

# JEWISH TELEGRAPHIC AGENCY

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## The Capitol siege rattled him, too. But Yoni Applebaum is more worried about 2024.

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Yoni Appelbaum (Courtesy); JTA Montage

*(JTA) — The Jewish Telegraphic Agency has partnered with the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America, a center of Jewish thought and education in Israel and North America, on Identity/Crisis, a podcast about Jewish news and ideas.*

*This week, Hartman's president, Yehuda Kurtzer, spoke with Yoni Appelbaum, the Atlantic's Ideas editor, who also taught history and literature at Harvard University, Babson College and at Brandeis University, where he received his Ph.D. in American history.*

*This conversation was recorded on Jan. 7, 2021, the day after a pro-Trump mob displaying various far-right and neo-Nazi symbols stormed the Capitol building in Washington, D.C. The conversation has been lightly edited for length and clarity.*

***Yehuda Kurtzer: We're recording the day after quite a bit of drama taking place here in America around what should have been a pro forma process of the confirmation of the electoral college vote in Congress, [became] something of an inept coup attempt in Washington.***

***Today I'm joined by a friend and colleague, Yoni Appelbaum, the ideas editor at the Atlantic. Yoni, thanks for joining me today on this momentous moment. We knew something was going to be going on in Washington, and in America, around the time of the kind of pre-inauguration.***

***I don't think we quite anticipated how dramatic and timely this conversation would be. So first, thanks for being here. And how are you? How's your family? I know you live in Washington. How's the mood around you?***

***Yoni Appelbaum:*** Tense and watchful. I thankfully live distantly enough from Capitol Hill that I was not directly exposed to the events yesterday, although I have many colleagues who were there in person.

I think that this is a city that is on edge, that did not expect — perhaps should have expected, but did not expect what unfolded yesterday and, and is a little uncertain about what will unfold today, but the streets are relatively calm and some degree of order is being restored.

***Tell me a little bit about just what the last 24 hours have looked like and felt like for you. What has the climate felt like for you?***

I think we should all step back for a second and remember that this is supposed to be a very boring period in American politics.

We elected a new president back in November, that became clear within about a week of the election. We've gone through an extended period of the loser being unwilling to accept his loss, mounting a series of sort of fantastical legal challenges that have been laughed out of court, including by many judges whom he appointed.

And we arrive now at one of the sort of strange and oddly formal rituals of our democracy: on Jan. 6, these ballots, that have been cast by electors in

various state capitals, arrive at the United States Capitol, are sent on by the National Archives, which receives them, and they are counted.

The purpose of this ritual — and it's the ritual steeped in a couple of hundred years of history — is that you wanted to be sure that that the ones that are arriving at the Capitol were in fact the right ones, because you wanted to be sure they hadn't been swapped in the mail, so to speak, that whatever certificate was there was signed by the people who were supposed to sign it, that it had the correct numbers on it. It's a verification procedure. It was intended to ensure that we are counting the right electoral votes.

It is a formality, it is a ritual. It is not a point of debate or contestation. It's not a moment to decide whether or not the states had counted their ballots correctly. It can be a moment, if there are multiple contested slates of electors coming from a single state, to decide which one to honor, but that's not the case this year. And so this ought to have been an extraordinarily boring day in the nation's capitol.

Instead, I woke up and first watched the president of the United States — having summoned thousands of supporters from across the country by lying to them about what was taking place and what had taken place — rouse their passions and their furies, deliberately incite a crowd of people who were already on edge, who already had been lied to by the president and told that evil forces were subverting democracy, stealing a victory from out of his grasp.

And then he turned and retreated to the White House after having encouraged that mob to go pressure Congress. And the mob went and pressured Congress exactly as he had asked them to do and burst through the lines of police, who clearly were not expecting them to do this, who were prepared for a handful of agitators, but not a vast crowd bent on violence.

They came into the halls of the Capitol building, which is somewhat labyrinthine; there are a wide variety of entrances to that complex, it is difficult to secure.

The ordinary working people, the staff of the United States Capitol, are friendly and polite. As I walk in and out of that building, I get to know some of them.

I really want to emphasize this: they're not privileged elites. They're ordinary workers who mop the floors and secure the doors. That's whose lives were most at risk yesterday in the violence. And they had no reason to have feared it.

And that was what we were left scrambling to unpack. How we had come to this, the nation that likes to brag it is one of the world's oldest democracies, watching as a violent mob attacked the seat of government in order to disrupt the orderly transition of power. It's something that we have rarely seen before.

I live on a battlefield; 150 years ago, there was a battle in my neighborhood as a Confederate army came as close as any Confederates came during the Civil War before being turned away. Abraham Lincoln came up here and watched that battle. It was a near won thing, but, in fact, the Confederates were turned away from the Capitol.

Yesterday, they were not. There were Confederate battle flags flapping over the shoulders of some of these riders as they walked through the Capitol. That was not a sign I thought I would ever see.

***I want to talk about an essay that you wrote that read kind of like prophecy as I was reading it again yesterday. It's titled "How America Ends," from the Atlantic in December of 2019.***

***For so much over the last few months, there's been a kind of scoffing at the unseriousness of the president's claims contesting the election. Yesterday demonstrates that it is a far more serious threat to American democracy than the skeptics claimed.***

***This has kind of been part of the Trump presidency all along. The kind of, "we take him literally, but not seriously" or 'seriously, but not literally,'" depending on who you are.***

***I've sensed politically a kind of, "let's hold our breath, get to Jan. 20, and of course, he's going to leave quietly."***

***I don't know what to think now. Do you think that this marks a turning point about how serious and vigilant we have to be for the next two weeks? Or do you think this marks the kind of final***

***release of that frustration, and now we can kind of quietly wait the next couple of weeks out?***

So one of the crimes, which I will one day have to atone for, is having written the headline “Taking Trump seriously, not literally.”

I am guilty here. And there’s two halves to the formulation.

The point of the article, written by a journalist named Salena Zito, was that Trump supporters don’t take him literally — they don’t always assume that he literally means what he says — but they take them extremely seriously.

And I think that the second half of it sometimes falls out of the conversation. Trump is remarkably direct about his intentions, although he is remarkably plastic about his means.

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He has said from the beginning that he intends to win the election by any means necessary; that he does not regard his loss as legitimate, would not regard any loss as legitimate. And we all ought to have been taking him extremely seriously about that even though when he says legislatures will throw out these votes, perhaps that is not literally the mechanism that he will use.

And so I think that we remain in an extremely dangerous period these next couple of weeks, because Donald Trump does not wish to acknowledge that he lost the election. To the extent that there is anyone in his orbit who is willing to tell him that there is a means for him not to have lost, he embraces them, no matter the warnings of his staff, no matter how many longtime loyal retainers tell him that these people are delusional. He’s done that repeatedly and embraced crackpot theories, and I imagine he will, again, in the next couple of weeks if somebody comes up with a new one.

I can’t claim a gift of clairvoyance or prophecy, I am by training a historian. And when I wrote that article, I was looking back, not forward. And I look back to the American past because I think it helps us understand where we are in the present. It helps us see that the things that are happening are not unprecedented, are not a sudden rupture with the American experience, but, rather, they are the flowering of seeds that have been out there. And

some of those seeds have not been watered in a long time, but they were always there.

And so what I really worry about is, frankly, 2024, is 2028. It is the fact that more than a hundred Republican members of Congress voted to reject the electoral votes of states that supported a man they did not wish to be president really for no greater reason than they disliked the outcome.

They substituted their judgment for that of the voters. There was no consistent logic applied. They did not contest votes in states that had exhibited the same purported flaws in their process but voted for Trump. They limited their scrutiny to those states that had supported his democratic rival.

And they threw out the votes, or they tried. Enough Republicans joined with the Democrats to stop that in the Senate. And that's the other lesson I would take from this. And I think that it's a really important one to focus on this morning, is that the threats are very large.

In 2024 and 2028, there could be another effort to do this. There will always be a pretext for doing this. And what we saw was that our institutions are very fragile. But the flip side of that is that our institutions are, for the moment, holding. They will hold as long as we recognize their fragility; they will hold as long as Americans understand that all that sustains them is their active participation, their insistence on adherence to norms and rules, their respect for process. They will shatter to the extent that more and more Americans lose faith in neutral processes and no longer invest those institutions with their power.

***Part of the reason your article feels prophetic now is your opening sentence: "Democracy depends on the consent of the losers." That has not played out.***

***Your broad conclusion, which felt very smart to me and also a little bit uncomfortable, was the way in which America is going to get out of this is through a principled conservatism.***

***Liberals have been arguing, essentially since Trump's election, about the decrepitude of the Republican party, the capitulation to Trumpism. You do a deep analysis in your piece of where Trumpism comes from, why it is so popular, and why it***

***constitutes a real risk to the Republican party: the supplanting of ethnic anxiety.***

***You argue the need for a certain type of conservatism. Your key sentence here is, “The United States possesses a strong radical tradition, but its most successful social movements have generally adopted the language of conservatism, framing their calls for change as an expression of America’s founding ideals rather than as a rejection to them.”***

***Let me ask two questions about this thesis. From a liberal perspective, the problem with American liberalism might be the same: the growing unpopularity of the American idea.***

***At the same time that you want to see conservatives re-embrace the American idea, and to use that as the anchor to move away from a politics of rage and more to a politics of identifying with America’s founding ideals, the bad news is that the left side of the aisle is also uncomfortable with that.***

***I’d love to get some analysis of the demise of this American idea. And second, do you put your hopes on conservatives to take their party back?***

How many hours do we have, Yehuda? [both laugh] I mean, let me try to do this standing on one leg, as it were. The reason that I focus so much on the importance of a moderate center-right is precisely what we’ve seen the last few months.

One way to think about most right-wing movements is that they are movements that tend to be dominated by those who traditionally enjoyed power and privilege within a society. And even as they start to lose that politically, even if their governing majority, culturally ascendant majority, slips a little bit, they have a tremendous amount of power, and it’s disruptive power.

And to the extent that it is pushed in a reactionary direction and a revanchist direction, it poses tremendous danger. It poses danger of violence. It poses danger of obstruction and repression. And that is one direction which political rights can go.

The healthiest societies in the West over the last couple of hundred years have been those societies in which right-wing political leaders are engaged in brokering some sort of a compromise. They recognize that society needs to change and they help the society move in that direction even as they tap the brakes on the pace of that change. And I don't want to endorse the tapping of the brakes. There's a lot of changes that center-right parties have retarded; there's a tremendous amount of injustice that they have endorsed. It's not that this is in some sense a morally defensible position.

But just as you look at which democracies have tended to endure and which ones have shattered, the ones in which there is a center-right which is accommodating their followers to some degree of change, whether they're in power or whether they're the opposition party, they're much better than those in which that right veers off to the hard-right, and tries to draw a line in the sand and prevent any change.

And so that really was what I was identifying, that America is presently undergoing a transition that perhaps no healthy stable democracy has ever undergone, in which its culturally ascendant majority — a white Christian majority — is becoming a minority. That's a remarkable process.

America's experiment in multiracial democracy is not nearly 250 years old; it's half a century old. It's really fragile. We tried to broadly enfranchise our population and have a multiracial democracy during the brief sunrise of Reconstruction. It lasted for a decade before giving way to Jim Crow. Lots of other injustices followed, the Chinese Exclusion Act. We turned hard away from multiracial democracy.

We gave it another shot in the 1960s. It was not some benevolent concession; it was a hard-fought victory by the crusaders for justice. But they couched that crusade in the main as an insistence that America live up to its values.

We're only half a century into that experiment. One of my colleagues, Adam Serwer, noted to me this morning that almost every member of the United States Senate is older than our experimental multiracial democracy. Almost every congressman who voted to support Donald Trump yesterday was born into a world that was not a multiracial democracy, in which most Black people did not have the right to vote. And one way to read the events of the last couple of months is as an angry opposition to that change, a

backlash kicked off by the election of our first Black president, doubled down by the nomination of a woman to take power.

These are inversions of the traditional hierarchies of American society. And they are tremendously destabilizing even as they can be tremendously exciting. But you know that this does not just move in one direction.

Also, yesterday we had confirmation that in Georgia, 105 years after a Jewish man named Leo Frank was lynched — and that was an event that helped give birth to the Anti-Defamation League and also to the rise of the second Klu Klux Klan — just 50-some-odd years after the main synagogue in Atlanta was bombed, blown apart for its support of the civil rights movement, the voters in Georgia went to the polls and elected a Black pastor and a Jew.

That was a remarkable thing. And it suggests that part of the reason we are seeing such a backlash against the inversion of these hierarchies is that there is, in fact, an American majority which supports a more equitable democracy, but we're in a very precarious moment. And I think that we all have to be aware of that precarity. And it's why I think it is so important to look at the Mitt Romneys of the world, traditional conservatives who are committed to the project of American democracy and to carrying out the experiment and ensuring it does not fail, as the most crucial actors at this moment. Not because I agree with them on everything — I disagree with the Romneys of the world on a tremendous number of things — but because I see them as sort of the gyroscope of democracy, the stabilizing force in a period of chaotic change.

***But your argument goes further than that. It's not just a matter of the search for moderate Republicans to take back the Republican party, it's also a call on Republicans to shift away from a narrative of "tear-it all down" towards a narrative of rebuilding America or recommitting to the foundations that are American.***

***Part of what you seem to be saying is that it shouldn't be that the only times that a state elects an African-American pastor and a Jew is through the Democratic party, right? If that's who America is, that actually should be represented in both the Democratic party and the Republican party.***

***But it feels not coincidental to me that in the four years of the Trump era, you're seeing in the Democratic party a multi-ethnic, multi-racial version of rage against the American idea. And that's why it feels as though those of us who are moderates interested in some notion of, as you say, "The conservative strands of America's political heritage, a bias in favor of continuity, a love for tradition and institutions" are a diminishing minority in both parties.***

***It doesn't seem likely to me that you're going to see a rise of a moderate conservatism if there isn't a moderate liberalism on the other side to be able to actually build some sort of moderate center.***

It's such an important point, and I think you've got it exactly right. There is a way in which this is a reinforcing downward spiral. To the extent that the political right sees the political left as increasingly radical, it feels more embattled and more inclined to indulge its worst impulses, and vice versa. You can easily see a society spiral downwards, both sides believing that they are reacting rationally to the radicalization of their political opponents.

And we risk that kind of spiral at this moment. I lied to you a little bit before when I said that no democracy has ever gone through a transition like this one. America has gone through this particular transition repeatedly. And this is one place where this American story also becomes a Jewish story. I was born in a state where, at its initial settlement, the only people who were enfranchised were members in good standing of a particular church.

Members in the sense that they had been recipients of God's grace. Right? So even people who regularly attended the church were not necessarily able to vote in Massachusetts back then. And gradually over the next couple hundred years, the circles of that sort of ruling majority have continually been enlarged. Right? So first it was, "OK, we'll let in anyone who is attending the church," and then it was, "OK, we'll let Episcopalians vote, too." And then the franchise was extended to white men. Then there were property requirements, and then there were no property requirements.

Eventually, this country gets around to enfranchising people who are not white. It enfranchises women. Jews arrived in this country before the Revolution, but they are a problematic class. You can point to Washington's

Newport letter and to other expressions of the ideal that Jews should be full and co-equal citizens. In lived reality, they were often indulged at the sufferance of the white Christian majority and treated as co-equal citizens to the extent that they essentially adopted the cultural and political, and, even in some sense, religious framework of that majority.

And yet, over time, that majority adapted each time it was challenged, right? If initially the majority of Massachusetts was white Anglo-Saxon Protestants from East Anglia who were members in good standing of what became the Congregational church, by the time I was born anyone born in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts could vote and that majority had continually extended itself. Rather than seeing itself be eclipsed, it just redefined what membership in that majority meant. So this is the choice that a nation like ours continually faces. Do you enlarge the boundaries of citizenship? Do you see it as possible to fold in new groups?

And there's a ray of hope here. In 2020, Donald Trump actually did quite well among many members of America's working class. Particularly, he excelled among Hispanic voters, and to some extent, even among Black voters, much more than he had in 2016. He did much better with a variety of minority groups by having articulated as part of his political message, a message that spoke to them and their concerns.

It is possible to build a conservatism that does that. It is possible to have a conservatism that, again, speaks for an American majority, but only if political conservatives see that as a possibility. If they define themselves in their identity too narrowly — and I would point to people like Sen. Josh Hawley (R-Mo.) as having done this — they're pretty much screwed, because that minority already is shrinking and it is going to be subsumed, and you find them turning toward counter-majoritarian means to retain power.

It is possible to have a conservatism that, again, speaks for an American majority, but only if political conservatives see that as a possibility. Some of those are legal and constitutional: gerrymandering, the power of the Senate, the filibuster, stuffing the courts with sympathetic judges and justices. Some of them are not constitutional — trying to throw out votes from states that have voted in a way you do not like — but that is the direction that you go once you stop trying to enlarge the majority, once you harden in your political identity, identify your political party with a

particular ethnic, religious, cultural heritage, and no longer see it as capacious enough to expand and adapt over time.

That's where I see the risk to the American idea, is that the political right moves in this direction, defines itself, in some sense, as an embattled white Christian majority. And you can look at polls. If you poll white Christians, they overwhelmingly will tell you that they are the most persecuted group in America. They will rank themselves ahead of, for example, African-Americans in that respect.

If that's what they believe, if they see themselves as an embattled group that is having their country taken away from them — and in 2016 you could pose that question to voters in the Republican primary, and it was a much better indicator than any other question we posed to them whether or not they would support Donald Trump. Do you see yourself as a stranger in your own country? If they said yes, they were a Trump voter. If they said no, they were a [Ted] Cruz voter or some other kind of voter — and so if they see themselves as an embattled minority, they will fight.

That fight will further radicalize the American left, and then they will see in the radicalization of the left and in the identitarian left a validation of their own fear, and fight harder. But if they can see their way back to the place that conservatives have traditionally managed to save themselves, if they can see their way back toward expanding their definition of what it is to be American, then they don't need to lose. And if they don't need to fear losing, then they don't have to fight this hard and they don't have to junk our institutions on the way.

***It's so easy to simply classify the left as identitarian, whether or not it actually sees itself that way. And once you've convinced enough people that that's what's going on, you don't feel implicated by needing to come up with an alternative. And that incentivizes the left to say, 'Why am I trying to appeal to some moderate censor? If this is the way I'm going to be painted, anyway.' I think the Raphael Warnock story is kind of a good example to that effect.***

***Warnock [the newly elected Senator from Georgia] draws on his religious, ethnic and political heritage as the pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church. But if he could be painted as a radical socialist, he might say, "OK, if either way I'm going to be a***

***radical socialist, all right, then defund the police, fine, I'll actually embrace that terminology because that at least it will signal to those who embrace the identitarian politics that that's actually the right kind of politics that we should be pursuing."***

***And let me push one other thing because you alluded to your colleague, Adam Serwer. Adam had written a piece about the false promise of civility, in which he talks about the certain type of capitulation that civility brings with it, when in the Trump era, civility to the Trump administration is basically, as he says, "I let you do what you want and I don't object." So that seems to be the cyclical force that we're in politically — the hope for a moderate turn among conservatives generates a kind of instinct to civility on the political left as opposed to, "How do I fight back in the most full-throated way to reclaim the democracy that I'm in?"***

You know, I belong to a synagogue in Washington, D.C. Like other synagogues, it's lay-led. And the current president was a clerk for [Supreme Court justice] Antonin Scalia. Before him, the president of the synagogue was a senior House Democratic leadership aide. I can go further back, one of them was married to a Trump appointee. I have this unusual American experience for 2020 of being embedded in a community of people who deeply disagree with each other about some very basic political issues. For the most part, Americans live in separate silos. They increasingly have sorted themselves geographically, and we have good research that suggests it's not so much even that they're seeking each other out, it's that this snowballs, that if you move into a neighborhood that's mostly Democratic, your views will shift the left as a consequence of being immersed in that social situation.

So it's not just that we're sinning by sorting ourselves geographically. We are sufficiently sorted geographically already that these kinds of communities push our views one way or the other. We know that fewer and fewer Americans mix with each other, are bounded within any kind of community in which they're stuck with each other.

I don't mean to paint myself as virtuous. I belong to the local shul. Of course I do. Where else am I going to go on a Shabbat? It's the one to which I can walk, but for now, it's what I've got. Right? And I have to find a way to live with the people there, even if I profoundly disagree with them; they're

members of my community. They have another level on which we connect and we're stuck with each other.

Most Americans no longer have the experience of being stuck with people with whom they disagree politically. They no longer belong to clubs and organizations as they did 50 years ago. They no longer live in places where there are people who live on their block and have different political views, or send their kids to the same schools and have different political views. These are now unusual American experiences.

We know that 50 years ago, most Americans were horrified by the idea of interracial marriage, of their own child marrying somebody of a different racial ethnic group. But they were perfectly fine with inter-partisan marriage. Those numbers have flipped. Overwhelmingly, American now tell pollsters that they have no problem with interracial marriage, but would be horrified if their child married somebody of the opposite political party.

And the reason I mentioned all of this is that when we're thinking about how to deescalate the kind of partisan vilification and mutual incomprehensibility that you pointed you to, I think it's not merely a matter of rhetoric and it's not merely a matter of goodwill. Part of this is a crumbling and collapse of communities. To the extent that there is a Jewish idea embedded in the American polity, it is the idea of the Hebraic Republic, which was enormously influential to the political thinkers around the time of the founding, to the Protestants who birthed modern representative democracy. They were thinking of a polity as constituted of a community, a covenantal community, where people committed to each other to sustain that polity and where power flowed from the consent of the governed. They didn't just do that in their government, They did that in many, many lived respects of their daily lives. It was how they chose to set up their businesses, right? So we got the corporation with the board and the shareholders who can vote. It's how they set up their institutions: rather than hereditary control or something like that, most of these institutions elected their officers out of their memberships, how they set up their religious communities.

This was weird. I mean, you can think about what happened when New York attempted to appoint a chief rabbi around 1900. It invited a very respected rabbi to come to America, and he arrives here and is stunned to discover that nobody really wants to pay his salary because it's a voluntary

subscription of all the synagogues. And nobody really wants to follow his halakhic rulings, because why should they? They have their own rabbis.

Eventually he starts like certifying kosher meat because he needs to find some sort of income, but it doesn't work very well. And that experiment is repeated in a number of American cities, but it's not just Jews. There's this remarkable correspondence I once came across between the bishops in Chicago and the Vatican, where the Pope tells them that everybody has to attend their parish church and they write back and explain that the Poles want to go to the church with the Polish priests and the Slovaks want to go with a Slovak priest. And the Pope says, but they're Catholics. You tell them what to do, and they do it. And the bishops are left to sort of try to explain gently to the Vatican that they're Catholics, but they're also American and they don't listen anymore. That's a very American story of communities controlling their own institutions and believing that they ought to be embedded in these institutions. And to the extent that that decays, we're in a lot of trouble, because we lived these principles through all aspects of our life. And as they've disappeared from other aspects of our lives, they become harder to sustain in a political realm.

***This is one of the gifts and flaws of the American idea and of the American experience for Jews, as for other Americans. Jewishness in America is a voluntary association. And Americanness is effectively a voluntary association. It's such a heavily baked-in piece of our story is this story of autonomy. And, and even in your example of your shul, the key piece that you said was that it has to be a shul that you walk to. And once Jews, like other Americans, can opt into whatever version of an association they want to participate in, it eliminates all of the incentive of thinking about the collective in the ways that it's painful.***

***But what moral commitments do both liberals and conservatives hold in common? When we asked this question at Hartman, the only one we could come up with was disability inclusion. On almost every other issue, you start to see them pull apart. Let me ask you this: What are the moral considerations that we can consider essential to the American project, to then separate between our partisan disagreements and our moral agreements?***

The Atlantic was founded as the magazine of the American idea, and one of our founders, Ralph Waldo Emerson, once wrote an essay in which he tried to pin that down. And he said that he'd never managed to put it better than the remark he overheard passing a schoolyard where one kid said to the other. "I'm as good as you be" as sort of a distillation of the American project, the radical notion that I'm as good as you are, that you're as good as I am, that we are all people of equal worth, that remains the most disruptive idea that America has ever launched into the world. And I think that you can still see that across the partisan divide, that at our best, Americans are committed to recognizing the humanity of every individual American. At our worst, we have denied it, right?

We're a nation that grew wealthy off of human chattel slavery that denied that inherent spark of God in each man. And yet, that idea was the thing that ultimately felled chattel slavery, because people like Emerson were insistent upon it.

If you want to find a center to the American consensus, an imperfect center, one which is often honored in the breach, I think that's where it is: the notion that we're not a country of hereditary aristocracy or caste. I'm not saying we always live up to it, but I think that that is a basis for consensus.

And frankly, it's maybe also when you pointed to disability inclusion, which was such a marvelous example, that gives us sort of a practical illustration of this because it's expressed in different terms, right? If you asked a religious conservative about disability inclusion, they would say — partially, it's driven by being part of a bounded community, in which people with disabilities exist, they are inherently members of your community, you would have to actively exclude them. And so people with inbounded communities are often more inclusive in one way or another, but they might express it in terms of the spark of God, right? They might have expressed it in, in that kind of moral and religious language, focusing on the worth of an individual.

If you ask somebody on the political left in contemporary America, they are more likely to articulate the same set of conclusions and language of rights, in a language of justice. So we can get to the same point framed from different perspectives, but you find that overlap in the Venn diagram on those points where Americans, whether they're approaching it through the frame of rights or are approaching it through a moral or religious framework end up at that same spot.

And then we can build from there, because if we recognize that we are all equal, if we recognize the inherent humanity of every American, there's a lot that you can build on that foundation. The scariest people I've talked to over the last four years are people who have lost sight of this principle, who have ceased to see their political opponents as human, as lives worth respecting, who can see life as worth sacrificing, particularly if it's somebody else's life, and particularly if it is obstructing their way in a political cause. Those are very frightening conversations.

A number of my colleagues were reporting from the Mall and the conversations that they brought back that most unnerved me were the ones that seemed untethered from reality, almost as if some people who were there were lost in a role-playing game in which the other characters were sort of NPCs, in the language of video games, non-player characters, the little figures that move around on your screen motivated by artificial intelligence, who can be slaughtered with impunity because they'll spawn a new and who were there mostly to be regarded for their utility; maybe you can trade with them, or maybe they'll help you on your quest. Once you've divorced yourself from reality to the extent that you no longer see the human spark and the people that you're talking to, that's a dangerous place to be.

***Do you sometimes feel like we're bringing knives to a gunfight?***

Sure. Yeah.

***Why is that still worth doing?***

I'm in one of the most precarious occupational roles in America, which is opinion editor for a mainstream publication, that the half-life of people in this job is not long.

I tend to think of what I'm trying to do in maybe a slightly different frame than pluralism. Think of it as having a deep and unshakeable commitment to a particular set of ends.

We want America to be a freer and more just society. We'd like to fight against racism and discrimination of all kinds. These are not negotiable stances, and we're not particularly willing to entertain people who disagree on those points, but we have a radical humility as to the means.

I'm not smart enough, I'm not wise enough, my experiences are not broad enough, for me to be able to read a particular writer and say, "The way you're trying to do this is wrong." I lack that kind of wisdom. And so I'm in the business of publishing people with whom I disagree.

That's what I do every day. I talk to a broad set of writers on my team of editors, and we try to find people who have really smart and provocative and interesting ways to talk about the means, because we don't know what the right means are. And if we can be committed to a common set of ends, if we can say that we want this republic to endure, if we can say we want this society to be more just, then we can have Republicans and Democrats and conservatives and liberals and libertarians and socialists, and people of all political ideologies and all backgrounds come and debate in our pages because they, too, share commitment to those ends. They can disagree quite profoundly as to the proper means of attaining them, but we can still have that conversation. And so our path to this pluralistic project is to keep those ends fixed in our sight at all times, because it's the commitment to those ends which enables so many different disagreeing voices to debate the means.

*JTA reporters will join Shalom Hartman Institute of North America President Yehuda Kurtzer in future episodes, and we'll be sharing transcripts of each conversation. You can listen to past episodes [here](#). Have an idea for an episode? Let us know.*

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