

North Shore Summer Project

Activists: Past and Present



Rabbi William Frankel

Rabbi William Frankel entered the civil rights struggle through a dark door, but he illuminated for many the path to a better world. A native of Vienna, he was 15 years old when the Nazis occupied Austria. Humiliated and beaten whenever he ventured outside, he identified and sympathized with all victims of human rights violations.

Although he was able to immigrate to New York before WWII, that early experience shaped his life's work. As his son Dan said, Rabbi Frankel transformed what could have been bitterness into a mission to protect the civil rights of all people, and that mission grew even more urgent when he witnessed the effects of Jim Crow laws in the South.

In the early 60's, after Rabbi Frankel had secured a position at Beth Hillel synagogue in Wilmette, he responded to a call for clergy to march from Selma to Montgomery. There, he marched with Dr. King and other Chicago clergy. When he announced the trip to his congregation, some members objected, arguing that a rabbi should not be "politically active." These naysayers represented only a minority of the congregation, but the rabbi felt he could no longer be their leader, and so he founded a spin-off congregation, Am Yisrael, whose founding principle is social justice. He served that congregation until his retirement in 1994.

Rabbi Frankel was instrumental in bringing Dr. King to the Winnetka Village Green in 1965. Several years later, he helped found the North Shore Interfaith Housing Council. As one of the first Jewish members of the Wilmette Rotary Club in the late 60's, Rabbi Frankel broke barriers, his son said, so that they would be open to others. Tolerance was at the heart of his message. Working for women's rights as well, the rabbi became a leading advocate for ordaining women. In fact, he made sure that the rabbi who replaced him was a woman.

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