

What Does Judaism Say About Cancel Culture?

On the High Holidays I often like to connect things familiar to people from contemporary culture to Jewish teachings. I do this to impart an appreciation of the eternal wisdom and insights of our sages and sources, to offer a framework for how to understand and respond to events in our lives from a Jewish perspective and to convey the enduring relevance of Judaism. By so doing, the underlying meta-message is that being Jewish offers a prescription for living and coping with life. To be even more concise, the message can be summed up in two words – Be Jewish!

The High Holidays are a time of introspection, a time when each of us is called upon to do an individual *heshbon hanefesh*, to look into our souls and consider what we need to change in our lives and what we need to do to improve our world. Think of it as an annual course correction, for our sages tell us that the origin of the word “*het*”, which means “sin”, is “to miss the mark”. They saw this time of year, when the whole world is judged as a call to heed the sound of the shofar. Its purpose is to motivate us to pause and stop our routine, to set aside these days and gather as a community in a House of Worship so we will reflect, assess and adjust our priorities and evaluate the choices we make that determine how we live our lives. It summons us to direct our efforts to strive to bring out the good implanted in each of us by the Holy One, *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*.

In light of this I want to raise and discuss on this Rosh Hashana a relatively recent phenomenon, a term which as recently as a few years ago was not part of our lexicon, a disturbing trend which gets to the very essence of some of the themes that are at the foundational concepts of the holiday.

Living in a hyper-connected age, where social media rapidly amplifies, intensifies and multiplies messages it is possible to instantaneously ostracize and eliminate people who are perceived as having made offensive comments and racial slurs, as well as those whose opinions do not conform to the norm, or to our own perspective. I am of course, referring to what has come to be known as – “cancel culture.”

In our polarized, emotionally charged world, the response can be swift and devastating. We can all cite countless examples where the public censure in social media can mark someone for life, resulting in loss of prestige, status and employment. In some instances, a single stupid, insensitive inappropriate comment or posting can derail a person’s career and tarnish their life’s accomplishments. It is not just people who are the subject of such condemnation, but also unpopular or unorthodox ideas, unacceptable political positions or opinions -- anything which can be deemed to be beyond the pale or outside the realm of respectability.

On the positive side, the rejection introduces accountability and shows that there are consequences to what we say and do. The strong societal indignation can identify odious and obnoxious behaviors or opinions and make us all a bit more sensitive to what we say, to our inborn prejudices, how we act and how we treat others. The adverse negative publicity and public shaming of individuals who make hurtful statements or express heinous opinions can shine light on and draw attention to prejudices, bigotry or stereotypes, and help render them unacceptable and obsolete.

Jewish teachings throughout the ages constantly command us to be considerate of the feelings of others and to be cautious with our words and the impact they can have. We are told to be consistent in our private as well as our public communications and actions – *“Yehay adam yirah shamayim beseter u'vaalguy”*. And it seems these days the line between the two is becoming increasingly blurred with the domain of what stays private constantly shrinking.

No one is immune, nor should they get a pass just because they are famous. Some instances of disqualification are obvious, especially when they are consistent and persistent and express and reveal deeply felt insensitivities and unacceptable attitudes, or, when there is no remorse or understanding by the offender of what they have done wrong.

The once beloved Bill Cosby is no longer held in the esteem he once enjoyed after more than 50 women came forward and revealed what he had done to them against their will. Similarly, Hollywood icon, Harvey Weinstein no longer wields the power he once commanded in the film industry now that a number of stories of how he used his power to manipulate and take advantage of vulnerable women have come out.

While the dismissal of predators like Cosby, Weinstein and others who have been punished and rebuked for their repulsive behavior is commendable, there are those who should be cancelled, like the unrepentant Jew-hater Louis Farakhan, who somehow escape the universal rebuke he clearly deserves.

And then there are instances which may not be quite as blatant and clear cut and are a bit more complicated and ambiguous. There may be times when it is difficult to ascertain who to believe -- the accuser or the accused.

The advice of Yehoshua ben Perahyah who is quoted in Pirke Avot as saying: *הוֹי דָן אֶת כָּל הָאָדָם לְכַף זְכוּת* – “When assessing people, judge all with the scale in their favor,” meaning to always give a person the benefit of the doubt, is seldom adhered to today.

With few checks and balances on self-appointed arbiters of virtue, there can be excesses and abuses. The response may exceed the offense, and the retribution can be mean-spirited and harsh. While demanding that every word that is uttered should be judged

and weighed, offenders can be attacked with intense vengeance, and denied the opportunity to defend or explain themselves. An accusation can be based on rumor, false information or innuendo, without sufficient investigation of the veracity of the charge. Once the truth comes out, more often than not, it is too late. The irreparable damage to one's reputation has already been done. Spreading rumors and gossip are so detested that the Talmud says it is worse than murder because when there is a murder one person dies, but in the case of a false rumor three are irreparably injured – one who spreads the rumor, the subject of the rumor, and the one who hears it.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks' tells the story in the last book he wrote, "Morality" of a Canadian psychologist who was denied a research fellowship at the Cambridge University School of Divinity after a photograph surfaced of him alongside an individual wearing a T-shirt with an offensive message. That there was no indication that he endorsed the message or was even aware of it being on the guy's shirt, or that he even knew the person with whom he was photographed was all irrelevant.

There have been instances of social media postings from decades ago being dredged up, raising the question -- should there be a statute of limitations on dumb things we say and do when we were young? Questions have also been raised about how to deal with standards that evolve and change, and what to do when what once was acceptable no longer is.

As one woman quoted in an article on the subject in the New York Times last year speaking from personal experience said, "You can do something stupid when you're 15, say one thing and 10 years later that shapes how people perceive you. We all do cringey things and make dumb mistakes. But social media's existence has brought that into a place where people can take something you did back then and make it who you are now."

People are not the only victims of cancel culture. It can pertain to companies and products, as well as in the realm of politics and ideas, where people are unwilling to hear or tolerate opinions contrary to their own. Instead, we just ignore, cancel or stop associating with those with whom we disagree, contributing to the polarization we all feel these days.

The problem is especially acute in places that are supposed to be cathedrals of free expression and places where an open exchange of ideas is supposed to take place – academia and journalism. James Bennet was harshly criticized and forced to resign from his position as editor of the editorial page of the New York Times because he committed the unforgiveable sin of publishing an op-ed by a conservative, Republican Senator (Tom Cotton of Arkansas), about how to respond to riots.

Campaigns have been launched on college campuses to pressure administrations and organizations to disinvite controversial speakers. Student-initiated social media

campaigns to cancel those who articulate out-of-vogue viewpoints, and “shout downs” whose purpose is to prevent speakers from expressing opinions outside of the mainstream, are all increasingly common on college campuses across the country.

Jews and supporters of Israel have felt the brunt of the phenomenon. Pro-Israel speakers and its Ambassadors have been denied the opportunity to speak. Even those without a political agenda, such as brilliant professors and scientists are also shut out. Ironically, in some instances these lecturers are even more liberal and radical than the groups who object to their appearance and who are preventing them from speaking on their campus.

Andrew Pessin, Professor of Philosophy at Connecticut College, and author of several books of philosophy and two novels commented in a recent article about what is happening in universities. He wrote, “In place of a neutral forum for civil debate in the shared pursuit of truth, we find the enforcement of official orthodoxies. Disagreement, once the driving force of intellectual advancement, now is anathema. If you dare to differ from some particular orthodoxy, it’s because you enjoy privileges that blind you to the experiences of others. Or, worse, it’s because you, are actively defending those privileges.” He says you risk being called out and accused of being “a racist, or a homophobe, or a transphobe, or an Islamophobe, or – a *Zionist*. All of this culminates in “cancel culture”: (the notion that) those who disagree with the orthodoxies must be eliminated from the table of discourse, and in some cases, from the campus altogether,...includ(ing) the increasingly frequent cancellation of Jews, especially Jews who support Israel.”

A recent survey of over 2,100 college students revealed that 85% of students reported that they have stopped themselves from expressing an opinion on “sensitive political topics to avoid offending other students” at least “occasionally”, with 20% doing so “often”.

The shutting down of dialogue and suppressing discourse is frighteningly authoritarian. Not only do we not wish to hear from those with whom we disagree, we cease to associate and speak with those whose opinion or politics is different than ours. According to a poll recently conducted by the Economist, 38 % of both Democrats and Republicans said they would be somewhat or very upset at the prospect of their child marrying someone from the opposite political party.

The dangers of this trend might be the only thing that our two immediate past presidents agree upon.

In July of 2020, Donald Trump criticized cancel culture in a speech comparing it to totalitarianism and saying that it is a political weapon used to punish and shame dissenters by driving them from their jobs and demanding submission. On several occasions Barack Obama has warned against social media call-out culture, which can amount to condemning people all the time, saying that, "People who do really good stuff

have flaws. People who you are fighting may love their kids and, share certain things with you."

They are both alluding to a problem I spoke about a few years ago on the High Holidays when I discussed what can happen when we make judgments and draw conclusions based on incomplete or limited information and do not take the whole picture, individual or situation into consideration.

Our tradition cherishes *makhloket*, disagreements, especially those which are deemed as being for the sake of heaven, for they fine tune our ideas and sharpen our critical thinking. The Talmud records, respects and preserves minority opinions rejected by the majority. In fact, the Bible itself begins by presenting two very different versions of how the world was created.

Furthermore, if ever there was justification for cancelling someone, God would have been fully justified had He cancelled the Israelites. In fact, He almost did. After liberating the Children of Israel from Egyptian bondage, sending the Ten Plagues on the Egyptians, opening the Red Sea for them to pass through and then closing it in on the Egyptians who were in hot pursuit, the Children of Israel committed the ultimate sin -- building a Golden Calf to worship.

I am reminded of the parents who asked their son what he had learned in Hebrew school. He told his parents that he learned how Moses rescued the children of Israel from being slaves in Egypt. When the parents asked him to explain how it happened, he said, "Moses called on the Israeli army to help, so they swept in and in a daring operation airlifted the Children of Israel by helicopters to the other side of the Red Sea. Then they placed mines in the Red Sea so they would explode and the Egyptians wouldn't be able to come after them." The incredulous parents questioned their child, "Is that really what they taught you?" The kid sheepishly admitted, "No. But you'd never believe what they did tell us."

After witnessing first-hand God's redemptive powers, they miscalculate by a day the amount of time Moses has been on Mt. Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments, and collectively commit the biggest sin imaginable. Showing no gratitude, they violate a fundamental principle of Judaism and build an idol. An idol! What were they thinking?! Even Jewish pre-schools kids know you don't do that!

HaShem is furious and tells Moses He is going to wipe them all out - in today's language, we would say that He is going to cancel them. There is almost nothing the people could have done that that would have been worse than this. But Moses prevails upon God and persuades Him not to give up on this stiff-necked people, and not to destroy them.

There are other instances in the Tanach when the people of Israel or individuals sin, err, disappoint, and incur the wrath of God, but ultimately, God relents and does not cancel them. He gives them another chance.

A wonderful story in the midrash tells us that one night Abraham was visited in his tent by someone passing by who sought to take refuge from a terrible sandstorm. After they spoke for awhile, the man revealed that he did not believe in one God, but worshipped fire. When Abraham heard this, he cast the old man out of his tent into the darkness of the night. According to the story, God appeared to Abraham in a dream and said to him, "Abraham, my son, I have put up with this man's ignorance for 70 years. Don't you think you could have tolerated it for one night?!"

This attitude is consistent with a message found in the Talmud and throughout the liturgy of the High Holidays – like God we should be forgiving and understanding.

We should hate the sin, but not the sinner.

Perhaps worst of all, cancelling someone leaves no room or chance for remorse or regret. One of the primary objections, from a Jewish perspective is that cancelling another person means giving up on them. And this is the problem. This attitude is antithetical to the theme of these days, the *Aseret Y'mei Teshuva*, the Ten Days of Repentance. Cancel culture does not offer the possibility for one to change, to admit they were wrong, that they regret what they said or did. Jumping to quick unequivocal draconian conclusions eliminates the possibility of giving a person the chance to acknowledge, learn and grow from their mistake. This approach contrasts with a central theme of this season, the concept of teshuva – that we can repent, that we can make amends, and that we can change our ways.

TV show host, actor and musician Nick Cannon was removed from his long-running comedy improv show *Wild 'N Out* last year after he made anti-Semitic comments on his podcast and YouTube show, *Cannon's Class*. Jewish leaders condemned the anti-Semitic rhetoric he spewed.

But that is not where the story ends.

Rabbi Abraham Cooper of the Simon Wiesenthal Center and Rabbi Norman Morans of the American Jewish Committee both reached out to him and demanded an apology – but that is not all that they did. They each opened a dialogue with him. As Rabbi Cooper told me when I asked him how this all came about he told me that Cannon is an extremely bright young man, an intellectually curious lifelong learner who is a Howard University School of Divinity doctoral student. As a result of their discussions and study of Jewish texts and history, he came to realize that the things he thought were based on fact turned out to be hateful propaganda.

Rabbi Morans explained the turnaround saying, "In other incidents of celebrities expressing anti-semitic comments, we have heard some utter a formulaic text expressing regret and a desire to grow. Cannon did not follow that pattern. While he issued a series of apologies in his own unique style, Cannon dedicated a good part of the past month to learning more about Jews and Judaism. He understands why his words were blatantly antisemitic and has begun the process of undoing the damage he has caused."

In his apology on Twitter, Cannon wrote, "First and foremost I extend my deepest and most sincere apologies to my Jewish sisters and brothers for the hurtful and divisive words that came out of my mouth during my interview with Richard Griffin. They reinforced the worst stereotypes of a proud and magnificent people and I feel ashamed of the uninformed and naïve place that these words came from. The video of this interview has since been removed....I used words & referenced literature I assumed to be factual to uplift my community instead (it) turned out to be hateful propaganda and stereotypical rhetoric that pained another community For this I am deeply sorry, but now together we can write a new chapter of healing."

Not only did he do teshuva, he also performed the mitzvah of tzedekah. When reinstated on his show, he donated his first paycheck to the Simon Wiesenthal Center.

A player for the Miami Heat, Meyers Leonard made a derogatory comment about Jews that was widely circulated. The sharp reaction caught him off guard, and so he embarked on a similar journey, contacting several Jewish organizations to begin the process of education, healing and redemption. Two days after using the slur, Leonard spoke with leaders of Miami's Jewish community. He met with the Chabad rabbi in Hallandale, Florida and had a Shabbat dinner with him. To show his remorse, he assisted in delivering over 500 food packages to elderly Jews and Holocaust survivors for Passover.

One woman was thrilled when Leonard delivered the package to her door and said, "He realizes that he offended us, and he really wants to show the Jewish community that he never meant them harm and that he's in solidarity with us, in support and apologetic."

The rabbi said he told Leonard that "one beautiful thing about the Jewish people is that we suffered so much, but if someone is truly sincere, we are very forgiving."

We have a name for this – it is teshuva. It means admitting a mistake has been made, asking forgiveness of the one whom we wronged.

While I have been referring to what happens with opinions, politics, and public figures, such as politicians, celebrities, athletes, professors or writers when they say things that are in poor taste, out of fashion, or of questionable judgment, cancelling can also happen much closer to home -- to teachers, youngsters, classmates, associates, friends and even family members.

Unfortunately, too often in families and personal relationships, there are instances when people stop talking to each other. Something happens. Something is said. Feelings are hurt. Misunderstandings arise. People become indignant and a relationship is ended.

Even psychologists and therapists advise patients to cut out those relationships that may be a source of discomfort. But our tradition encourages us to be compassionate and understanding, to have *rahmanoos*, mercy towards others, even those who have wronged us, just as God did with the Children of Israel in the wilderness of Sinai.

The beauty of the two stories about Nick Cannon and Meyers Leonard is not just that they came to realize and recognize that what they had said was wrong and hurtful and that they asked forgiveness, but that the Jewish community allowed them to repent and express regret, turning something negative into something positive.

Teshuva entails being willing to forgive and pardon when a person expresses remorse. We may become so entrenched and self-righteous about our rejection that we are unwilling to absolve and accept or recognize a sincere apology from someone we have cancelled, but who wishes to make amends.

As fictional TV “football” Coach Ted Lasso played by Jason Sudeikis tells one of his players who was upset for missing an easy shot, “The happiest animal in the world is the goldfish, because it has a memory of ten seconds.”

This is a time for teshuva – not a time to dwell on past grudges or relive perceived slights. Take Ted Lasso’s advice: Be a goldfish.

Rosh Hashana is a time to heal and repair our world,..... and our relationships. Don’t cancel people. Don’t remain separated or distant from loved ones. Reach out to them. Don’t give up on them. Life is too short. Give them a chance. Open a new chapter, which after all is the meaning and blessing of the gift of Rosh Hashana, a New Year.

May this New Year be one of peace and healing for our world and for all of us.

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