

# The Tribalism of Our Day

Rabbi Todd A. Markley – *Kol Nidrei 5779*

President Donald J. Trump.

I have no way of knowing this with certainty, but I strongly suspect that the collective blood pressure in here just escalated significantly. For some in the room who are among our president's supporters, you may be reflexively fearful that I am about to tear into his leadership or publicly shame you for your vote. I assure you, I will not. For others in the room, your anxiety spiked because hearing our President's name conjured up for you any number of actions or policies of the current administration of which you vehemently disapprove. Still others surely experienced a wave of discomfort that comes with raising anything political in public, an increasingly taboo act in our day. And still others find our nation's current leader so personally repugnant that the mere mention of his name is upsetting.

That is, potentially, a lot of emotion I stirred up...simply by saying the name of our Commander in Chief. There were surely Americans who were not enamored with the leadership of Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan, Bush, or Clinton..but this moment feels different, does it not?

Ten years ago I delivered a sermon which highlighted – and bemoaned – the increasing political divide in our nation. In it I lamented the clear trends that had already begun to take shape: Americans sorting themselves into communities – real and virtual – of the like-minded, only consuming news sources which reinforced our existing beliefs, less compromise and even dialogue between the two major parties at the expense of both. And, oh, how quaint and charming the realities of a decade ago seem when held up beside the world in which we now live.

And just last week, on Rosh Hashanah, I shared a sermon about the vast gaps between generations currently living in our world. To my surprise, one of my primary sources, written by Paul Taylor of the Pew Research Center, opened its discussion of the differences between Baby Boomers, Gen X'ers, and Millennials not by speaking about any one of those groups in particular, but rather with these words: "...[Hyperpartisanship is] arguably the most powerful force in 21st century American politics. These days, Republicans and Democrats don't stop at disagreeing with each other's ideas. Increasingly, they deny each other's facts, disapprove of each other's lifestyles, don't live in each other's neighborhoods, impugn each other's motives, question each other's patriotism, can't stomach each other's news sources, and bring different value systems to such core institutions as religion, marriage, and parenthood. It's as if they belong not to rival parties but to alien tribes."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [The Next America: Boomers, Millennials, and the Looming Generational Showdown](#), Paul Taylor and the Pew Research Center, PublicAffairs, New York, 2015, p. 1

Such political tribalism is a concept worth exploring more deeply as being part of a tribe has played a significant role in humanity's historical evolution. To understand the human tendencies we now see playing out on our national stage, it helps to understand our innate tribal instincts, their roots, their benefits, and their dangers.

As human evolution occurred, we – like the chimps with whom we share 98.8% of our DNA<sup>2</sup> - had to rely upon one another to survive. One could not make it on his or her own, so primacy was placed on one's relationship to the larger group. This was true for social reasons as well – as the tribe was the place where humans felt their closest and most life-affirming connections to others.

This desire to be deeply connected with others who share our goals and communal norms, who need our contributions to survive, and whose support we require in return...this is hardwired into our very beings as humans, but in our modern age, we have a harder and harder time finding natural settings in which to express and meet those needs.

As journalist and author, Sebastian Junger, reflects in his book entitled, Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging, "First agriculture, and then industry, changed two fundamental things about the human experience. The accumulation of personal property allowed people to make more and more individualistic choices about their lives, and those choices unavoidably diminished group efforts toward a common good. And as society modernized, people found themselves able to live independently from any communal group. A person living in a modern city or a suburb can, for the first time in history, go through an entire day – or an entire life – mostly encountering complete strangers. They can be surrounded by others and yet feel deeply, dangerously alone. The evidence that this is hard on us is overwhelming..."<sup>3</sup>

It is because of this, in part, that soldiers home from war sometimes express a longing to return to the front, or people who have experienced a natural disaster are grateful for their eventual safety but remain strangely compelled by the camaraderie felt between their neighbors in the wake of their shared calamity. These are among the few settings left in which the needs of the collective – the unit for military personnel, or the community following a disaster – supersede the needs of the individual in our society. In such circumstances, the differences which might ordinarily divide the group – gender, race, sexuality, religion – these become irrelevant. In short, such settings are thoroughly tribal, and it can be uplifting and life-affirming to once again feel so deeply connected to – and relied upon by – one's fellow humans.

Clearly, we have not shed our tribal instincts. Instead we apply them to novel and sometimes artificial groups of our own making so that we can gain some small taste of that mutual reliance upon which our species evolved and for which we long. We are

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<sup>2</sup> American Museum of Natural History: <https://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/permanent-exhibitions/human-origins-and-cultural-halls/anne-and-bernard-spitzer-hall-of-human-origins/understanding-our-past/dna-comparing-humans-and-chimps>

<sup>3</sup> Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging, by Sebastian Junger, Twelve Publishers, p. 18

Yankees or Sox fans. Members of this club or that one. And, of course, Democrats or Republicans, Liberals and Conservatives.

In her recent book, Political Tribes, Yale Law Professor, Amy Chua, lays bare how these primal human tendencies are playing themselves out in American political life today. She writes, “tribal instinct is not just an instinct to belong. It is also an instinct to exclude. [O]nce people belong to a group, their identities can become oddly bound with it. They will seek to benefit their group mates even when they personally gain nothing. They will penalize outsiders, seemingly gratuitously. They will sacrifice, and even kill and die, for their groups.”<sup>4</sup>

This is particularly true when the tribe in question feels threatened, under attack by neighboring tribes. And who in America is not feeling that sense today? As Chua teaches, groups who feel beset from the outside “close ranks and become more insular, more defensive, more punitive, more us-versus-them. In America today,” she writes, “every group feels this way to some extent. Whites and blacks, Latinos and Asians, men and women, Christians, Jews, and Muslims, straight people and gay people, liberals and conservatives – all feel their groups are being attacked, bullied, persecuted, discriminated against. Of course, one group’s claims to feeling threatened and voiceless are often met by another group’s derision because it discounts their own feelings of persecution – but such is political tribalism.”<sup>5</sup> And this reality leaves us in a particularly perilous position as a nation.

Or, as Junger puts it, “The ultimate betrayal of tribe isn’t acting competitively – that should be encouraged – but predicating your power on the excommunication of others from the group. That is exactly what politicians of both parties try to do when they spew venomous rhetoric about their rivals. That is exactly what media figures do when they go beyond criticism of their fellow citizens and openly revile them.”<sup>6</sup>

So, how are we to navigate this political minefield? How do we respond to these realities and strive towards a healthier path forward? First, the Jewish people has quite a bit of experience with tribalism. In fact, to this day, I continue to hear Jews refer to one another as “members of the tribe.” This has its roots in our ancient history, when the sons of our forefather, Jacob, and their descendants were divided into the Twelve Tribes of Israel. This arrangement might have been a loosely affiliated “super-group,” as Amy Chua would call it, an amalgamation of different sub-groups which “does not require its members to shed or suppress their subgroup identities. On the contrary, it allows those subgroup identities to thrive, even as individuals are bound together by a strong, overarching collective identity.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Political Tribes: Group Instincts and the Fate of Nations, Amy Chua, Penguin Publishing, p. 1

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.* p. 8

<sup>6</sup> Junger, p. 128

<sup>7</sup> Chua, p. 12

The Hebrew words typically used to describe these Israelite tribes, *shevet*<sup>8</sup> and *matteh*,<sup>9</sup> reflect this understanding. In addition to meaning “tribe,” both words can also refer to a branch of a vine or a shoot that is growing off from the main tree. In other words, in our tradition, tribes were intended to be seen as variant branches of a single unified whole, components which could not survive were it not for that whole. Were there intertribal skirmishes and disagreements born of competing interests? Yes, of course there were, but their shared fate and common interests remained primary, and their leaders regularly reminded the people of that reality.

Here too, in our nation of fifty states which we now so often think of only in terms of “red” or “blue,” we would do well to remember that the first word in our country’s name is “United.” We were not a unified whole for much of our nation’s history, but we grew to become one over time through great effort, sacrifice, and struggle. That balance is fragile, and when we speak of the other subgroups within our nation – and even the leaders thereof – with utter scorn and contempt, we do so at the risk of fracturing that whole beyond repair.

I do not mean to imply, however, that we shouldn’t be holding our leaders responsible for the ways in which they contribute to our discord and division. In ancient Israel, each tribe was represented by its own precious gemstone. The High Priest in those days wore a breastplate, and set within it were those twelve stones, one for each of the tribes which he was duty-bound to represent thoughtfully and faithfully in his sacred work.

These were called “remembrance stones,” as their presence served as a constant reminder to the people’s leader that there was to be no pandering to one’s base or favoring the needs of one sub-group over another. He also wore two additional stones, one on each shoulder, and upon them the names of the tribes were carved.<sup>10</sup> Literally, the weight of responsibility for serving his people – all of his people - needed to be borne by the High Priest at all times. We ought demand nothing less from our own leaders today. Leaders from Kennedy, to King, to Reagan – each in his own way – used rhetoric that sought to highlight a shared and collective path forward for everyone in our nation. I do not hear such a clear and unified vision being offered by either side of the political divide today.

Such widespread unity does not require a complete convergence of opinion or belief. The Lubavitcher Rebbe is said to have taught: “Unity is often confused with sameness. We may think that if everyone thought and acted the same, we would have perfect harmony. But unity is a *process*, whereas sameness is just a state of being. Unity is the harmony [that we make] within diversity.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> i.e. Exodus 24:4, 28:21, or 39:14

<sup>9</sup> i.e. Exodus 31:2, 31:6, or 35:30

<sup>10</sup> Exodus 28:9-12

<sup>11</sup> [Toward a Meaningful Life: The Wisdom of the Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson](#), by Simon Jacobson, William Morrow Publishers, p. 237

I was pleasantly surprised by the Pew Research Center's findings that "[i]f you ask adults of all ages if they would rather that elected officials in Washington, DC, who share their views (1) work with those they disagree with, even if it results in some policies they don't like, or (2) stand up for their positions, even if it means little gets done, most [Americans] choose (1). As ever, the majority of Americans are pragmatists, ready to meet in the middle. Yet nowadays these Americans are a silent majority."<sup>12</sup> Leaving our nation's future solely in the hands of the most polarized – and polarizing – forces in America will not lead us to realize our nation's dreams for itself.

And, of course, much of the healing that needs to be done won't happen at the state or national levels of government. It won't happen in government at all – at least not at first - but rather between neighbors, friends, and relatives who don't see eye to eye but who can appreciate one another's shared commitment to our nation and to its future. Our Needham Community's Potluck Dinner Conversations – which TBS will be hosting in October – are a good start in our local area, and they reflect a growing trend of intellectuals, celebrities, comedians, journalists, and – most importantly - ordinary citizens who are emerging from their walled off tribal bunkers with humility and compassion as they reach across the great divides that separates us.

And finally, since the Broadway sensation, *Hamilton*, has – at long last - arrived in Boston, I conclude with Professor Chua's closing words about the political tribalism of our day, her own homage to the hit musical:

*"Hamilton doesn't deny American racism or injustice. On the contrary, the pointed casting [of an all-minority cast portraying America's Founding Fathers] draws attention to those historically excluded from center stage in the nation's creation, and reminds us that America's ideals always far exceed its reality. But the play is also a reminder that this country's history is built on principles that transcend their time...It gives voice to an America that is not rooted in blood or parentage, that is open to people of all different ethnicities, and that allows – indeed, gains strength from allowing – all those subgroup identities to flourish...What holds the United States together is the American Dream...Dreams are not real, but they can be made so. The American Dream is a promise of freedom and hope for every individual on these shores. But it is also a call on all of us to make true the myths we tell ourselves about what America has always been."*

Chua concludes: "More than anyone else, Langston Hughes was the poet of this dream. In his 1935 poem 'Let America Be America Again,' he writes:

*Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed –  
Let it be that great strong land of love.*

But then a second voice enters:

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<sup>12</sup> Taylor, p. 3

*(It never was America to me.)*

The first voice replies:

*Say, who are you that mumbles in the dark?*

And the second answers:

*I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart,  
I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars.  
I am the red man driven from the land,  
I am the immigrant clutching the hope I see –  
And finding only the same old stupid plan  
Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak.*

But far from concluding with defeat, Hughes offers a prayer and an affirmation:

*O, let America be America again –  
The land that never has been yet –  
And yet must be – the land where every man is free...*

*O, yes,  
I say it plain,  
America never was America to me,  
And yet I swear this oath –  
America will be!"<sup>13</sup>*

*Ken Yehi Ratzon* – May the realization of that dream be God's will...and our nation's as well.

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<sup>13</sup> Chua, pp. 208-210