


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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radicalize their tactics, intensifying polarization and cementing their “troublemaker” status in the eyes of the mainstream.

### Version Three: Let the Silent Speak


Finally, the call for civil discourse is sometimes read as a request for inside groups to listen to those who have felt ignored, excluded, or oppressed. Marginalized or dissenting voices want a place at the community table, and conveners sometimes want to absorb them into the mainstream as a moderating force.

While the intention to be inclusive and to address grievances is important, this mode of civility can also exacerbate the very polarization it’s trying to undo. For example, inside groups may anticipate that the effort will amount to diatribes of political correctness in which they will be lectured about how horrible they are. They may see outside groups as simply venting anger, with no recognition for the positive work of the establishment or viable solutions to the problems at hand. Marginalized groups, meanwhile, resist co-optation when the goal of the mainstream is to neutralize challenges to the status quo. Constructive communication may fail to get off the ground or be quickly overcome by resentment and defensiveness from mainstream and marginalized groups alike.

### What We Learn from Potential Pitfalls

When any of these strategies is the primary goal

of civility efforts, destructive consequences are almost certain to follow. When that happens, participants often leave more disillusioned and cynical than before, vowing not to fall for such nonsense again and making conflict only more intractable. The great challenge is to address the legitimate desires behind calls for civility — turning down the volume in order to speak constructively, stopping those bent on derailing the conversation, and creating an authentically inclusive conversation — without falling prey to the traps.

Getting there requires embracing a different interpretation of civility: a way of treating our conflicts — especially our hardest, most enduring ones — as signposts that there is something essential for us to learn together as a community, something that needs our greatest collective wisdom if we are to learn its lessons. Seen this way, civility transforms us from adversaries to partners in conflict, involved in a generative, collaborative pursuit of the best course of action. This leads us to discipline our speech voluntarily so that it will be heard, and to listen as resiliently as possible to anyone willing to grapple alongside us — especially neglected voices that may contain uncommon but essential insight. Only this version of civility can be a true catalyst for transforming polarization, replacing it with a rigorous, vibrant conversation that advances sustainable solutions and strengthens communities rather than destroys them. 

## ‘Abomination’ is Hate Speech

JAY MICHAELSON

Most American Jews, according to polls and the official positions of the major religious movements, do not believe that there is anything wrong with homosexuality. Outside the Orthodox community, they understand that sexuality is a trait, not a “lifestyle” or a pathology, and that LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) people lead lives as complex, rich, and varied as everyone else. Many people inside the Orthodox world feel the same way, and wrestle with how best to understand their biblical and halakhic traditions.

Language, though, continues to trip us up. Even people who have put aside strict readings of the Bible believe that the Bible condemns homosexuality and labels it, in Leviticus 18:22, an

“abomination.” Set aside the fact that this is a wild anachronism, since both the word and concept of homosexuality are of recent coinage. The continued use of the term “abomination” is part of the problem. Well-meaning folks who use the term innocently should stop doing so and regard it as hate speech.

“Abomination” is the translation of the Hebrew word “*toevah*” used in the King James version of the Bible. It is neither a Jewish word nor an accurate translation. Really, no one even knows what it means. As I’ve crisscrossed the country talking about my book *God vs. Gay? The Religious Case for Equality*, I’ve asked audiences about the term. The responses usually have something to do with unnaturalness and

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