

Healing Hyperpartisanship, Renewing Sacred Connection
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Congregation Emanu-El of Westchester
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I would argue that Paws Place Dog Park in New Rochelle is the best dog park around. Located by the Ward Elementary School off Quaker Ridge Road, it's about the size of a football field, with a wooded stretch, open grassy areas, a few sloping hills, a separate space for small dogs, and benches for the humans. The City of New Rochelle's care for the park is a testament to the town I call home, and our mini goldendoodle Yofi loves it there. But it's not only about the dogs, it's the people. On any morning a stay-at-home mom might chat with a veteran, a senior from Mount Vernon with a finance bro from Larchmont, or a Port Chester worker with an Orthodox Jew from New Rochelle. It is a delightful kaleidoscope of Westchester residents and their dogs, gathered in surprising bonhomie - talking about everything, except politics.

It turns out that dogs are apolitical. At the park I can't help but make assumptions about people's politics-the woman with the WNYC tote bag, the man in a Vietnam Veteran hat, the tattooed twenty-somethings, the guy in his electrician's union t-shirt. People who might otherwise say nothing to each other laugh at their pups' antics, swap treats, and speak in ridiculous high-pitched voices: "Who's a good doggy-woggie?!" People no algorithm would ever pair end up laughing together over morning coffee. That spirit spills into my neighborhood too, where I chat just as easily with the man who has the toy poodle and MAGA sign as with the pride flag-displaying lesbian couple and their westie. I'm pretty sure Yofi has brought me into contact with a greater variety of people than any other part of my life - an antidote to the intense hyperpartisanship that now shapes where we live, whom we marry, and how we relate to one another.

While we may imagine that hyperpartisanship is a new feature of our day, humans have, of course, fallen into this trap throughout our history. We can start way back at the Tower of Babel when the humans formed a sort of political party against God with their attempt to build a tower to the heavens. That ended with humanity scattered, languages confused, and communication broken.ⁱ Fast forward to the Israelites wandering in the desert and we find a fellow named Korach. He gathered a band of followers, a new political party, if you will, to protest the leadership of Moses. That partisan feud left nearly 15,000 Israelites dead.ⁱⁱ The succession struggles after King Solomon split the nationⁱⁱⁱ and set the stage for the exile of the northern kingdom in 722 BCE.^{iv}

Just before the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE we find the most notorious period of partisanship in Jewish history. Under Roman siege, Jerusalem fractured. Zealots resisted fiercely; Sicarii killed collaborators before fleeing to Masada. John of Gischala schemed, Simon bar Giora rallied rural populists, while Sadducees sought peace to save the Temple - even through traitorous surrender to Rome's pagan army.^v Ordinary people, trapped between factions, suffered famine, disease, and terror. Rome's power was never in doubt. But the rabbis taught it was baseless hatred - not Roman legions - that brought Jerusalem down and sent us into exile.^{vi}

Violence that flows from hyperpartisanship is, unfortunately, not a relic of the past. Sadly, it is all too familiar in America today. Congresswoman Gabby Giffords, Congressman Steve Scalise,

Paul Pelosi, Presidential Candidate Donald Trump, Minnesota State Representative Melissa Hortman, and her husband Mark, Minnesota State Senator John Hoffman and his wife Yvette, and most recently Political Activist Charlie Kirk. And beyond the violence, the finger-pointing, ridicule and ensuing political machinations only deepen the poisonous root of hyperpartisanship.

We know its consequences – from the deaths of modern-day politicians to exile from our homeland. Indeed, that 2,000-year exile was not only a question of geography, but also a spiritual exile.^{vii} While we do not typically speak of partisanship in spiritual terms, given that it is Rosh Hashanah, we ought to examine the spiritual toll that it takes on us and on our communities. Hyperpartisanship undermines a tradition that places unity above all – from the Shema’s assertion that God is One^{viii} to the rabbinic dictum או חבירותא או מיתותא, community or death.^{ix} Broken community is antithetical to Jewish spirituality.

Partisanship - rooting for one team or another - strains community by design. Hyperpartisanship destroys it. That mindset divides people instead of encouraging discussion of ideas. Rather than thoughtful debate, we default to the talking points of our preferred political party or group. The Talmud celebrates מחלוקת לשם שמים arguments for the sake of heaven^x that genuinely seek truth. Hyperpartisanship is a nail in the coffin of that kind of serious discourse fraying community and damaging the relationships we need for spiritual sustenance. So, between the straining of communal bonds and the breakdown of relationships, hyperpartisanship is, indeed, a spiritual crisis. And every crisis demands a response. What wisdom might help us reimagine – no, not reimainge, remember – What wisdom might help us remember how we live together?

My teacher, Yehuda Kurtzer of the Shalom Hartman Institute, has argued that the damage from hyperpartisanship comes from our failure to distinguish between the moral, the political, and the partisan.^{xi} These ought to exist on a spectrum or, perhaps, concentric circles. The moral is the broadest category, it includes the values and ideals which we hold most dear, that which is right and good. The political is the way that we hope to see those values play out in the world. These may be expressed as public policy or laws or societal norms. The partisan, the narrowest of the categories, refers to the tactics used to achieve those political goals through coalition building, compromise, and winning. Or, put another way “our partisan commitments are the imperfect choices about which team we believe will come closest in enacting our morals and our politics into policy and law.”^{xii} Of course, not every political goal or partisan tactic is morally neutral. Some are amoral, even immoral, and we should have the courage to name them as such.

But, the immoral notwithstanding, we still need to keep the moral, political, and partisan separate if we hope to continue living as a diverse community because the collapse of these categories leads to hazards of all kinds. First, we allow lazy partisan identification to shape our own notions of morality. Rather than think through issues, discuss issues, wrestle with issues, we simply check to see what our “team” thinks and reflexively advocate for that. When our moral horizon shrinks to a binary choice between parties, we limit ourselves. Instead of developing moral conviction, we cede our morality to candidates whose positions are shaped by money, public opinion, party platform, coalition compromise, and the desire for power.

A few examples can show how important it is to distinguish the moral, political, and partisan – and how easily we sometimes blur those lines. The most repeated commandment in the Torah is

to welcome the stranger, the non-Israelite, the foreigner.^{xiii} People of goodwill can seek to make that moral commitment real in the world through different and often contradictory policies. But no one can seriously argue that any one political party's immigration platform fully encompasses their moral commitment to welcome the stranger. We ought to begin with that value and form policy opinions from there, not simply parrot a politician. Similarly, the Torah teaches, “לֹא-תִקֶּם וְלֹא-תִטֹּר” You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge...^{xiv} This sort of moral teaching allows us to live in diverse community together. We can apply that moral in the political and partisan realms by carefully distinguishing vengeance and justice. When actions drift from justice to revenge, it is a plain violation of this moral teaching not to take vengeance. We who seek a moral society should measure all leaders against this moral standard – and, as members of community, extend the same presumption of moral seriousness to one another.

Unfortunately, most of us do not extend this grace to people on the other side of the aisle. Instead, as soon as we see someone's lawn sign, we ascribe to them not only a partisan choice, but a complete set of political views and, most damningly, an assumption about their morality. We turn neighbors into moral enemies and who can be in genuine community with a moral enemy? No one. Indeed, the whole world then becomes split between friend and foe, ally and enemy. When this sickness takes hold in the Jewish community, we lose the ability to wrestle with the issues that matter most to us. That commitment to *מחלוקת לשם שמים*, constructive argument, helped to make us one of the most resilient people in history. We cannot lose it.

Partisan schisms need not be deadly to cause real problems, to cause what Kurtzer calls a “constriction of community.”^{xv} This happens when congregations organize around partisan groups, when memberships become self-selecting based on partisan ideological criteria. We should not avoid political debate: *מחלוקת לשם שמים* makes us stronger as a community. Indeed, as we said earlier, politics ought to be the business of making our values real in the world - any religious institution ought to strive for that. But vilifying our political or partisan foes makes constriction of community a sad reality.

But imagine this. Imagine if congregations could be places where we first debate and articulate our values and only then debate the ways those values might be realized in our world. This intellectual endeavor flourishes when it takes place among people whose relationships are based on care and concern, shared values, and a commitment to one another. Start with relationship, then debate ideas. And we build those relationships. We build them by saying kaddish together, celebrating b'nei mitzvah together, yelling mazel tov at the chuppah together, attending family education mornings at religious school together, and even doing fun hand motions at Shabbat services together. We are each so much more than our ideological commitments and being part of a congregation allows us to see and experience that.

All of that being said, we should not give up our individual partisan or political commitments. However flawed, these are the ways that we get things done in America. Indeed, now is not the time to capitulate on our most deeply held values and the ways we hope to see those values play out in the world. We are all aware of the threats around us - to Jewish community, to free speech, to the environment, to reproductive rights, to Zionism, to the LGBTQ+ community, to science and to truth. These threats are real, and they touch every corner of our lives. And so, we need to engage deeply through both politics and partisanship. But if we do not change the WAY that we

approach that discourse, if we continue to yield to hyperpartisan tendencies, if we continue to demonize those we disagree with, we face the dangers I have spoken of this morning, the dangers we already see playing out around us.

And so, I hope that we can model a better way with our communities, our congregation, and with our friends and families. I believe that we can live in community with those who hold different political or partisan views because we share a vast number of core values and morals. Those morals - not any particular policy or partisan position - are the real *שְׁעֵי צְדָקָה*, the true gateways to righteousness of which the psalmist speaks.^{xvi}

I also know that our ability to advocate politically depends on the strength we draw from local relationships and community – strength and support that has nothing to do with politics or partisanship. Four practices can anchor us as we strive for a better discourse: (1) Root positions in real moral reflection, not team loyalty; (2) Presume ethical conviction in fellow congregants; (3) Build relationships first - common humanity and heritage before politics; (4) Keep the moral, political, and partisan as distinct lenses when we debate. Of course, this does not mean that all politics are morally equal. Some goals and some tactics simply cross the line. But naming those should not keep us from sustaining our community by focusing on the morals we share and the relationships that unite us. Doing these things will allow us to strengthen our community... and perhaps our nation.

A few weeks ago at the dog park I watched Yofi play with dogs of every size and breed; all chasing one another across the grass. Their owners - from every walk of life - stood shoulder to shoulder, laughing together, sharing stories, and for a brief moment, transcending all that might otherwise divide us. That small scene is a big lesson.

That is the vision we need for our country. If we want America to remain a “shining city upon a hill,” “a place called Hope,” “the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity,” or “the last, best hope on Earth,”^{xvii} then we must remember what unites us: the simple, human desire for connection, community, and care. That means taking our moral commitments seriously. It means treating politics and partisanship as tools, not ends, not idols. When we practice this here at Emanu-El, when we practice it in our neighborhoods and with our families and friends, when we do that, we might just help heal our society. This is not just civic work - this is holy work, work of teshuvah, work of renewing our covenant with one another and with God.

ⁱ Genesis 11:1–9

ⁱⁱ Numbers 16:1–35

ⁱⁱⁱ 1 Kings 12:1–24

^{iv} 2 Kings 17:1–23

^v Josephus, Flavius. *The Wars of the Jews*. Translated by William Whiston, Book 4, Chapters 7–9, sections 121–388. Sefaria, https://www.sefaria.org/Josephus_Wars_of_the_Jews.4.7

^{vi} Yoma 9b and Gittin 55b-56a

^{vii} Rosh Hashanah 31a

^{viii} Deuteronomy 6:4

^{ix} Ta'anit 23a

^x Pirkei Avot 5:17

^{xi} “Moral, Political, and Partisan – Yehuda Kurtzer Lecture.” *YouTube*, Shalom Hartman Institute, uploaded by Shalom Hartman Institute, n.d., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yux7F1lEXa0>

^{xii} Kurtzer, Yehuda. “We Need to Stop Casting Politicians as Moral Leaders.” *The Times of Israel: The Blogs*, 19 Feb. 2021, blogs.timesofisrael.com/we-are-more-than-the-sum-of-our-moral-political-and-partisan-parts/

^{xiii} Exodus 22:2, Leviticus 19:33–34, for example

^{xiv} Leviticus 19:18

^{xv} Kurtzer, Yehuda. “We Need to Stop Casting Politicians as Moral Leaders.” *The Times of Israel Blogs*, 19 Feb. 2021, blogs.timesofisrael.com/we-are-more-than-the-sum-of-our-moral-political-and-partisan-parts/

^{xvi} Psalms 118:19

^{xvii} Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, Barak Obama quoting Abraham Lincoln