

APPENDIX 2

*Rabbi Ira Sanders' Speech before the Arkansas General Assembly,
February 18, 1957*

I am Ira E. Sanders, rabbi of Congregation B'nai Israel, Little Rock. I have been its spiritual leader for almost thirty-one years. However, tonight I speak as a private citizen. I am representing no organization and no group. This I wish to be recorded most emphatically.

The state of Arkansas is very dear to me. It has provided me the opportunity to serve many causes in social welfare, touching both colored and white citizens, Jew and Christian alike. And in recognition of these efforts, the University of Arkansas in 1951 conferred upon me its highest honorary degree—Doctor of Humane Letters. I say this with the deepest humility, so that you may know why I doubly love this State and want to keep unsullied its good name. I would be unworthy of the sacred trust did I not raise my voice in protest of all four measures.

Why do I ask you, the senators of our state, to defeat these measures?

Above my love for Arkansas comes my devotion to America. This country protects your rights and mine through the finest interlocking of democratic processes in the world—its executive, its legislative, and its judicial departments. In the domain of the last of these, I regard the Supreme Court as the final democratic authority of the land, because it is the combined wisdom of all the people through the ballot box which gives to these legislators the high privilege of confirming or rejecting appointments of justices made by our chief executive, the president of the United States.

Because of the high legal talents with which they are endowed, it is their duty to interpret the Constitution as befit men of such high trust. Once they pass on the constitutionality of the law, it should become operative as the law of the land. Higher than the legal law, however, stands the moral law—those imperishable mandates which are the ethical repository of the best in our Judeo-Christian concept of life. Both Judaism and Christianity posit the dictum: “We shall have one law.” And a great prophet among my people, Malachi, once said, “Have we all one Father, hath not one God made us all.”

I believe that the words of Leviticus 25 are the bedrocks upon which American democracy alone can survive. That are these words inscribed on our Liberty Bell: "Ye shall proclaim liberty throughout the land unto all the inhabitants thereof." Our nation must be based on liberty and justice for all peoples, whose contributions to the cultural pluralism of our land have been great and varied. The dignity of the individual must never be destroyed by granting the state those powers which would deny anyone the liberty and the freedom guaranteed by the Constitution. These four bills on which we are speaking tonight were all concerned with the thought of circumventing the highest legal authority of the land. They will never stand the test of time, for higher than the legal law of the land stands this moral law of God. It operates slowly but surely, and in the end justice will prevail.

You have just passed a magnificent tax law to help the state financially. The increased revenue will bring untold good into the state, and industry from afar will want to come within our blessed boundaries to give to all of us increased economic, cultural and spiritual enrichment. If these measures which deny America's traditional guarantees of individual freedom and liberty are allowed to pass, the state you and I love will lose first an increased economy coming from new industries and secondly it will be held morally in just opprobrium before the country. And what you have done to bring industry into the state will be overwhelmingly nullified.

When Jesus died on the cross, He repeated those immortal words: "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." Legislators! May future generations reading the statute books of Arkansas laws not be compelled to say these words of you. For the sake of the glorious heritage Arkansas may yet give to our beloved America, defeat, I pray you, in toto, these four measures, and the God of all men will bless your handiwork.

Source: Ira E. Sanders. Papers. Box 1, file 15, Congregation B'nai Israel Archives, Little Rock, Arkansas.