The Cycle of Conviction: How Persecution Fuels Delusion and Perpetuates Conflict

In Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock, the Jewish moneylender, stands as a figure both vilified and victimized, his vengeful pursuit of a "pound of flesh" from the Christian merchant Antonio born from years of humiliation and prejudice. His famous plea—"Hath not a Jew eyes?"—lays bare the pain of being an outcast, yet his refusal to show mercy marks him as a villain in the eyes of the play's Christian characters. Shylock's story is more than a literary artifact; it's a window into a timeless human dynamic: the way persecution, whether historical or personal, can entrench devotion to an idea, even when that devotion leads to actions that contradict the very values one claims to uphold. This cycle—oppression breeding rigid conviction, which in turn justifies harm—plays out not just in Shakespeare's Venice but across cultures, histories, and even everyday arguments, creating a world where delusion, cloaked in certainty, perpetuates conflict and division.

The Roots of the Cycle: Persecution and Identity

At its core, this dynamic begins with suffering. When a group or individual is marginalized, attacked, or dehumanized, it often strengthens their sense of identity. This is not mere stubbornness; it's a survival mechanism. For Jews in Renaissance Europe, like Shylock, systemic anti-Semitism—legal restrictions, social ostracism, and physical violence—forced a reliance on community and faith to endure. Shylock's insistence on his bond reflects this: his demand for justice is less about the money and more about reclaiming dignity in a world that denies it. Similarly, early Christians, persecuted by the Roman Empire, clung fiercely to their faith, which later fueled the Crusades and Inquisitions when they gained power. Early Muslims, facing tribal hostility in seventh-century Arabia, unified around their new religion, which later justified conquests in the name of spreading the faith.

This pattern isn't exclusive to religious groups. Any community under threat—whether ethnic, political, or ideological—tends to double down on its defining beliefs. The trauma of being an outsider creates a siege mentality, where loyalty to the "in-group" becomes paramount. In modern times, this can be seen in Israel's policies, where the historical memory of Jewish persecution—from medieval pogroms to the Holocaust—shapes a defensive posture. Actions like settlement expansion or military operations in Gaza are often framed as necessary for survival in a hostile region, even when criticized by groups like Amnesty International for resembling apartheid. Yet this dynamic isn't unique to Israel. Palestinian narratives, rooted in the 1948 Nakba, when 750,000 were displaced, similarly fuel a resolve to resist, sometimes through violence, justified as reclaiming justice.

From Defense to Delusion: The Moral Paradox

The tragedy lies in how this devotion, born from suffering, can twist into a justification for actions that betray the group's own moral code. Shylock's pursuit of revenge contradicts the mercy inherent in Jewish teachings, just as Christian crusaders' violence clashed with their faith's call for love. Today, this paradox is evident across ideologies. Israel's leaders, citing security, enact policies that marginalize Palestinians, despite Judaism's emphasis on justice and compassion. Some Muslim-majority states or groups invoke historical grievances to justify authoritarianism or militancy, sidelining Islam's principles of mercy. In the West, populist movements claim to defend "traditional values" against perceived cultural erosion, yet often embrace rhetoric or policies that exclude minorities, contradicting the democratic ideals they champion.

This moral slippage happens because persecution doesn't just deepen devotion—it blinds. When a group feels under existential threat, self-criticism becomes a luxury. Questioning one's own actions risks weakening the unity needed to survive. Shylock doesn't pause to reconsider his bond; to him, it's justice itself. Similarly, nations or groups rarely admit fault when they feel besieged, whether it's Israel citing Iran's threats or Western powers justifying post-9/11 policies as anti-terrorism. The result is a kind of delusion—not insanity, but a conviction so absolute it drowns out nuance. Each side believes its cause is uniquely righteous, its suffering uniquely profound, making compromise feel like betrayal.

The Microcosm: Everyday Arguments and Entrenched Beliefs

This cycle isn't confined to grand historical narratives; it plays out in daily life, from political debates to social media spats. When someone's beliefs are challenged with hostility—called "stupid" or "wrong" without reasoned argument—the instinct is to double down, not reflect. A 2023 study from the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology found that confrontational rhetoric in debates increases defensiveness, making people cling harder to their views, even when presented with contradictory evidence. On platforms like X, this is rampant: users sling insults, dismiss entire ideologies, and rarely engage with facts or context. The result? People entrench further, not because their ideas are sound, but because they feel attacked.

This mirrors Shylock's reaction to Antonio's mockery. Had Antonio debated him with respect, Shylock might have softened; instead, the insults fuel his resolve. In modern discourse, whether it's about politics, religion, or culture, lazy attacks—labeling someone a "snowflake" or "bigot"—don't persuade; they radicalize. Each side walks away more convinced of their own truth, perpetuating a cycle of mutual delusion where no one learns, and everyone's shouting.

A Mass Psychosis? The Global Consequences

The cumulative effect of this dynamic is what might be called a "mass psychosis"—not clinical insanity, but a collective state where groups and individuals are so locked into their convictions that they can't see the shared humanity beneath their conflicts. Abrahamic faiths—Judaism, Christianity, Islam—share a common root, yet their followers often use historical suffering to justify modern aggression, missing the irony that they're all playing the same game. It's survival of the fittest disguised as morality, where each side's narrative of victimhood becomes a blank check for actions that perpetuate harm.

Globally, this fuels intractable conflicts. In the Middle East, Israel and Palestine are locked in a cycle where each side's trauma—Holocaust and Nakba—justifies the other's suffering. In Western democracies, political polarization sees left and right demonizing each other, each claiming to defend "freedom" or "justice" while dismissing the other's humanity. Even on a smaller scale, cultural debates—over identity, race, or religion—become battlegrounds where no one concedes, because conceding feels like annihilation.

Breaking the Cycle: A Path Forward?

Breaking this cycle requires what Shylock couldn't muster: self-reflection and empathy. For groups, this means acknowledging past suffering without weaponizing it. Israel's security concerns are real, but so are Palestinian rights; both sides would benefit from recognizing their shared stake in peace. For individuals, it's about engaging opponents with facts and respect, not insults. A 2024 study from Stanford found that structured, empathetic dialogue—where participants explain their reasoning calmly—reduces polarization more effectively than confrontational debates.

Shakespeare leaves Shylock's fate ambiguous, a broken man forced to convert, but his story challenges us to see how persecution can distort even the most human desires. If we're to escape this "blind leading the blind" spiral, we need to stop seeing every challenge as an attack and every defense as a moral absolute. The alternative is a world where conviction, not truth, reigns—a cycle of delusion that, as you put it, is just "bullshit" masquerading as righteousness.