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Views

editor's note

# Learning from History

Why Metro Detroit's Jews should stand up for justice and equality.

In March, the *Jewish News* ran a story about Oakland County Sheriff Michael Bouchard and his senior staff paying their regular visit to the Holocaust Memorial Center. Sheriff Bouchard went there, he told us, so that he and his staff "can better prepare ourselves to not let history repeat itself." Many of our readers praised local law enforcement for their efforts.



Andrew Lapin

Now, it's time for us in the Metro Detroit Jewish community to reflect on the events of the past few weeks, and, with that same spirit, to take a stand with those advocating for racial justice and local police reform and accountability. Because history is indeed repeating itself.

We have witnessed the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, the umpteenth such police killing of a black civilian captured on video for the world to see (alongside many more with no video); the arrests and charges of the officers responsible (including one for second-degree murder); and the weeks of ongoing civil unrest this tragedy kicked off around the country. That includes in Detroit, where, to disperse crowds and enforce an imposed curfew, police have shot protesters with rubber bullets and tear gas and targeted members of the media, while opportunists (most from outside the city) have seized on the protests

as an excuse for violence and looting. One 21-year-old man was shot and killed, not attributed to police. Other Michigan cities, including Royal Oak and Ferndale, have held mostly peaceful protests; elsewhere, demonstrators smashed windows at the governor's office in Lansing and engaged in looting and vandalism in Grand Rapids.

Detroit is a city that, on top of being one of the hardest-hit nationwide in the COVID-19 pandemic, knows all too well the devastating consequences of police brutality toward its black residents — and the ways in which the destruction of local businesses, especially black-owned ones, over a few days of unrest can set a population back for generations. We saw this scene play out a half-century ago in the events of 1967, precipitated by, yes,

police violence against black residents. These events accelerated the departure of many of our Jewish families from our homes and businesses in Detroit and into the suburbs.

This is what I want to say. Because of our largely white skin, most of us in the Ashkenazic Jewish community have never been on the receiving end of police violence and America's systemic racism. And yet these systems have helped shape our community today. Prior to and following the '67 unrest, we largely fled from Detroit to Oakland County, where we could afford to establish our own communities, assuring local law enforcement would protect our interests.

From 1992 until his death last year, Oakland County Executive L. Brooks Patterson helped facilitate that reality,

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### GET ENGAGED

Local groups in our community are engaged in peacebuilding work from within the Jewish community, including the Coalition for Black and Jewish Unity, the JCRC/AJC, Repair the World Detroit and Detroit Jews for Justice.

National groups working toward reform include the Marshall Project, a nonprofit investigative newsroom focused on criminal justice, and the National Police Accountability Project, a nonprofit that offers legal assistance and educational programming to advocate for individual rights in police encounters.

Black-owned businesses in the Detroit area could use our support and patronage: Log on to [visitdetroit.com/detroits-black-owned-businesses](http://visitdetroit.com/detroits-black-owned-businesses) and check your local neighborhood Facebook groups for more.



ALEXANDER CLEGG/JEWISH NEWS



Detroit police control protesters in the streets of Detroit.

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promoting the area where most *JN* readers live as a thriving economic hub that welcomed Jews. Patterson did this while disparaging Detroit and its citizens in vile, heinous language, calling the city “an Indian reservation.” In his own words, he said he would “rather join the Klan” than help a group of CEOs rebuild Detroit. As the Oakland County prosecutor prior to becoming its executive, he expressed similar sentiments.

It was clear Patterson thought nothing of Detroit’s majority-black population; to him, these black lives didn’t matter. In Patterson’s eyes, Oakland County, and the many Jewish-owned businesses that helped power its economic engine, could only find success if Detroit failed.

We can’t allow ourselves to think like that anymore. We must realize that our fates are directly tied to those of our black and brown brothers and sisters, including Jews of color, with whom we share the Detroit Metro area, and indeed this entire country. We must help to heal this deep wound in our society, starting right here in Detroit.

Above all, please listen to and acknowledge this pain

and anger. Rather than looking for reasons to invalidate it or finding ways to rationalize a violent police response to it, take a moment to understand where it comes from. When it comes to interactions with law enforcement, our own history demands we find a peaceful alternative to the structural prejudice that leads to police violence against entire groups of people.

We have local examples to point the way forward, consistent with Jewish values. In Flint, seeing a crowd of protesters approaching, Genesee County Sheriff Chris Swanson disregarded his training. He laid down his baton and riot gear and accompanied civilians on a peaceful march.

And since protests began, Sheriff Bouchard has supported Michigan Senate Bill 945, requiring mandatory bias training for the state’s police forces.

Many more reforms are needed. We may need to completely rethink the relationship between our communities and the police. But amid all the horror, these are positive steps. We all must learn from history to avoid repeating it. ■