

# This Is Your Brain on Conflict: The Problem of Polarized Communication

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*The human world is today, as never before, split into two camps, each of which understands the other as the embodiment of falsehood and itself as the embodiment of truth. . . . Each side has assumed monopoly of the sunlight and has plunged its antagonist into night, and each side demands that you decide between day and night. . . .* —Martin Buber, “Hope for this Hour”

Does this sound like a description of the combative rhetoric between Democrats and Republicans in the current election cycle? Or among Jews at different points on the religious or political spectrum? This description of polarized discourse, as contemporary as it is classic, was written in 1967 by Martin Buber.<sup>1</sup> There, he named the central problem of conflict interaction and hinted at the healing needed to transform it. In so doing, he anticipated the work of the best theory and practice in contemporary conflict studies.

Family therapists Richard Chasin and Margaret Herzig write that ideological opponents often resemble families stuck in chronic conflict.<sup>2</sup> In such rhetorical battles, supporters of each side “believe they hold the high moral ground and are prey to unprovoked attacks from the other side, which they see as power hungry, self-centered, destructive, and perhaps even deranged. . . . [E]ach find[s] ‘proof’ of their own innocent victimhood and of the other’s unwarranted attacks and wrongdoing.”<sup>3</sup>

Whatever the particulars of our personal histories, nearly all of us have experienced such painful conflicts in our lives.

Chasin and Herzig, along with a group of colleagues in the Boston area, created the Public Conversations Project (PCP) in response to the escalating rhetoric in the late-1980s abortion debate. Today, PCP analyzes and facilitates public conversation around highly polarized issues, applying the insights of family therapy to the transformation of toxic communication in the sociopolitical realm.

When stuck in the midst of entrenched conflict, combatants in discord — be it familial, communal, or international — tend to think that their dispute is uniquely intractable. From a communications perspective, however, certain patterns of polarized communication are common to virtually all cases of chronic conflict. The first stage in transforming dysfunctional conflict interaction is to recognize the common characteristics of such discourse — what I have

come to call: “This is your brain on conflict.”

Conflict specialists have observed common and predictable patterns in all intractable conflicts, including:

- Complex issues are defined in dichotomous, “win-lose” ways, with nuances and intermediate positions suppressed.
- There is little genuine listening to perspectives from the “other side.”
- Questions from one side to the other are prosecutorial rather than genuine requests for understanding.
- Those on the “other side” are seen as all alike and completely negative and those on “our side” are seen as unified and exemplary.
- Self-critical thinking is rare, as each side seeks to put forth its strongest argument.
- Opinions are strong and emphatic; personal authenticity is sacrificed, since doubt, ambiguity, and complexity have no place in the rhetorical battle.
- There is rarely openness to other views or perspectives, since “our side” is completely right and the other side cannot be trusted.<sup>4</sup>

The media all too frequently exacerbate the problem, believing that the public prefers stories of conflict and violence to nuanced wrestlings with ideas. As a result, they frame polarized issues in adversarial ways, reinforcing the public perception that there are two — and only two — diametrically opposed sides to the conversation, hopelessly locked in combat with one another. Worse still, parallel media outlets each offer only their own interpretation of issues, creating communal echo chambers without communication or understanding among them.

But conflict specialists understand that, with skillful intervention, people can be led away from high-conflict communication patterns, and they can learn to speak with

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Buber, “Hope for this Hour,” *The Human Dialogue: Perspectives on Communication*, edited by F.W. Matson & A. Montagu.


<sup>2</sup> “Creating Systemic Interventions for the Sociopolitical Arena,” Richard Chasin and Margaret Herzig, in *The Global Family Therapist: Integrating the Personal, Professional, and Political*, edited by B. Berger Gould and D. Demuth.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Adapted from “Creating Systemic Interventions”

genuineness, listen with respect and curiosity, and see both self and others as whole, complex human beings, even across chasms of disagreement. When dialogue participants agree to experiment with communication guidelines that promote a blend of rigor and respect, they find that the conversation can readily move from stuck, adversarial positioning to authentic exchange. Even without changing minds or finding common ground, participants can rediscover human dignity in “the other,” recognizing that every conversation partner has a

unique set of compelling life experiences, personal needs, and perspectives.

I can imagine how pained Buber would be to see the dynamics of polarization growing ever more violent with the passage of time, endangering the integrity and cohesiveness of Jewish communities and of democratic societies. But once we recognize the underlying dynamics of polarized communication, we may rediscover our ability to relate to others — even our ideological opponents — as persons created in the image of God, our neighbors and friends. 



## Can Civility Be the Answer to Polarization?

EYAL RABINOVITCH & MELISSA WEINTRAUB

With the country and the American Jewish community increasingly and stubbornly polarized, fatigue, rampant frustration, and residual hope have led many to call for civility. Volatile community conflicts rife with attacks, threats, and pervasive fear have spurred a wave of efforts seeking to undo the damage of our polarized public space. In the Jewish community, polarization has been most acute around the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with Jewish organizations and synagogues creating official policies to avoid Israel altogether, and rabbis across the country retreating from “the death by Israel sermon.” In the resultant wave of civility efforts, those invoking civility generally have one of three things in mind. For these efforts to succeed, we must rightly assess the value and consequences of each line of thinking.

### Version One: Play Nice

By far the most common interpretation of “civility,” the idea of “playing nice” is also the reason so many people roll their eyes when they hear the word. People immersed in the urgency and emotions of high conflict do not want to muzzle themselves in a bland exercise of false politeness. If civility means holding back passion and assertive action, people understandably see it as a waste of time.

But there’s more to the niceness meme. For many, the ugliness of polarization is about more than mere decorum; it’s about the sense that divisiveness is eroding our core bonds and pushing us to undermine our basic values of integrity, community, and dignity. Furthermore, when people are too uncomfortable to speak

and feel that no one is listening, the conversation misses out on much creative thinking and problem-solving. There are moral and practical reasons — reasons not only of style but of substance — for turning down the volume and learning to communicate constructively.

### Version Two: Isolate the Extremists

This strategy tends to focus on excluding those whom the “reasonable middle” regards as beyond the pale, the idea being that a productive, civil conversation becomes possible once we marginalize the extremists and unite ourselves against them. This theme often leads to debates over where to draw the line and how wide to extend the tent.

Without a doubt, successful depolarization would disarm those determined to shut down communication or instigate violence. However, in a polarized context, the effort to marginalize the “haters” can be deceptively dangerous. The distance, distrust, and antagonism between opposing groups means that we are predisposed to see those who disagree with us as malicious, irrational, or even hateful, primarily because our understanding of them is based on fear, caricature, or stereotype. This makes it likely that the extremist tag will get invoked opportunistically or prematurely to dismiss people, even though there remain both room and need for constructive engagement across our differences.

Moreover, once people have been labeled and marginalized, they don’t pack up and go away. More likely, their frustration with what they see as an avoidant and arrogant mainstream only heightens, which in turn may

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