



## An Open Letter to Our Baltimore Jewish Community

FOR THE PAST FIVE YEARS, it has been my honor to serve as rabbi of Beth Am Synagogue in Reservoir Hill. Together, we have worked to advance an agenda of community engagement, deepening bonds between our members and our majority non-Jewish, African-American neighbors. These efforts have led us down an exciting and meaningful path including timely and provocative discussions, musical and cultural exchanges, volunteerism and advocacy. But at the heart of our work is the forging and deepening of relationships. Beth Am strives to be not just IN and FOR but increasingly OF our neighborhood. These efforts are driven by our Jewish values and texts but also by honoring Reservoir Hill's historically Jewish identity. Here, we engage not just in *tikkun olam*, repairing the world, but also *tikkun shechunah*, repairing our neighborhood, softening boundaries and, perhaps in some small way, mending bonds broken or strained decades ago.

This past week, as attention turned from Ferguson, Mo., and New York to Baltimore, our Jewish community was rightly concerned about violence, vandalism and looting and the victims of these crimes. I'm proud that The Associated, long committed to Baltimore City, saw fit to support efforts to provide food, clothing and other necessities to those affected.

Having said that, permit me to share a bit of our experience here in West Baltimore. First, while it's deeply unfortunate more than 200 businesses were looted and tens of millions of dollars in revenue lost, it's important to remember that those rioting Monday were dwarfed in number by thousands throughout the past week who joined in civil protests and thousands more who worked Tuesday to clean up the damage. Miriam and I, along with our two children, spent several hours lending a hand. We wandered throughout Sandtown-Winchester that day with a diverse crowd including many from Freddie Gray's community, and at no time did we feel unsafe. So many voices in print and visual media this week have excoriated Baltimoreans for "destroying their own neighborhoods." Believe me when I say how many more have, in fact, been working to build their own neighborhoods over years and decades.

Furthermore, while I am grateful to the *Jewish Times* for praising those of us who "stood side-by-side with residents of Sandtown," it's also important to recognize that West Baltimore (like most of Baltimore City) is hardly monolithic. Surely, there are areas of concentrated blight whose residents struggle with near universal poverty and food insecurity, but there are also plenty of neighborhoods that are thriving or have experienced significant improvements. To

my knowledge, there were no broken windows or any significant damage in Reservoir Hill nor in our sprawling and beautiful backyard (Druid Hill Park). Our neighborhood, despite its proximity to looting and riots, was quiet and calm. Neighbors here from diverse racial backgrounds and of varying financial means supported and cared for one another. And while dozens of recalcitrant Baltimore citizens squaring off with rows of riot police and national guardsmen may have monopolized cable news broadcasts over several nights, the other 620,000 of us were in our homes, frustrated only that we could not go out to enjoy the many wonderful restaurants and entertainment venues, visit with families and friends or simply go about our business as free citizens.

There is much more to say — about the nature of riots, the need for better police training, oversight and accountability, the consequences of mass incarceration or the root causes of racism. And there's our struggling education system, the scourge of drug addiction or toxicities ranging from gang violence to lead paint. It is on these challenges we must focus in the coming months and years, and those of us in the city need the help and participation of our neighbors to the North. This is your city too.

Where to begin? Problems, like relationships, are only fixed by first

seeking to understand them. And our quest for understanding leads inexorably to a fundamental Jewish truth: that we are all created in God's image; that each person, whatever

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his/her appearance or background, shares our humanity. We all have the same capacity for love, hate, anger, empathy, knowledge, ignorance, debilitating fear and transcendent hope. In Baltimore City, here at Beth Am and beyond, we don't have the answers. But we are seeking them.

Won't you join us? JT

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