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Six of the 16 rabbis who were arrested during the civil rights protests of 1964 return for the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Civil Rights Act. Paul Ortiz of the University of Florida moderated a panel discussion with the rabbis on Tuesday at Flagler College in the Victoria Room.

Large crowd hears riveting story

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The 200-seat capacity Virginia Room at the Ringhaver Center was overflowing Tuesday evening as members of the community gathered to hear the stories of six rabbis who came in 1964 to march with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

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A recipe from Cora Tyson, who cooked for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

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of six rabbis who came in 1964 to march with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

The rabbis traveled from as far away as Los Angeles to revisit a place at

least one of them thought he'd never see again.

"When I was driving in last night and saw the sign, 'St. Augustine,' I was stunned," said Rabbi Richard Levy. "I never thought I would come back here."

Levy and the other five panelists were among 17 rabbis who came to St. Augustine at King's request at the height of the movement. They knew they would be arrested. They feared they would suffer worse.

"I can't tell you how frightened I was," Rabbi Allen Secher said. "Holding a young black girl's

hand and walking for a couple of hours — the scariest 2½ hours of my life."

The panel discussion was part of a two-day Justice, Justice 1964 event organized by the St. Augustine Jewish Historical Society.

"We chose the name Justice, Justice 1964 from a passage from Deuteronomy that says, 'Justice, and only justice, shall you pursue,' said event organizer Carol Rovinsky.

During the two-hour panel discussion, the

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rabbis talked about why they answered King's request, how coming to St. Augustine that hot summer shaped their lives and the reception they received from the residents here.

Levy recalled the warm welcome the 17 received when they entered the St. Paul AME Church 50 years ago.

"We were taken into the homes of people in the church with such hospitality and warmth and welcome that the next morning when we went outside and would see blacks walking in the street and whites walking in the street, my instinctive feeling was to be frightened of the whites and to feel at ease with the blacks in the community," Levy said. "To my shame, I don't know that I have ever felt that before. So, if you were to ask about how we were received, we were received in a life-changing manner."

ON THE PANEL

■ Rabbi Daniel Fogel, of the North Shore Synagogue in Syosset, New York.

■ Rabbi Israel Si Dresner, of Wayne, N.J., a renowned Freedom Rider and friend of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who later earned the title as the "most arrested rabbi in America."

■ Rabbi Jerrold Goldstein, who serves as volunteer Secretary of the Sandra Caplan Community Bet Din in Encino, Calif., since retiring in 2005.

■ Rabbi Allen Secher, a Freedom

Rider and pioneer in the use of multimedia techniques in sermonic expression from Flathead County, Mont.

■ Rabbi Richard N. Levy, recipient of the 1994 Covenant Award for Jewish educators and current rabbi and director of spiritual growth of the Campus Synagogue in Los Angeles.

■ Rabbi Hanan Sills, a former U.S. Navy chaplain with the Marine Corps and a congregational rabbi of 5,000 from Eugene, Ore.

Though Rovinsky referred to the rabbis as "our heroes" in opening remarks, more than one of the rabbis said they were not heroes.

Rabbi Israel Si Dresner, who was a friend of King's, was one of them.

He talked about the courage of people in the African-American community, like Robert B. Hayling, who risked his life every day, and the Rev. Frederick Lee Shuttles-

worth, who tried to integrate the beaches, and J.T. Johnson, a young black man who jumped into the segregated pool at the Monson Motor Lodge.

"You've lionized us, and we really appreciate that. I thank you from the bottom of my heart, but the real heroes are not the people who came down here for a couple of days — namely us," Dresner said. "The real heroes were the people who fought the

battle day and night, week after week, month after month, year after year."

Paul Ortiz, panel moderator and director of the Samuel Proctor Oral History Program at the University of Florida agreed that there were many people to be proud of during that summer, but the city itself deserves some credit.

"For a year or more St. Augustine, Florida, was one of the most important cities not only in the United States, but it was one of the most important cities in the entire world," Ortiz said. "The city was at the center of the greatest questions of the day — the questions of equality, human rights and dignity, and how we relate to each other as individuals. The city has so much to be proud of."

In addition to filming the panel discussion, the oral history program interviewed several of the rabbis during their visit. Once edited, those interviews will be available on the program's Youtube channel.