

# Samuel S. Mayerberg

Rabbi

1892-1964

by Daniel Coleman

Near the end of his life, Rabbi Samuel Mayerberg told his Temple B’Nai Jehudah congregation that he wished not to be remembered as a fighter for civic justice, but merely as a man of unequivocal faith in God and the Ten Commandments. Historians, however, now write mainly of his willingness to put into action another idea, expressed in his favorite quotation: “Of all the evil done in the world, one-third is due to the vicious people who do it, and two-thirds to the virtuous who let it be done.”

Samuel Mayerberg was born May 8, 1892, in Goldsboro, North Carolina. He would later recall his mother’s wish that both he and his twin brother become rabbis like their father. While his brother pursued a medical career, Samuel developed an early desire to emulate their father’s rabbinical study and teaching. After studying liberal arts at the University of Cincinnati, Mayerberg received a degree from Hebrew Union College in 1917. That year was the first of his nearly fifty-year marriage to wife Gertrude, and the couple relocated to Detroit, where Mayerberg served for several years as assistant rabbi at Temple Beth-El. After eight more years as a rabbi at Congregation B’Nai Jeshurun in Dayton, Ohio, Mayerberg came to Kansas City in 1928 to lead Temple B’nai Jehudah.

He established himself immediately as a wiry, energetic presence before the congregation, combining passionate speech with a scholar’s eloquence. From the time of his arrival in Kansas City, he was willing to confront matters of conscience. He spoke out for academic freedom in a 1929 flap at the University of Missouri in which several professors were suspended for distributing an anonymous questionnaire about sexuality to sociology students. In 1931, he contacted state authorities in an attempt to stop the lynching of an African American man in Maryville, Missouri. He also took up the case of Joe Hershon, a young Jewish man who had been sentenced to death in Jackson County after his conviction in the murder of a police officer. Unsuccessful in persuading authorities to commute Hershon’s sentence to life imprisonment, Mayerberg sat with Hershon the night before his execution and accompanied him to the gallows.



But Mayerberg would become best known for his vocal and courageous opposition to violations of the city charter—and public trust—by political machine boss Tom Pendergast, his lieutenant City Manager McElroy, and Pendergast’s north side enforcer, John Lazia. Mayerberg began his crusade at a downtown hotel on May 21, 1932, when he told an afternoon meeting of a women’s civic organization known as the Government Study Group that the “time for study has passed,” and called for action against the “gang” and “racketeers” who controlled the city. A cub reporter happened to be covering the event and ran with the story, printing much of Mayerberg’s message beneath the headline “Crooks Run the City.”

Mayerberg persisted, addressing clubs and religious groups across the city, eventually voicing his opposition to City Manager McElroy before the city council. He received a groundswell of public support and was even urged to run for mayor in 1934. He received death threats, was assigned bodyguards by the governor of Missouri, slept with a pistol beneath his pillow, and temporarily left Kansas City for his personal safety. His car having been fitted with bullet-proof glass, he survived an assassination attempt in which he was fired upon by four men in another vehicle.

The reforms Mayerberg called for did not happen immediately, but when the Pendergast regime toppled in the early 1940s, Mayerberg was seen as one of its earliest and most outspoken opponents. He continued his work at Temple B’Nai Jehudah until retirement in 1960, where his notable accomplishments included the establishment of interfaith alliances, teaching classes on religion at the University of Missouri-Kansas City and the University of Kansas, and receiving the Jacob Lorie Service Award—the highest honor given by the Kansas City chapter of B’nai B’rith. He died at age 72 on November 21, 1964, having refused to remain silent on matters of conscience through the final decade of his life, as a vocal critic of partisanship in city and county government and taking a controversial stand at a large rabbinical conference.

### Sources

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