Exhibition Marks 50th Anniversary of The Temple Bombing

Fifty years ago exploding dynamite ripped a gaping hole in the brick edifice of The Temple on Peachtree Street, home to Atlanta’s oldest and largest Jewish congregation. The Oct. 12, 1958 attack was linked to an epidemic of hate group activity plaguing the South during the civil rights movement.

The impact of the attack on Atlanta’s Jewish community and on the civil rights movement is documented in “‘The Bomb that Healed’: Rabbi Jacob M. Rothschild, Civil Rights, and The Temple Bombing of 1958,” opening Aug. 23 at the Manuscript, Archives & Rare Book Library (MARBL) in Emory’s Robert W. Woodruff Library building. The influence of the bombing was not what the bombers might have expected, says curator Ellen G. Rafshoon.

“The bombers had intended to intimidate Jews, who were seen as co-conspirators along with blacks in the civil rights struggle -- but this act of terror had the opposite effect,” said Rafshoon, a history professor at Georgia Gwinnett College. “When The Temple’s spiritual leader, Rabbi Rothschild, returned to his office the following day, he was greeted with mailbags filled with sympathetic messages from Atlanta and from across the nation.”

The overwhelming support extended to the congregation gave Atlanta Jews the confidence to become more active in bridging the divide between whites and blacks, Rafshoon noted. That is why Rothschild’s widow, Janice, has referred to the otherwise tragic event as “The Bomb That Healed.”

The exhibition, which draws on Rabbi Rothschild’s personal papers and includes letters, photographs and published clippings, will show how the rabbi worked openly to build support for desegregation among Atlanta’s religious and civic leaders. For example, he participated in plans to desegregate Atlanta’s schools peacefully.

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“This was an especially significant achievement, considering that some of Atlanta’s Jews feared challenging Atlanta’s rigid racial order,” explains Eric Goldstein, associate professor of history and Jewish studies at Emory University. “They themselves had often been victims of social discrimination, and even virulent attacks such as the lynching of Leo Frank in 1915. They hoped that if they kept a low profile, discrimination would pass, and they would eventually be accepted.”

Goldstein explains that with Rabbi Rothchild’s encouragement and the more accepting environment they found in the wake of the bombing, many Atlanta Jews found they could confront discrimination, both against themselves and African Americans, and even become leaders in this cause.

One of the most rewarding moments in Rabbi Rothschild’s career will be highlighted in the exhibition: the rabbi’s successful organization of the South’s first racially integrated banquet, which honored Martin Luther King Jr. after he won the Nobel Peace Prize.

That event, held at the Dinkler Plaza Hotel on Jan. 27, 1965, was attended by 1,400 guests. In a letter thanking Rabbi Rothschild for the tribute, which will be on display at the exhibition, King confided that the encouragement he received that night would sustain him during the “many dark and desolate days of struggle” ahead.

The banquet evening, King wrote, “was a testimonial not only to me but to the greatness of the City of Atlanta, the South, the nation and its ability to rise above the conflict of former generations.”

The exhibition, which is free and open to the public and runs through Jan. 5, 2009, is being held in conjunction with several other events commemorating the bombing:

- Rafshoon will present a slide show about the exhibition; Temple congregants, including the rabbi’s widow, Janice Rothschild Blumberg, will share their memories of the attack. 9:45–11:45 a.m. Oct. 12 at The Temple, 1589 Peachtree St., N.E., Atlanta, GA 30309. For more information and to RSVP, please contact Ronnie VanGelder, program director for The Temple, at rvangelder@the-temple.org.
- “Jews in A Changing South,” the 33rd Annual Conference of the Southern Jewish Historical Society. Hosted by the Tam Institute for Jewish Studies and Emory University, Nov. 1-3. Lodging at Emory Conference Center hotel; most events on the Emory campus. Registration plus SJHS dues, $160; registration for SJHS members, $125; full-time students, $50. All Atlantans invited to attend special portions of the program at reduced rates. Registration deadline is Oct. 1, 2008. For more information: http://www.jewishsouth.org/upcoming_conference.htm or egoldst@emory.edu.
- The Southern Jewish Historical Society annual conference features “The Bombing and Beyond: Jews, African Americans and Social Change in Atlanta

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during the 1950s and 1960s,” a discussion featuring several activists and politicians of the era and moderated by writer and journalist Melissa Fay Greene, author of *The Temple Bombing*. Co-sponsored by The Temple. 7:30 p.m. Nov. 2 at The Temple, 1589 Peachtree St., N.E., Atlanta, GA 30309. For more information and to RSVP, please contact Ronnie VanGelder, program director of The Temple at rvangelder@the-temple.org.

MARBL and the exhibition are located on the 10th floor of the Robert W. Woodruff Library building on the Emory University campus, 540 Asbury Circle, Atlanta, GA 30322. MARBL is open 8:30 a.m.-5:30 pm. Mondays through Fridays. For Saturday hours or other information, call 404.727.6887 or send e-mail to marbl@emory.edu.

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