

We Need More 'Good Conflict' in Our Lives. Here's How It Works



Synagogue B'nai Jeshurun congregants discussing interfaith marriage in the synagogue on May 17, 2017.

Nomi Ellenson/ Resetting the Table

IDEAS

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APRIL 17, 2021 7:00 AM EDT

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A dozen liberal, Jewish New Yorkers traveled to rural Michigan to stay in the homes of a dozen conservative corrections officers, whom they'd never met, to try to understand each other.

It sounds like the opening to a joke, and not a very good one. But for three days, the Michigan conservatives hosted the liberal New Yorkers, driving them in their pick-up trucks to a firing range and a prison museum, sitting down for long, hard conversations, asking and answering many questions. Then, a couple months later, the conservatives

came to stay with the liberal New Yorkers, attending services at their Upper West Side synagogue wearing borrowed yarmulkes and taking walks in Central Park while arguing about immigration, gay marriage and, of course, Donald Trump.

It was a strange and bewildering exchange to witness, quite unlike the gladiator showdowns we've seen on cable TV, in the White House and in the streets of America. How did this happen? How, at a time when Americans are **more politically segregated** than at any period in memory, living in different realities altogether, did these people wind up in each other's kitchens?

I've spent the past four years following people who understand conflict intimately. One thing I've learned is that there are two categories of intense human conflict. **High conflict** is the kind that has crackled across the country in recent years. It can start small, but it rapidly becomes self-perpetuating and all-consuming. There is an *us* and a *them*, and everything becomes very clear, too clear. Certain conditions predictably lead to high conflict—including oversimplified, binary choices and buried grievances that go unaddressed.

In this state, the brain behaves differently. We feel increasingly certain of our own superiority and, at the same time, more and more mystified by the other side. When we encounter *them*, in person or on Facebook, we might feel a tightening in our chest, a dread mixed with rage, as we listen to whatever insane, misguided, dangerous thing the other side says.

But there is another kind of conflict—one that is catalytic. *Good conflict* can be stressful and heated, but it doesn't collapse into caricature. It sounds like a fantasy, I know. I was skeptical, too. But I've now seen enough good conflict—in politics, family feuds and even gang rivalries—to know that it's a real thing. There's nothing squishy about it. Good conflict is not about surrender or unity. It's about walking into the fire, not walking away.

That's how those conservatives and liberals ended up in each other's homes in the spring of 2018. They were leaning into good conflict. But there's a catch: good conflict doesn't occur by default. To understand how this happened means going back in time, when the New Yorkers nearly fell into a high conflict of their own making.

In 2012, B'nai Jeshurun a prominent Upper West Side synagogue known to all as BJ, almost came undone, torn apart by a political controversy. It started when BJ's left-leaning rabbis praised a United Nations vote upgrading Palestine's status, in an email to the congregation. This email set off a chain reaction, enraging many of the synagogue's 2,400 members, who recoiled at their rabbis' support for what they saw as a dangerous affront to Israel's security.

“It was like an earthquake: the hostility, the animosity,” said BJ’s senior rabbi, José Rolando Matalon. The backlash rippled across the city, landing on the front page of *The New York Times*. People withheld donations. Others left the synagogue forever.

The rabbis were stunned. “People whom I loved and respected and thought respected me were saying terrible things,” Matalon said. Like most people who stumble into conflict within their own group, the rabbis apologized and tried to move on. But conflict like this doesn’t go away. It just goes underground.

A year later, the rabbis signed onto a letter criticizing New York City’s mayor for having pledged loyalty to a pro-Israel lobbying group. And just like that, the conflict roared to life again. Once again, the rabbis were publicly accused of disloyalty to Israel. More people left.

Rabbi Matalon felt attacked and betrayed. He’d lived and studied in Israel. The reason he’d criticized certain Israeli policies was because he cared so much about Israel. And now he was being called “anti-Israel”? It was mind-boggling.

It had all the makings of a potential high conflict: there was a powerful, reductionist binary, for Israel and against, fueled by an unexplored understory—the thing the conflict was really about, which no one was mentioning.

When people get rejected or ostracized by their own group, they usually withdraw and then become depressed or enraged. For the brain, this kind of “social pain” operates a lot like physical pain (except it’s even easier to relive in our own minds), according to research by Purdue University’s Kipling Williams. Social pain can be unbearable.

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In this case, Matalon considered his options: he could quit and find a new synagogue that aligned with his views; he could carry on fighting with his congregants; or he could keep his mouth shut about taboo topics, which is what most people do. (Almost half of American rabbis said they’d refrained from voicing their views on Israel, according to a 2013 [survey](#).) But none of those three options felt right.

Instead, Matalon decided to lean into the conflict, in a different way—a fourth path, less traveled. To help, the rabbis brought in mediators who had worked with Israelis and Palestinians in the Middle East. Surely BJ’s problems would be simpler, right? They decided to excavate the understory of the conflict—to figure out what it was *really* about—which required asking different questions and truly listening.

Melissa Weintraub, a rabbi and the cofounder of the dialogue organization Resetting the Table, sensed the tension on her first visit to the synagogue. “People were sitting with

assumptions about each other, and were no longer speaking to each other,” she told me. “It felt like a kind of microcosm for polarization.”

In any intense conflict, one of the most powerful disruptive strategies can sound deceptively basic. It’s to listen, with genuine curiosity. It rarely happens in real life—because almost no one knows how to do it. We jump to conclusions. We think we understand when we don’t. We tee up our next point, before the other person has finished talking. On average, doctors interrupt patients after only eleven seconds of listening to them explain what ails them.

There are proven ways to listen, and BJ did almost all of them. First, Weintraub surveyed 750 of BJ’s members and discovered that nearly half kept their true feelings about Israel to themselves to avoid tension. That was a loss, she knew from experience, preventing people from being challenged and coming out stronger. And it explained why the rabbis were so shocked by their congregants’ reactions—and vice versa. They’d long suppressed the conflict, which just made it harden, underground.

Next, the mediators did 50 in-depth interviews, listening even more deeply, getting past the talking points. Then the congregants listened to each other. For a year, BJ ran 25 different conflict encounters. There were structured workshops, intensive staff trainings, in-depth sessions with the rabbis and the board. The goal was to understand—*not* to agree (a huge and underappreciated difference). In groups of forty, BJ’s congregants haltingly shared personal stories about their connections to Israel, about feeling torn between their sense of justice and their sense of duty.

When people feel heard, researchers Guy Itzchakov and Avraham Kluger have found, they open up to new ideas. They listen. They say less extreme, more interesting things. “I was surprised by how broad the range of thoughts and feelings about Israel are in our community,” one congregant said. “I became a little less sure of my routine position,” said another.

In experiments, Palestinians who feel heard by Israelis during brief, online encounters, have more positive attitudes towards Israelis afterward, according to research by Emile Bruneau and Rebecca Saxe. This pattern holds true across many contexts, from offices to divorce courts: workers who feel heard perform better and like their bosses more. Patients who feel heard are more likely to follow their doctor’s orders. Couples who feel understood still have conflict, but it doesn’t degrade their relationship satisfaction, psychologists Amie Gordon and Serena Chen found in a series of experiments.

Over time, something shifted. The congregation began to glimpse the understorey—to see that the Israel conflict wasn’t just about Israel. “Conflict is a window into something underneath, like an iceberg,” says Kyle Dietrich, who leads the Peacebuilding and Transforming Extremism practice at Equal Access International. “Underneath, there are values, beliefs and historical legacies.”

The under-story in this case was about loyalty, justice and fears for the future. One woman explained how, since so many of her relatives had been killed in the Holocaust, she'd been raised to believe that any criticism of Israel was sacrilegious. "There were people whose views I disagreed with pretty profoundly," said Irv Rosenthal, a congregant, "but when I heard their life stories, I could have some understanding."

One surprise was that most people wanted the same end goal. They wanted Israel to be stable and secure and for the Palestinians to have independence and dignity. What they disagreed about—profoundly—was how to get there. The other revelation was that there were not just two camps. There rarely are. Some people took extreme positions but most had ambivalent feelings. Their opinions differed from one day to the next, depending on how a question got asked. That's because there was no easy answer.

Eventually, they got to a place where they could express their own views and "tolerate the discomfort of someone else's opinion," as Matalon put it. They could hold the tension—in good conflict. It felt exhilarating, but also new, in an unsettling way. What would happen, they wondered, the next time controversy erupted?

We think of conflict as bad, but what I've learned is that it can be better than no conflict at all. We need more good conflict in America, to defend ourselves and to be challenged. It's the only way to get to lasting solutions, the kind that don't get reversed with each new election or lawsuit. But it's so easy to slip into high conflict, given the right conditions.

One solution, then, is to build guardrails in our towns, our houses of worship, our families and schools, the kind that lead us into worthwhile conflict but protect us high. There are several ways to do this, but one is to do what BJ did: to develop rituals and routines to incite curiosity *in* disagreement, not in spite of it.

More than anything else, it's about changing how we think about conflict. "The biggest thing I do when I train people," says Dietrich, who has worked in Nigeria, the Philippines and Haiti, "is to help them get comfortable with the mindset that conflict is a creative force for change—a healthy, important part of life that is fundamentally mismanaged."

One year after BJ's experiment ended, the next controversy flared up—this time over whether to perform inter-faith marriages. Once again, the situation felt volatile. There were two camps forming. So BJ brought the mediators back, and for one year, everyone leaned into the conflict again.

This time, it felt different. Less like a battle, more like an inquiry. The rabbis ultimately decided to allow inter-faith marriages under certain conditions. No one left the congregation, not even those who thought the rabbis were dead wrong. The conflict strengthened the community, rather than splintering it.

The greatest test came in 2016. Trump was elected president, shocking the synagogue's members, most of whom had voted for Hillary Clinton. This felt unique from the other conflicts, out of reach: how could they lean into conflict with people they'd never met? "I didn't know anybody I could have had a conversation with," said Martha Ackelsberg, a BJ member. "They were only stereotypes to me."

It took two years, but eventually, BJ found a way. Led by Simon Greer, an organizer with ties to BJ and the Michigan Corrections Organization, the union for the conservative corrections officers, agreed to a sort of domestic exchange program. This would not be a one-off dialogue session or kumbaya workshop; it would be a home stay, with everyone fully immersed.

Both groups had grave doubts about this idea. The New Yorkers had trouble sleeping the night before their flights. In Michigan, the conservatives wondered if they were nuts to open their homes to a bunch of left-wing New Yorkers.

It was striking to hear both groups say they felt afraid. Both expected intolerance and maybe aggression. The New Yorkers seemed mostly afraid they'd run into a wall of ignorance or hate, or that just by going there, they would betray their ideals. They expected bigotry. The Michigan participants seemed mostly wary of being misunderstood, belittled, or mocked. "I was afraid they were going to judge me and my lifestyle," Mindi Vroman told me. They expected condescension. It would have been less nerve-wracking for both groups to host actual foreigners, rather than fellow Americans.

I joined both trips, watching as the two groups shared stories, argued and marveled at how much they'd misunderstood—and how differently they still saw the world. It was notable how bad almost everyone was at anticipating each other's positions. The Michiganders kept assuming the New Yorkers wanted to take away their guns. The New Yorkers kept saying they didn't.

There were flashes of agreement. "We both think Trump should not have Twitter," Vroman said, gesturing to herself and a rabbi. The New Yorkers agreed it was important for the country to have a border, to the surprise of the Michiganders.



Rabbi Matalon (in hat) with Caleb Follett and other members of the exchange, at a subway stop in New York City.

And there were oceans of disagreement, like when Caleb Follett, from Michigan, tried to explain his support for Trump. “He’s not really racist. He’s not any of these things!” he said smiling at the absurdity of taking Trump so literally. “He’s like a wrecking ball. He blows through political correctness.” The New Yorkers did not smile, nor did they storm out of the room. They pushed back on each point.

Despite everything, in defiance of all the forces keeping them in conflict, these Americans wanted to make sense of each other. “It’s hard to explain,” Vroman said, “but I’m really starting to like these people.” The conversations have not ended, even now. One week after the January 6th riot at the Capitol, the group held a Zoom reunion, which was somber and too short, but better than nothing at all. They held another one in March.

To thrive in the modern world, we need to understand how two dozen strangers from Michigan and New York were able to do something that members of Congress rarely accomplish—and how places like BJ intentionally conjure up good conflict, again and again. We need to bring that wisdom to our public squares: good-faith questions, generosity without capitulation.

Good conflict is the exception right now, it’s true. But that’s by design. Too many of our institutions, media platforms and norms intentionally incite high conflict, instead of

good. There are ways to redesign our world to do something else, if we choose. We can keep torching our own society, one institution at a time. Or we can do controlled burns, the kind we set on purpose, which still get plenty hot but leave us all a lot safer, in time.

*This essay was adapted from Amanda Ripley's new book **High Conflict: Why We Get Trapped—and How We Get Out***