assure you we will be rewarded, G-d willing, in the future, and this will be behind us. We will never forget, but we will have rewards." And, thank G-d, we were rewarded with three fine children all born in Montgomery.

It was during the polio epidemic in the country. One of my Sunday School teachers, a young lady, came to me and said, "Rabbi, I'm so afraid for my daughter, a young little girl, who might catch polio, and I think we ought to go North or something. What do you advise me to do?" I said, "Melba, if I were you, I would stay put, because this could be all over the country." Well, she did stay put and on *Yom Kippur*, in the middle of services, the president came to me and said, "Rabbi, I want you to know that Melba, the mother of this young child, has polio and she's in the hospital, and she will not let them touch her until you come to see her. And of course you know she is contagious, and it's very dangerous for you to go." I assured them that *motzei Yom Kippur*, after *Yom Kippur* was over, I'd see what I could do and go to the hospital and visit her, since there was nothing to be done immediately according to the doctors.

Well, as soon as the *shofar* was blown, I did go to the hospital, even though they did not want me to go in because she was highly contagious. But she refused to let the doctors or nurses touch her until I came, so they gowned me. I had on a cap, gown, mask, etc., and I went into the polio ward. And she was on the stretcher lying there, and she saw me and started to cry very bitterly. As I was talking to her, I watched as her arms and her legs went limp. She was paralyzed from her neck down. They immediately put her into an iron lung, and she was in that iron lung until she died several years later.

But we were very close. I had performed her wedding, and named her little daughter. I was very friendly with her parents and in-laws. And this young lady was a very, very religious and wonderful person, and very active in the synagogue. She used to love to sing, she was very personable and took part in all activities available.

Once they took her home, we used to visit her very frequently. And people and friends would come and all you could see was her head because she was enclosed in the iron lung, and she could only talk. Her friends would always inquire and ask: "Melba, how do you feel?" And she'd say, "Fine." And she'd ask them, "How do you feel?" Their response was, "Oh, I had such a horrible headache. I didn't sleep all night." So with that her response would be, "Tell me, can you scratch your nose?" Since she was paralyzed and couldn't move, she'd say, "Be thankful you can scratch your nose. Don't worry about your headache, because I can't scratch my nose when it itches. I can't do anything." And she taught people that they should not complain about the little things because things could be much worse. We were very friendly with her and suffered with her from this very horrible incident. But this was one of the unfortunate things that happened while we lived in Montgomery.

One other occasion I recall very vividly occurred one Friday when I was in my study. A young lady came in with a baby in her arms. I didn't know her. She said, "Rabbi, I want you to help me find someone to adopt my child." So I said, "Well, I have nothing to do with adoption, you'll have to go to Child Welfare, or to the City." She said, "No. I want you to take care of it." I said, "I am very sorry, but this is beyond my ability." She gave me her name. I said, "I'm sorry. I can't handle it." She pulled out a gun, and said, "Rabbi, if you don't help me with this, I'm going to kill the baby right in front of you and I'm going to kill you and myself also." Of course then I felt I didn't have much of a choice so I said, "Okay. Let me make a call to an attorney in the synagogue and see what we can do." So she waited and listened to my conversation. When I called him, he could hear the anxiety in my voice. I told him, "I have a very desperate young lady who wants to have her child adopted."

The attorney tried to get out of it, too. But I said, "No, this has to be taken care of today before *Shabbos*!" He realized that I was quite upset, and said, "Fine." He would see what he could do. So I waited until he called me back as he asked me to wait for his call. In the meantime, while he was making arrangements, I took the young lady home with me. Beverly saw what was going on, and she was very upset and worried about the whole situation. A while later, the lawyer called me and said he had someone who would take care of the adoption. Well, I took the baby to the lawyer and he had a member of my congregation who wanted the baby, and he proceeded to put the baby up for adoption. The mother was very happy about the situation. But, we really were not too happy in all honesty. Finally, she left and that was the end of that and we could breathe a sigh of relief and prepare for a happy and peaceful *Shabbos*.

During the summer this same young woman came to me and said, "You are going on vacation?" I said, "Yeah." She said, "Could I use your home while you're gone?" I asked, "For what reason? Don't you have a place of your own?" "Oh, yes," she answered, but she had something she had to take care of and she wanted to use my home as it would be more convenient. Well, with that, I realized she was a prostitute. I said, "I'm awfully sorry, but this is my home, I can't let my home be used by anybody, because I have certain things of privacy and my home is kosher and the religious aspects are not available to anyone." She insisted, but I said, "I'm sorry." I wouldn't let her use any of our facilities or have access to our home.

So, we went on vacation, and when we came back there was a subpoena for me to appear before a judge. I didn't know what it was all about. I went down to the court to ascertain its validity and learned that the woman who forced me to have her

child adopted was claiming that I took her baby and now she wanted her baby back.

The judge, however, happened to be a good friend of mine, Judge Hill, and he was from the big Hill family of Alabama. We were speaking, and he called me into his chambers. He said, "Rabbi, let me tell you something. Don't get involved with this woman. She's no good. I don't want you to go to court. I don't want you to have to answer to her. I don't want you to have anything to do with it. Rabbi, you ought to just let her have the baby back." I said, "Well, I don't have the baby. But she knows where the baby is." She had some people tracing the parents when they took the baby, and she knew just where the baby was, in another little town, Dothan, Alabama. He said, "If I were you, I wouldn't go to court and let them take her baby back."

Meanwhile, the Welfare Department got ahold of me and they too were very upset about the situation. "How dare you go above us and get someone else and use a lawyer for adoption," they said. I was very green in these matters. But to make a long story short, there was no problem. The woman got her baby back and I felt very sorry for the people who had adopted this baby because they endured tragedy upon tragedy. After the man and wife returned the baby, they went to their car, and as the husband opened his car door, his wife dropped dead, right there in his arms. The entire situation was just horrible.

The husband was in the hospital for quite a while. He had a breakdown. Later on he wanted to get married again. He did end up meeting somebody, and he brought the woman to me. I said, "To be honest with you I don't think she is for you, because I can see that she is someone who is trying to get all she can out of you." Soon, it came to a point where she would not leave him alone. He asked me, "What should I do?" I said,

"Well, if I were you, I just wouldn't have anything to do with her." She had a brother, who was a big lawyer from somewhere in Michigan. So, she told him one day that she spoke to her brother and her brother was going to sue him because she came down thinking he would marry her and now he changed his mind. And then she claimed she was pregnant. Well, he never had any relations with her so he knew it was a lie. The court didn't know what to do to resolve the case. The husband had a lawyer and I asked the lawyer, "Will the court deputize me and let me go with you to interview this woman, and perhaps we will be able to resolve the matter to the satisfaction of all parties?" I was deputized and we drove a distance at night to the court and the lawyer was trying to get this woman to cooperate to see what arrangements we could make for a settlement out of court. But whatever the lawyer would ask, she would give every excuse, continuing to say she was pregnant. Finally, we thought of a plan to put her on thin ice, and so we went to her, and the lawyer said, "Tell me something. You claim that you are pregnant." She said, "Yes." I said, "Are you positive?" She said, "I think so." Then I said, "Is it possible that you're not?" She answered, "Oh, yes, that's possible, too." So I said, "In other words you're not positive." She said, "Well, no, not really." Well, having been deputized, this was the message we wanted to hear. So we went back to see the man, who by now was back in the hospital. I said to him, "Let's make a settlement with this woman. You don't want to go through anything." He said, "Rabbi, give her $10,000 to get her out of my life. You handle it." I said, "Fine."

So I called her the next day and said, "I'd like to meet with you." She said, "I want a lot of money. My brother said I could get a lot of money because I'm pregnant." I said, "No, you're not. You proved that the other night. But I might be able to get

a $1,000 settlement for you if you want." She said, "You think you can do it?" I said, "I'll try." Well, since the young man told me he'd give her $10,000, I started low to have something to work with. She ended up taking $1,000 and left town. That was the end of her. But it took a great toll on the man, who had gone through the tragedy of losing his adopted baby and then his wife. This was the final straw that broke the camel's back.

The young man came from a very Orthodox, religious background, and everything seemed to go the wrong way. After his father died, I remained close friends with him and his mother. His mother couldn't thank me enough for the things I did for the family. We were like one big family, even though he was a little older than me, and he was a member of my *shul*, but she believed that I would work on his behalf, which I did. Anything that came along that I could help her with that was what I wanted to do.

It may be surprising to many people now, but when I lived in Montgomery, I was friendly with members of the Ku Klux Klan, because I was master of the Masonic Lodge, and a majority of the members of the Ku Klux were also members of the Masonic Lodge. How did I feel being in an organization with them? Well, I felt fine because we got along beautifully. They used to come to my house. There was one man who had asthma, and who could hardly breathe, and he said, "Rabbi, do you have any liquor at your home? Can I get a glass?" I said, "Sure come on over." So he came over, took one or two drinks, his asthma would clear up, he could breathe, and we were very good friends. And this would happen frequently, he'd bring another buddy, and they'd have a little drinking party. I never drank with them, but we became good friends. One day one of the "big wigs" from New York came down. He heard my lecture, and told me, "Rabbi Atlas, that was a mighty beautiful

lecture, but I'd like to challenge you." I said, "Challenge me?" And he said, "Yeah." I said, "What kind of a challenge?" He said, "I challenge you that if you die first I'll preach your funeral, and if I die first, you'll preach my funeral. Will you accept that challenge?" And I said, "Absolutely, on my condition." "What is your condition?" "That you die first." And thank G-d he did die first! But I didn't preach his funeral, because I was living in New Jersey at that time, and he was still in Alabama, and I didn't go back for it. But that's how friendly we were. But at the same time I was close to some members of the Ku Klux Klan, I was also close to the blacks.

I had no hatred for anybody, and truly, that's how I got to know Martin Luther King, Jr. The black community knew that I was very friendly with everybody. To me, I didn't look at your color, I didn't look at who you were. If you were a nice person I liked you, if you weren't a nice person, I didn't have anything to do with you. And from that, it grew into a friendship that my congregation resented. They didn't want me to be friends with the blacks. They didn't want me to be friends with anybody that might be against them. But still, that was my nature, and is until this very day. I don't feel any hatred against color, religion, or anything else. I've always been open.

I first met Martin Luther King, Jr. when he approached me on the street. His church and my *shul* were a block apart. We happened to be walking, and I greeted him, said "Hello" or "Good morning" or whatever, and that's when the conversation started. He had heard about me and said he'd like to learn to read Hebrew, because he wanted to know the Bible in Hebrew, the original, and could I teach him to read Hebrew? I said, "Sure. I'd be glad to teach you." He was not known at that time. It was way before integration and civil rights. He was just a plain preacher of a church. While the congregation had

no choice about having a black church right down the block, they felt that they did have a choice about other things. And they refused to let Martin Luther King come in through the front door of the *shul*. I had many black friends, who—if they wanted to see me—had to go through the kitchen. They could not come through the front. The board told me at a board meeting. "Rabbi, if you want to be friends that's your business, but they have no place in our *shul*. And if you want to bring them in, let them in through the back door." I wasn't going to buck the congregation on that; it wasn't that important. They came in through the back. I went in through the back myself many times too. Usually, when Martin Luther King came, there was nobody there except me. The congregation only came for services in the morning and evening, and he would come in the afternoon. I'd teach him for 30-40 minutes. He was an intelligent student, he had a D.D. (doctor of divinity), and he was just a nice, down-to-earth, plain, good fellow. His father was even more friendly. He was known as "Daddy King." A wonderful guy. A wonderful, old-type religious preacher. I knew Coretta and his kids too. I was in his church and I spoke in their assembly hall (the social hall, not the church *per se*), and I had his kids in my lap. Thought nothing of it. Later on, the FBI put out the rumor that Martin Luther King was a Communist. Martin Luther didn't know anything about that, because he was not a Communist. But then people told him to watch his back, and he got a few bodyguards. But this was still before the Civil Rights movement began.

The famous incident with Rosa Parks also happened while I lived in Montgomery. Rosa Parks was a seamstress in a department store in Montgomery. She was a quiet person who was unknown until she was arrested in December of 1955 for refusing to give up her seat on a segregated bus to a white passen-

ger. After her arrest, the blacks in Montgomery boycotted the segregated buses—they were trying to break the authorities of the bus companies, because if the blacks didn't ride the buses, the buses couldn't continue to run. The buses were empty, since most of the whites had their own cars—they didn't need the buses. With no passengers to ride the buses, the buses were put into storage. No one used them. Martin Luther King was the director of the boycott, and he was arrested during that time, and thrown in jail with Rosa Parks. The authorities felt that his preaching non-violence had caused violence to come into play, but his arrest as well as others only strengthened the will of the boycotters.

Rosa Parks had ridden the bus with our maid. Once the boycott started, I started to pick our maid up in the morning, and drive her home at night. In the morning, my car was covered with such hateful words as, "[N-word] lover." I had a special permit from the sheriff's office to carry a gun in my car, because it was very dangerous to try and do anything that would offend those that were for this segregation.

I never discussed what was happening with Rosa Parks, the boycott, and other such things with our maid—even though we were close. Maids would never even whisper the words "segregation" or "integration" in the house. You never heard a word from any of them—they were afraid to say anything. They used to say "the walls have ears." But I knew that our maid wouldn't dare take the bus, and I didn't want her to walk. I wanted to help her out, so I picked her up and drove her home each day.

When my congregants heard about the Rosa Parks incident on the news, they never said a word about it. They felt she was just another criminal, rightly thrown in jail, to serve time. That was the attitude. But she wasn't a criminal. She didn't do anything. She just didn't move—that wasn't a crime. Despite

my sympathy with her situation, I generally did not discuss my thoughts on the matter with my congregants.

At first, Rosa Parks' arrest really didn't affect anything or anybody in Montgomery. It was just another incident, on an ordinary day, and nobody cared one way or another. But things changed when the NAACP came in, and Martin Luther King's followers wouldn't let the matter rest. They went into court—to try to get her off—because she was being charged with a crime. But the court would not dismiss the charges, so they went into federal court, and ultimately, up to the Supreme Court. And that was really what started the whole Civil Rights movement, which led to the Civil Rights Act.

Although the boycott went on for almost a year, the Jews in Montgomery did not really talk about it. No one paid attention, because they were not really affected by the buses. While many people, like me, just started to take their maids in their cars and the richer people had their chauffeurs pick up their maids, they didn't feel that either Rosa Parks' arrest, or the boycott was the beginning of anything. They felt that Rosa Parks was in the minority, and that they couldn't do anything anyway. They had no clout, or say in the community, or the law, or anything else. But that one incident sparked another, and before they realized it, it boomeranged into the Civil Rights movement. And the Jews continued to keep silent, because they knew that they were partially responsible for it—by joining the White Citizens' Council, they contributed to the racial unrest that fueled the boycott. The White Citizens' Council was a segregationist organization that formed throughout the South in protest to the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education.* The White Citizens' Council met openly, included many civic leaders, allowed Jews, and was deemed more "respectable" than the Klan. White Citizens' Council members

generally tried to pressure supporters of integration through economic measures like rent increases, firings, and boycotts. They opposed the Klan's resort to violence.

The janitor of my synagogue was the transportation chairman for the people who refused to ride the bus. He told me that if I ever left the synagogue, he would leave too, because he knew how many of my officers and member had joined the White Citizens' Council. He felt that as long as I was there he would be protected. As it turned out, we both left the same day.

My problems in Montgomery started in early 1956, while the bus boycott was going on. I was asked to join an "interfaith trio" on the black radio station in Montgomery in honor of "Brotherhood Week." The other participants in the program were Father Michael Caswell (a Roman Catholic priest), and Reverend Ralph Abernathy (a well-known black Protestant minister, civil rights leader, and close friend of Martin Luther King). On the morning that our interfaith show was to air, Reverend Abernathy was arrested during a mass arrest of boycott leaders. Luckily, someone from one of the national news media bailed Reverend Abernathy out of jail, and brought him to the studio in time for the "Brotherhood Week" broadcast. Although Reverend Abernathy was quite upset at what had happened to him, he said that he held no malice or hatred towards anyone, and he pleaded with his people to unite and not to be violent or use force. I had great respect for him and admired his calm disposition under such trying circumstances (I doubt I would have handled the situation as well as he).

As we sat together for the radio broadcast waiting for Reverend Abernathy, a photographer from *Life* Magazine covering the boycott, came into the studio, and snapped a picture of me sitting at the table with Father Caswell and Reverend



The Life Magazine photo from Brotherhood Week, March 5, 1956, captioned: "Talking Tolerance, a boycott leader, Rev. L.R. Bennett (center), joins Father Michael Caswell, Rabbi Seymour Atlas on radio panel." (Don Cravens/Time-Life)

Bennett (another black civil rights leader, and leader of the boycott). When the *Life* story entitled "A Bold Boycott Goes On" came out on March 5, 1956, there was our picture from "Brotherhood Week" (right next to the mug shot of Martin Luther King right after he was jailed, and a picture of Rosa Parks being fingerprinted after her second arrest, a "near empty bus," the boycotters' solidarity meeting, and as *Life* termed it, the "worried governor" Jim Folsom). The caption under my picture was "Talking Tolerance," and *Life* identified me by name, with Father Caswell and Rev. Bennett. The boardmembers of my synagogue were beside themselves, and ordered me to immediately demand a "retraction" from *Life* with an explanation that "Brotherhood Week" had nothing to do with the boycott. When I refused, asking how I was supposed to retract

a picture, one of the board members (who was a prominent member of the White Citizens' Counsel) reminded me of what had happened to the prior rabbi—Rabbi Goldstein—because of his sermon condemning the conviction of the "Scottsboro boys." The boardmember suggested that I join the White Citizens' Counsel, but I politely told him that I would do no such thing.

This was around the time of the Suez Canal Crisis. Israel was actually sending pilots over to the Maxwell Air Force Base, to learn how to fly planes including jets. I met with many Israeli officers and pilots at the base, and they attended my synagogue. There happened to be a captain, who was a nurse. She was a black Jew, but not a convert, from New York. She called me one day and said she would like to find out about *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur* services. I told her to come to the *shul* and I would give her a bulletin and tell her everything about our community. When she came and I saw that she was black, I said, "Wait a minute. I'm going to have to bring this up to the board of the *shul* because I know from whence I speak." So I brought it up to the board, and at the board meeting, the same president who yelled at me about not wanting his non-religious butcher and who said I throw cold water on everything, spoke up and said, "Rabbi, my wife will not sit next to this blankety blank," using his foul language, "and no one else will sit next to her. My advice for you is to get her transferred out of the South." Well, I called her and I explained the situation. I did work with the general or the colonel in charge at that time and got her transferred to a Northern community where she did not have to contend with this. It was getting more and more difficult for me to tolerate the intolerant attitudes of my board members. But it was the next incident that angered my

board even more, and resulted in my decision to finally leave Montgomery.

During the Suez Canal Crisis, Eisenhower was president, and everyone was talking about averting the crisis by having the Jews and Arabs get together. So I decided to give a sermon on "integration" in Israel between these two groups, and planned to say that with the successful integration of the Arab minority with the Jewish majority, hopefully there would be no war. I titled my sermon "Social Integration," and submitted that title to the local paper prior to the weekend, as was my practice. Well, someone at the paper alerted the synagogue that I was going to speak about "integration." One of my boardmembers called me and begged me to change the topic, because it would be "bad for the Jews." I told him I did not need a topic as far as I was concerned but if it made him happier, I would oblige. I laughed to myself when I saw my entire board turn out in full force *Shabbos* morning. Most of them worked every *Shabbos* and never came to *shul*. But this *Shabbos*, they wanted to hear what I was going to say.

When I started talking about the social integration of the Arabs and Jews in Israel, my boardmembers were caught off guard, and some even felt that I had tried to humiliate them. They later told me that mentioning the word "integration"—even in this different context—was a no-no, because it implied that I was anti-segregation. And the president told me squarely, "Rabbi, you are *never* to speak on this topic. We want to see your speeches before you give them." I replied, "No one will ever see my speeches, or check my sermons." He said, "What do you mean? You're our employee. We have to approve the content." I said, "Not my sermons"—and that's what started the whole conflict with my board (many of whom, as I said, were White Citizens' Council members).

While most of my congregants were wonderful, I saw that with this handful of people on the board, I wasn't going to get anything accomplished. I told the board—let's get a meeting of the congregation on this. But they said, "Oh no, we're not going to do that." The board never said a word to the congregation about the matter, and the congregation never really knew what was going on until I resigned. When my congregants heard about my resignation, many of them came to me and begged me to stay. They said they wanted a general membership meeting. But I said no, I would not go for that. I wouldn't go against the board at that point. I'd rather leave and go elsewhere. All my years in the rabbinate, and they're going to censor my sermons? I don't know anyone in the rabbinate that would allow that! Your congregation's going to tell you what to speak about? No way. So the congregation went to the reformed rabbi, Rabbi Blachsleger, and asked him to do something, because he was the senior rabbi of the community, and we had been very good friends. (He used to come to my *shul* for the second day of Rosh Hashanah, since his *shul* only kept one day). But Rabbi Blachsleger wouldn't get involved in anything. (He's the one who said that he didn't even know who Martin Luther King was. All his years in Montgomery, he had never once spoken to him).

So, after 10 years with the community, we left Montgomery in July-August of 1956 (while the bus boycott was still going on). Things had just become too rough and unpleasant there. The year after I left, in May of 1957, Harry Golden, a writer at the *Congress Weekly* (a popular review of Jewish issues at the time), wrote an article entitled, "A Rabbi in Montgomery," about the events triggering my departure from that community. I received many letters after the article was published, congratulating me for my "courage," "high principles," "forthright

stand for justice," and "strength of character and leadership" (the latter, from Moses Feuerstien, then-president of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America).



Convention of Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America in Montgomery in the early 1950's. I am seated in the center next to Beverly. On my left is then-president, Moses Fuerstien

I did not return to Montgomery until 1987 when I was a rabbi in Wildwood, New Jersey. I received a call from the president of the congregation asking me to please come and be the speaker for their Centennial celebration. I was very surprised and I said, "I don't know that your congregation would want me there." He said, "Rabbi, we want you and we will do anything in the world to get you. Promise you'll come." Well, Beverly, *olov hashalom*, and I discussed it. I said, "This is something I want to prove to them—that I was not wrong,

and not driven out, but left on my own. So, we will go there." I was most anxious to see the response and welcome we would receive.

So, we went, and when I came to the synagogue, my picture was plastered all over the walls from *bar mitzvahs*, weddings, and other activities I was part of, and some of the people came to me and said, "Rabbi Atlas, you were here 10 years. Why did you leave?" I said, "Ask your parents." They said, "We did, but they won't tell us." So, I explained to them the situation and everybody was so happy to see me, even those that were happy to see me leave, because of the segregation. They were all happy to see me because they had had no luck in keeping a rabbi or getting a rabbi and until the present time no rabbi had been in this congregation for 10 years.

At the time I left, the synagogue decided they'd do without a rabbi for a while. Then they got another rabbi, and he was Orthodox-Conservative, so to speak. There was a change in the congregation's philosophy, more toward Conservativism. They built a new *shul* out in the suburbs without the balcony, and no separation of the sexes. There was no more kosher butcher. The synagogue became Conservative and now there are not many Orthodox families there.

But I *did* have one major "success" in making someone Orthodox in Montgomery—although I did not learn the extent of my success, until years later when I was a rabbi in Wildwood, New Jersey. When I was in Wildwood, I got a call from the rabbinate in Israel that there was a boy who wanted to get married, his mother was Sara Avisar, and she said she was a convert. They wanted to know if she was Jewish. I told them that I had indeed converted her when I was in Montgomery. What had happened was that someone came up to me in Montgomery and said, "Rabbi, I'm surprised that you have a Christian

Sunday School teacher." I said, "Who's the Christian?" They said, "Sara Goldstein. She's a Christian." So I asked her, "Sara, someone told me you aren't Jewish. Is that true?" She said, "I don't know what they're talking about." So I said, "Why would they say that?" "Well," she said, "I think because my father is Jewish and my mother is not." So I explained, "That's exactly it. If your father's Jewish and your mother is not, then you're not." But I converted her. It was 1956—around the time of the Suez war in Israel. Sara fell in love with a Major Avisar, one of the Israeli pilots who came to Montgomery to learn how to fly jets. I performed the wedding. Chaim Herzog was the attaché in Washington at the time, and he came down and was one of the witnesses, and all the big shots from Israel were there for the wedding. And the couple moved to Israel after he finished his training. Anyway, Sara Goldstein went on to become the secretary to Golda Meir!

When I was in Israel a few years ago, I contacted Sara and she came to see me in the hotel. She has a son with a long beard who is a scribe, and writes Torahs. He is one of the most outstanding and respected artists in Israel. All of her children are very Orthodox. In those days, there were not that many converts that you could follow up and be so proud of. Sara has meant so much to Judaism. There were certainly some hard times in Montgomery, but Sara Avisar was one of my greatest success stories.

CHAPTER 4

BRISTOL, VIRGINIA (BORDERING TENNESSEE) 1956-1959

After I left Montgomery in 1956, I had no position. I didn't know what I wanted to do. I wasn't too anxious to return to a situation similar to the one I left involving so much fighting over integration and segregation. So, I took my family and we drove down to Miami to take a few weeks' vacation. I got calls from the Orthodox Union in New York telling me about this job and that job, but I said, "I don't want any of the positions, if this is what goes on in a community after 10 years." So they said, "But what are you going to do, rabbi?" I said, "I don't know, I'll clean the streets, I'll sweep up." I was so angry that the board of a congregation would be that way—that they would deal with people in that way. I had to do everything in the *shul* in Montgomery. I was the rabbi, the cantor, I read the Torah, I did divorces, I was the mohel, I had to learn to be a *shochet*, I did everything. You won't find rabbis like that today. And the livelihood that I was making at that time was $600/month!

But finally, I decided to try again, and I took a position in Bristol, Virginia, on the border of Tennessee. I had no idea

what type of congregation Bristol was, but I knew that it was a small congregation, and I always liked small communities. So I went ahead and took this position. When a board member of the Montgomery congregation heard that I was going to Bristol, he called Bristol and told them not to take me because I was a "troublemaker." But the man who received the call told him, "I know the truth."

So off we went to Bristol. We liked the people immediately, but the community was different than what we were used to. The first affair was a Friday night gathering for services. We had a *Kabbalat Shabbos*. After that they had a social get together in the basement of the *shul*. When we went down to the basement, people were smoking. There was no *Shabbos* atmosphere. This was a *Shabbos* we'd never in our lives witnessed, and Beverly, *olov hashalom*, started crying and said, "Where did we come? Look what we are getting ourselves involved in."

I felt very badly for Beverly, *olov hashalom*, and also for myself, and I felt badly for the whole situation. I said, "Look, let's not worry about this for the moment. Let's see what I can do. I'm sure that I'll be able to make some changes here."

Well, I decided that I was going to take this congregation and I was going to make it a real traditional congregation, an Orthodox, observant one, but I would need the cooperation of all the members. So in July I called a meeting of the congregation. It was not too far from *Rosh Hashanah* when I called this meeting. I said, "Gentlemen,"—though there were ladies on the board, too—"I would like to know what is your position on *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*? How do you conduct services?" They answered, "Well, Rabbi, you know we have a special prayer book for *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*, and the rabbi reads some English psalms, some prayers, and a sermon..." And as I was listening to this, I asked myself, "What

am I doing here?" But I was already here. So I told the board, "I tell you what, if you want me as your rabbi, you'll have to go along with *my* religion. We'll have regular *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur* services." A board member interjected, "But, Rabbi, we have no cantor. We can't afford a cantor." I said, "I will conduct the service. There'll be no problem. I'll do all of the service. I'll do everything if you go along with me." Well, they agreed that I would do the service and they would all go along with it.

The first day of *Rosh Hashanah* during the opening of the ark when the Torahs were being removed and we were singing the traditional prayers, the elder and most respected member of the congregation—a very wealthy man and main financial supporter of the congregation—entered the synagogue followed by his wife and family. When they neared the ark and saw me in *tallis* and *kittel* (white robe worn on special holidays), chanting in Hebrew, they turned around and left the synagogue in anger and disbelief. It was a disturbing situation for the congregation as the man was the largest donor and if he left the synagogue it would be very bad. There was a special meeting called to discuss this situation and what we could do to appease this individual, or if I would change my attitude with regard to my religious observance.

The president was from England, a very nice traditional man, a *yeshiva bachor* (an educated *Yeshiva* boy). He appreciated my feelings, but he was also president, and he had to protect the finances of the synagogue and try and bring harmony and peace into the congregation.

A few weeks later, after *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur* had passed, I learned that all the European people in the congregation as well as the older people appreciated what I had done, except for this one man. Unfortunately this man developed a

kidney ailment, and he was in the hospital. I went to visit him frequently and was very friendly toward him. He was friendly toward me, too. We just didn't see eye to eye on religion. We had a nice conversation, and he said, "Rabbi, I can appreciate your feelings, but you must respect mine. I'm a Reform Jew, and I don't believe in Hebrew prayers. I want only English prayers. I'm not a religious man, but I do go to the synagogue, and I do support it financially. You have to understand that. I feel there must be some concession from you and you should accommodate me with my religious belief."

I was very nice. I said, "I appreciate how you feel, but you know as a rabbi, I have a certain belief; I have certain traditions; I have a certain way of life, and I cannot change my way of life for a congregation or for anybody else. This is the way I am." He said, "Well, you go ahead and you do whatever is necessary and if I feel like coming to the synagogue I will, and I can assure you my finances will not stop." This made me feel very good.

It was probably a month later that the man passed away. He was very sick before he died. The community was talking. Everybody felt very sorry for him. I conducted his funeral. There were rumors then not to start up with Rabbi Atlas because people said, "Look and see what happened to this man." Well, this was just one of those unfortunate incidents we could not foresee and it was very sad and we were very sorry about it. We lost a wonderful man and an outstanding philanthropist.

A few months later, his daughter became engaged to a nice Jewish man. And her mother, the widow, came to me and said, "Rabbi Atlas, I would like for you to perform the wedding of our daughter." I said, "Fine." She said, "On one condition." I said, "What is that one condition?" She said, "I will not let you use a *chupie*." I listened and said, "I beg your pardon, what'd you say?" She said, "I will not let you use a *chupie*." I said, "Tell

me, what is a *chupie*?" She said, "You know that thing that you put on top of the wedding." I said, "Do you mean a *chupah* (a canopy)?" She said, "Oh, yes, that's what I meant. I want the wedding, but I won't have one of those things, because I don't believe in it." So I said, "I'll be very happy to perform the wedding, but I will not be able to give in to this because I perform weddings according to Orthodox tradition." She said, "Well, I'm a member here, and I insist that this is what I want." I said, "Well, I'll be honest with you. I will give you permission to get any rabbi you want. You have rabbis, predecessors of mine; you have friends; I give them permission to perform the wedding and I will step aside." And that's what I did. I had nothing to do with the wedding. I didn't attend, and it was performed by an ultra-Reform rabbi. There was no *chupah*. There were no *yarmulkes*. There was no tradition at all. But she remained very friendly with me, and we were friends for quite awhile.

The job in Bristol was a busy one. It required me to travel constantly, holding Hebrew classes, adult study groups, and other activities for my membership which was spread among communities in two states: Johnson City, Kingsport, and Elizabethton in Tennessee, and Gate City, Pennington Gap, Abingdon, Marion, and Pulaski in Virginia. (Bristol was on the Virginia/Tennessee line).

In Bristol itself, I *kashered*, or made kosher, a few homes and some of the people to this day still keep kosher homes. I started a Hebrew school, something they never had. There were *bar mitzvah*s. Some of the kids I taught are outstanding members in their own congregations today because they had a good Jewish background. Many belong to Conservative congregations, and some even belong to Orthodox. Over all, I am proud of my accomplishments there.



Beverly preparing for the model Sedar held in our home in Bristol



Sunday school class in Bristol. My daughter Vivian is standing on the far right



My daughter Nina's Sunday School class in Bristol. (Nina is seated fourth from the right)

One of my priorities in Bristol was making the *shul* kitchen strictly kosher. They would have affairs using it, and the Sisterhood used it for bake sales. One day, the Sisterhood president came to me and said, "You know, Rabbi, we have this kosher kitchen, but it's very difficult because some people want to bake and bring in their goods from their homes and they don't really keep kosher. We're going to have to forgo the kosher kitchen because we have to make money for the *shul*." I said, "Well, if the kitchen goes *tref* (not kosher), I leave." She said, "No, you wouldn't do that. It's just the kitchen, nothing else." I said, "I'm sorry, but if it's important enough for you, I'll be happy to bow out." Which I did. The kitchen went *tref*, and immediately we left. We did leave with good feelings, though, and to this day we have wonderful relations with the community. After I left, I was called back on many occasions

for *bar mitzvah*s, weddings, and funerals. I even flew in from Hollywood, Florida, where I now reside, for funerals of some friends who remained very close over the years. Some of them were traditional Jews, with whom we kept in touch.

I must say I'm very proud that the congregation continues to exist, though now it has moved from Bristol on the Virginia/Tennessee border, to a little town called Bluntville in the Tennessee countryside. It's a pretty place, where the congregants bought a beautiful, colonial-type mansion, and converted it into a *shul*. It's a gorgeous *shul*, and people go out there, where it's located about 10–15 miles out of the town. Situated in a big field, the *shul* is beautiful. I'm proud to know they continued in the ways I taught them.

CHAPTER 5

BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA 1959-1962

After Bristol, we left for Birmingham, Alabama. There was some discussion before I came whether or not they wanted me in Birmingham. A few people from Montgomery had told their friends or family in Birmingham that I was involved with Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights movement. They warned their friends and family to watch out if I came to Birmingham, because I might become one of the "radicals" in this field. And the same boardmember who had called Bristol telling them not to take me, called Birmingham as well.

But my brother Harry (an optometrist) and his wife Barbara (a kindergarten teacher) were members of the Birmingham synagogue, and so people in Birmingham knew me. And they knew I was never involved in any of the demonstrations. The Chairman of the Economics Department at Tennessee State College (who was not Jewish, but with whom I had had contacts at the college, through the Rotary Club, and at the Jewish Community Center) wrote a beautiful letter to one of the *shul* members telling him of my "great worth as a scholar, a gentleman, and a spiritual and moral leader," congratulating the congregation for making "a very wise choice" in selecting me,

and predicting that I would become "one of the most popular clergymen in the Birmingham area." But there were still some who wanted to see if they could cause me to have a little grief. Thank G-d, they could not.

It had been the *shul* in Birmingham that had called *me*. I didn't seek out Birmingham, but I went there quite willingly and enjoyed a wonderful, wonderful congregation. People were very, very fine. My only problem with the congregation was that there was no *mechitza*. And I could not be in a *shul* without a *mechitza*. So I told the president, a friend of mine, "I wonder what we can do for a *mechitza*?" He said, "Rabbi, you know, you're not going to be successful here."

By the way, Birmingham had two Orthodox congregations, two Reform congregations, and a Conservative congregation. It was a very large Jewish community. The Conservative and Reform were the largest, and my congregation, Kenneseth Israel, was the smallest. Though the services were strictly Orthodox, and there were some people who sat separately, there was no *mechitza*. It aggravated me, and I said, "I have to bring in a *mechitza*."

Well, we were very active with the National Council of Synagogue Youth (NCSY). We would go to Memphis or Nashville for conventions, and I wanted to bring a NCSY convention to Birmingham. But I could not host a convention without a *mechitza*. So I came to the board and said "I would appreciate it if you would let me put up a temporary *mechitza* so we can bring the youth to Birmingham." They agreed, but asked, "How long will you do that, Rabbi?" I said, "Well, they'll be here over a weekend, so we'll see." They said, "Fine."

So we put up a temporary *mechitza*, a cloth *mechitza*, and we hosted NCSY. They came and had a wonderful *Shabbos*. We even had some New Yorkers from the OU as well, and ev-

erything went fine. When the convention was over the following week, the *mechitza* was still up. Some people said, "Rabbi, are you having any more NCSYers coming?" I said, "Not right now." They said, "Well, you asked us to let you put up the *mechitza* and we did. Now, don't you think it's time for it to come down?" I said, "Yeah, but let it stay another week if you don't mind." So they let it stay another week, and then a third week, a fourth week, until people started grumbling. I needed help so I called on the big forces from New York. There happened to be, of blessed memory, Rabbi Shimshon Weiss from the OU, a terrific speaker and very good friend of mine. I called him and said, "Dr. Weiss, I need some help here to see if we can't keep this *mechitza* up." So we called a general meeting of the congregation for a Sunday, and he came as well as several others, and they spoke about the *mechitza*, the importance of it. One of my members happened to be a European woman who could barely speak English. She stood up in front of the whole congregation in the middle of his speech and said, "Take that *shmatte* (rag) down!" And it started a whole turmoil, but we went through hell, fire, and brimstone, but thank G-d, the cloth *mechitza* remained until we had a permanent *mechitza* in place. It was built with flowers across the top to make it look pretty and to beautify the synagogue. To this day there is a beautiful *mechitza* in Birmingham.

There was a *mikvah* in the *shul* and I also started a school there, with a nursery, kindergarten (Barbara was one of my kindergarten teachers), first grade, etc. Today, they have a day school that goes up to the 8th grade, and it is a very Orthodox community. When I took over, I was more than happy to be with this congregation, and today when I go back, I'm received quite lovingly. People treat me like there's no other person in the world because of what I did. Besides many Orthodox members

in that *shul*, there are also many *Lubavitchers* (a sect of *Chasidic* Jews), who belong to the *shul*, so this is one congregation of which I am most proud.



Meeting of the Southeast Region Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America at Knesseth Israel, March 1961. (L-R): Harry Jaffe, myself (seated), Sol Shapiro, Joe Brown, Harry Asman

While I was in this congregation, many of my members also belonged to the Conservative congregation. They were traditional Jews, European Jews, but they would ride on *Shabbos* since they were not observant. And I had one member, a very nice man, a friend of mine, who went from me to the Conservative rabbi for *shilahs*, or halachic questions. One day, he walked in with a chicken, and said, "Rabbi, I would like for you to check this chicken to see if it's kosher. I just bought it

from the kosher market." I asked, "Have you had it checked?" "Oh, yes, I was over at the rabbi from the Conservative *shul*." I said, "Well, if you've already asked him, I cannot answer you. You've already got an opinion." He said, "Yeah, but I don't like what he told me. I want you to check it." I said, "I'm sorry. You can't go from rabbi to rabbi. I will not answer that question." He asked again, "But will you look at it?" I said, "Oh, sure, I'll look at it." Well, I happened to look at it, and in reality it *was* kosher. There was nothing wrong with it. I said, "What did the other rabbi tell you?" He said, "He told me he doesn't know. He couldn't tell me if there was anything wrong. Rabbi, what do *you* say?" I said, "I'm sorry. You have to follow him. So go back to him ask him again, and tell him I refused and said you have to follow the rabbi you asked first. Then, do what he tells you." There were many incidents like this with many congregants playing one rabbi against the other, but I happened to be very stubborn in that respect. I wouldn't have it. If one rabbi gave a ruling, you went to him; you accepted his ruling. If you didn't like it, then you shouldn't go back to him anymore. And they knew if I took a stand on whatever issue it was, this was the way it was going to be. And this is how I became very successful in this community of Birmingham.

I also had a very interesting situation in Birmingham. In the community, we had a kosher butcher. He was a very nice European man, a *shochet* and *mashgiach*. He did the *trebering* and he had people cutting the meat in a Jewish grocery store. Well, he passed away, and a former-president of the *shul* and "big wig," whose son-in-law owned the grocery store, came to me one day and said, "Rabbi, now that we've lost the *shochet*, I want my son-in-law to continue with the beef and I've decided that I'm going to put a friend in there as a *mashgiach*, and he'll take care of the meat." I said, "He's a very nice man, but I don't

think I can sanction this." He said, "Why not?" "First of all, he doesn't know how to *treber*, second of all, he rides to *shul* on *Shabbos* and on *Yom Tov*, and third of all, I don't think he knows anything about being a *mashgiach*." He said, "I want him there and I'm going to keep him and he's going to do a good job." I said, "Well, you do what you want, but I'm sorry, I will not sanction it, and I won't use the meat." This man was a very quick-tempered man and a very wealthy man, who controlled the community and the town.

A few weeks later, after *Minchah* and *Maariv,* I was leaving the *shul* with the *shamas* (the one who takes care of the *shul*), a big *Talmud chacham* and *baal korei,* fluent in Talmud and Jewish law, who was a very fine, young, but poor, European man. The wealthy man approached us and said, "I want to see you both," so we all went into my study. He was holding a big box. He said, "Rabbi, these are steaks for you and also some roasts. I want you to take them home. I want you to enjoy the best Grade-A meat you will ever see." I looked. The steaks were gorgeous. I said, "I really appreciate that. It's a very nice gesture on your part, but I'm sorry I can't eat it." He said, "What do you mean you can't eat it?" I said, "I told you I do not sanction this man as a *mashgiach*, I don't know that this is kosher, and I will not use it." So he handed it to the *shamas*, who was standing next to me, but the *shamas* told him, "If Rabbi Atlas won't eat it, you know I'm not going to eat it." And he also refused to accept it. Well, you would think this man was going to have a stroke. He started screaming and carrying on and he soon became my worst enemy. But I stood by my guns. I would not accept something like this.

This was right before *Shavuos*, the holiday of receiving the Torah. On *Shavuos*, my in-laws, *olov hashalom*, Rabbi and Mrs. Dimont, visited us. While we were all in *shul*, this man, who

always walked with a cane, entered the *shul* and walked down the aisle, straight to the pulpit as I was standing on the pulpit in the middle of *davening*. In front of the whole congregation, he lifted his cane to me and hollered, "You S.O.B.!" Well, you can imagine the hysteria that went on, and the embarrassment. I didn't say a word. I just looked at the man, and with that he turned around and he left.

There was an emergency meeting on Sunday. They expelled the man as a member of the *shul* even though he was the largest donor. His whole family gave big money. But now he was no longer a member of the *shul*. He no longer had rights to the cemetery. This is how I had to stand my ground in some of these small communities. But, if you can imagine, you're standing on the pulpit; your in-laws are there; you have strangers in the *shul*; you have your congregation in front of you, and in walks a much older man holding up his cane, ready to hit you had he been able to get closer. This was Birmingham, Alabama, but thank G-d it is a wonderful community today and they are prospering in *yiddishkeit* all the way down the line.

The irony of it all was that this man was capable of being a very generous and wonderful man. Before this incident took place, when I first came to Birmingham, they had no place for me to live. There were no homes available. Well, this man owned a home a few blocks from *shul*. He gave us the home to use until they could build a home for us. The *shul* had quite a large lot and he was going to build a home for us according to our needs. We stayed in his beautiful little home for approximately four or five months, when he decided he was going to build us a new home right on the *shul* property. He built a gorgeous three-bedroom brick home and gave it to us, per my *shul* contract. We didn't pay anything and every Sunday morning when I would get up, I would go to the front door and

right near the front door there was a bag full of rolls, bagels, breads and all kinds of things. During the summer, he would put watermelons and cantaloupe right at our doorstep and he would never take a penny for any of this. This was his way of showing if he loved you, he would do anything in the world for you. If, on the other hand, you turned against him, or he had something against you, he would go to the extreme to try and harm you.

He was a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde in every aspect. When the *shul* needed money and my secretary would tell him, "Mr. B, you know I don't think we can make payroll this week for the janitor, the secretary, the employees of the *shul*, etc.," he would say, "How much do you need?" "Well," she'd say, "X amount of dollars." He would take cash out of his pocket, give it to her, and say, "Go ahead, Darlin', deposit this. Put it in there." She said, " Oh, thank you very much. I'll put it down..." He'd say, "Don't forget. Don't put anything down. Forget about it. We need it to bring people to the daily *minyan*." Because Birmingham was a very hilly place, there were many older congregants who lived across the mountains. He bought a bus to pick up the people for the *minyan* every morning and every evening. He planted beautiful flowers and beautified the synagogue grounds on his own, rising very early every morning. He was a great asset to the synagogue, and overall a wonderful person.

In the end, however, I became frustrated with Birmingham because it was truly so difficult to get a *minyan* and I was working very, very hard—so hard, in fact, that I decided I was ready to give up the Rabbinate altogether. I had a friend who I happened to bring down to Birmingham, who had a brother-in-law who owned a kosher sausage factory in Cincinnati, Ohio. I met him and he asked me if I'd like to go up to Cincinnati

with him and work in the deli business and I said, "Sure, why not?"

So we left Birmingham and moved to Cincinnati for about six or seven months. Working in the deli business was not to my liking and I couldn't take what went on there. The only good part about Cincinnati was that I became very, very friendly with Rabbi Eliezer Silver, may he rest in peace. He was the Chief Rabbi of America at that time. He and I became very close. I was in his *chevra Shas*, or group who learned Talmud, and we used to learn together. I would visit him in his home and chauffeur him around. We were very close and our whole family was close to him and he loved us very much. My home was one of the few homes he ever came to visit. And he came, as a friend, not as a rabbi. So this is the only good part I have to record from Cincinnati, Ohio.

CHAPTER 6

LITTLE ROCK, ARKANSAS 1962-1970

From Cincinnati, we migrated to Little Rock, Arkansas, where we remained for eight very happy years.

When I first got to Little Rock, I went to a Scottish Rite meeting. I showed them my card, but they wouldn't let me in the lodge. They said, "I'm sorry, you're not welcome here." I asked, "Why am I not welcome?" And they said, "You know what you did in Montgomery." I looked at the guy like he was nuts. He didn't know anything about Montgomery, but had heard that I was somehow involved in the segregation/integration issue. Despite the fact that I was a 32nd degree Mason, and had every right to be there, I left and never went back to that lodge the whole time I was in Little Rock.

I focused my attentions in Little Rock entirely on the *shul.* I had the opportunity and pleasure of being a *kolbo,* being the rabbi, *chazan*, *baal korei*, Torah reader, *shofar* blower and everything imaginable. It took some time until I could get a *minyan* for *Shabbos* and weekdays. But I finally got the *minyanim* going, and I also had the pleasure of instituting a *mechitza* there, which is still there to this day. Because of the *mechitza*, NCSY came down and participated (they wouldn't come without a



mechitza), so my work in this regard actually benefited both NCSY and the synagogue. Though I had gone through very, very difficult times, thank G-d, it all worked out in Little Rock. Beverly *olov hashalom* was my "right hand man" in everything there. She was one of the teachers in my Hebrew School, and planned all of the plays and activities for the children there.

Little Rock was definitely different than any of the other communities I had been in before. Once, while I was reading the Torah on a *Shabbos*, one of my members was given an *aliyah*, and after the *aliyah*, he said, "Rabbi, I want you to make a *misheberach* (a prayer for good health)." I said, "Fine. Give me the name." He said, "Lark." I said, "Lark? What's the Hebrew name?" He again said, "Lark." So I said, "What's the father's name?" And he replied, "Rabbi, there is no father." I said, "What are you talking about?" He explained, "You know, I had an old car and I had nothing but trouble. Now I bought a new car, a Lark, and I want you to make a *misheberach* for it. Maybe it will bring me better luck than my last car." I was quite taken aback, and I said, "Ya' know, Phil, this is very unusual, and I can't make a *misheberach* for a car." He said, "You



Beverly and myself at a model Sedar



Leading the choir for the High Holy Days in Little Rock



Torah procession for the giving of the Izkowitz Torah

mean to tell me all that I went through with my old car, and you know I suffered with it and now I have a new car and you won't make a *misheberach*? Is that the kind of rabbi you are?" I said, "I'm awfully sorry, but this is against everything that we believe in and it's impossible." And with that, he ran off the pulpit, walked out of *shul,* and he never came back again. He could not understand that a rabbi would not bless his new Lark

when his old car brought him so much trouble. But this is part of the rabbinate I guess, and I wonder how many rabbis had this type of experience.

While in Little Rock, I was the auxiliary chaplain of the Little Rock Air Force Base, and the VA hospital. At the Little Rock Air Force Base I had the opportunity to erect a beautiful candelabra, a *menorah*, for Chanukah. The head chaplain gave me permission. It was known and seen all over this beautiful Air Force Base. This base had the Titan missile, so you can imagine that it was a nice base, large and important. We had services out there weekly; I had the first *succah* ever erected on the base. During my time there, I met many, many fine young men and women from the North and elsewhere.

There was one particular young man, a lawyer, who was a captain. We became very friendly. He came to services at the air base. We would stay in touch, and he would come to our home. He happened to fall in love with a non-Jewish girl. And, as it happens very often, he continued to go out with her and he wanted to get married. But he wanted her to convert. Well, I had no way of converting anybody because there was no *mikvah*, nor a *Shomer Shabbos Bais Din* (Jewish judging council), or anything of that kind, and thus no way of conversion there. But we worked on it until finally we did get a *Shomer Shabbos Bais Din*, but we still had no *mikvah*. I taught the girl and she knew everything about Judaism that I expected her to know. She became religious, but now the time for the marriage came about, and neither she nor he could get off the base to drive out of town to go to a *mikvah*. Well, we had the Arkansas River there. So I came up with an idea, and said, "I tell you what. We'll take the *Bais Din* and witnesses and we'll go down to the Arkansas River and if she can go down the bank of the river, we'll tie a rope around her and let her down into the river, and

when she gets into the river, she will disrobe, as is required, say the *bracha*, or blessing, and do whatever is necessary, and when she gets through, she will have the rope right nearby and will be able to put it around her and we'll pull her back up, which we did. My dear wife, Beverly, *olov hashalom*, was the one who took care of everything to make it kosher.

It was very exciting but it was very traumatic. Here we were letting a young lady go down all by herself into the Arkansas River. She got on the bank of the river and as she walked into the water and got to right around knee deep, she disrobed completely. No one paid any attention to her. She got into the river, said the *bracha* with the witnesses watching, and she dunked under the water as is required. After that she put the rope around her and we pulled her back up to shore.

It was a beautiful ceremony, a beautiful wedding. It was a military wedding in the chapel with swords and marching. As she came down the aisle everybody noticed she was not exactly what you would call a young bride, though she was very pretty, but no one paid a bit of attention to her. They were all happy for her, however, and this was a marriage in Little Rock, Arkansas, with the Arkansas River as the *mikvah*.

In Little Rock we lived eight miles away from the *shul*. Every Friday afternoon we would pack our clothes and food, and we would move to a motel a block from the *shul*. It was very enjoyable, yet it was trying, especially when it came before *Rosh Hashanah*, *Yom Kippur,* or *Pesach* (Passover) when we really had some problem adjusting. It even happened once on a Friday when we got to the hotel, our son Arthur realized he didn't have his shoes with him. Well, we had to rush back home real quick before *Shabbos* and pick up his shoes. Though we always would forget something, it was still enjoyable.

Once while in Little Rock, on a Friday night in the middle of conducting services and giving my sermon, I heard screaming from outside. I ran off the pulpit because I recognized the voice of one of my members, a very religious woman, who was on her way to *shul* on Friday night and was stabbed by a black man several times. She didn't have any money of course. He grabbed her purse, and she was left bleeding. We had to call an ambulance. Meanwhile, I was holding her abdomen. Blood was just pouring out, but I was holding it real tight to try to stop the bleeding. Luckily, I learned later that what saved her life, according to the doctor, was a very tight girdle and hosiery she was wearing. Because of that she didn't bleed to death. While she was in the hospital, a policeman came to interview her, and we all spoke to her, but she refused to cooperate. She would not give a description of the man. She was afraid that if she gave his description he would come back and take advantage of her or kill her. So I tried to tell her, "You know, sometimes, something like this could save someone else's life." She said, "I'm sorry, but I will not take a chance." And she did not reveal who it was and we never found out who committed this great crime. She has since passed away and I think of her often.

Our children had to go to public school in Little Rock, because there was no day school or any outstanding Hebrew school around, except the Hebrew school that I had, which was on an afternoon basis. There were no yeshivas in that area of the South in those days, and we wanted to give our children a better education. So I got together with a couple of rabbis from Memphis, Tennessee, and a couple of rabbis from other places and a few laymen, and we started a high school in Memphis (approximately 140 miles from Little Rock) that became known as the Yeshiva of the South. Our children were among the first children to go to the new high school in Memphis,

and as more and more children went there, before we knew it this was flourishing. There was a dormitory there and some people also stayed with relatives or with rabbis, and children from Memphis came to stay in our house for *Shabbosim* and the holidays as well.

All in all, the school went very well. We were pleased with the way it was instituted and the way it started. But, as with all schools, there seemed to be a financial problem. Even though there were many people in Memphis and other places that could afford to pay—and we all paid tuition—there still was not enough. So, another rabbi and myself, we did a little traveling around into Oklahoma and to other places in the area, and we collected some funds to get the school off the ground so they could really operate in the black instead of having debt. We had so much *naches* from the children from that school, and we had a very fine time and a very good relationship with them and their families. Even today, we are still close with them, and our children (both of our daughters, Vivian and Nina graduated from the school) are still involved with the Memphis group.

Due to our problem of living so far away from the *shul* in Little Rock, we had a building campaign to try and build a new *shul* out where we were living, in the suburbs, which was the new section. A new *shul* was in fact built, but not until after we left Little Rock.

We left Little Rock because our children were all away in school in New York. Vivian and Nina were in Stern College for Women, and our son Arthur was in Yeshiva High School. They would fly back and forth to Little Rock, but any time they would fly down they would have to fly to Memphis or St. Louis first and then transfer and get another flight into Little Rock. Many a time the flights would cancel and they would be

stranded in strange communities. It got to the point where we could not take this anymore.

But I had a lifetime contract with the *shul* in Little Rock. So I went before the board, which was a very friendly board and very nice to me, and I asked them to please release me from my contract only because I could not bear to see the children suffering flying back and forth like that. Well, they didn't want me to leave, but I promised I would not leave until I got them a replacement. I was determined to get a replacement who would fulfill the needs I had instituted there, who would want to keep the *mechitza*, who would want to have an Orthodox congregation as it was. And I was fortunate. I brought them a candidate whom I'd met in New York, a friend of my nephew's from the Yeshiva, and he filled the bill for this community perfectly. But he was not experienced; he had never had a pulpit. Before I left, I taught him how to blow the *shofar*, and I even wrote his first bulletin for *Rosh Hashanah*. I did many things to make sure he would be happy, and I knew if he would be happy, the congregation would be happy. He also stayed quite a few years after I left and is today a very, very fine young rabbi up North.

I tried to help the community in any way I could, because I wanted to make sure it would remain an Orthodox community. It joined the Union of Orthodox Congregations and is to this day an Orthodox congregation with an Orthodox rabbi. I consider this one of my greatest accomplishments in a small Southern community. If you ever have any opportunity to travel in the direction of Little Rock, you will be very happy to see what a beautiful *shul* they have and what fine people are in that community.

CHAPTER 7

WILDWOOD, NEW JERSEY 1970-1990

After having made the arrangements for my successor in Little Rock, I began to think about where we would like to live for the next few years. We wanted to be closer to our children, who were studying in New York. I made some inquiries and found that there was a place only a couple of hours away from New York, which was in need of a rabbi. It was Wildwood, New Jersey. They hadn't had a rabbi for a couple of years. It was a small congregation that had had very fine rabbis prior to my coming there. There were a few in between, but they had not worked out as well as the congregation would have liked.

So I made a call to the president of the congregation. He asked if I would like to come for an interview. I told him I had always had pulpits in the South and I was not too anxious to make a change for a Northern pulpit. He said, "Come up and take a look at our congregation and we'll discuss it. And I made up with him I would fly in. When I flew in to Philadelphia, he met me there because there was no airport in Wildwood, and we drove into Wildwood. On the way there, he said, "You know, Rabbi, you mentioned you wanted a Southern congregation. Well, if you look on the map, Wildwood is south of

the Mason Dixon line, so you're still technically in a Southern community." Well, when I heard that I thought that was great! Here, I would still be in the South, and close to my children as well!

I went for an interview, had a very fine meeting with the board and members of the congregation, and there was no problem. They immediately asked me to become their rabbi. My children were so thrilled I was going to be within a couple of hours of New York. Now they could come home frequently, and we could drive back and forth.

I remained in Wildwood for 20 very enjoyable years. But, again as with my prior congregations, I had a lot of work to do. This *shul* had an upstairs, for women, but as with all my prior congregations, everyone seemed to want to be on the more modern side, and they were not too anxious for separation. So I knew I had a problem ahead of me. But I took over and again I had to do all of the work. I was the cantor, *chazan*, rabbi, *mohel,* and Torah reader. I formed a Hebrew school, something they had not had before. Beverly and I taught the children right from the beginning. Each bar mitzvah child had to be prepared to conduct services, to give a sermon, and we were very proud of our accomplishment in this respect, because this had been a congregation that had been somewhat neglected over the years. Everybody was thrilled that I just took everything in hand without the board asking me to do it. They said, "Well, this is the first rabbi we've ever had that could just take the bull by the horns and know exactly which way to go."

Everything was working fine. I remember very vividly one of the members of the congregation, a very fine young lady, coming to me. She said, "Rabbi, you know we had a rabbi here before for eight years and when he came he was very Orthodox. He came from Europe, from the Holocaust. But we changed

him. We made him a little more modern and he became Conservative. And in time we will also have the opportunity to change you." So, I laughed, and I said, "Well, you have your opportunity. If you think you can do it, go right ahead. But I would bet that rather than you change me, I will probably change you, because nobody thus far has been able to change me from my way of religion, or my beliefs."

We got along very well. There were some occasions where we had some ups and downs. But I had beautiful *bar mitzvah*s, and even had one of my young men *layn* on *Yom Kippur*. I taught him how to do that. Every *bar mitzvah* boy had to *layn* the whole *sedra*, or portion of the week, and *daven Musaf*. Some even *davened Shacharit*, something they had never seen before. And while I was in Wildwood, there were many, many interesting aspects of the rabbinate that had not occurred in other congregations, but this is part of growing into a new community.

As an example, I had an operation in Philadelphia on my back. When I came home from the hospital I was in my bed. A member of mine walked in on a Friday after I got home and said, "Rabbi, one of our dear members has died and the funeral is Sunday and we hope you'll be able to officiate." I said, "Well you know, I just came home from the hospital and this is a real imposition." He said, "But Rabbi, he is a member, and you are the rabbi, and we depend on you. And I hope you can come. We'll pick you up and go to the funeral."

Well, I could not say, no. And you can imagine having been in the hospital, recovering from an operation, how it went. The funeral was that Sunday and the cemetery was approximately 30 miles from town. I conducted the funeral, and afterward went back home, and right back into bed. I was so weak. But, I guess as a good soldier in the Army, you serve when you are called.

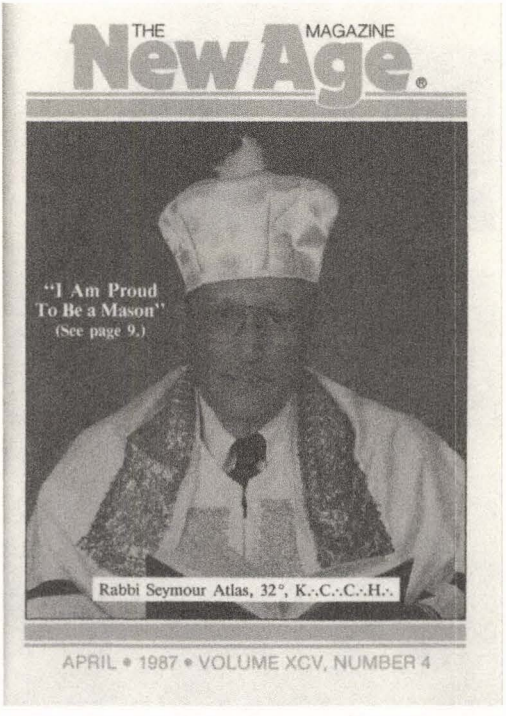
Then the wife of a friend of mine, a Holocaust survivor, passed away. We were very close. He had another young lady, who had survived the Holocaust, whom he wanted to marry. So he said, "Rabbi, I'd like for you to perform the wedding," and we picked out a date. In the interim, however, I had another back operation and he came to see me in the hospital in Philadelphia. He said, "Rabbi, you know you promised me you were going to marry me. We set a date for the wedding. Now what am I going to do?" I said, "Well, I did promise you, and G-d willing, I will keep my promise." So he was very happy about that.

I came home from the hospital on a Thursday or Friday after having been there for 36 days. The wedding was on Sunday. Sunday morning I got up out of bed. I was going to go and get dressed because I had to have this wedding Sunday afternoon. Well, I collapsed in the bathroom. Luckily, my son, Arthur, was home at that time. They rushed me to the doctor. Fortunately, I didn't break anything, but I was quite bruised up and I still had this wedding to perform. So, the doctor gave me some injection for pain, and I went back home. When it came time, I was taken to the synagogue to perform the wedding. I was held up on the pulpit because I couldn't stand. They were helping me up, and holding me up, as I performed the wedding ceremony. After that, I went into the social hall, where they had a reception. I stayed for a few moments and then I went home.

This man came over to me and said, "Rabbi, you're a man of your word. You promised me. I didn't think you were going to do it." I said, "Well, I had full intentions of doing it, but under the circumstances it was not easy, but I'm glad, very happy, that I could perform this wedding for you and your wife." I wished them well. And these incidents happened very often throughout my 46 years in the rabbinate. For some reason, if

I promised you I'd do something, I would do it, even if it was very difficult.

Wildwood was a resort and coastal area. People from Canada, from the North to Northeast, from Philadelphia, and all points around Baltimore or Boston, would come there for the summer. It was a very active community in the summer, but it was very, very inactive during the winter.



Cover of The New Age Magazine, April 1987

But I myself was very active in the winter, and engaged in the community in many ways. Having taken a long "hiatus" from the Masons while I was in Little Rock, I was eager to reinvolve myself with the Masons again, and I became quite active in the Lodge in Wildwood. While I was there, I wrote an article entitled, "I Am Proud To Be A Mason," describing how



Portrait taken on the occasion of my becoming a 33rd degree Mason



Dedication of the chapel at the Cape May Coast Guard Base

I was inspired by my father to become a Mason, how I enjoyed working with men of different religions, and the many reasons that I was proud to be a member of such a wonderful organization—including its devotion to helping widows and orphans, and its commitment to truth, justice, and kindness for all. The Sovereign Grand Commander, C. Fred Kleinknect, was so impressed with the article, that he decided to feature it in *The New Age* Magazine. He wrote me a beautiful letter, telling me that my article would "make a distinct impression and be an inspiration for us all to emulate" and that the fraternity would benefit from my "strong moral example," and asked me for a color picture of myself "in religious vestments" for the cover of the magazine. I readily complied, and so there I am on the April 1987 cover of *The New Age*, dressed in my *kittel* and *tallis* for Yom Kippur! My greatest achievement as a Mason occurred towards the end of my stay in Wildwood, when I received the 33rd (the highest) degree.

My involvement in the greater community of Wildwood extended way beyond the Masons, however. I served as the President of the Wildwood Ministerial Association, and was appointed by the Mayor as Chairman of the Affirmative Action Committee out of Trenton. I also took on duties similar to those I had held as an auxiliary chaplain at the military bases in Greenwood during World War II and then in Little Rock—serving as an auxiliary chaplain to the Cape May Coast Guard Base, where I not only conducted services for the Jewish servicemen, but also worked with the military chaplains and architects to help design a new interdenominational chapel on the base. In recognition of my service as an auxiliary chaplain at Cape May (and in Greenwood and Little Rock), I was named to the Legion of Honor at the Chapel of Four Chaplains in Philadelphia.

My final "side" job was as chaplain to the Jewish residents at Woodbine State Developmental Center, a home for mentally retarded persons 25 miles outside of Wildwood. Every other week, accompanied by my wife Beverly *olov hashalom* (and often my children as well), I would drive out to Woodbine to hold services and religion classes. On the alternating weeks, I would hold the class in my synagogue in Wildwood, and the Jewish residents of Woodbine would travel to me. But it was the Seder that I organized at Woodbine that became the talk of the place—it was written up in the local paper, with a picture of me making the *charoses*.

From the first moment that I arrived in Wildwood, I became friendly with the rabbis in the area of South Jersey, especially Atlantic City. They had four or five rabbis and there was a Rabbinical Council, of which I became a part. And we would have meetings every month. One day, the rabbi of the Reform temple of that community said, "I understand you're a *mohel*." I said, "Yes." He said, "One of my members had a little boy. Would you perform the *bris*?" I said, "Sure." So we made up to meet up the following week when the *bris* was going to be happening. I went over to Atlantic City, had the *bris*, and the father came over to me and asked, "Rabbi, what do I owe you?" I said, "I have no fee for my religious services." He said, "What do you mean?" I said, "Well, that's my way." After that, the Reform rabbi, the rabbi of the father, came over to me. He said, "Seymour, let me tell you something. You're not in the South now. You're in the North. We have a different life here." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "You told this man you have no fee for a *bris*." I said, "That's right." He said, "Here there is a fee. We have fees. The rabbis have fees and you have to go along with us." I said, "What do you want me to do?" He said, "Well, would you mind if I negotiated for you?" I said, "Well, if it will

make you happy, you go right ahead." So, he spoke to the man and came back and told me he made up with the man that the *bris* was $150 if that was okay with me. I said, "Fine." So I got $150 for that *bris*.

The next month we had a meeting at one of the hotels in Atlantic City. The president of the rabbinical group said, "Rabbi Atlas, I'd like to welcome you. We're happy to have you here. We'd like to explain to you the situation among the rabbis in the North. We have fees for weddings; we have fees for funerals; and we don't tell people that we have no fee. There is a fee." I said, "Well, I've never had a fee all the years I've been in the rabbinate. I've never told anybody a fee. If they give a gratuity, fine; if they don't, it's fine." He said, "Well, that doesn't work here." I said, "Well, what are your fees?" So they gave me a whole list of X amount of dollars for funerals, unveilings, weddings, *brises*, *bar mitzvah*s, *bat mitzvah*s... I was flabbergasted! Something I'd never done in my life. Well, I thought, if I'm going to live harmoniously with these rabbis, I guess I'd have to go along and do whatever they did. I wouldn't want to be the bad apple in the pie among all of the fellows. So we got along very well and I became vice-president of the group. We had joint meetings and activities together.

In Wildwood, which was a resort, we had many Israelis and many out-of-towners who would come down for the summer. There was a boardwalk with many different types of shops—T-shirt shops, candy shops, you name it. And it became a very active town in hot months when it went from a community of 15,000 in the winter, to approximately 200-300,000 in the summer. This is how crowded it was. Most of these were out-of-towners who would come down and open their little places on the boardwalk for the summer months. And they did quite well. I was very friendly with the mayor and police chief.

Motzei Shabbos (after *Shabbos*), the police chief would pick me up, and I would ride with him through the town going through the bars to see that everybody was behaving and that the bars closed on time. And it was a lot of fun.

One day, I got a call that some of the Jewish people on the boardwalk with T-shirt places had violated some laws that were not becoming for not only Jewish people, but for anybody. They would try to take advantage of people. One Friday night, the police walked down the boardwalk, and arrested 27 Jewish merchants who owned T-shirt and other shops, and closed their stores. They were arrested and taken to jail. The next morning in *shul*, Saturday morning, one of these Jewish people from out of town came to me and said, "Rabbi, they arrested the Jewish people and they're in jail. We'd like you to get them out." I said, "Well, what did they do?" He said, "Well, the police claim they were cheating and not treating customers right, but that's not true. They are probably anti-Semitic and don't like Jewish merchants and that is why this happened." I said, "Well, I'm going to be honest with you. If they violated the law or did anything wrong, and the police feel they're wrong, I guess they'll have to pay the consequences, and if they're innocent, we'll find out the truth." He said, "Rabbi, how can you say something like that? These are Jewish people. You have to stick up for them and protect them." I said, "I do stick up for Jewish people, but I don't tolerate crime, and if they've committed a crime they will have to deal with it and I cannot do anything about it."

I soon learned what these Jewish merchants were doing. A customer would walk into one of these shops, which displayed a sign on the outside that said, "T- shirts for $2.88." The customers would then want to buy the shirt for $2.88, but on the way out of the store, the cashier would stop them and say the shirt cost $12.88. The customer would say, "Well, your sign

says $2.88." The merchant would say, "Yes, well, that's $2.88 for the shirt, but we have to iron the shirt and put the logo on it. And all of that adds up to $12.88." Then, the merchants wouldn't let them out until they paid the full amount. They went so far as to put tables in front of the door to block these people from walking out. Well, the merchants were arrested, which I can understand.

The following Monday I went to City Hall as I was very friendly with the mayor and district attorney. First, I went to the mayor and spoke to him, and I always called him by his first name. I said, "Bill, tell me something. What did these fellows do?" He said, "They've been warned so many times. Now they're going to pay the price for this." I said, "What will happen?" He said, "Well, they're going to trial and if proven guilty, whatever the sentence will be, that's what they'll have to accept." I said, "Is there any way that we can get them released on bail or given probation?" He said, "Well, you go and talk to the DA, you know him, he's a friend of yours, and see if you can work out a deal, and whatever he does I will concur and go along with his decision."

So I went to the DA and we worked out a deal where 50% would plead guilty, and 50% would plead not guilty, and there would be a monetary fine, a very large fine, and that would have to be divided among these 27 families as they were equally guilty. That is what happened and it was agreed among all parties, and the unpleasant situation was resolved.

I went with all the parties involved to court, where some pleaded guilty and others not guilty. At the final conclusion, the outcome was that half were guilty and half were not guilty. So the judge pronounced the sentence—I believe the fine was around $25,000, which would have to be split between all the individuals—and with that, the case was dismissed. They came

up with the money and were released from jail. They went back and opened their stores the next day and what happened from then on is anybody's guess. But this was happening constantly in Wildwood.

In my synagogue for *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*, some of these people came to see me, and wanted to know if they could rent part of our building for their services, because they were mostly *Sephardic*, or Jews from countries near the Mediterranean Sea, North Africa, the Balkans, Italy, Syria and Israel. So we did let them have our upstairs, our classrooms, and they had their own services. They did their own *davening*. The only thing they didn't have was someone to blow the *shofar*. So either my son, Arthur, or I would go up at the time to blow the *shofar* for them. And I was always very friendly with all these people and performed many *brises* for them. Many were still angry with me for not taking their side in the T-shirt incident, but I couldn't take their side because I knew they were wrong. We continued to be friends, regardless, and remain so even until this day. I was in Wildwood for 20 years and I saw the ups and downs of what was going on in the boardwalk and it amazed me how these things could continue.

Not only were many of the merchants out-of-towners, but many of them were from Israel, and some were from Canada. There were even some local people who lived there all year long who had these places. And they always had very, very fine business and made quite a bit of money during the summertime, which was the season for the resort.

I mentioned that I was Chairman of the Affirmative Action Committee from the state of New Jersey. We had a meeting once in Wildwood. And on my committee, there was a black man and various different people, Christian and Jewish. While I was conducting the meeting one day, the black man stood

up and said, "Rabbi, we elected you as president of our group because we know you're from the South and you know what it means to be in slavery the way we were in slavery. We were slaves for 100 years, and we deserve some consideration. You should remember all that."

I looked at him and said, "Curtis, you mean you were slaves for only 100 years?" He said, "That's right and we should be compensated." I said, "You know, it is funny, Curtis, but we Jews, we were slaves for 210 years in Egypt, but we never asked for any compensation. We picked ourselves up and we started making advancements, and we pulled ourselves out of the doldrums, and we became a people." I said, "You have the same opportunity. One day you won't need affirmative action. Everything will work out fine." We got along fine and he became a friend of mine.

I was driving a Lincoln at the time. So every time I'd go into the post office, which was small since it was in a small community, I'd meet him. He would be talking to different people as I would walk by and say, "Boys, I want you all to meet Rabbi Atlas. You know why he drives a Lincoln? Because Lincoln freed the slaves and he is on that side to free all of us slaves." And he would joke about it and we continued to be very friendly. Every affair we had in synagogue whether a wedding or any other celebration, he and all the commissioners and the mayor would come. It was one small community where everybody knew everybody else and got along in great harmony.

Talking about weddings, my congregation knew that I was always punctual. If I called a meeting at eight o'clock, it was eight o'clock. If service was at eight, it was eight, always on time. I happened to have a wedding once in Wildwood; the wedding was called for three o'clock in the afternoon on

a Sunday. The *shul* was packed, the orchestra was there, and everything was ready. At two-thirty, a quarter 'till three, the orchestra started playing and the father of the bride was standing around. I went over to him and said, "You know, we're going to start on time." He said, "Don't worry. I'll be there." I said, "But your daughter, the bride, should be here because I'm going to start exactly on time, at three o'clock." He said, "Don't worry." I said, "I'm telling you now. It's ten minutes 'till three." He said, "You wouldn't start without her." I said, "You know I will."

Well, it was five minutes 'till three, and they lived just a couple of blocks from the *shul*, and I said, "You'd better go get your daughter, because at three o'clock I'm going to have the orchestra start the procession." He jumped in his car and ran to pick up his daughter. He returned just in time as the procession started. He said, "I didn't think you would do that." I said, "Well, you've known me already 17 or 18 years. You know when I say it's three o'clock, it's three o'clock. When I say five o'clock, it's five. You invited these people to come here at three so you should have the respect for the people you invited and make an effort to make sure that things start at three. You don't keep people waiting around." I said, "That's one lesson I hope you've learned from now on. When I say three, I mean three, and I don't mean three fifteen."

And this has always been my way in all of my congregations. They could set their watches on my time because they knew that whatever time I said, that's the time we started, if we had the crowd or if we didn't have the crowd. And I have always lived by this motto that if you invite people, give them the courtesy and make sure that they're respected, that you start on the time that you told them. Don't make them come and sit and wait around because you have decided to make everything

a little bit later. This is only a small bit of courtesy to show to people out of respect.

In my congregation in Wildwood there were a few young men who were opposed to tradition and were hoping we would have more innovations of some of the modern type of Judaism, such as the new Reformation group that they had. They wanted women to be counted for the *minyan* and for woman to get *aliyahs*. These were things they knew they would never be able to accomplish with me.

There was a young man in the congregation whom I would see at different affairs. I noticed him at bagels and lox breakfasts we held once a month with speakers and different entertainment. One day I introduced myself to him and spoke to him for a few moments. He said, "Rabbi, I would love to learn about Judaism. I'm Jewish 100 percent, but I've never had any opportunity and I wonder could you advise me where I could get some instructions?" He was a very nice young man. I said, "I would be very happy to work with you and see if we can't get you on the right path." So I made up with him that he would come over to the house one day the next week, and we had a long conversation. I said, "I'm surprised you waited so long. Why didn't you come to me before?" He said, "Well, I wanted to but so-and-so said, 'No use in going to Rabbi Atlas. He won't give you the time of day. He's not interested in giving you any more knowledge than you have.' That is why I never came to you." I said, "I'm surprised that he would say that because he knows just the opposite to be true. I'm more than happy to work with those who want to learn." Well, this is the type of individual the other guy was. He just wanted to tear down whatever I would build, as he was determined to make the congregation lean toward his nonreligious and nonobservant ways.

I started working with the young man. He was 32 years old, in business, and a very fine fellow. I worked with him until he was knowledgeable and could have a *bar mitzvah*, something he'd never had before. I taught him how to put on *tefillin* and how to *daven*. When he had his *bar mitzvah*, his mother came. She was from Europe. He had no father. His father had died in the Holocaust. The young man conducted the *Shacharit*, morning service, and read from the *Torah,* and he gave a *kiddish* for the congregation. He was so thrilled that I had taught him that he became one of the outstanding members of the *shul* and later president. We remained very close friends and he called me quite often to ask about religious questions. Many people have told me, "If he were not in the leadership there, the *shul* would have closed up." After I left they brought in a Reconstructionist rabbi, who completely changed the whole congregation. They went from all types of tradition to no tradition at all.

But this young man kept fighting and moving things along. I understand that now he has moved away to another community, not far from there, near Atlantic City, so his children can go to a day school. He wanted his children to have a Jewish education. So he kept his business in Wildwood and moved between Wildwood and Atlantic City so they would have a close connection to the school. He is becoming very observant, a real *ger tzaddik*, or a righteous convert to more traditional Judaism. This goes to show that in every community, I don't care wherever I was, I left my imprint one way or another, and thank G-d it was in a very positive way, rather than in a negative way.

But this congregation, sad to say, is on the way down. Young people are not staying there. They don't want to live there, but rather, to go back to the big communities where they

went to college. And they want to practice their professions in larger communities, which I can understand. Because, this is, like I said, a summer resort, and for young people it is no place to bring up your children since there are not enough Jewish people there, people to have contact with and raise your children in a traditional way. Atlantic City has it, but not everybody can travel 30-35 miles each way every day. So, hopefully, Wildwood will survive, but the prognosis does not look too good at this time for Orthodox or traditional Judaism there. The community and the people are wonderful and very warm and friendly, but Orthodox Judaism, as we know it, is absent.

While I was in Wildwood, one of my members conducted services on *Shabbos*. He'd *daven Shacharit*, take out the Torah and go around with the Torah so that everybody would kiss the Torah. One day he laid the Torah down on the pulpit and as we were getting ready to read the Torah, he went to his seat and collapsed. The medics and doctors in the *shul* worked on him but they couldn't do anything for him and he died right there in his seat in *shul*. Well, there was nothing we could do because it was *Shabbos*. They could not even remove his body. The body remained in the synagogue until *motzei Shabbos* when *Shabbos* was over and they could come and pick it up.

Another very wild incident happened to us while we were in Wildwood. We were at the ocean one day driving along the beach when a tidal wave came in and covered my car. Everything became black. We didn't know where we were, but thank G-d we got out of this as soon as the wave started going back. I said *Shema Yisroel* quickly, and luckily, I managed to back my car up to get out. Otherwise, we would have been lost and no one would have ever known the difference. But this is how the danger was with tidal waves in Wildwood, an experience I had never had before and do not wish to experience again.

In all the years of the congregation, Wildwood had never made an appeal from the pulpit. It was known that they would not make an appeal. Whenever I had new people come to town and want to join the *shul*, the first thing they'd ask me is how many appeals do we have a year. I'd say, "This congregation is unique. They never make an appeal from the pulpit." So consequently, these people were very happy and they joined the congregation.

This went on for many years. But in the last years before I left, the congregation had a financial problem, and they had to do some renovating of the *shul*. They needed approximately $50,000. I was at the board meeting, as I always was, and they were discussing the $50,000 they needed to borrow from the bank, on which of course they would have to pay interest. I was asked if I could offer any suggestions and I asked, "Why should you borrow money from the bank and pay interest? Let's make an exception. Make a *Yom Kippur* appeal and we'll probably get the $50,000 and we won't have to pay any interest." Well, they said, "Rabbi, we appreciate it, but you know we've never made an appeal, and I don't think we can raise $50,000 on a *Yom Kippur* appeal." I said, "Well, let's try it." They asked, "Who'll make the appeal?" I replied, "I'll be more than happy to and I promise you that you will get your $50,000 with no problem."

After discussing this back and forth, realizing they had never had an appeal but still wanted to do this, they didn't know how it would go over with the membership. Of course some of the members were very much opposed to it, but I decided that I would make the appeal with the congregation's permission and they consented and wished me luck.

It pleased me so much when I made that appeal. I didn't raise $50,000, but rather over $150,000! People could not be-

lieve it. One man in particular said to me, "Rabbi, when I came to *shul Kol Nidre* night (the night of *Yom Kippur*), I made up my mind that I was going to give $1,000 for this appeal. But when you finished with your sermon, I increased my pledge to $5,000." And this made me feel so good. There were so many people who felt inspired the way I put this across to them, and the appeal was so successful, that they were more than happy to give this money.

And from the $150,000, every penny was collected except a pledge of $250 from some stranger who happened to be in *shul* that night. But the rest of the money came in. And so now we were in good financial standing and there was no reason to worry about borrowing from the bank.

They appreciated all of these things that I did and I felt good in being able to do them because my heart and soul had always been in the congregation. I knew what I wanted to do and they respected me and I respected them, and our success was wonderful.

As I mentioned earlier, I was told that Wildwood was in the South because it was below the Mason-Dixon Line. That is true. But the climate is not the Southern type. We had some very heavy snowstorms. There were many, many *Shabbosim* that we could not get to *shul*, and even when our children were married, we had a job getting to the weddings, which were all held in New York. And all of our members, the whole congregation, were invited to all of the weddings. We'd hire buses, but with everything going in our direction, the weather seemed to turn against us. Still, in all, we had beautiful affairs, beautiful *simchas*, or celebrations. But the weather is not the Southern weather. It's beautiful weather, if you like cold weather, which I personally do not. I'm a warm weather fan, not a cold weather fan.

So, after 20 years in Wildwood, which is a nice time to be in a congregation, I decided it was time to retire and to move to a warmer climate. Beverly, *olov hashalom*, and I went down to Florida, looked around, and found that we liked the city of Hollywood. When we came back to Wildwood, we told them when we were leaving. It was in September, but I would not leave them before *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur* since they didn't have another rabbi.



The *shul* made us the most gorgeous banquet that you can imagine. The whole congregation was invited to our farewell banquet. Even the mayor was there, and the governor sent his representative. The Senators sent their representatives. All the

ministers from the community who knew me were there. All of the officials of the government locally were there as well. They presented me with all types of plaques and honorariums. When we left there, we had such warm feelings for Wildwood which remained over the years. We'd go often when we returned to visit our children in New York. We'd always be treated like one of their lost brothers or sisters. We really enjoyed the community and the people, and had much *naches* from them. But, sorry to say the community, as I mentioned before, is not the community we left. It is no longer Orthodox. And in due time, I really don't think there will be too much left in Wildwood, because the people are sending their children out of town, which I'm happy to know. They're getting a good education. They are getting involved with other communities. They're getting involved with other *shul*s, and at least there is an outgrowth from Wildwood, even though it will not be localized in Wildwood, but it will have an influence on that area and on other communities as well.

CHAPTER 8

HOLLYWOOD, FLORIDA 1990-PRESENT

After these 20 years, when I retired, I felt, well, now I can sit back and relax and I don't have to do a thing. We moved down to Hollywood, Florida, in 1990, in November. I think I was in town about three weeks when I was approached by one of the board members of the Hillel Day School, in North Miami Beach. He said, "Rabbi, would you please substitute? We need a substitute in our day school." I said, "No, I'm retired. I don't want to do it." He said, "But, Rabbi, it's a *mitzvah*. We need you." Ultimately, he twisted my arm and I accepted, and I substituted for a couple of years.

But I didn't enjoy doing it because the children today are from wealthy families. They know that their parents are paying a tremendous amount of tuition and they feel as long as their fathers are paying this kind of money, they can behave as they want. I went through quite a bit of behavior problems from some of the children of very wealthy families. After a while, I told them I would not substitute anymore. I didn't want to have anything to do with it. And, thank G-d, I did finally get out of doing any more substitute work for the school.

However, one of the things that I enjoyed the most about the move to Hollywood, is that the rabbi of the Young Israel, Rabbi Edward Davis, and his wife, Rebbitzin Meira Davis, become very close friends. Beverly, *olov hashalom*, used to always say, "All the years we were in the rabbinate, and we always envied the other people. These people have everything you can imagine and there is one thing they have we can never have." And people would say, "What are you talking about? Their money?" I'd answer, "No. Hopefully some day we may be able to retire, and have a little money for retirement." They'd say, "Do you mean health?" I'd say, "Well, with the good Lord, we'll have good health." They'd say, "Well, Rabbi, what do you mean they have something you don't have?" I'd say, "All these people have a rabbi. We don't have a rabbi. Those people can go to a rabbi to ask questions, get counseling, whatever they need. I have no rabbi to go to. I am the rabbi, and I have no rabbi I can go to if I have problems. I have to go out of town. I have to contact someone from a distance. There is nobody that I have within my community that I would say is my rabbi or my mentor or my advisor." But when we moved to Hollywood and we met Rabbi and Rebbitzin Davis, we felt that now, finally, we had what everybody else always had with us. We had a wonderful rabbi, a wonderful *rebbitzin*.

Beverly remained in good health for many years in Hollywood, but finally her health started to fail, and we suffered together through her illness. Beverly was quite ill when our first great-grandchild was born in 1997, but it was her greatest joy to make the trip by plane, and to be present with me at the *pidyon ha ben*. It was when we returned home that Beverly started to deteriorate rapidly, and in December of that year (not very long after we had returned) she passed away. But we were married happily for 52 years, and had so much *naches*

from our three children. My oldest daughter Vivian Sharon graduated from Stern College, became a medical assistant and a teacher, and married Harry Zelcer. They have five wonderful children: Adam, Raizee, Joshua, Uri, and Akiva. After graduating from Stern College as well, Nina Raye, my middle daughter, attended Beth Israel Nursing School, and became a nurse. She is married to David Mermelstein, and they have six wonderful children: Adeena (married to Ephraim Jacobson), Eliyahu (married to Ayelet Kalker), Shmuel (married to Raizy Berry), Esther (married to Ari Sorotzkin), Avrohom (married to Rivky Birnbaum), and Chani (married to Ashie Silber). And from these beautiful couples, I have (at the moment) thirteen great grand-children: Hillel, Bayli, A. Jay, Gaby, Bracha, Tzippy, Aron, Yitzchak, Coby, Leah, Tzvi, Shoshana Leba, and Bayla Pearl. Last, but certainly not least, my son Arthur Bernard graduated from Yeshiva University and Einstein Medical School, and is a specialist in pediatric pulmonary medicine. He is married to Debby Schoenfeld, and they have four wonderful children: Abby, Reuben, Leah, and Talia. G-d willing, hopefully, we will have more weddings and more great-grandchildren—and more *naches* and *simchas* from all of these young people—in the future. We are so proud of each of them, because they are all religious, and they've all followed in the footsteps of real Yiddishkeit.

As for me, when I am not attending a family *simcha* up north, I keep myself busy in Hollywood. Even though I will not substitute in the school, any time Rabbi Davis needs me for something, he knows he can call on me, and in any way I can be of help, I'm always available to him. It is my pleasure, and whatever I do for him, I enjoy doing. In the Young Israel of Hollywood on *Shabbos* morning, I enjoy making *kiddush* for the congregation. When Rabbi Davis is out of town and

they ask me to do the *misheberach* or give a sermon, I'm very happy to do that. So any way I can be of help, I am. If Rabbi Davis needs a *Bais Din*, for a witness, he calls me and knows I'm available, and that is my pleasure. Another pleasure I have is my *chevrusas*, with whom I learn several times each week. The final pleasure I have now that I'm retired is working with the *Bikur Cholim*, or visiting the sick. But really, that's not at all new to me. I've done that all my life. Even before I took my first pulpit, I used to visit at the hospital because I felt sorry for those who were sick. And everybody knows that I visit the hospital, usually covering all eight floors, and most everyone who is there. I do that regularly at least twice a week, and on other days, when I'm notified that there is a new person.

So, when people say, "Are you retired?" my answer is, "Retired from what?" I don't feel this is retirement. I feel I have readjusted my life in such a way that I do the things I *want* to do, the things I've always loved doing, but I don't do it under duress because I'm under a contract or because I have to because my congregation and board insist that I do it. Now I do the things I like because I enjoy participating and I feel it is a pleasure and a special blessing to be in a position with, thank G-d, good health. I can perform the duties and religious participation without being under any obligation or control, but merely for the love and devotion that I have acquired over these many years. May G-d grant me many more years of good health and ability to continue to serve in the vineyard of our Torah and all its *mitzvahs*.



At our surprise 50th anniversary party in Hollywood



Speaking after being honored by the Young Israel of Hollywood, 2003



Family photo taken in 1996 aboard Alaskan Cruise: (Standing L-R) brother-in-law Charles Stockheim, brother Raphael Atlas, sister Louise Davis, brother Harry Atlas, and myself. (Seated L-R) sister Judith Stockheim, sister-in-law Barbara Atlas, and Beverly



Nina Mermelstien and daughters (L-R): Esther, Chani, and Adeena



David Mermelstien and sons (L-R): Shmuel, Eli, and Avrami



Vivian and Harry Zelcer and their children (standing L-R): Adam, Joshua, Harry, Vivian, Raizi; (seated) Uri, Akiva



Arthur and Debby Atlas and their children: (L-R): Talia, Reuben, Abby, Leah

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A seventh-generation rabbi born in Greenville, Mississippi, raised in the nearby town of Greenwood, but then educated at the Yeshiva Torah Vodaath and Chafetz Chaim in New York, Rabbi Seymour Atlas came back to the South in 1943, to serve as a pulpit rabbi. With his characteristic wit, charm, and insight into Southern life and human behavior, Rabbi Atlas describes the trials, tribulations, adventures, and oddities but also the tremendous excitement of his whirlwind journey through five different Jewish communities of the South: Greenwood, Mississippi (1943-1946); Montgomery, Alabama (1946-1956); Bristol, Virginia (1956-1959); Birmingham, Alabama (1959-1962); and Little Rock, Arkansas (1962-1970). When his children went to college in New York, Rabbi Atlas searched for a pulpit closer to them, and was delighted to find one in Wildwood, New Jersey (which was technically "Southern" in that it lies south of the Mason-Dixon line). Rabbi Atlas remained in Wildwood for 20 happy years until his retirement in 1990. As a current resident of Hollywood, Florida, and active member of the Young Israel of Hollywood, Rabbi Atlas is a popular speaker and teacher, and is known for his *Kiddush* with the Southern "twang."

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