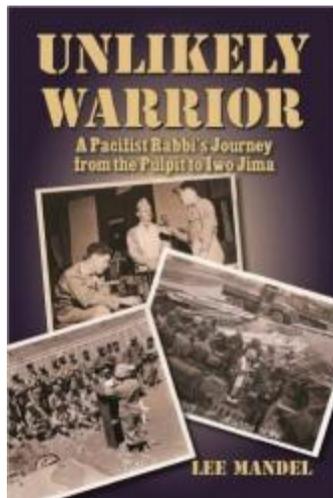


## A Boston rabbi who made history is focus of new book

By Rabbi Harold L. Robinson  
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A look at Rabbi Roland B. Gittelsohn. The Battle of Iwo Jima was an iconic Marine Corps battle of World War II. Remarkably Rabbi Roland B. Gittelsohn's eulogy delivered at the dedication of its battlefield cemetery transformed American thinking about the war and largely defined it the war for the generation that fought it. How did the speech, entitled "The Purest Democracy," come to be delivered by a rabbi, and who was the rabbi that delivered it? Lee Mandel's book "Unlikely Warrior: A Pacifist Rabbi's Journey from the Pulpit to Iwo Jima" answers these two questions.

Jewish Boston of the Sixties was bursting with rabbis and lay leaders of renown; not least among them was Rabbi Roland B. Gittelsohn. Gittelsohn was a respected thinker, a prolific author, a fierce advocate for civil rights, sex education, and Zionism—and by chance, my rabbi.

Gittelsohn had been a warrior against the despair of the Great Depression and the inequality of American society. Most of all he was a passionate pacifist who saw in the wars of Europe and Asia only the machinations of old world empires. Mandel describes the rabbi's personal struggle to reconcile his thinking to everyday events, and his description of Gittelsohn's experiences leading up to and at Iwo Jima are nothing short of gripping. Sadly, the book concludes before Gittelsohn is called to serve Boston's Temple Israel.

By 1995 Gittelsohn and I had spent endless hours together, first as student-teacher, then as colleagues on committees and boards. Still, it was only in 1995, the 50th anniversary of the Battle of Iwo Jima, that I actually read the sermon or realized its impact on America. I was a Naval Chaplain when a general

confronted me in a passageway and described the 50th anniversary commemoration that had occurred at the Iwo Jima Memorial. He reported that the President, Secretary of Defense, and Commandant of the Marine Corps spoke, the most remarkable moment occurred when a rabbi – too short to be seen over the podium – had reprised his eulogy from 50 years earlier. Brandishing a copy of “The Purest Democracy,” the general challenged me, “Do you know this guy?” It was not the last time a Marine would ask that question.

America entered WWII in the Pacific because the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor – and in Europe, when Hitler declared war on us. Our involvement was reactive, not proactive – simple self- defense. In 1945, Rabbi Gittelson’s words transformed the war’s essence from a war of selfdefense to a war of self-definition. Gittelson described an America which through enormous sacrifices had proved itself a nation true to its democratic, humanitarian and egalitarian values. Americans had fought, and many had died, to ensure the Fascists, Nazis, and Japanese could not prevail, and that American society had become, and would remain, the very antithesis of the hateful regimes we defeated. In short “The Purest Democracy” gave the war meaning for Americans, in terms that resonated with our aspirations.

Who was this rabbi that preached this sermon? Lee Mandel starts at the beginning with Roland’s father’s origins in Eastern Europe and takes us through Gittelson’s early years, and his religious, philosophic and educational development. In Mandel’s description, we are tempted to see him as a young, sophomoric firebrand – almost arrogant. His early political sermons seem beyond the scope of a 26-old-year rabbi. However, those sermons contain the seeds of the greatness for which he was destined, as one of the Jewish community’s most influential and articulate personalities of the post war years. His youthful zeal had not been viewed as arrogance by his contemporaries. In fact, one early student sermon, “More Human Bondage,” so impressed the Reform movement that its leadership commissioned him – a rabbinic student – to write the movement’s study guide on war and peace. At war’s end Americans needed to understand – intellectually and emotionally – the reason they had fought and so many had died. Rabbi Gittelson voiced the answer.

“The Purest Democracy” so resonated in the forties, fifties and sixties, that it was published in countless newspapers and in Time magazine. It was distributed by shortwave radio to all American troops around the world. It was read on Memorial Day in 1945, and for years after the war, on national radio. We can only speculate that Gittelson’s sermon is not remembered and studied along with “the Gettysburg Address” and “Washington’s Farewell to his Officers” because he was a private citizen. Then too, by the 1970s many Americans imagined that the great ideals of “The Purest Democracy” were already realized – they seemed to be the givens of American life. Little did we know that a generation later we would still be struggling to make real at home, the very ideals Roland B. Gittelson articulated 70 years ago on that tiny volcanic atoll in the far off Western Pacific.

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