

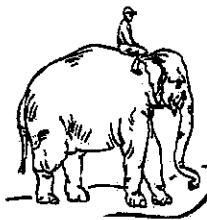
# Framework for Understanding and Overcoming Polarized Political Conflict

## Patterns of Moral Reasoning: The Elephant and the Rider

The dominant mode of discussing contentious political issues is a debate model that prioritizes facts, history, and legal-style argument. Such communication can be extremely ineffective, frustrating, and counter-productive for meaningful cross-conflict conversation.

People tend to react to the world with their moral intuitions (the heart and the gut) much faster and more profoundly than they do with their reasoning mind. These moral intuitions come from core values and direct experiences (especially early life experiences).

In other words, people make rapid intuitive judgments to which they feel profoundly committed. Only afterward do they marshal evidence and arguments to support political judgments that justify their already-formed, gut reactions to the world.



Jonathan Haidt offers a metaphor for this: the reasoning rider who sits atop the much larger, more powerful morally-driven elephant. "The rider is skilled at fabricating post hoc explanations for whatever the elephant has just done, and it is good at finding reasons to justify whatever the elephant wants to do next."

The consequences of this truism of human cognition include these kindred psychological phenomena:

### *Confirmation Bias*

A tendency to favor information that confirms our already-existing beliefs. "We can believe almost anything that supports our team" so long as we have even the most minimal evidence for it.

### *Motivated Reasoning*

A more complex version of confirmation bias, whereby as we listen to facts or evidence that go against our beliefs, we go to great lengths to find ways to dismiss, undermine, or ignore them even in the face of overwhelming evidence.

**Overall: If we want people to remain open to people or views that contradict their pre-existing political judgments, we must engage "the elephant."**

## **Patterns of Charged Interactions: The Rider and the Elephant on Crack**

Interpersonal conflict produces “fight or flight” reactions that *greatly* intensify the dynamics of confirmation bias and motivated reasoning while also eroding trust in others.

In the midst of conflict, we tend to:

- either become argumentative or shut down and disengage
- see those who disagree with us as adversaries rather than allies in any sense
- assume our adversaries have bad intentions
- think of those adversaries increasingly in one-dimensional terms, as arrogant, wrong, stubborn, crazy, or in some way “enemy” to be dismissed or overcome
- increasingly assume our adversaries are hopelessly immovable in their ways
- listen to those who disagree with us only to prove them wrong or find ways to dismiss them as speakers
- focus primarily on how we have been harmed or misunderstood and on who is to blame
- dig further into our pre-existing views and positions, pursuing ever-greater certainty that we are right and they are wrong
- seek out evidence that proves us right and ignore that which doesn’t
- seek out evidence that delegitimizes our adversaries and ignore all else about them
- hide any of our own uncertainties or doubts
- seek out people who agree with us and avoid those who don’t
- feel increasingly committed to winning
- feel frustrated that this situation is happening and wish it would end
- feel frustrated that we are unable to communicate better, explain our views more clearly, and be heard and seen as we really wish to be heard and seen
- feel confused as to what we should do, what our options are, and how to get beyond the situation and move forward

**Overall: the sum of these tendencies is as follows. Conflict tends to:**

- 1. narrow our understanding of ourselves and others**
- 2. disconnect us from those around us**
- 3. overwhelm our capacity to think and act as we want to**

**Put differently: conflict *destabilizes*. If we want people to sustain openness in the face of charged disagreement, we must support and sustain their broad thinking, connection to one another, and personal stability.**

## **Patterns of Communication Amidst Entrenched, Polarizing Social Conflicts**

When the issues being discussed involve long-standing, polarizing social conflict, several patterns take place that intensify the destabilizing effect of interpersonal conflict:

### Self-Segregation and Groupthink

- people tend to cluster in like-minded enclaves, both informally and through organizations that serve as “homes” for particular perspectives
- for each of these enclaves a series of selective “facts” and “talking points” comprise the story of the situation that they see as rebutting those with whom they disagree
- meaningful interactions across lines of disagreement grow rare and people rarely have their assumptions challenged
- over time, people grow increasingly certain of the obvious rightness of their views and increasingly baffled by what seem like unreasonable, malicious, extreme, or crazy beliefs and actions of others
- within each enclave, there is less and less tolerance for criticism, doubt, ambivalence, or deviation from the group’s views
- people tend to feel that those who don’t agree with them are inflexible and immovable – “they” will never change
- people on different “sides” tend to attack one another in cycles of escalation

### The Intimidated, Frustrated, and Disappointed Majority

- for those that do engage – including advocates and activists – frustration and burnout typically come quickly after enduring cycles of escalation, adversarialism, and attack
- many who might otherwise engage don’t out of intimidation or frustration, fearing they may be attacked no matter what they say and/or that they “just don’t know enough” to enter into the fray; many of them present as indifferent or apathetic

### A Distorted Communal Conversation

- community space becomes a volatile minefield, with the potential for volatility regarding the conflict always-already in the room, just a moment away from escalation
- triggering buzzwords and hyperbolic labels get created that demonize different camps; in charged settings, people tend to reach for such labels quickly, rushing to box others into pre-existing categories (“oh, you’re one of *those*”)
- media, which tends to follow controversy for the sake of controversy, amplifies and perpetuates escalation and tension

- those who choose to speak on public stages – especially community leaders – tend to feel they must speak with a sense of certainty and often adopt a defensive/aggressive stance, anticipating attack
- public forums tend to present experts or advocates from rival “sides” either speaking to those who already agree with them or debating one another with expected talking points; these debates are often attractive to partisans, but audience members rarely learn anything new
- all in all, the public conversation gives the impression that the issue as such is an “ugly, intractable conflict” made up of clear sides that despise one another.

**Overall: long standing, polarizing social conflicts tend to calcify into a self-reinforcing system of destructive conflict where most of the above patterns become routinized and virtually all feel their only options are antagonism or avoidance. These social patterns intensify personal and interactional conflict patterns, and make cross-conflict communication that much more challenging.**

## Transforming the Destructive Conflict System: The Foundational Vision of Resetting the Table

### Our Vision

Our aim is to overcome the challenges and destructive consequences of the social conflict system currently facing many corners of the American Jewish community with respect to Israel. Doing so requires crafting an alternative framework for engagement and building institutional and communal capacity to implement that framework at a systemic level.

At its center, there must be a different vision for how people with differing perspectives, opposing views, and diverse backgrounds can come into meaningful conversation with one another on a charged topic. We need a better model for how to “do” our conflicts in ways that are constructive, meaningful and intelligent— a model of *generative disagreement*.

Social conflicts – especially our hardest, most enduring ones – are driven by great, deeply felt passions, such as the desire to fight for good or to protect self and family. As we’ve just seen, many common patterns of thought, interaction, and social dynamics work to translate those passions into antagonism or avoidance.

By contrast, conflicts can be constructive when those same passionate differences are translated in another way; when we treat our differences 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. When we see our most profound differences in this way, we no longer view our relationship to one another in simple adversarial terms. Rather, we see ourselves collectively as **partners in conflict**, involved in a collaborative pursuit of the greatest wisdom and the best course of action.

The goal of Resetting the Table is to build dialogue and deliberation across political disagreement in ways that support participants to explore issues that matter without intimidation or fear, to deliberate over those issues in partnership with one another, and to sustain that same spirit of partnership and exploration as passionate differences arise.

### Our Strategies

Applying tools and insights from the arenas of conflict resolution and mediation, we adopt three primary strategies for building rich, productive dialogue across differences in place of the current toxic and polarized ecosystem:

- Intensive training of facilitators, conveners, and trainers
- Workshops and forums supporting meaningful communication across divides
- Consultation for institutional and systemic culture-change

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## Communications Agreement<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this agreement is to enable us to speak with *kavod* (honor) and *emet* (truthfulness) in all our conversations.

1. We will listen carefully and resiliently, even when we hear something hard to hear.
2. We will speak with respect and humility,
  - Expressing our views without insulting or attacking individual participants or an entire group,
  - Connecting what we know and believe to particular sources of information and experiences,
  - Asking questions rather than assuming we know the intentions of others.
3. We will share airtime,
  - Refraining from interrupting (except to indicate difficulty hearing),
  - Being brief in comments,
  - And cooperating with facilitator if she intervenes to support all voices being heard.
4. **We will honor confidentiality:** We will not attach names or identifying information to comments made without permission. We will not issue statements, blog, preach, post, or report in writing about this meeting, except as agreed to by the group as a whole.

