

Rabbi Jessie Wainer

Four years ago on January 6, I sat on my couch in Arlington, VA, having just emergently ended a staff Zoom meeting to watch as the horrors of the insurrection played out. In the few days prior to that, we had seen the increased presence of the national guard, as well as many of the people who ultimately participated in the uprising. On January 5, I took a walk with a friend and, as we walked amongst the military personnel and civilians alike, we marveled at the fact that toxic polarization had taken us this far, not even being able to imagine what our city would experience the next day. What sticks out to me more than almost anything else from that day, was the issuance of a curfew. Here I was, living just a few miles from our nation's capital, under curfew, unsure of what the next day would hold, unsure if I could even safely go outside to walk my dog (spoiler alert: my dog was happily allowed outside for a few minutes).

In the following days, the clergy of my congregation came together to understand the immediate needs of our community, as many in our community were public or civil servants, as well as what the longer term needs would be. January 6 was an attack on our democracy, the very thing that our congregation, amongst many other organizations, had been working to rebuild and strengthen since 2016. We engaged our community in conversation and ritual, creating space to begin healing and moving forward in this ever divided world.

As a Jew, we are no strangers to polarization. Some of our most well known scholars, like Rabbis Hillel and Shammai, engaged in polarized discourse on a regular basis. However, we are also no strangers to episodes in history when that polarization has gone past unhealthy to become toxic, the most recent example stemming from the October 7th attacks and the ensuing aftermath.

I now serve in a congregation in the midwest, with people who did not experience January 6th in the same way that I did. The fear and anxiety that I felt on that day are, in part, what motivates me to continue my work addressing and combating toxic polarization in my community. When I share my experiences from January 6th, I want to be able to say that I helped to solve the problem, rather than contributing to it. I want to be able to tell the next generation that we saw what happens when we let toxic polarization get out of hand, and we took steps to lift up democracy above all else. I want to be able to tell them that, in every election thereafter, because of the work that so many of us believe in, democracy continues to win.