

LESSON PLAN FOR POS 223 - CIVIL RIGHTS AND CIVIL LIBERTIES

Terri Desai

A common question which comes up in the historic discussion of the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s is why people took the positions they did and what would we have done in their place. Students assert that, had they been alive at the time, they would have supported the African American struggle. What kind of people wouldn't have, after all? I often discuss the fact that hindsight makes this look very different. Mohammed Ali and Martin Luther King, Jr., for example, are now universally revered but were not viewed that way by many, if not, most of their white contemporaries. In this lesson plan, using a few select examples of southern Jewish response to the Civil Rights movement, I aim to explore the reasons why people may have behaved the way that they did and to help students critically consider the cultural and socio-economic factors which influence how people respond to injustice. Ultimately, the intent would be to bring the issue back to the present day and ask whether any of those factors continue to influence our response to today's injustices.

PART I: Discussion of Readings

Prior to class, students will read both:

- 1) The letter written by the Hebrew Union Congregation in Greenville Mississippi to the Union of American Hebrew Congregations dated May 1, 1956 concerning a public statement about desegregation.
- 2) Sermon of Rabbi Burton Padoll of Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim Synagogue concerning his congregation's responsibility to support Civil Rights entitled "Sorenson (sic) on Religion" circa 1965

In class, students will then discuss the documents in small groups. They will be asked to consider what factors they think might have led to such different responses from the two Jewish groups and report back to the class with their thoughts.

PART II: Lecture

I will give a presentation summarizing the material from the article "Jewish Segregationists" in *Fight against Fear: Southern Jews and Black Civil Rights* by Clive Webb concerning three southern Jews who were committed to segregation - Soloman Blatt, Sol Tepper and Charles Bloch. Brief summaries of the men's stories will be summarized from the article.

I will then discuss the materials I found concerning Rabbi Burton Padoll in the Lowcountry Digital Archive. Specifically, I will discuss the oral history taken by Dale Rosengarten with Rabbi Padoll and Sol Breitbart. Padoll maintains that he eventually left his Pulpit because of his outspoken support for civil rights. It was his

contention that he had the support of $\frac{2}{3}$ of his congregation but the powerful and wealthy congregants who were the more ardent segregationists wanted to silence him.

PART III: Guided Class Discussion

Re-engage the class in the question of why some southern Jews supported Civil Rights while others didn't.

Specifically addressing:

- **Racial dynamics** - Jews tenuously accepted as “white” in southern society and reaped the benefits of that. Nonetheless, aware lurking anti-semitism as evidenced by the bombings of Jewish Buildings and Institutions in 1957-1958 (Display Chart “Locations of Bombings and Attempted Bombings of Jewish Buildings and Institutions 1957-1958”) and the ever - present memory of the lynching of Leo Frank. Greenville letter nicely summarizes this.
- **Socio-economic dynamics** - Wealthier Jews may have had power and less to fear. If merchant class starts opening their doors to blacks, they may lose white business. Jews in larger communities with larger and more established Jewish populations may have had less to fear than Jews in smaller towns who faced more pressure to conform and more dire financial consequences for that failure. Different response from more assimilated Jews versus more recent Jews of eastern European descent.
- **Religious Dynamics**
While some Jewish leaders believed and taught a social justice message, that didn't necessarily permeate with all Jews who didn't see the Black Freedom struggle as analogous to the Jewish struggle. Some Jews believed that prejudice against anyone made all minority groups unsafe. Others didn't make that connection.
- **“Southernness”/States Rights** - Many Jewish southerners not immune to the attitude held by most southerners that outsiders (particularly northern Jews and Freedom Riders) should not be coming down into the south and stirring up trouble.
- **Other Possible Dynamics-** For example, Rabbi Allen Krause argues that Padoll's troubles were due, in large part, to his personality (had he moved more slowly and more graciously, things would have been different), his “unfriendly wife,” his Vietnam War opposition.

Final wrap up question: Which of these factors are currently influencing people's response/or lack of a response to the Trump administration's actions against immigrants and refugees. Have students discuss the connections.

Possible Further Activity - As a follow up, a project or an extra credit opportunity, students could listen to and reflect on the podcast “White Lies” about the murder of the Reverend James Reeb in Selma, Alabama.