

SIXTEEN

RABBIS

Lessons in Stirring Up Trouble from the St. Augustine Movement

Jay Saper

It isn't nice to block the doorway,
It isn't nice to go to jail,
There are nicer ways to do it,
But the nice ways always fail.
It isn't nice, it isn't nice,
You told us once, you told us twice,
But if that is Freedom's price,
We don't mind.

How about those years of lynchings
And the shot in Evers' back?
Did you say it wasn't proper,
Did you stand upon the track?
You were quiet just like mice,
Now you say we aren't nice,
And if that is Freedom's price,
We don't mind.

Malvina Reynolds

Civil disobedience is not our problem.
Our problem is civil obedience.

Howard Zinn

THE STORY

JUNE 1964

From his jail cell in St. Augustine, Florida, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. dictated a message to have telegraphed to his friend Rabbi Israel Dresner. Before long, sixteen rabbis, as well as the director of social action for Reform Judaism, boarded a plane to fly down to Florida.

A decade after the passage of *Brown v. Board of Education*, St. Augustine still refused to integrate its public schools and accommodations. While the city had received federal funds for the 1965 celebration of its quadricentennial, officials excluded Black people from serving on the committee in charge of planning the festivities.

Local Black activists, led by dentist Dr. Robert Hayling, urged the city to end segregation by its birthday. He helped to organize sit-ins at whites only restaurants, wade-ins at whites only beaches, and pray-ins at whites only churches.

City officials and the Klan put up a fight. They launched firebombs at the homes of Black activists. A Black family who sent their kids to a white school found their car set ablaze. White supremacists shot into Hayling's house. The bullet barely missed his pregnant wife and took the life of his pet dog Madonna.

Hayling reached out to King to help bring national attention to the intensifying horrors. When King arrived in St. Augustine, the movement focused on integrating the Monson Motor Lodge, where over 200 activists had already been arrested.

With the United States Senate in the midst of staging the longest filibuster in its history to prevent the passage of the Civil Rights Bill, King hoped that what happened in St. Augustine would reverberate far beyond the city limits.

King went to the Monson. Motel owner James Brock denied King service and police hauled him off to jail. From there, King reached out to Dresner.

When the rabbis showed up, they joined a demonstration at the town's slave market, where they held a prayer service and sang freedom songs amid white supremacists wielding bricks and broken bottles.

The next day, on June 18, 1964, Dr. C.T. Vivian and Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth led the rabbis to a sit-in at the Monson. When Brock denied them service, they knelt down to pray and Brock attacked them. The largest mass arrest of rabbis in the history of the United States unfolded.

The commotion diverted attention away from the motel's pool, where two white guests brought their Black friends to swim. When Brock discovered the dive-in taking place, he grabbed two gallons of muriatic acid and poured them into the pool.

Photographs capturing this moment circulated across the globe, deeply embarrassing stalled politicians. The very next day, the Senate ended its filibuster and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was soon signed into law.

While the St. Augustine Movement had achieved an enormous victory, the struggle was not over. Brock and his teenage daughter still proudly raised their Confederate flag high above the Monson. When they eventually were forced to integrate, white supremacists picketed and fire bombed the former segregationist hero. Black activists continued to be subjected to violence.

Three months later, King won the Nobel Peace Prize. St. Augustine Police Chief Virgil Stuart commented, "I consider it one of the biggest jokes of the year. How can you win the peace prize when you stir up all the trouble he did down here?"

City officials approved the demolition of the Monson Motor Lodge in 2003 because they felt it had no historical value. What follows are lessons for stirring up trouble that no wrecking ball can remove, no bulldozer can obliterate.

THE LESSONS

CULTIVATE TRUST

Dr. King knew he could count on Rabbi Dresner because they had built trust together through the years. Dresner was the first rabbi arrested as part of the Black Freedom Movement during a sit-in at a segregated restaurant in the Tallahassee airport as part of the Freedom Rides of 1961. The following year, Dresner visited King in Albany, Georgia. At King's request, Dresner organized a contingent of clergy to make a prayer pilgrimage to Albany and stage a mass arrest. While Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel is perhaps the rabbi most remembered for marching in 1965 alongside King from Selma to Montgomery, Dresner was also there. King traveled to New Jersey to speak to Dresner's congregation on multiple occasions.

- If you are preparing to engage in high risk action to directly challenge injustice, it is imperative to build a foundation of trust with those whom you hope to act. Sing together, eat together, laugh together, share your visions of the world to come. When you connect deep down in your soul with your accomplices, you tap into a collective courage that helps you endure through the most trying moments. When police harass you alone it can feel monstrously intimidating, yet amidst a group with trust it suddenly feels possible to hold your ground and resolutely refuse to obey an order.

COMMUNICATE SECURELY

When Dresner met with King inside the Albany jail, King tapped on his cell wall. The Black college students in the cell over began singing freedom songs so the guards wouldn't hear their conversation.

- The government's practice of spying on activists and sabotaging our efforts, most commonly associated with COINTELPRO, continue to this day. If you plan to engage in high risk action, it is helpful to take precautionary measures to ensure your target and the police do not know your plan ahead of time. Consider communicating with those you have established a foundation of trust with through an encrypted messaging app. Better yet, talk face to face with all phones left in a separate room. Do not brag to friends about what you are planning to do or post a picture of your brainstorm on social media. When we reveal any information

about those who might have helped us in our planning, we subject them to the risk of being charged with conspiracy. Come to an explicit agreement with those you are organizing with about what secure communication looks like for you and commit to holding each other to communicating in that agreed upon manner.

ASSESS YOUR RISK LEVEL

Dr. Hayling knew that most Black people in St. Augustine feared the repercussions of getting involved with the movement. They felt they simply could not afford the very real possibility of losing their jobs. Youth were certainly also vulnerable, yet in a different sense. They were more eager and better positioned to take higher risks. While the youth were on the frontlines, the adults ultimately supported their courageous action. After Audrey Nell Edwards, JoeAnn Anderson Ulmer, Willie Carl Singleton, and Samuel White were arrested at a Woolworth's lunch counter sit-in, their parents refused to sign a form that would have kept them from participating in any more demonstrations until they were 21. As a result, the St. Augustine Four remained in jail for months, until mounting national pressure, including support from Jackie Robinson, forced their release. Leaders of the St. Augustine Movement strategically leveraged the different ways activists were impacted to bolster their actions. While people who were Black were not able to reserve a room at the Monson, two white members of the movement got keys so they could bring Black guests to the pool for the dive-in.

- Each of us are impacted differently by engaging in direct action and civil disobedience. While no one should decide for another whether or not they should risk arrest, we should be real about the various impacts getting arrested might have on us. Ask a movement lawyer to train you on your rights. Consult them with specific questions pertaining to your own unique circumstances. A successful direct action requires a broad range of support roles in the lead up to, the day of, and even after the action: including scouts, logistics, legal observers, de-escalators, medics, media, jail support, and more. All of these are vital and not one is more important than another. Nobody is less committed to the movement just because they do not choose to risk arrest; let's continuously self-assess what we can give to the movement, keeping in mind where we hold privilege and where we are vulnerable.

KEEP YOUR PEOPLE SAFE

King's close colleague Andrew Young remembered St. Augustine as their "most violent and bloody campaign." Homes were burned. Bomb threats were made. The Klan broke Hayling's ribs. It is a distortion of the movement to assume that Black activists simply withstood this violence without planning for their defense. A journalist reported Hayling as saying, "We will shoot first and answer questions later. We are not going to die like Medgar Evers."

- We need to create plans for keeping ourselves safe outside of the system of police. Determine together what safety means for everyone in your group. What backlash do you anticipate? How can you prepare for this? Train a support team in de-escalation and have medics on hand. Plan for how you will protect yourselves from cops, cars, and counter protesters. Remember, counter protestors are not always supporters of our target, sometimes they come from our own community and have a different opinion than us for how to go about making change. How can we inoculate our community against the attacks we plan to face so we are emboldened and not beaten down when criticism is lodged at us? While sometimes police attack demonstrators right away, sometimes they hope to wait us out. Prepare as needed.

DISRUPT THE STATUS QUO

Sit-ins at whites only restaurants, wade-ins at whites only beaches, and pray-ins at whites only churches went beyond the purely symbolic to directly confront an injustice while simultaneously presenting possibilities for living in a better world. While the backlash was brutal, it had not yet galvanized the public conscience, which is why Hayling invited King to town. King helped to narrow in on the Monson Motor Lodge and utilized that specific target as a way to dramatize something much bigger. With repeated sit-ins at the Monson, activists continued to scout the site and build knowledge of its vulnerabilities, which could be strategically exploited. While there was value to actions that focused on doing one thing well, the most striking action of the St. Augustine Movement had two well coordinated components: the rabbis' sit-in turned pray-in diversion and the pool dive-in. With King, came cameras. Local activists created a theatrical display that would produce a compelling image that would tell their story and shake the complacency of those sleeping through the storm.

- While action is always theater, the most compelling action includes elements of and yet also moves beyond the symbolic to directly disrupt an injustice and illuminate a better path. Prefigurative politics invite us to mirror in our action the world we're trying to create. Come up with a cover story and go out and scout your site. Recreate it with drawings and models. Dream together how you can best utilize the space. When you are dreaming, come up with impossible ideas. Don't limit your imagination. With the element of surprise, you often are able to pull off far more than anyone would have thought possible if thinking in realistic terms. Note where doors, guards, stages, gates, cameras, elevators, stairs, windows, streets, and sidewalks are. Get a sense of the size of the space. Is there one primary action you are planning? Are there multiple actions you hope to pull off simultaneously or in a rolling fashion? Is there something happening that you want to stop or shutdown through forming a blockade? Will you use your bodies or build a lockbox? Is there something that is not happening that you want to happen? How will you make it through the barriers? Do people need to be adept at climbing, running, jumping? Are there tools you need to assist you? Will the action itself communicate your message or will you utilize some form of banner or other medium to communicate? Consider forming affinity groups, a helpful horizontal structure to utilize for actions with multiple components. A spokescouncil is a process that can be used to coordinate logistically among various affinity groups. Think about how much each affinity group needs to know or not about other affinity groups' components of the actions for everything to be successful. Remember, communicate securely to keep the element of surprise in your favor. Create multiple backup plans and figure out how the call to shift from one to another is going to be made in the moment.

KEEP CALM

When Brock dumped two gallons of muriatic acid into the pool at the Monson, the image circulated around the globe and led to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The image had such power because of the underlying assumption that Brock was inhumanely subjecting the activists to acid that would burn their skin. While some of those who had dived into the pool believed the same thing, one knew that the acid Brock used was simply a common pool cleaner and would be so diluted by all the water in the pool that it wouldn't cause any harm. He took a gulp of pool water and swallowed it before their eyes to encourage everyone to keep calm.

- Our target and the police love to play on our fears, especially when they lead us to cave in on each other. When we anticipate backlash and other forms of violence, we can create plans to prepare for them so we can keep calm throughout our action. Rehearse multiple backup

plans. If forming a blockade, those on the ends are most vulnerable and most likely to be either arrested first or last. Decide together where you feel most comfortable. Talk through what needs you might have when the action comes. Discuss what keeps you calm. Continue to check in on each other throughout the action and remind each other to breathe. Connect with activists who have been arrested before in the city you are planning your action. Learn from them about their experience so there are as few surprises for you as possible. Talk with a lawyer about the common charges activists face in your city and how that might impact you. Discuss your legal strategy together before the action. Are you agreeing to all do the same thing in the courts or each take your own route? Remember, when you are arrested, you might feel nervous and cops might try to manipulate you into discussing the details of your action with them: simply breathe and don't talk to the police.

SHOW SOLIDARITY

After the rabbis were arrested with Dr. C.T. Vivian and Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, they refused to enter segregated cells. They formed a circle around Vivian and Shuttlesworth, demanding their constitutional right to remain with the Black clergy. Together they held strong through threats and the barrel of guns pointed at them. Eventually, the sheriff got a cattle prod and shocked a Black teenager until everyone separated.

- We cultivate trust through practicing solidarity. Solidarity strengthens us before, during, and after an action. Discuss your needs and come up with ways to meet them together. Create a jail support team to track you through the system, communicate with loved ones and employers, take care of your kids and pets, and demand any medical attention you might need. If someone's handcuffs are too tight or people are not given drinking water in jail, think of how you can practice solidarity to address this. You will not always get everything you want and should not expect any preferential treatment. Though, when you feel someone is being grossly mistreated or needs medical attention they are not receiving, practicing solidarity is the most powerful way to get something done about it: collectively advocate or refuse to comply until the issue is addressed. This applies not just to those whom you are arrested with, but also other people you encounter inside. Don't fear connecting with those around you. Despite what you might have been taught, those behind the bars are kinder than those with the badges keeping you inside. Remember your experience and all the injustices that infuriate you inside. When you get out, connect your own work to the ongoing struggle to abolish police and prisons.

SUSTAIN YOUR COMMITMENT

On the fiftieth anniversary of their action at the Monson, six of the eight rabbis who were still living returned to the city to speak at the St. Augustine Jewish Historical Society. “We don’t want you to lionize us,” Dresner said. “The real heroes are the ones who stayed and fought the battle.” Not everyone arrived in and left St. Augustine on an airplane. Those most vital to the movement were of the community and struggled for justice there long before the rabbis showed up and continue to struggle to this day. While the rabbis did not stay in St. Augustine, they kept their commitment to justice when they returned to their own communities. Dresner continued his activism, as one of the first rabbis to protest settlements in the West Bank, protest the wars in Vietnam and Iraq, as well support the queer liberation movement.

- Movements are more than individual people, individual actions, and individual laws that are passed. It takes sustained and unseen collective labor of communities to build and transform a culture. Our own work rests upon the shoulders of our ancestors. We cannot be free until everyone is free. Discover how you have skin in the game. Commit for the long haul to working for collective liberation.

LESSONS AT A GLANCE

Cultivate Trust

When you connect deep down in your soul with your accomplices, you tap into a collective courage that helps you endure through the most trying moments.

Communicate Securely

Come to an explicit agreement with those you are organizing with about what secure communication looks like for you and commit to holding each other to communicating in that agreed upon manner.

Assess Your Risk Level

Nobody is less committed to the movement just because they do not choose to risk arrest; let's continuously self-assess what we can give to the movement, keeping in mind where we hold privilege and where we are vulnerable.

Keep Your People Safe

Determine together what safety means for everyone in your group. Create a plan for keeping your people safe outside of the system of police.

Disrupt the Status Quo

While action is always theater, the most compelling action includes elements of and yet also moves beyond the symbolic to directly disrupt an injustice and illuminate a better path.

Keep Calm

When we anticipate backlash and other forms of violence, we can create plans to prepare for them so we can keep calm throughout our action.

Show Solidarity

Solidarity strengthens us before, during, and after an action. Discuss your needs and come up with ways to meet them together so you have each other's backs.

Sustain Your Commitment

Collective liberation requires more than a single action. Let's commit for the long haul.

WHY WE WENT

Inside the St. Johns County Jail, on the back of a leaflet about the Klan, Rabbi Eugene Borowitz began drafting a statement from the rabbis on why they came to St. Augustine. Below is an abridged version of the letter.

St. Augustine, Florida
June 19, 1964

Dear Friend:

We went to St. Augustine in response to the appeal of Martin Luther King.

We came because we realized that injustice in St. Augustine, as anywhere else, diminishes the humanity of each of us. If St. Augustine is to be not only an ancient city but also a great-hearted city, it will not happen until the raw hate, the ignorant prejudices, the unrecognized fears which now grip so many of its citizens are exorcised from its soul.

We were arrested on Thursday, June 18, 1964. Fifteen of us were arrested while praying in an integrated group in front of Monson's Restaurant. Two of us were arrested for sitting down at a table with three Negro youngsters in the Chimes Restaurant.

We came to St. Augustine mainly because we could not stay away.

We came because we could not stand silently by our brother's blood. We had done that too many times before. We have been vocal in our exhortation of others but the idleness of our hands too often revealed an inner silence, silence at a time when silence has become the unpardonable sin of our time. We came in the hope that the God of us all would accept our small involvement as partial atonement for the many things we wish we had done before and often.

We came as Jews who remember the millions of faceless people who stood quietly, watching the smoke rise from Hitler's crematoria.

The conscience of the wicked has been troubled, while that of the righteous has gained new strength. We are more certain than before that this cause is invincible, but we also have a sharpened awareness of the great effort and sacrifice which will be required.

We shall not soon forget the stirring and heartfelt excitement with which the Negro community greeted us with full-throated hymns and hallelujahs, which pulsed and resounded through the church; nor the bond of affectionate solidarity which joined us hand in hand during our marches through town; nor the exaltation which lifted our voices and hearts in unison; nor the common purpose which transcended our fears as well as all the boundaries of race, geography and circumstance. We hope we have strengthened the morale of St. Augustine Negroes as they strive to claim their dignity and humanity; we know they have strengthened ours.

These words were first written at 3:00 A.M. in the sweltering heat of a sleepless night, by the light of the one naked bulb hanging in the corridor outside our small cell. They were, ironically, scratched on the back of the pages of a mimeographed report of the bloody assaults of the Ku Klux Klan in St. Augustine. At daybreak we revised the contents of the letter and prayed together for a new dawn of justice and mercy for all the children of God.

We do not underestimate what yet remains to be done, in the north as well as the south. In the battle against racism, we have participated here in only a skirmish. But the total effect of all such demonstrations has created a Revolution, and the conscience of the nation has been aroused as never before.

Baruch ata adonai matir asurim. Blessed art Thou, O Lord, who freest the captives.

Rabbi Eugene Borowitz
Rabbi Balfour Brickner
Rabbi Israel Dresner
Rabbi Daniel Fogel
Rabbi Jerrold Goldstein
Rabbi Joel Goor
Rabbi Joseph Herzog
Rabbi Norman Hirsh
Rabbi Leon Jick

Rabbi Richard Levy
Rabbi Eugene Lipman
Rabbi Michael Robinson
Rabbi B. T. Rubenstein
Rabbi Murray Saltzman
Rabbi Allen Secher
Rabbi Clyde T. Sills
Mr. Albert Vorspan