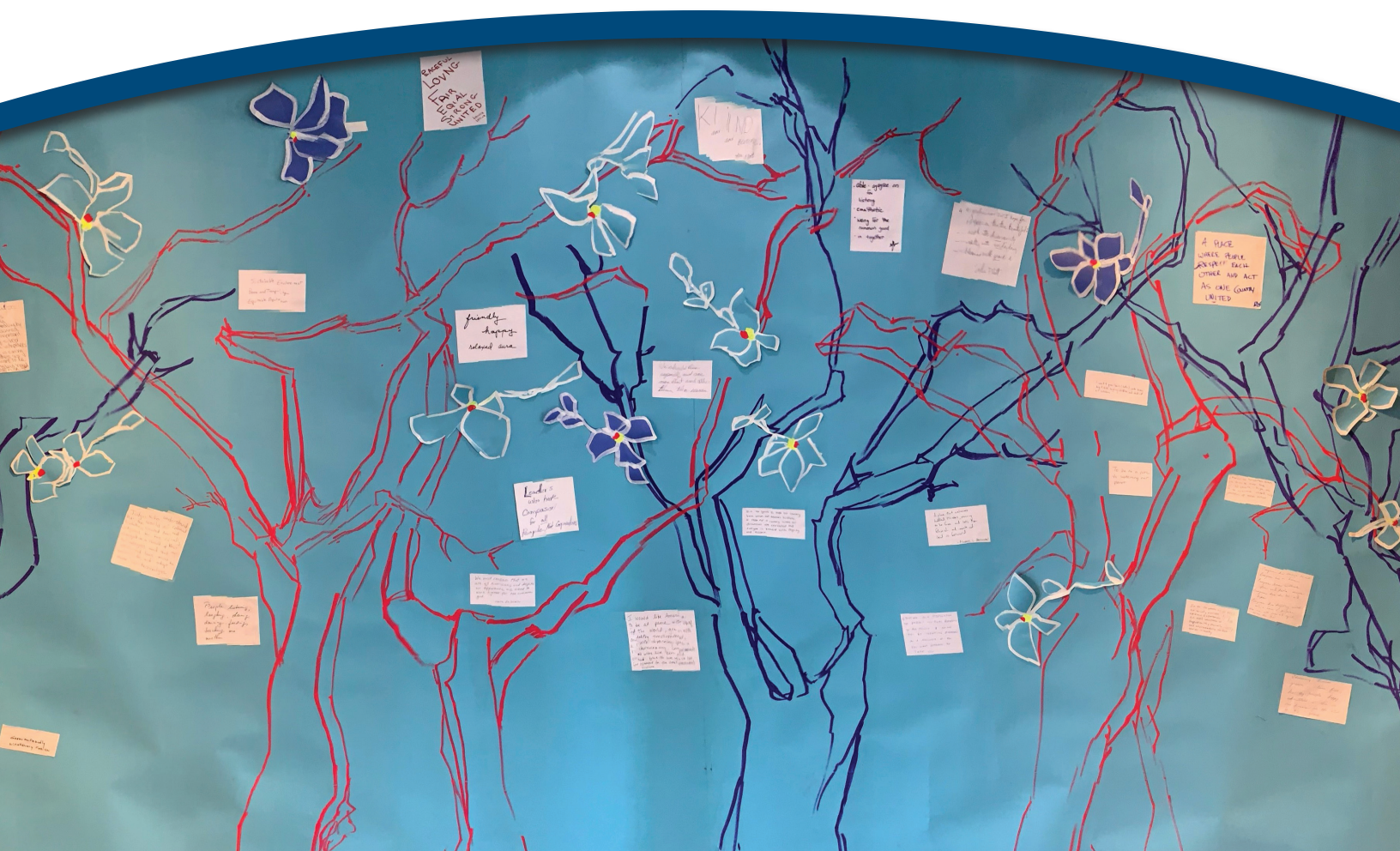




INCLUSIVE AMERICA PROJECT



THE REBUILDING DEMOCRACY PROJECT: A CASE STUDY IN POLARIZATION, FAITH, AND THE COMMON GOOD



By Rabbi Michael G. Holzman and Members of the Northern Virginia Hebrew Congregation

The Inclusive America Project is grateful to Rabbi Michael G. Holzman of the Northern Virginia Hebrew Congregation and his congregant coauthors for their partnership on this study, and to the congregation as a whole for their courage in listening deeply to each other. *Shamanu*.



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Introduction

The United States Constitution's First Amendment encapsulates an ideal of religious freedom for every citizen amid diversity, yet this ideal is under threat. Today, distrust between and about faith communities, polarization, and hate crimes are all on the rise.

The Inclusive America Project envisions an America where everyone has the rights, freedoms, and safety, to worship - or not - according to their conscience. This isn't just a nice idea, it's critical to the health of our democracy.

Although religion in America is often portrayed as divisive, and subject to political and social manipulation, religion is also uniquely grounded in traditions and values that cut across party lines. With over 70% of Americans still claiming a religious affiliation, America's diverse faith communities can play a key role in supporting a strong civil society and vibrant democracy. Religious communities have unique opportunities to use those assets to teach skills that are essential to our democratic republic. The Inclusive America Project is honored to present a case study of one American house of worship that is doing just that.

Members of the [Northern Virginia Hebrew Congregation](#) (NVHC) in Reston, VA, led by Rabbi Michael G. Holzman, developed the Rebuilding Democracy Project to bring specific, meaningful aspects of their religious traditions to bear on the polarizing and emotional conversations of American political life.

According to the lead author, Rabbi Michael G. Holzman, civic engagement has been integral to Judaism ever since Joseph rescued the hungry from famine and Moses spoke against tyranny. As American democracy has evolved, Judaism in this country has absorbed democracy itself as a central pillar of faith and culture. Today, American Jewish communities span the political spectrum while also grappling with the same forces of polarization that stress nearly every house of worship in America.

NVHC applied these traditions of debate and scriptural analysis to their Project. The Project was designed to help them navigate community decisions and intergenerational misunderstandings, and even to grapple with systemic racism. Developed piecemeal over the last four years, some of the Project's programs were developed to address a particular situation, while others take the form of informal conversations focused simply on relationship-building.

Although NVHC grounds its work in Jewish prayer, Torah study, and Jewish liturgical traditions, their methods can be adapted to many other faith traditions, communities, and situations. These programs are not intended to win one faction over to the other. Rather, they serve to strengthen and deepen relationships and community ties. They aim to make conversations about political differences more civil and more humane, and because these methods have no inherent political bias, they would work equally well in majority conservative or liberal congregations.

The following case study was written by Rabbi Holzman and members of NVHC. It includes the strategies they use in their programs, along with actionable methods readers can apply to their own communities. At the end of each program description, congregants offer testimony to how the programs have affected them personally; a powerful and important witness to the effectiveness of the approach.

We hope that you find NVHC's attempt to address polarization in their community a helpful guide to developing programs in your own congregations and communities in this particularly fraught moment in American history.¹

¹ For further reading, the program was profiled in 2019 in the Washington Post as well. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2019/01/23/studying-declaration-independence-like-its-torah-one-synagogue-applies-old-methods-modern-divisiveness/>

Executive Summary

During the 2016 election year, the Northern Virginia Hebrew Congregation (NVHC) found its congregational culture had been infected by the toxic politics of the election cycle. Community leaders stopped trusting each other, and they avoided situations where disagreements would have to be hashed out in public. The politically purple congregation was facing an institutional crisis of governance.

The essential elements of American democracy—and of institutional governance—depend upon the norms that are agreed upon by its citizens. So, instead of allowing their arguments over institutional policy to be mapped out along political fault lines, the congregation chose instead to lean into aspects of their faith traditions: regular convening, consistent reflection on their reasons for affiliating with the institution, and pauses for prayer and study. The congregation has named these the **10 Faith Habits for Effective Citizenship**, and they are central to the success of the Rebuilding Democracy Project:

- | | |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1 Sacred Space and Time | 6 Text |
| 2 Sacred Leadership | 7 Repentance |
| 3 Convening | 8 Affiliation |
| 4 Prayer and Music | 9 Intergenerational Interaction |
| 5 Acts of Loving-Kindness | 10 Governance |

By weaving elements of these 10 habits into their deliberations, the congregation survived the institutional crisis, and gained insight on how to use their religious habits and traditions to shape their congregational response to the most divisive problems.

Between 2016 and 2020, the congregation and its leaders took these learnings and developed several distinct programs to address various community needs. Rabbi Holzman and his congregational coauthors lay out examples of these programs in the case study below. Each example details how uniquely religious, that is, *moral* and *spiritual* programming elements drawn from the regular 10 habits of congregational life, eased the *partisan*, *political*, and *policy* divisions that threatened the very survival of their community. These same divisions have deeply wounded American democracy, but we believe that efforts like those outlined here are exactly the balm we need.

-The Inclusive America Project

The Moment We Face

In the winter of 2018, as many in the country were grieving the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, FL, a group of congregants asked if our synagogue could hire buses to go to the March for Our Lives. This kind of decision is common for rabbis like me and synagogues like ours. Our denomination and congregation lean to the left on most policy issues, including gun violence, so the buses would be popular, but I knew this decision could easily trigger an institutional rift.

The essential elements of American democracy—fair elections, stable institutions, an independent press, and so forth—depend upon the norms that are agreed upon by its citizens. Since the time of the Puritans, religious participation has shaped American political norms, sometimes encouraging forms of action like non-violent resistance, and other times allowing murderous witch trials and lynching. Now, religion's influence wanes as external polarization infects the internal workings of faith institutions: cynicism creeps into the boardroom, social ostracization chills divergent viewpoints, politically-divided couples and families visit the pastor's couch, and preachers measure their words. When religion is fractured by partisanship, America loses vital sustenance for democracy, and limits on political behavior are erased.

Over the last four years, the Northern Virginia Hebrew Congregation (NVHC) has explored how we can counter these trends by marrying spiritual practice to public issues. From the start, we sought to diffuse rancor, model respectful public discourse, and ultimately fortify the norms of citizenship by connecting our political fears and aspirations to our experience of the Almighty.

To see religion as a contributor to the health of American democracy is not to pray that God will intervene or send the messiah. Rather, it is to believe that prayer creates vulnerability in the worshipper; that exposure to scriptural study opens the mind; that visiting the sick reframes a debate about healthcare; and that our capacity to disagree with respect is an example of humanity at its best.

To apply religion to citizenship would mean rejecting the two most common ways American clergy and faith institutions navigate today's partisanship: either stake out territory as an isolated island of "spirituality," or pick sides and accept the rules of the political arena. This binary does terrible harm. The former option separates spirituality from the imperatives of our traditions and the latter forces religion into the categories set by politics.

This false binary leaves communities ill-equipped to handle controversy, whether it be solving complicated institutional problems or addressing pressing public issues. Even after decades of civic engagement, and five intense years of community organizing at NVHC, by 2016 our internal institutional discourse and our

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commitment to public advocacy had been corrupted by America's rancid political culture. Only an intense governance review caused us to see that keeping our spirituality separate from our politics undermined the values and norms of our congregational leadership.

The programs described in this report illustrate what happened when our institution realized the damage caused by this false binary and embraced a spirit of experimentation. Religious communities have long-standing traditions of applying our faiths to social and political issues, but comparatively little recent history of applying those faiths to the political system itself. The Rebuilding Democracy Project is our congregation's attempt, rooted in our tradition and our unique communal identity, to push back at toxic polarization.

A Hypothesis: Religion Can Help Heal Democracy

Arranging buses to help congregants attend the March for Our Lives would affirm the primacy of saving a life and the virtue of civic engagement in Jewish tradition, but I knew we risked alienating our gun enthusiasts and politically conservative members. I felt overwhelming support for the cause, but simply ordering the buses felt like more polarization, even though I knew I could respond to naysayers with the kind of administrative dodge clergy use all the time (“If enough congregants want to go to an NRA rally, we’ll get buses for that too!”). I brought the question to our Social Action Committee and Board, and some members wanted to avoid the issue. But in this case, inaction would be a decision.

In February 2018, as we faced the urgency of the March for our Lives, we decided to apply the lessons learned from the previous two years of internal governance review. We needed to invent a methodology to communicate at a large event the values and norms of healthy deliberation, and we found inspiration by returning to our religious practices.

At the core of the Project is the assertion that the elements of religious life—rituals, scriptures, sacred space, clergy, vestment, prayer, song, silence, sabbath, or holidays—might slow, or even reverse, the decline of American democracy. Our goal has not been to create a new program or class to teach about civics, but rather to weave together religious practice, democratic ideals, and the American narrative.

Our hypothesis was that we could apply spiritual habits to the practice of citizenship, and as a partnership between clergy and lay leaders, to create new formats and programs that push people out of their partisan comfort zones. The intention was to discuss precisely the kind of issues normally avoided, and to break the adage that “one does not talk about religion and politics in polite company.” We aimed to create new norms that would lower initial anxieties, ensure emotional and social safety, change expectations for outcomes, and demonstrate an alternative discourse. In short, we wanted to access the way participants think about public issues from a side door to the mind, avoiding the partisanship, that couches like sin at the front door (Genesis 4:7).

After the conversation on the March for Our Lives, a small group met to draft a covenant statement for future discussions. We started with the prayer for Torah study, and then looked at President Abraham Lincoln’s [Gettysburg Address](#) like we would look at Torah.² When studying scripture, we believe every word matters, and every connection in the text tells a story. In our study, we show how President Lincoln draws a line directly from the hallowed ground to the “great task before us,” and directs us to apply our souls to sustain “Government by the people, of the people, and for the people.” He makes democracy a spiritual issue.

The way we understood Lincoln’s spirituality was through the experience of *citizenship*: a word we often use to describe a binary status, one who is either in or out. But citizenship is meant to be the practice and experience of democratic engagement. As one of our colleagues put it, the spiritual is to religion as citizenship is to democracy.

² <http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/gettysburg.htm>

In short, we wanted to access the way participants think about public issues from a side door to the mind, avoiding the partisanship, that couches like sin at the front door (Genesis 4:7).

A Framework

I needed a playbook. Organizations dedicated to civil discourse said nothing about religious behavior, and while Judaism has ample source material for the norms of democracy, Jewish curricula and program material lack ways to put those sources into practice. It is not enough to know that our tradition encourages healthy debate, respect for minority opinions and constructive disagreement, we also need to figure out ways that people can experience the tradition both cognitively and effectively. In this case, we needed to figure out how to encourage our members to share their opinions on guns while not just speaking but also listening.

While seminaries train clergy to bring their spiritual passion into the public square, they do not teach clergy how to bring public issues into spiritual spaces. Through our experiments, we at NVHC have discovered an intellectual framework and a set of healthy habits that have guided our work, providing guardrails for our current programming and guiding future innovation. For example, in the run-up to the 2020 presidential election, we knew that our community needed ways to process this national moment. Our intellectual framework, described below as **Five Dimensions of Disagreement**, helped us realize that we needed to look beyond finding a speaker on politics or partisanship, and instead we needed to focus on the spiritual struggles felt by the members of our community. As we designed a ritual called *From Fear to Fortitude: A Pre-Election Sacred Space*, our list of **10 Faith Habits** became our tools for construction.

Five Dimensions of Disagreement

Groups will always disagree, and disagreement operates through various paradigms. Through the experiments of the Project, we came to identify five ideas on how to manage disagreement. Three of the approaches will feel familiar to those experienced in policy deliberation, but two more are necessary to avoid toxicity. None of the approaches are inherently good or bad, and each has its place at different times; but neglecting any one of these allows tribalism's toe into the communal door.

- **Partisan:** The partisan paradigm prioritizes team strength and loyalty, and supports solutions that are primarily in the service of the party and at the expense of the opposing party. Our experience has taught us that when we engage as partisans, the inherent worth of a policy matters less than what will affect an electoral outcome.
- **Political:** The political paradigm sees disagreement as a competition for power. The team with the most power wins. This approach favors solutions that contribute to one party's or individual's strategic accumulation of power for future deployment.
- **Policy:** This paradigm is the purely pragmatic, intellectual, or idealistic search for efficiency and efficacy. A policy-focused lens is meant to look solely at the problem itself, isolated from the dynamics of who might favor or disfavor it, or which group might benefit or lose due to its adoption. A policy purist relies upon current expertise to engineer solutions in as closed a system as possible.

- **Moral:** We employ morality to determine what we find to be most right or just. Morality sometimes makes compromise impossible (Michael Sandel, a political philosopher, points to abortion as an example) and at other times, produces complexity as morality balances competing demands. Across an entire polity, those demands become infinitely more centrifugal.
- **Spiritual:** This approach addresses the personal experience of public problems. Extreme personal pain or success can overwhelm all other paradigms: the loss of a child or a lifetime of savings can lead one to disregard party, power, policy, or even morality.

The first three paradigms—the *partisan*, *political*, or *policy*—dominate public discourse today and they are the familiar province of forums like Congress or a Board of Supervisors meeting, but they are not enough to foster democratic citizenship. Citizenship requires the *moral* and *spiritual* paradigms because a democracy consists of individuals in relation to the collective, and that relationship contains more than *party*, *power*, and *policy*. Our moral beliefs and spiritual experiences need an outlet.

These five approaches inform each other, and when we focus on the *moral* or *spiritual*, some of the blurriest aspects of the *political* or *partisan* become clear. Our stalemates on immigration, health care, economic inequality, gun ownership, race, abortion, and climate are driven not by reasonable, sterile, scientific disagreements but rather by the pain and fear of people on all sides. The problem is that the spaces designed for the *partisan*, *political*, and *policy* are ill-suited to contain the *moral* and *spiritual*. We overburden those spaces when we allow alternative venues to disappear. We cannot solve shared problems only through team loyalty, power, or efficiency; we also must address beliefs and experiences amongst the citizenry.

10 Faith Habits of Effective Citizenship

Faith habits are powerful shapers of behavior, thought, acceptable norms, beliefs, and groupings of people. These habits evolve over centuries or millennia and are passed across generations and geographies. Faith habits can be employed for any agenda and are often deployed toward specific policy goals. But they also exist outside the partisan, political, or policy arenas and create a moral or spiritual arena which can mitigate the more divisive and corrosive elements of contemporary discourse and deliberation. These faith habits are the specific elements of our various religious traditions that can provide the moral and spiritual framework for engagement across political difference. NVHC has drawn upon each of these 10 faith habits in our programming to help move us out of the partisan and into the sacred.

Faith habits can mitigate the more divisive and corrosive elements of contemporary discourse and deliberation.

1. **Sacred Space and Time:** By designating certain places and moments as different and separate from the necessary mundane aspects of life (eating, working, procreating, dying), faith reminds us of the elevated nature of all humanity. A physical location, or a certain part of the calendar, changes our consciousness. While non-religious systems can employ the sacred (Sunday at 1:00 PM in a specific stadium is a holy time and space for many a football fan), religious institutions utilize the sacred to protect and sustain our humanity, which ought to be distinct and ideally immune from partisan influence.
2. **Sacred Leadership:** People such as clergy, who are designated in a different capacity from the rest of the group, can function not only as participants but also as symbolic exemplars, reminding the group of inherited values and special obligations that transcend the issues of the moment.
3. **Convening:** All faith groups call for regular gatherings. No matter how familiar we are with each other, face-to-face interaction breaks down the simplifying effects of written online communication and exposes us to more unpredictable ideas.

4. **Prayer and Music:** Slightly or dramatically, prayer and music distract the mind from cognitive thought and toward affective experiences, which can open us to evaluate and change habits of thought or predetermined opinions.
5. **Acts of Loving-Kindness:** When we visit people in the hospital, console the bereaved, or celebrate a birth - regardless of party affiliation, power, policy position, or even moral background - we engage in acts of loving kindness.
6. **Text:** Different faiths approach the authority of their Scriptures differently. Traditions that encourage “scriptural wrestling” call on readers to develop habits of finding conflicting ideas in the text and seeking resolution through communal interaction. This interaction helps people realize that narratives are complicated, which cultivates understanding, patience, deep thought, empathy, and open-mindedness.
7. **Repentance:** All faiths grapple with human frailty and error, which includes the reality that nobody can always be correct. This core experience inculcates an awareness of one’s own vulnerability and an openness to the ideas of others.
8. **Affiliation:** It is possible to practice a faith without being affiliated with a traditional house of worship. However, when we feel a sense of belonging in a faith community, we accept that it represents and sustains a tradition of values with their own inherent worth, ideas outside of present controversy and often, but not always, concepts that point to the complexity and nuance of policy. Affiliation also discourages behaviors detrimental to the institution, reminding citizens that we act within boundaries, not with freedom to act on our passions.
9. **Intergenerational Interaction:** The vast majority of faith practices place intergenerational passage at the center. Few other social institutions bring the very old and young together, and few others elevate moments of passage from one stage to another. Given that so many policy issues reflect historical problems or long-term future risks, thinking in generational time gives the faith community a strong vantage point.
10. **Governance:** While the politics of the average church, synagogue, or mosque have a terrible reputation, these often reflect external cultural habits, rather than having originated within the institutions. By participating in committees and boards, citizens practice the skills of governance and gain an understanding of the complexity of governing at a local, state, or national level. By nudging our faith institutions toward healthy, values-based, and mission-driven governance, we not only help the faith institutions, but we also cultivate more constructive citizens.

Programs of the Rebuilding Democracy Project

When the Board of Trustees could not decide on buses for the March for Our Lives, the Project had its first test. We quickly scheduled a design session and decided to create a format that would allow Board members to hear the range of views present in the congregation, while reserving the right to deliberate separately as a Board. We did not want the Board to function like a Congressional committee, where they would sit in judgment at a dais, but rather to participate within a covenantal community. So, we sent an email to the full membership inviting them to a new kind of program: Congregational Conversation, which was the first of our experiments, in February 2018, and we have continued with a variety of innovations under the Project umbrella. Our internal brand, for lack of a better word, communicated the type of deliberation and discourse that we value and gave participants the assurance that partisan, political, policy, moral, and spiritual positions would be respected and not prejudged.

We have provided six different examples of programs, outlining our specific goals, the program's format, and testimonials from community members. Although addressed last, the governance program was our learning ground where we tested new ways to use our faith habits to address our disagreements. Of the first five programs, some are one-off and address an urgent need, and some are ongoing. For instance, the Congregational Conversation was started to address the particular issue of our congregational response to the shooting in Parkland, but has since become the format we use to address any particular, difficult community decision. We hope that the testimonials provided will give a sense of how faith habits have the potential to reinvigorate norms of citizenship within our community and country.

Congregational Conversation

The Goal:

To encourage community members to share a wide range of positions and discuss controversial subjects without rancor while eliminating the drive to immediately resolve the issue. Our explicit use of sacred space, clergy leadership, prayer and music, text study, and clear governance roles – components which are often absent from political speech – created a spiritual “safety net” that communicated respect for controversial opinions, encouraging growth from exposure to disagreement, and highlighting how issues often defy the simple binaries usually cited in the news cycle. Congregational Conversations are held to address specific issues or concerns and may be called at any time, even at short notice.

The Format:

The clergy leads from the Bima (pulpit near the ark where the Torah scrolls are held), wearing a tallit (prayer shawl). We begin with singing and prayer, and then the clergy member leads a demonstration on how to teach Jewish texts while including a range of voices on a topic. All who are assembled are asked if they can agree to

“The Covenant for Discussion,” an evolving community document. (The initial Covenant was drafted hurriedly by the clergy team before the March for Our Lives conversation, and then refined with a team of lay leaders. Since then, we have continued to invite anyone present to suggest changes to the Covenant by email following the program.) Most importantly, each participant agrees to respond to each speaker with the Hebrew word *shamati*, “I hear you,” or “I have heard.”

The centerpiece of the event is storytelling, always from members of the community. The event invitation includes a call for storytellers personally affected by the topic. We always ask the storytellers to give 80% facts and events from the storytellers’ lives, and 20% commentary, opinions, or feelings about those facts. All of the storytellers sit on the *Bima* with the clergy member.

After each story we respond with *shamati*, and then sit in silence for 10-20 seconds to absorb what was said. We do not take questions about the stories.

Following the stories, those attending can discuss the story, but they must follow the covenant and the tradition of responding with *shamati*. Responding and waiting slows the discussion and makes interruptions impossible. Following the process deflects the instinctive quick response to the previous speaker and instead challenges participants to speak from their own convictions. Reactions are not forbidden, but this format de-emphasizes them.

Testimonials:

“‘I hear you’ does not mean ‘I agree with you,’ but without first listening to the other point of view, understanding is impossible, with or without agreement, and we Americans remain stuck in our divide. It does not help, of course, that far too many of our national leaders refuse to listen to each other. In truth, because it is so difficult to converse with someone whose ideas I find impossible to accept, more and more I find myself simply avoiding the conversation, and unfortunately that behavior forecloses any opportunity to change that individual's point of view.”

-Howard Pearlstein

“After attending some of the Rebuilding Democracy meetings, the word ‘*Shamati*’ is ingrained in my thinking. ‘*Shamati*,’ I hear you, is my mantra when I listen to people, especially to those whose views are very different from mine. I try to listen to them with an open mind and understand where they are coming from. ... I have also heard speakers, who come from backgrounds that are very different from mine, talk about their life experiences. This has helped me understand and empathize with the actions many take and, consequently, support the mass demonstrations we have now.”

-Laura Zelman

Great Texts of America

The Goal:

To find and explore complexity in the American narrative, by applying practices from scripture study to the Great Texts of America. Historical texts can transcend current partisan divides, and the practice of close reading excavates ideas, trends, and themes. The habits of scripture study—meeting in person, on the Sabbath, starting with prayer, leadership from clergy, including multiple generations, within a context of loving relationships—as opposed to academic investigation—adds a layer of reverence and personal investment to the experience.

The Format:

Since November 2018, once a month, we have dedicated the time normally associated with Shabbat morning Torah study to this program. We begin with our usual bagels and coffee, song, prayer, and blessing for study, and then after a brief look at a Torah text we go into a previously advertised famous text from American history. After a concise historical overview, we examine specific passages from the text and discuss how those words shape our understanding of American identity. After two years, this program remains very strong, usually attracting twice as many participants as regular Torah study.

Texts are chosen from across the full political spectrum of American history, and participants are encouraged to challenge their pre-existing loyalties while exploring the text. Specific focus is paid to lines that illustrate key themes in our American citizenship and surprising ways that famous texts describe their historical moments. For example, during a study of President [Franklin Delano Roosevelt's first inaugural speech](#),³ (“The only thing we have to fear is fear itself ...”) we had an extended conversation about how Roosevelt talked about changing [the Constitution](#), which led to a conversation about the holy status of the Constitution in American discourse.⁴

Longer texts pose a challenge to facilitators and require greater preparation and excerpting. The definition of a “great text” is subjective, and sometimes the session itself can highlight the greatness of a text previously unfamiliar to many in the group—for example, Fredrick Douglass’ speech “[What to a Slave is the Fourth of July](#),”⁵ or the [Port Huron Statement](#)⁶—or a series of obscure texts on a famous subject (such as a study of intolerance which included [Colorado Governor Ralph Carr's 1942 radio address against hatred of Japanese Americans](#)).⁷ The key criterion is how that text speaks to an important element of American identity.

Clergy use the various techniques of scripture study to elicit introspection and response from community members, and those techniques have worked well with historical American documents. Participants are asked to relate personally to the words and revisit seemingly simple phrases in order to confront hard truths, like the reference to Native Americans as “savages” in the [Declaration of Independence](#).⁸ The morning ends with a blessing after study which ends the sacred time.

Testimonials:

“A common theme of all these programs is Talmudic in nature; to explore and define the subject, to listen to insights or opinions that have been expressed, and leave with a broadened appreciation of the complexities and ramifications of the issues at hand.”

-Frank Hare Newman

“I have come away from our sessions with a deeper appreciation of how complicated our history is. Nothing was ‘a given.’ The people who wrote the documents and lived through the events we studied were never sure of success. Throughout our history, there have been conflicts and opposing viewpoints that needed to be confronted. Our ‘American Experiment’ continues to evolve, and the fact that it has prevailed despite conflicting opinions should give us hope that it will continue to do so.”

-Judi Ormoff

3 https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/froos1.asp

4 <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/constitution-transcript>

5 <https://masshumanities.org/programs/douglass/>

6 <https://history.hanover.edu/courses/excerpts/111huron.html>

7 <http://media.janm.org/projects/ec/pdf/EC-CO-Kurtz-Lesson2.pdf>, Page 30.

8 <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>

We Were Strangers Once

The Goal:

To spend one academic year engaging teens in a deep study of one specific issue, immigration, from a range of perspectives, relying on voices from the congregation to serve as speakers when possible. In one example, teens were prepared to ask questions and relate to the complexity of immigration. By placing the conversations in our sanctuary, and connecting teens with older members, we created an atmosphere of honesty that allowed for both strong conviction and acts of repentance related to immigration controversies. We sought to take a polarizing subject and demonstrate the human impacts of policy decisions.

The Format:

Our weekly teen religious education program focuses on peer-to-peer learning. When we discuss public policy, we see the teens sharing polarized opinions along familiar lines and embrace simplistic narratives provided by social media. Our teens usually lack a personal connection to the people who are directly affected by the policy issue, so our goal was to increase the depth of their knowledge in the controversial topic of immigration.

Once a month, we replaced the regular weekly teen programming with a Project program focused on immigration. Each month, a different speaker has been chosen and announced in advance. Teens generally prepare a set of challenging questions to ask in a Q&A session following the speaker's talk. Adults can observe but not intervene. The Q&A was the primary focus of the evening, and the most successful sessions have featured a speaker who was a member of the community. Teens have asked extremely challenging questions, such as when the speaker was a member who led the Army Corps of Engineers team that built the border wall and the temporary immigration detention centers. One teen asked, "Can you explain the expression 'kids in cages?'" and the speaker slumped in his chair and explained all the limitations that led to the choice of chain link dividers. He looked at the teen and said, "Some of these choices are just awful." A different session gave our teens the chance to interview our synagogue's Facility Manager, a refugee from El Salvador who is living in the U.S. under Temporary Protected Status. These interviews transformed the way they saw both immigration and a person who shared their house of faith.

Testimonial:

"When it comes to politics, I used to feel that I had to choose between two fully formed narratives: paths that were stringent and emotionless, built upon years of talking points I would never comprehend. The democracy programs at NVHC, however, have pushed me to actively engage with political issues to not only form my own opinions but also to question those opinions in light of new information and perspectives. Lesser programming may have presented two political platforms, drawn a Venn diagram, and called that bipartisanship, but NVHC centers its conversations around primary sources, including people with close ties to the issues. Every Jew has a personal connection to immigration but mine was generations ago. These sources helped me see that because immigration law had tangible effects on my community, I need to be more mindful of the policies I support."

-Sarina Bell

Pulpit and the Pew

The Goal:

To allow for the benefits of the traditional sermon form—sacred space and time, clergy leadership—but through face-to-face interaction within a context of covenantal relationship, also to address the potential for polarization and alienation between clergy and congregation. Sermons foster complex thinking because of their faith language and metaphors, context of long-term pastoral relationships, and setting within sacred time and space. In light of American polarization, however, sermons can be seen as problematic. Since sermons are unidirectional, and the speaker represents an authoritative tradition (or in some theologies the conduit to God), the exalted status of sermons can imply that dissent with clergy is transgressive. Sermons that take positions popular with the majority of a community are especially common, which, for those with a minority opinion, adds social stigma to the spiritual power imbalance. Because of these problems, many preachers hold back, censoring their message out of fear of estranging large segments or vocal minorities of the community.

The Format:

In our regular congregational messaging, dates and topics for these specific Pulpit and the Pew program sermons are announced well in advance. Clergy prepare remarks on a specific policy topic, grounding our positions in Jewish text or ethical tradition, and they deliver the sermon at the appropriate time in the worship service. In these messages, clergy push the envelope to advocate stronger policy positions than they would in a typical service. The sermon begins with an announcement that members of the community will be invited to provide feedback after the service in a structured conversation, and during the sermon a guiding question is presented for congregants to consider afterwards.

The sermon ends, and the worship service continues until its conclusion. During final announcements, the congregation is invited to enjoy *oneg shabbat* (desserts) and, for those who wish, to return to the sanctuary for conversation in 15 minutes.

The clergy person who delivered the sermon facilitates a conversation beginning with a guiding question but then is shaped by responses from the congregation. For the clergy, this can sometimes veer into defensive territory, so we have recently begun experimenting with an alternative format that has a different facilitator, and in which the preaching clergy listens and waits until the end of conversation to provide a response.

The goal of this conversation is to give the clergy the opportunity to share complex arguments based upon their faith tradition, while also providing an avenue for listeners to express their respectful disagreement. Given the self-sorting that is prevalent in American faith institutions today, many in the pews likely will agree with the sermon message, and so our challenge is to make sure we hear from those who disagree.

Testimonial:

“Rabbi Holzman uses the word 'interrogation' to help describe the process we use to examine the issues of the day. I can't say the discussions – the interrogations – are comfortable, but they are challenging because they have pushed me to examine the reasons why I hold beliefs about issues and why I disagree with others about those issues. The faith approach has slowed my thinking. That is, it helps to remove the emotion wrapped up in conflicting thoughts, and to re-direct my focus to a much more productive, if not useful, process for examining the issues we discuss. Like studying Torah, there seldom is a direct line from cause-action-effect. We must engage in deeper reflection – interrogation – to help broaden our thinking. We also have to respect the process and respect others who are part of our debates. When the talking stops, learning ends. We need to keep pushing ourselves to engage as broadly as we can in issues and with the people who may not be like us or think like us.”

-Jay Silverberg

Juneteenth Tikkun

The Goal:

The murders of Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, and Breonna Taylor were the latest in a long history of state-endorsed or state-ignored racist violence. Like the news footage of Bull Connor's attack dogs in the 1960s, these incidents were so egregious, and the videos so graphic, that they forced much of White America to take notice of how racism remains deeply ingrained in the American story. Religion has a word for this kind of "take notice" moment: Revelation.

The Jewish holiday celebrating the revelation of the Torah is Shavuot (Pentecost on the Christian calendar), and we have a tradition of all-night study called a tikkun to prepare for the moment of hearing God's voice. The Jewish mystical tradition teaches that the mind opens in the dim hours before dawn in ways that are impossible during the harsh noonday sun. We sought to apply the tikkun tradition to the issue of racism on the night prior to Juneteenth, the anniversary of the emancipation of the last enslaved people in the United States. This event, done for the first time in the Covid-19 era, transferred as many of the Spiritual Habits of Highly Effective Citizenship as possible into a virtual medium: we included moments of prayer, song, meditation, text learning, repentance, and long hours of conversation across generations. The rawness of the topic, the overnight online experience—itself a form of sacred time and space—and overt mentions of the need for vulnerability opened up many of the more challenging topics related to racism within our community.

The Format:

Because we wanted to avoid the possibility of cultural appropriation of the Juneteenth day itself, our ritual focused on the night before, ending with the dawn of Jubilee day. We created a series of smaller programs of various formats over nine hours of online time in one continuous Zoom room. Some of the programs were worshipful, while others were focused on study or conversation. We used ancient and contemporary texts as well as video and audio media as springboards for conversation. In the earliest hours of the morning, we presented the most difficult material, including a full viewing of the 8-minute and 46-second video of George Floyd's murder, followed by a memorial reading of the names of people killed by police violence or lynching. During that reading, the camera was focused solely on a burning candle.

One key to the success of this program was hiring a scholar/artist-in-residence, Pastor Michelle Nickens, who is African American and has a long creative career in the Black womanist spiritual tradition. She is also the pastor of a local church with whom we have an ongoing institutional relationship. These factors—showing respect through an honored and compensated "scholar/artist-in-residence" position, relying upon the existing creativity in the Black community, and furthering a relationship with a local house of worship—are characteristic tools of religious communities. We leveraged our existing interfaith work, which gave us the confidence to innovate in the fraught area of race, while being honest about our blind spots as a predominantly White congregation. Spiritual communities are, by design, works in moral progress.

The tikkun format is a specifically Jewish tool, but like many traditions, we rely upon times of day to emphasize the truth embedded in a spiritual experience, a technique that, in this case, reinforced Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s famous call for America "[to live up to the true meaning of its creed.](#)"⁹

Testimonials:

"The Juneteenth event was just one way in which we hope to stimulate conversation among people and learn from one another. Events such as Juneteenth help us self-reflect, discover new ways of thinking, connect with others seeking change, bridge gaps, and think about actions we can take toward eradicating biases. Only by learning and opening ourselves up to different perspectives on the issue of race can we confront our own prejudices and truly realize what work needs to be done."

- Nina Zaretsky

continued on next page

“This week’s Tikkun has been a powerful and meaningful way of addressing racism. An expansive variety of ways to address this topic offered a chance for everyone to find his or her own path to approach a critical and fundamental issue: the collaborative planning and implementation was rewarding and mind broadening; ritual ways of commemoration and services throughout the entire event served as an essential and indispensable frame; knowing about the difference of perception during the night, and the idea of adding a Lament-Service in the early morning hours was a particularly powerful and emotional way of mourning. Multiple ideas on how to fight racism as an individual and within a community emerged through the night. Ending the Tikkun by the sounds of the Shofar could not have been more meaningful.”

- Carola Seiz

Governance

The Goal:

The overwhelming majority of American faith institutions follow the legal structure of non-profit organizations, which requires certain formal processes to legitimize decision-making. While an institution can do the bare minimum to fulfill the law, ongoing success depends upon developing norms, values, leadership habits, and organizational culture. One of the drivers for the formation of the Project in 2016 was an institutional crisis among the leadership of our synagogue, much of which was due to the ways that toxic polarization had seeped into the thinking of our organization. Our leaders stopped trusting each other and avoided situations where disagreements would have to be hashed out in public.

Unlike the other programmatic elements described earlier, this element of the Project was born under duress. Our organization simply had to address our broken leadership systems and make rapid corrections. The goal was to right the ship and restore confidence in the Board of Trustees, various committees, and professional leadership. Despite these circumstances, the process of improving our governance helped us understand how to be better citizens writ large. By leaning into faith habits like regular convening, consistent reflection on our reasons for affiliating with the institution, pauses for prayer and study, and engaging in acts of kindness for each other, we gained an education that gave us the ability to address some of the hardest and most divisive problems we came to face in subsequent years, and issues that remain controversial on a national level.

Although our governance program focused on a small group of our top leaders, because we, like many houses of worship have a rotating Boards of Trustees, the habits established trickle out to additional leaders over time and become the standard of behavior and thinking for the organization.

The Format:

Because governance is often a behind-the-scenes part of organizational life, this element of the Project requires some type of public prioritizing step. For us, that meant adding an element to our strategic plan that would strengthen our organizational governance. In this element, existing leaders across the organization would now be invited to participate in a series of conversations and document-drafting projects to articulate communal standards and priorities.

A steering committee, which for us was the Governance Task Force, established the agenda by asking committees and the Board to write values statements, leadership covenants, and charters. We engaged in a series of exercises to define our values, working relationships, and our most basic principles of leadership.

9 <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/i-have-dream-address-delivered-march-washington-jobs-and-freedom>

During these exercises, we discovered the need to make frequent and overt references to Jewish texts and values, and to insert prayer and moments for personal sharing into the conversations. These techniques were not our invention but were practices we had gleaned from denominational experts on governance. Using these techniques helped us see how an approach through the spiritual dimensions of disagreement would open minds and hearts to new forms of thinking. In the end, the final documents were less important than the experience of talking about how we work together, resolve disagreements, and agree upon roles and responsibilities, all within a context of sanctity.

Most Americans, including our synagogue members, do not realize the ways that local organizational leadership exercises and prepares the necessary muscles for participation in a democratic system. Our Governance work made the connections between democracy, governance, and spirituality explicit. Over two years, the Governance theme created an ethos of stewardship for democracy that led many participants to join other programs.

Testimonial:

“Several years ago, we recognized a need for a Governance plank in our Strategic Plan: leadership silos did not communicate or collaborate effectively; lack of clear decision-making authority led to conflict; we over-relied upon unanimous consent to get around polarization; and decisions became concentrated with only our most senior leaders. We needed Governance that would better reflect our values, and that would attract emerging leaders, so we created new habits of deliberation. By emphasizing the importance of participative leadership and listening, and creating forums (like the Congregational Conversations) where Board members could hear minority views, we made the value of respect and sacred partnership equal to any topic under discussion. Now, we still disagree, but we no longer polarize. These were internal governance changes, but many of us found this experience shaped the way we thought about the larger challenges in American governance.”

- Andy Cohen, Past President of NVHC

Conclusion

The comments were all over the political map, many hard to place, defying the usual left-right polarities. The Board members listened attentively, knowing that later they would have to decide. The last comment most likely swayed the outcome, when one teenager (there were about 35 present) stood up and asked: “anyone who has been through a lock down drill, please stand up.” The teens and a few schoolteachers stood. The rest sat in silence. We ended with singing. The two storytellers embraced. The Board approved the buses the next night. And my gun-rights activists did not complain. They listened and they had been heard.

Our experiments—Congregational Conversation, Great Texts of America, We Were Strangers Once, Pulpit and the Pew, The Juneteenth Tikkun, and the Governance plank of our strategic plan—have elevated citizenship as part of our spiritual journey. These are opportunities to wrestle with the achievements and frustrations of American democracy.

In his 1983 book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Neil Postman complained that the evening news had reduced Americans’ ability to think about complicated issues and discover compromise. Today’s polarization follows a long-term trend toward newer, simpler, faster, and more binary forms of communication, and we believe that the older, more complex, slower, and multivalent methods offered by religion might push back against this trend. Social media often reduces discourse to a thumbs-up or down, while a common response during scripture study often begins, “Well, I sort of agree, but ...” The Project posits that over time, our faith habits can shape the mind to listen and consider what others say without judgment.

By claiming the attitude of “experimentation,” NVHC leaders could signal novelty, some necessary messiness, and the invitation to provide constructive reaction. The framework of experimentation defused volatility. Some of our experiments have worked better than others, but as a whole they have created a way to address public issues that defy today’s American cultural norms around political speech.

Across these experiments, we have developed a communal culture that prioritizes viewpoint diversity, constructive disagreement, and intentional listening. Over our first four years, our success depended upon creating an environment that emphasizes the dignity of the person speaking, even when that means we have disagreements about fundamental issues of truth. The Juneteenth Tikkun, for instance, which began with a carefully developed aura of sanctity, respect, and honor, allowed participants to share raw honesty and gracefully challenge assumptions. In contrast, the moments that fall flat are those that lack enough structure to prevent people from falling back into the broken norms of contemporary American political discourse. One early Pulpit and the Pew discussion went completely awry when a dissenting voice was booed by the crowd because we had failed to start with any intentionality—the norms of prayer from the prior service had evaporated over tea, and when we regathered, people were no longer in a sacred space or time.

The specifics of our experiments sprang from the idiosyncratic nature of our synagogue. Rather than imposing an external curriculum or program onto our community, something that might be fascinating but have only superficial results, our experiments emerged from the creative interplay between program designers and participants. We have developed a set of core principles and habits that we now can transpose across platforms—taking from the Congregational Conversation, for example, to help address anxieties about the

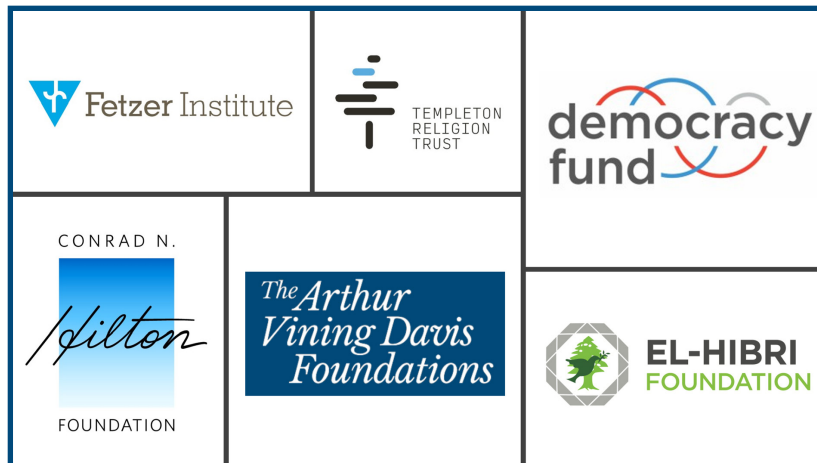
2020 election or the Covid-19 pandemic. These are not plug-and-play programs that can be copied wholesale, but rather a liturgical expression of the spiritual yearnings of the community.

The most inspiring signs of success appeared when we faced internal congregational controversies, such as when we had to wrestle with collapsing enrollment in our preschool, or had to decide about joining an external organization fighting climate change. In both cases, members of the community applied lessons and methodologies learned from our experimentation to completely new contexts, strengthening our community and infusing new energy into our congregation.

A key driver of success has been the way these programs are integrated into the life of our community. These are not separate events, siloed off to the side of congregational life. Integration means that our approach is built upon the specific leadership culture, spiritual practice, and theology of our synagogue. Other faith leaders and institutions who hope to incorporate democracy into their liturgical or spiritual practice would need to do this work in a way that feels authentic to their communities. We hope that our framework and program examples with their goals, formats, and testimonials provide a starting point.

We believe that faith institutions, through efforts like the Project, can reshape our understanding of American citizenship and turn America away from extreme division. We are not addressing a specific policy, nor are we tackling some of the structural inadequacies of and attacks on our democratic system, all of which are worthy projects. Rather, we are addressing norms of behavior and creating opportunities to exercise the ways of thinking necessary for a democracy--the stuff that underlies the health of the whole system. We hope that by explaining our process and methodology in detail, the reader will be stimulated to think about the ways this may be applied in their own context. We know our programs will not produce immediate changes to America's broken political culture, and we know the work we are doing is slow. But, fortunately, as religious people, we are used to thinking in generations.

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