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The Mobilization Ladder

And how to get off it



POLITICS IN AMERICA and much of the Western world are often said to be polarized. The reality is worse.

We reach for the word *polarization* as though we are witnessing an unusually heated but still recognizable democratic argument. But polarization is only the surface manifestation of a more dangerous phenomenon unfolding in our society. Beneath polarization lies something far more combustible: moral mobilization.

In a polarized society, people disagree. In a morally mobilized society, people are sorted into warring tribes. Each tribe assumes a combative posture, and victory is about subjugating and destroying the other side. A morally mobilized society is engaged in a permanent civil war in which dehumanization flourishes. Tribal vic-

tory does not resolve the conflict; it intensifies it. When one side triumphs, the other does not feel persuaded—it feels humiliated. And humiliation is the most reliable engine of political radicalization we know. The humiliated do not reflect. They consolidate, harden, and countermobilize.

All of us, ourselves and our enemies alike, are trapped in this mobilization cycle. Each side uses the fear of its opponents' mobilization to fuel its own. In doing so, both evade responsibility for the society they are jointly creating. We treat the other side's escalation as proof of its depravity and our own as a justified response, refusing to see the feedback loop by which each side radicalizes the other. Everyone is feeding the fire, poised to burn our collective civic life. Democracy can survive disagreement. It cannot survive the loss of pluralism, and pluralism is exactly what moral mobilization erodes.

Instead, what protects democracy and a healthy civic culture is a cultural *demobilization*. Demobilizing does not mean abandoning moral clarity. It means recognizing that this moral combat is self-perpetuating and ultimately self-defeating.

In a mobilized society, beliefs are not just beliefs. They are identities, and a demand that one renounce one's beliefs is therefore a demand that one renounce oneself. This is why conversion—the attempt to move someone from the wrong belief to the right one through exposure, shame, or sanction (and a topic worth its own essay)—is so unlikely to prove successful. It requires a level of self-negation that is foreign to most people in free societies.

Much of the Jewish community has adopted the same mobilized posture as the society surrounding it. Because antisemitism is existential, it provokes an equally totalizing desire for moral victory: If anyone has earned the right to fight without restraint, surely it is us. The problem with this is not a moral one. It's

that the mobilizing posture is to our strategic detriment, often strengthening the very dynamics we are trying to defeat, hardening opponents, intensifying tribal identification, and pushing people further into entrenchment and radicalization.

Ideological conversion and political conquest are the dominant response in a mobilized society; complexity and humanization are the key operational levers of demobilization.

To understand why so many of our efforts have failed, we must first understand how mobilization works: how people are drawn into moral combat and how to attune our interventions to what will interrupt that process rather than feed it.



A helpful metaphor for thinking about mobilization is a ladder. The ladder of mobilization has six rungs; the higher one goes, the harder it is to demobilize. The more clearly we understand this ladder, the more prepared we will be to keep people from climbing it and the greater our chances of remaining grounded in the more productive world of generative disagreement.

Rung 1: Blank Beginning

At the lowest rung of the ladder is not hatred but absence, a blank slate before belief has formed. As children, we all exist at this rung, and on some matters, it's where we always stay.

But what happens at this rung can end up being a first cause. Imagine a Christian child asking a Jewish classmate what she got for Christmas, or a teacher scheduling a big test on Yom Kippur. No malice, just non-awareness. In our mobilized society, there is a tendency to treat even innocuous occurrences as slights or worse,

as though honest ignorance were some kind of evil. It is easy at this stage to mistake ignorance for hatred. But ignorance is simply the absence of a specific piece of knowledge. Our response should be that you are allowed to not know and you are welcome to explore, not that you should already have this piece of knowledge. Respond to questions, even awkward or bizarre ones, with warmth, openness, humor, and an exploratory tone. This signals that not knowing something is natural. People who feel embarrassed for asking are likely to withdraw or start climbing the ladder. People who feel invited lean in.

At this rung, the goal is to prevent mobilization in the first place. That starts with humanizing the person standing in front of you. Vilify someone's ignorance, and you put him on the defensive. Invite him in instead, and you create a positive foundational experience for him while planting something durable: an initial map of warmth that later vilifying stories about Jews and Israel will have to contradict. The seedling of humanization you plant will grow even in a corrupted soil of antisemitic stories because those stories become harder to absorb. They no longer arrive on empty ground. They collide with a personal experience that does not fit the caricature.

As the psychologist Gordon Allport observed, prejudice weakens when people encounter out-groups as recognizable human beings rather than abstract symbols. My own research with psychologist colleagues at the Psychometrics and Hate Mitigation Lab narrows that further. In the antisemitism context, highlighting Jewish achievements can often backfire, since they signal elitism rather than warmth. Telling someone that Jews should be liked because they have contributed to civilization is like expecting a child to like vegetables because they are healthy. The objective of this rung is not to convince but to cultivate a sense of safe inquiry.

Rung 2: Ambient Absorption

One rung above the blank beginning is ambient absorption, the stage at which loosely held cultural narratives that circulate through society become adopted in a person's mind. Jews and money. Immigrants and crime. Rural conservatives and ignorance. These associations are often absorbed passively, through media, family, and cultural signals.

At this stage, the belief is not deeply held. It has not yet fused with identity or ego. It is simply the familiar explanation someone has heard before. Shame someone here, and the conversation shifts instantly from learning to self-defense. Take the greedy Jew trope: If someone surveying the American economic scene observes the disproportionate wealth of the Jewish community, a demobilizing intervention might be to acknowledge the accuracy of the observation while offering humanizing context as backstory. Explain that Jews were not allowed to own land and were forced into careers of banking, and that the way history unfolds often lends itself to different religious and ethnic groups having disproportionate representation in different fields for cultural or historical reasons. Or, that, after Jews were exiled, stripped of assets, and banned from professions, financial savvy became a survival skill. This explanation does not ask the person to deny what he thinks he noticed. Or take the sense that Jews are insular and clannish. Explain that for centuries, survival depended on discretion and hiding religion, identity, and assets from anyone who might confiscate, convert, or kill Jews. Neither reframing asks anyone to admit he was racist or even wrong to notice the correlation.

Lee Ross, the Stanford social psychologist, found that misunderstandings often arise from “failures of empathy,” and that attempts at persuasion tend to be blocked by the conviction that one already knows the truth. For these reasons, interventions that disrupt certainty out-

perform direct confrontation. *'Huh, that's funny. What you see is true, but here's the weird reason it exists'* opens up a conversation in a way that *'How could you believe that?'* cannot.

The trouble is that what a person says at this rung sounds identical to what he says at higher ones. Same words, same trope, different attachment underneath. Up and down the ladder, the diagnostic is rarely what someone has said but how he holds it. Someone repeating a trope without much emotional charge is likely still at this rung even if he doesn't know it. Offer context without attacking the person, and if he's open to it, that tells you which rung he's on. If he argues back and resists the reframe, he is higher up, and this rung's approach is no longer sufficient.

The instinct to assume the worst, to hear an ambient script and respond as if the person were already entrenched, risks missing an opportunity to demobilize.

Rung 3: Reality Retreat

The third rung is where the ladder gets steep, driven upward by the energy of mobilization. A person at this rung begins attaching her sense of identity and security to the beliefs she holds. Giving it up can mean losing both.

Someone in reality retreat stops exploring in an open and unencumbered way. She starts filtering or reinterpreting anything that threatens her worldview. A patriot recoils from history that complicates the nation she loves. Someone who will not acknowledge a politician's antisemitic rhetoric is usually protecting something bigger than the political claim: her own moral innocence, political or social belonging, or a stable sense of self. Anything that undermines the belief feels like a personal attack. On lower rungs, attuned framing can keep someone from feeling defensive in the first place. Here, defensiveness

is already embedded. People on this rung are not simply resisting an argument; they are defending themselves from information that could destabilize their sense of reality, something all humans naturally resist, given its implications for their survival.

This is where conversion starts reliably backfiring, because the problem is no longer the lack of better information but the psychological cost of accepting that information. Confrontation strengthens the very defenses it needs to dismantle. It also reinforces the person's sense of embattlement, not to mention the rigid binaries from which antisemitism draws: Either Israel or Jews are perfect and incapable of wrong, or the opposite—they are incapable of good.

At this rung, then, demobilization must operate differently. It does not force reversal. It makes complexity manageable to hold. It starts by affirming the person's values before touching her beliefs. *I know you care deeply about fairness*' demonstrates that you see the person as a morally responsible agent, a human being. It places you beside someone rather than standing in opposition.

Once that affirmation lands, belief becomes examinable, and competing-goods reasoning becomes possible. Name the conflict as a tension between two legitimate priorities—security and liberty, compassion and accountability—allowing her to see their various values at play on all sides.

Jewish advocacy has often triggered this rung by shaming opponents without prior relational groundwork. Label someone antisemitic too fast, and that person—who most likely sees herself as committed to justice for all—will simply never take you seriously. You have attacked her moral identity, which is not a way to her heart or mind. She will move further up the ladder if only to get away from what she regards as a false accusation.

Reducing identity threat is the goal at this rung, and it should be a central discipline in all Jewish political communication, not an acci-

dent of tone. Leaders should be trained to affirm shared values, safety, dignity, and opportunity before they present a critique. Public humiliation may energize a base, but it hardens the opposition and creates more enemies than friends. Leaders who do this well are genuinely unthreatened when presented with criticism of Israel. They know and are unfazed by the fact that our side gets some things wrong. This demonstrates moral confidence rather than weakness, proof that loyalty does not require blindness.

Rung 4: Self-Sighted Symbolism

By the fourth rung, the mind starts building. It constructs distortions that make the world feel coherent again. Individuals begin interpreting events through a moral storyline in which they occupy a particular role: the betrayed patriot, the silenced dissenter, the righteous defender. The opposing side is no longer simply mistaken; it becomes an archetype—colonizer, traitor, extremist, oppressor.

Hostility toward Jews or Israel starts doing work. It stabilizes identity. It externalizes grievance. It gives shape to pain.

This is why conspiracy thrives here. There is a villain now, a hidden cause, a story that finally makes sense of amorphous frustration, fear, and despair. Someone who feels helpless and disenfranchised, and therefore comes to see power as fundamentally corrupt, can find in Israel its ultimate symbol. Israel ceases to be a country and becomes a container for everything he hates about power, corruption, and elites. Jews and Israel become the explanation for suffering itself, transforming what feels overwhelming and unknowable into something concrete, personal, and blameworthy. That is the seduction of conspiracy. It replaces an impossibly complicated world with a single, morally satisfying answer: the Jews. Jews and Israelis aren't seen as people at this rung. They are seen as symbols, and a

symbol can survive almost anything except emotional connection with an actual person.

Demobilization on this rung begins by acknowledging the underlying frustration or fear that fuels conspiracy narratives, while undermining the narratives themselves. The aim is not to win the argument but to interrupt the narrative's simplicity. So the task is to separate the underlying fears and grievances from the Jews on whom those fears and grievances are projected. Progress here is quiet. It means moving people away from accusations that *'Israelis are evil'* to assertions such as *'I strongly disagree with Israeli policy.'* It means recognizing that Israel is not the culprit behind the litany of domestic factors fueling public anger—immigration, civil liberties, health care, or economic inequality. That is not a small shift. It is fundamental: the difference between political persuasion and existential legitimacy, between contesting what a government does and contesting whether a people deserve to exist at all. The moment a person is fighting over the former instead of the latter, he is demobilizing, whether he realizes it or not.

Rung 5: Tribal Truth Trap

At this rung, beliefs are sustained not only by the individual psyche but by communities, digital ecosystems, and social environments, where belonging, status, and moral identity are all at play and dependent on others. Doubt now carries real social consequences: humiliation, group exile, loneliness.

What defines the rung is not the belief's origin. It is the addition of collective reinforcement. External pressure, condemnation, and public shaming often strengthen the worldview instead of weakening it, because they confirm the group's self-image as righteous and embattled. Some of the Jewish world's most combative advocacy has unintentionally served the very ecosystems it meant to disman-

tle, validating the persecution narrative holding them together.

The Kanye West episode is as an example of crystallized failure. When West made openly antisemitic statements in 2022, the response followed the standard template: swift condemnation, corporate severances, wall-to-wall denunciation. Morally, that was appropriate. Strategically, it was costly. The coordinated-looking sequence did not refute the trope about Jewish power in media and finance. For anyone already carrying that narrative loosely, it illustrated it. And because the condemnation came almost entirely from Jewish organizations rather than respected voices inside West's own community, it was easy to dismiss. Beliefs at this stage are propped up by the group as well as the individual. For that reason, the demobilization at this rung requires the participation of in-group members. A progressive is more reachable by another progressive, a veteran by another veteran. Nuance from within the tribe reads as self-correction. The same message from outside reads as an attack. Insider correction creates the permission structures that outside pressure cannot.

Not everyone in a mobilized community plays the same role: enforcers, amplifiers, peripheral believers, silent skeptics without cover to speak. If you treat them as a mass, the reachable ones get defensive, handing the enforcers the very persecution narrative they wanted. The target is the movable middle.

The task at this rung is to build off-ramps that do not require public defection from the group. Create communities that allow people to hold their convictions while not being ostracized or not going along with extremes.

Rung 6: Dogma Dead End

By the final rung, belief has fused with a person's sense of self, and no amount of complexity, humanization, or expansion can reach

that. At lower rungs, mobilization can be interrupted if the need the belief is serving gets met in a different way. At this rung, the belief has replaced the need entirely.

Removing someone from this rung is nearly impossible. It requires something close to ego death. So the task changes. While the earlier rungs asked how to reach the person, this rung asks how to contain him, because people here often function as amplifiers and ideological anchors within mobilizing ecosystems. You are no longer treating the patient. You are managing the outbreak, preventing him from infecting others.

That shift changes who the target is. A person at this level cannot be convinced of anything, so the only thing left to move is how the rungs beneath him see him: not the purest voice in the room, but a hypocrite or a fringe act that no one else is willing to follow that far out. Containment, done well, is more severance than confrontation, cutting him off from the rungs beneath him until he stops being the pacesetter whom other people are racing to keep up with.

The most consequential error is failing to distinguish Dogma Dead End from the rungs below it. Treating those at the lower rungs as though they are on the sixth is a sure way to push them upward, while resources that could fund what works lower down—education, relationships, identity-threat reduction—get spent on spectacle at the top. The same error runs the other direction too: Naming a fringe actor as representative of a movement inflates exactly what that movement wants, and being called the primary opponent of powerful institutions raises his status within the movement's own ecosystem.



One of the most unsettling lessons of the 20th century is just how little separates those who don't march from those who

do, and how ordinary the machinery of mobilization can be.

After the Second World War, the American psychiatrist Douglas Kelley was assigned to evaluate the imprisoned Nazi leadership during the Nuremberg Trials. Kelley conducted extensive examinations of figures such as Hermann Göring and the other defendants. In the book he wrote about his analysis, his unnerving conclusion was that, with one exception (the Nazi labor-movement leader Robert Ley), the men tried at Nuremberg were not insane. Under certain social and political conditions, he believed, similar crimes could have emerged anywhere. The book was a flop. At the time, few wanted to believe that the capacity for such evil might exist beyond the defeated regime they had just fought.

But the psychological and social mechanisms that drive mobilized hate are not alien pathologies. They are human instincts, easily activated under sufficient pressure or incentives. Our current political moment has been cooking up those pressures and incentives for years, and the end result is, predictably, the mobilization we see all around us. Antisemitism is perennial, but mobilization need not be. The ladder of mobilization works just as well as one of demobilization. It teaches us how to live inside an unjust world, and how to make it at least safer, one rung at a time. *

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