Concerns are grave over city’s future, how Baltimore will be perceived

By Marc Shapiro and Melissa Gerr

After a week that saw peaceful protests turn to riots and looting, members of the Baltimore Jewish community are concerned about the future of their city as well as what the world is seeing.

“We really were seeing a majority of very nonviolent protests. Our city has a very long history of being involved in nonviolent protests. This was really personal for a lot of people who feel like Baltimore has come a long way,” said Cailey Locklair Tolle, deputy executive director of the Baltimore Jewish Council. “When we see something like [rioting and looting], it completely detracts from where we started from.”

Tolle’s comments came Tuesday morning, a day after afternoon clashes with police in West Baltimore turned to looting, car fires and damage to businesses and properties that stretched from Mondawmin to Fells Point.

“It’s just heartbreaking,” said Baltimore City Councilwoman Rochelle “Rikki” Spector. “I am devastated.”

Baltimore Hebrew Congregation Rabbi Andrew Busch said it worries him what the world outside of Baltimore may be seeing, but it does not surprise him.

“Baltimore becomes the same as any other place dealing with a tragic crisis in that it’s hard to convey the complexity of the message,” he said. “I think what most of us are looking at locally is knowing there is the worst and the best. The people who have [peacefully] protested far outweigh, numerically, the people who then turned to riot.”

The city has been on edge since the death Freddie Gray, 25, who was arrested on April 12 and died on April 19 after suffering injuries while in police custody. It is not known when and how he sustained the injuries.

It was late Monday night when Tolle thought about how far and wide images of Baltimore were being broadcasted.

“My first thought when I had turned on WJZ was, ‘Is this also airing on CNN?’ I switched over to CNN and came to the realization that this isn’t just our local news, the whole world is seeing this,” she said.
The previous week saw smaller demonstrations that culminated on Saturday, April 25, when thousands of people chanted and waved signs as they marched from West Baltimore toward City Hall. When the protest got near downtown and near Camden Yards, the dispersing crowd turned violent as police cars were vandalized, business windows were broken, cars stuck in traffic were damaged and fights broke out between protesters and baseball fans at a bar outside the stadium.

Calm turned to chaos Monday afternoon, the day of Gray’s funeral, after a call for a “purge” spread through social media and what appeared to be school-aged individuals quarreled with police in the Mondawmin area, according to news and police reports. They threw rocks, bricks and bottles at officers; a car was set on fire, and later, residents ransacked Mondawmin Mall. But before the looting began there, businesses in the area of North and Pennsylvania avenues were attacked, including a CVS pharmacy, which was set on fire. Businesses on the west side of downtown were looted, their windows smashed. A large fire at Federal and North Gay streets destroyed a building that was under construction by a local church that was to become senior housing.

Spector maintained that recent events shed light on problems in the city that must be dealt with. “I think that what has been swept under the rug, or not really tended to, is right in our face right now,” she said. “We can’t be blinded, we can’t give it a pass, we’re going to have to roll up our sleeves and get to these people who have nothing to lose but something to gain. We’re going to figure out how to fix this.”

At least 15 police officers were injured by Monday night, according to reports. Gov. Larry Hogan declared a state of emergency, and Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake instituted a weeklong curfew from 10 p.m. to 5 a.m. starting Tuesday. (Baltimore City already has a curfew of 9 p.m. for those 14 and under.) City schools were closed Tuesday as were many businesses and offices, some of which closed early after opening in the morning. The Orioles postponed Monday’s and Tuesday’s games, and while many fans were peeved, Orioles COO John Angelos, son of owner Peter Angelos, offered thoughts via Twitter that were widely praised and circulated.

“The innocent working families of all backgrounds whose lives and dreams have been cut short by excessive violence, surveillance and other abuses of the Bill of Rights by government pay the true price, an ultimate price, and one that far exceeds the importance of any kids’ game played tonight, or ever, at Camden Yards,” he said in several tweets. “We need to keep in mind people are suffering and dying around the U.S., and while we are thankful no one was injured at Camden Yards, there is a far bigger picture for poor Americans in Baltimore and everywhere who don’t have jobs and are losing economic civil and legal rights, and this makes inconvenience at a ballgame irrelevant in light of the needless suffering government is inflicting upon ordinary Americans.”

On Tuesday, with threats of more “purges” on social media to be held in areas such as Northern Parkway and the Owings Mills Mall, which did not occur, many organizations took action. A large number of Jewish day schools and the Park Heights JCC closed early. Baltimore County Public Schools canceled after-school and evening activities. CareFirst’s office in Owings Mills, located in the tower office buildings adjacent to the mall, closed early as well.

Rabbi Nochum Katsenelenbogen of Chabad of Owings Mills was still going to hold a minyan at 2 p.m. at one of the office buildings by the mall, although he said some people will not be there and security will be beefed up. He also evacuated the Torahs from the Chabad facility as a precaution.

While Monday was chaotic and there were “hotspots” until the following morning, before dawn on Tuesday dozens were out in the streets helping clean up the city. Cleanup on North and
Pennsylvania avenues, which experienced looting and fire Monday, started before dawn when a diverse group of people from the neighborhood and beyond showed up.

A front-loader earlier in the day moved large pieces of trash, and the city brought in a large dumpster around 9 a.m. that residents used to dispose of bags of trash, broken doors and twisted metal shelving from stores. People were sweeping and hauling trash, while others gave out free drinks and snacks.

Molly Amster, Baltimore director of Jews United for Justice who attended Saturday's protests, said her organization was heartbroken after Monday's violence. She was out helping cleanup efforts on Tuesday.

“The message that is being sent by everyone, regardless of what types of actions they’re taking, the message is our system is broken,” Amster said, adding that she condemns Monday’s violence. “The issue of police brutality and the lack of accountability that we see when it occurs is what people are asking to be addressed and be fixed.”

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The Associated: Jewish Community Federation of Baltimore started accepting donations to benefit the neighborhoods affected by Monday’s violence and is working with churches, community centers and civic organizations to properly distribute that aid. Through Jewish Volunteer Connection, The Associated also sent volunteers to help clean up.

“For generations, The Associated has been there in the good times and bad,” its president, Marc Terrill, said in a prepared statement. “We know that soon, with everyone playing a role, we will rebuild Baltimore into the community of strength and charm for which it is known.”

On Tuesday morning, City Council President Bernard C. “Jack” Young held a news conference where unidentified gang members pleaded for the violence to stop. Videos and photos of members of the Bloods, the Crips and the Nation of Islam coming together to condemn violence circulated social media the day before.

In news conferences on Monday night, Young, Rawlings-Blake, Hogan and Spector referred to Monday’s rioters as “thugs.”

“This is not what Freddie Gray’s family wanted,” Young said, noting that the riots remind him of the 1968 riots after Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. “These are thugs who are seizing upon an opportunity to show their anger, their distrust and their frustration at the police department, and this is not the way to do it.”

Councilman Brandon M. Scott was blunt: “I am simply pissed off,” he said.

Rawlings-Blake added, “It is idiotic to think that by destroying your city, you’re going to make life better for anybody.”
Beth Am Synagogue Rabbi Daniel Cotzin Burg, who was out at the protests on Saturday with Jews United for Justice, did not think the same people who peacefully protested Saturday were responsible for Monday’s destruction.

“This seems to be a social media instigated [event] that quickly turned violent,” he said. “It’s different people, not community leaders, not the social justice community. It’s a reflection of the overall racial tensions in Baltimore, but the comparisons need to stop there.”

Burg was firm that there are problems that need to be addressed, but Monday’s events were not the right way.

“There’s no excuse for people stealing [and] throwing rocks and bricks at police,” he said. “It’s never helpful, never called for.”

In Northwest Baltimore County on Monday night, Shomrim was at work on a plan in case the violence migrated north to the Orthodox community, where things were quiet, spokesman Nathan Willner said.

“The biggest concern is that most of the police resources are deployed to the harbor and where the riots are taking place, which means our community would have less resources,” Willner said around 9:45 Monday night. “We are at a high alert. We are making sure that our responders are available.”

Less than five miles from several of Monday’s incidents, the Harbor East area was relatively quiet. A handful of restaurants hosted dining patrons, but almost everything was closed, including the 24-hour CVS.

Deirdre, a Baltimore County native and a manager at Gordon Biersch Brewing Company on Lancaster Street in Harbor East, was moving large tables and chairs inside from the patio with help from her staff.

“We’re just trying to get closed up so everyone can get home safely; we don’t know where all of the commotion is happening or where it’s coming [from],” she said. “We’re [bringing in] and locking up our patio furniture, anything that can be lifted and thrown is now locked up. We never do this. We usually lock things up with cords and master locks. So right now we’re getting everything safe.”

At the same time, neighbors helped each other clean up broken glass, board up windows and stand guard just half a mile away on Broadway in Fells Point, where a 7-Eleven, another convenience store and a MetroPCS mobile phone store was broken into and looted.

Because of the protests on Saturday, Rabbi Ariel Fishman, his wife and their son walked back from Lloyd Street Synagogue Saturday mid-afternoon to Judaic Heritage, near University of Maryland, Baltimore, where he is director.

“We decided to walk down Lombard thinking we’d be off the main Pratt Street protest traffic, but we still saw tons of people pouring out,” he said, noting that some wore anonymous Guy Fawkes masks. “It didn’t feel unsafe, but there were a lot of people moving out of that area.”

“Some of the people had a pain and sadness on their faces,” said Fishman. “I always think of what MLK said, ‘Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that.’ And that resonates with Jewish ethics, to love all people, love all creation. It’s a concept that has a firm hold in Jewish tradition.”

Tolle expressed concerns over what impact this week’s events may have on the city from things such as business insurance, taxpayer costs and the city’s economic future. But there needs to be dialogue, she said.

“These are conversations we need to have about how to better our community,” she said, “how we can come together and make sure this doesn’t happen again and address the issues that started all this.”