

# sixth&i

## Convictions and Compromise

December 17, 2019 • Rabbi Jesse Paikin • rabbijesse@sixthandi.org

### 1. *The single most important fact about American politics, Ezra Klein, Vox*

It's tempting to imagine that rising political polarization is just a temporary blip and America will soon return to a calmer, friendlier political system. Don't bet on it. Political polarization maps onto more than just politics. It's changing where people live, what they watch, and who they see — and, in all cases, it's changing those things in ways that lead to more political polarization, particularly among the people who are already most politically polarized.

“Fully half of consistent conservatives (50%) and 35% of consistent liberals say it is important to them to live in a place where most people share their political views — the highest shares of any of the ideological groups,” reports Pew. “If people living in ‘deep red’ or ‘deep blue’ America feel like they inhabit distinctly different worlds, it is in part because they seek out different types of communities, both geographic and social.”

### 2. *On Leaving the SJW Cult & Finding Myself, Keri Smith (Civility Dinners, Unsafe Space)*



Kill Trump  
Kill Pence  
Kill Bannon  
Kill Kelly  
Kill Ivanka  
Kill Jared  
Kill Jeff  
Kill Sean  
Kill Ryan  
Kill Mitch

No more of this acceptable genocide on humanity.  
I'm a pacifist, but I am over it.  
I don't owe you political correctness.  
I'm a proud LOUD faggot from Texas.  
I want everyone to be able to live without fear.  
Even you straight white cis males.  
But not you fucking fascists .



I have been dwelling on this Nietzsche quote for almost six months now, “*He who fights with monsters, should be careful lest he thereby become a monster. And if thou gaze long into an abyss, the abyss will also gaze into thee.*”

How easy is it for ordinary humans to commit atrocious acts? History teaches us it's pretty damn easy when you are blinded to your own hypocrisy.

When you believe you are morally superior, when you have dehumanized those you disagree with, you can justify almost anything.

### 3. From I Maccabees, Chapter 1

In those days, there went out of Israel wicked people, who persuaded many, saying: “Let us go and make a covenant with the heathens that are around us, for since we departed from them we have had much sorrow.”

This device pleased them well. Some of the people were so forward in doing this, that they went to the king, who gave them a license to follow after the ordinances of the heathens. So they built a place of exercise in Jerusalem according to the customs of the heathens, and made themselves uncircumcised, and forsook the holy covenant, and joined themselves to the heathens.

Many also of the Israelites consented to Antiochus’ religion, and sacrificed to idols, and profaned the Shabbat.

The king had sent letters by messengers throughout Jerusalem and the cities of Judah, that they should follow the strange laws of the land, and he forbid burnt offerings, and sacrifice, and drink offerings in the temple; and that they should profane Shabbat and festival days, and pollute the sanctuary and its holy people, by setting up altars and idols, and sacrifice pig’s flesh, and other unclean beasts; they should also leave their children uncircumcised, and make their souls abominable with all manner of uncleanness and profanation: To the end they might forget the law, and change all the ordinances.

This drove the Israelites into secret hiding – wherever they could flee for support in times of hardship and distress.

Now on the fifteenth day of the month Kislev, the heathens set up the abomination of desolation upon the altar, and built idol altars throughout the cities of Judah on every side. They burnt incense at the doors of their houses, and in the streets. And when they had torn to pieces the books of the law which they found, they burnt them with fire.

Whoever was found with any the book of the testament, or any commitment to the Torah, the king’s commandment was that they should put him to death.

On the twenty-fifth day of the month, they sacrificed upon the idol altar, which was upon the altar of God, at which time according to the commandment they put to death women who had their children circumcised. And they hanged the infants about their necks, and rifled their houses, and slew those who had circumcised them.

Nevertheless, many in Israel were fully resolved and confirmed in themselves not to eat any unclean thing. They preferred to die, that they might not be defiled, and that they might not profane the holy covenant: so then they died

And there was very great wrath upon Israel.

#### 4. From I Maccabees, Chapter 2

In those days, Matityahu, a priest of Jerusalem, lived in Modi'in. When he saw the blasphemies that were committed in Judah and Jerusalem, he said: "Woe is me! Why was I born to see this misery of my people, and of the holy city, and to live there, when it was delivered into the hand of the enemy, and the sanctuary into the hand of strangers?"

Her temple has become like a person without glory. Her glorious vessels are carried away into captivity, her infants are slain in the streets, her young men with the sword of the enemy. Is there any nation that hasn't taken away a part of her kingdom and gotten of her spoils? All her ornaments are taken away; she is like a free woman who has become a slave. And, behold, our sanctuary, even our beauty and our glory, is laid waste, and the heathens have profaned it. Why should we live any longer?"

Matityahu and his sons tore their clothes, and put on sackcloth, and mourned very sore.

Meanwhile, the king's officers compelled the people to revolt, and they came into the city Modi'in to make them sacrifice. And when many of Israel came to see them, Matityahu also and his sons came together. Then the king's officers said to Matityahu:

"You are a leader, and an honourable and great man in this city, and strengthened with sons and brethren: Therefore, you come out first, and fulfill the king's commandment, just like all the heathens have done. If you do this, your house will be in the number of the king's friends, and you and your children shall be honoured with silver and gold, and many rewards."

Matityahu answered and spoke with a loud voice,

"Though all the nations that are under the king's dominion obey him, and each of them falls away from their ancestral laws, and consent to his commandments, nonetheless, I and my sons and our fellows walk in the covenant of our fathers. God forbid that we should forsake the Torah. We will not hearken to the king's words, to waver from our tradition."

Now when he had left speaking these words, one of the Jews came out, in the sight of everyone, to sacrifice on the altar which was at Modi'in, according to the king's commandment.

When Matityahu saw this, he was inflamed with zeal, and he trembled, but he couldn't restrain his anger and judgment. So he ran up, and slew him upon the altar. He also killed the king's commissioner, who compelled the people to sacrifice. And he pulled down the altar.

Thus, he acted zealously for the law of God. And Matityahu cried throughout the city with a loud voice: "Whoever is zealous of the law, and maintains the covenant, let him follow me!"

He and his sons fled into the mountains, and left all that ever they had in the city. Then many that sought after justice and judgment went down into the wilderness.

### ***5. The Maccabees and the Hellenists: Hanukkah as Jewish civil war, James Ponet, Slate***

The Hanukkah story is really about a revolt against the Hellenized Jews who had fallen madly in love with the sophisticated, globalizing superculture of their day. The Apocrypha's texts make it clear that the battle against Hellenization was in fact a kulturkampf among the Jews themselves. Here is how the first Book of the Maccabees describes Jerusalem on the eve of civil war and revolt in the time of Antiochus (translation by Nicholas de Lange):

At that time there were some evil-doers in Israel who tried to win popularity for a policy of integration with the surrounding nations. It was because the Jews had kept themselves aloof for so long, they claimed, that so many hardships had befallen them. They acquired a following and applied to Antiochus, who authorized them to introduce the Greek way of life. They built a Greek gymnasium in Jerusalem and even had themselves uncircumcised.

Uncircumcision as the price of admission to the Jerusalem gym! When they were eight days old, the "sign of the covenant" had been carved in their flesh; now as young men, these Jews risked health and sacrificed sexual pleasure to "become one flesh" with the regnant beauty culture. In Judea, then, there were Jews choosing to die rather than publicly profane Jewish law—and there were Jews risking death to free themselves from the parochial constraints of that law. The historic Jewish passion to merge and disappear confronted the attested Jewish will to stand apart and persist.

***What's more important?***

***Not defying God's will (convictions),***

***or how we treat each other (compromise)?***

## Argument A: It's not About Convictions

### 6. Rashi, commenting on the aftermath of the incident of the Tower of Babel

*“That is why it was called Babel, because there Adonai confounded the speech of the whole earth; and from there Adonai scattered them over the face of the whole earth.”* (Genesis 11:9)

Which sin was greater: that of the generation of the Flood or that of the generation of the Dispersion (at Babel)?

The former did not stretch forth their hands against God; the latter did stretch forth their hands against God to war against God (surely, then, the sin of the generation of the Dispersion was greater).

And yet the former (the generation of the Flood) were drowned, and these (the latter) did not perish from the world!

The reason is that the generation of the Flood were violent robbers and there was strife among them, and therefore they were destroyed; but these (the generation of the Dispersion at Babel) conducted themselves in love and friendship, as it is said, “They were one people and had one language” (Genesis 11:6). You may learn from this how hateful to God is strife and how great is peace.

### 7. *Those People We Tried to Cancel? They're All Hanging Out Together*, John McDermott, *The New York Times*, November 2, 2019

Cancellation does present a question about power, and who has it.

“The biggest problem we have as a culture is that we can’t define who the establishment is,” Mr. Tavana said. “Is the establishment the woke media people who own 99 percent of the keyboards in the country, or is it the old, canceled guys in media? Who’s the punk rock band and who’s the corporate rock band?”

Mr. Rubin imagines a near future where everyone is canceled for 15 minutes.

“The woke progressives are going to implode, and pretty soon they’ll destroy everything,” he said. “It’s just a matter of how much will they take down with them. They’re going to cancel Barack Obama one day, because Obama ran against gay marriage at one time.”

Mr. Shapiro said, “Our culture is dying because we have no capacity for forgiveness or discussion...”

“SJWs don’t have friends, they have allies,” Ms. Smith said. “And your allies leave as soon as you’re not speaking the ideology anymore.”

## Argument B: It's About Convictions

### 8. Genesis 3:13-14

And the Eternal God said to [Eve], "What is this you have done!?" The woman replied, "The serpent duped me, and I ate."

Then the Eternal God said to the serpent, "Because you did this, more cursed shall you be than all cattle and all the wild beasts: On your belly shall you crawl, and dirt shall you eat all the days of your life."

### 9. Rashi, commenting on Gen 3:14 ("what is this you have done" vs. "because you did this")

From here we see that we do not turn over (i.e. scrutinize a case from all angles) for the acquittal of an inciter. For if God had asked the serpent: "Why did you do this?" it could have answered: "When confronted with the words of the master and the words of the student - whose words do we listen to?" (Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 29a)

### 10. Babylonian Talmud *Sukkah* 48b

Rabbi Yehuda gave instructions for the ritual of the water libation on the festival of Sukkot:

The basin for the ritual was not that large, so one would pour the water into a vessel that had the capacity of six medium-sized eggs, and do this on all eight days of the Festival and not only seven.

And the appointee says to the one pouring the water into the silver basin: "Raise your hand, so your actions will be visible," since one time a Sadducee priest intentionally poured the water on his feet (instead of onto the altar), and in their rage all the people pelted him with their *etrogs*.

### 11. *In Defense of Cancel Culture*, Shamira Ibrahim, Vice, April 4, 2019

"How else do we, the public, [who are] largely powerless in the everyday execution of systems of value, moderate society without something like cancel culture?," [communications strategist Camonghne Felix] asks, adding, "Where we can point out in real time the attitudes that perpetuate violence and call them out? That said, does cancel culture work? I don't know, but it's what we have. I think it helps mobilize people and direct intentions toward better legislative possibilities."

## Argument C: It's About Compromise

### 12. Babylonian Talmud *Menachot* 99a-b

Reish Lakish says: Sometimes the apparent dereliction of the study of Torah is its foundation, e.g., if one breaks off their studies in order to participate in a funeral or a wedding procession. This is derived from a verse in the Torah, as it is written: “And Adonai said to Moses: Carve for yourself two tablets of stone like the first, and I will write upon the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke” (Exodus 34:1).

The Holy Blessed One said to Moses: “Your strength is true (*yishar kohakha* / Congratulations!) in that you broke the tablets, as the breaking of the first tablets led to the foundation of the Torah through the giving of the second tablets.

### 13. Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav, *Likutei Moharan*

On the face of it, this is very perplexing: How can a person separate themselves from the Torah even for a short while? Why, it is our life.... Who would want to separate from life for even a brief moment?

...There is an aspect of “My soul thirsts” (Psalms 42:3) — like someone who is so thirsty that they drink even bad water. The same applies to worshipping God. There are individuals who are always thirsty. They study Torah and constantly serve God, yet are forever thirsty.

This is because although their soul constantly longs to worship God, [their service] is without regularity or intellect. For, occasionally, setting aside Torah preserves it (*Menachot* 99b).

### 14. Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson & Rabbi Aaron Alexander, commenting on the above

We sometimes need to break God's written words, as well as boldly redefine others through creativity, interpretation, or moral insight... God is pleased that Moses shattered God's Tablets with the Ten Commandments! Why? Perhaps to tell us that faithfulness to a tradition cannot be equated to clinging to indiscriminate precedent or habitually holding to the ways something has always been conceived.

There are times when honoring the values undergirding tradition requires us to break with a particular practice, to shatter an outdated convention. And when we perform that act of constructive dismantling in loyalty to the larger values which animate the tradition — values of relationship, honoring the dignity and reality of the actual, the embodied, and the specific rather than subsuming the real to some theoretical ideal — then... God is pleased with our initiative.

## Argument D: It's About a Different Kind of Compromise

### 15. Jerusalem Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 3:6, 21b

When considering the entire Torah, if an idolater tells a Jewish person to transgress one of the commandments that are said in the Torah or die – with the exception of idolatry, sexual immorality, and murder – they should transgress and not be killed.

This rule applies only when a person is alone. But if a person is in public – even for a less significant commandment – they don't follow this rule.

For example, consider the case of Papus and his brother Julianus: idolaters gave them water to drink, in a coloured glass. They did not accept it (and they forfeited their lives).

### 16. *Dear Zealots*, Amos Oz (pp. 27-31)

A prominent Israeli writer, Sami Michael, once told of a long car journey with a driver. At some point, the driver explained to Michael how important, indeed how urgent, it is for us Jews “to kill all the Arabs.” Sami Michael listened politely, and instead of reacting with horror, denunciation, or disgust, he asked the driver an innocent question: “And who, in your opinion, should kill all the Arabs?”

“Us! The Jews! We have to! It's either us or them! Can't you see what they're doing to us?”

“But who, exactly, should actually kill all the Arabs?? The army? The police? Firemen, perhaps? Or doctors in white coats, with syringes?”

The driver scratched his head, pondered the question, and finally said, “We'll have to divvy it up among us. Every Jewish man will have to kill a few Arabs.”

Michael did not let up: “All right. Let's say you, as a Haifa man, are in charge of one apartment building in Haifa. You go from door to door, ring the bells, and ask the residents politely, ‘Excuse me, would you happen to be Arabs?’ If the answer is yes, you shoot and kill them. When you're done killing all the Arabs in the building, you go downstairs and head home, but before you get very far you hear a baby crying on the top floor. What do you do? Turn around? Go back? Go upstairs and shoot the baby? Yes or no?”

A long silence. The driver considers. Finally he says, “Sir, you are a very cruel man!”

This story exposes the confusion sometimes found in the fanatic's mind: a mixture of intransigence with sentimentality and a lack of imagination.

Sami Michael, by invoking the baby, forced the fanatic at the wheel to use his imagination, and so strummed on the emotional string in his soul. The baby-loving driver became confused, hurt, and filled with anger at the passenger who had forced him to define, by means of a horrific image, the simpleminded slogan "Death to Arabs!"

But it is in the driver's fury, perhaps, that we find a small glimmer of hope, albeit partial and tentative: when the fanatic is forced to visualize the slogan, to imagine the details of the horror and find himself in the role of a baby murderer, perhaps sometimes – only sometimes – he will feel a certain embarrassment. A slight hesitation. A tiny crack will surface in the wall of imperviousness.

Certainly, this is no magic pill. **Nevertheless, perhaps activating one's imagination, being forced to look at the suffering of one's victims at close range, may have the power, here and there, to act as an antidote** to the simplified cruelty of slogans such as "Death to Arabs!" and "Death to Jews!" and even "Death to fanatics!" ...

Curiosity and imaginative power: these two things may give us partial immunity to fanaticism... most fanatics are not driven by sadism but by lofty ideals, a longing for redemption and a desire to mend the world, which necessitate "getting rid of the bad ones."

To imagine the inner world, both intellectual and emotional, of the other. To use our imagination even in times of strife. To use it also, primarily, in moments when we feel a surge of fury, insult, loathing, righteousness, and the certainty that we have been wronged and that justice is entirely on our side.

Perhaps also to ask, once in a while: What if I were her? Or him? Or them? To step, for a moment, into the other's shoes and under his skin, **not in order to cross the river or be "reborn," but simply to understand, to sense, what is there. What is beyond the river? What do they have in their head? How do they feel over there? And what do we look like from there?** Perhaps also to try to find out how deep the dividing river is. How wide? How and where might we build a bridge?

This curiosity will not necessarily lead us to a conclusion of sweeping moral relativity, nor to self-abdication in favor of the other's selfhood.

It will lead us, sometimes, to an exhilarating discovery, which is that there are many rivers, each of whose banks can show us a different landscape that may be fascinating and surprising. Fascinating even if it is not right for us; surprising even if it does not appeal to us. Perhaps, indeed, in curiosity lies the prospect of openness and tolerance.