

Cancel Culture
RH 2 5782
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Today is Yom Ha-din - the day of judgment. We stand before The Judge and pray that the judgment will be favorable. From that position of fear and trembling when submitting ourselves to the judgment of another, we can take a critical look at another form of judgment that has become pervasive in our society in a negative way.

The term “cancel culture” has been used so widely that it’s come to mean many different things to different people. Books have been written about it, there was a famous Harper’s letter by prominent academics denouncing it, presidents have commented on it. Basically, it’s a form of ostracism - that often takes place online and through social media. When someone, often a prominent personality, does or says something offensive or harmful, people use the tools of social media to call for that person to be fired from their job or to boycott their work. It takes many different forms, but the goal is to shine a light on abuses publicly and often with the intention of shaming in order to demand accountability.

This happens with particular ferocity, I’m told, on college campuses these days. Places which ought to be spaces of free exchange of ideas and argument (good argument that is - where people disagree with one another and ideally with mutual respect and equal opportunity to express their ideas). But often those who express unpopular ideas are drowned out or personally attacked. When we share a diverse community or society, we need to be able to work out these differences. This is supposed to be a process of refinement of learning, of growth, of incorporating different perspectives so that we are more inclusive. But too often, in an attempt for purity of thought, it’s easier to cancel people and cut out the voices that are unpleasant to us, that shake the foundations of what we know and believe than to

listen with an open ear, an open mind, and an open heart to another person's truth. And so we wind up with a culture that is dysfunctional. Filled with echo chambers and people become more extreme in their ideas and beliefs rather than seeking to compromise or work together.

This seems counter to the best of what Judaism asks us to do. The Talmud is filled with a culture of *mahloket*- arguing with mutual respect. It is said that when two *havrutot* - friends engage each other in debate, they are like two swords sharpening each other. But that has a double edge - swords are dangerous and they can hurt. And when our differences cause hurt, as they inevitably will, we're faced with a choice - to cancel or not to cancel? Do we care enough about the person we've hurt or the person who hurt us to try to heal or do I cut this person out of my life?

Our texts and tradition have plenty of examples of cancelling.

God cancelled all of humanity in the flood in the time of Noah. Having seen how evil and violent we can be, God decided I'm done with these people, time to start over! Cancel button!

Then God cancelled Sodom and Gomorrah for their wickedness.

We as a Jewish people are commanded to cancel Amalek - and not just ostracise them online, but to wipe them out completely!

There's one colorful tale from the Talmud in which a particular butcher offended one of the rabbis - he insulted his dignity. So the sages put him in *nidui* a kind of ostracism where he is stripped of all communal honors - they had a ceremony where they sounded the shofar publicly announcing his ostracism - (maybe the shofar was the ancient equivalent of a social media post?) It was determined that the butcher

could not have an aliyah to the Torah, he wouldn't count in a minyan, and they boycotted his store for a period of thirty days.

But the story doesn't end there. The butcher seeks out the rabbi whom he offended and appeases him. They make up! And then in typical Talmudic fashion, the rabbis then debate whether they can undo the נידוי or if he must wait until the end of the thirty day period.

This is sort of like when a parent will say to a child, "I'm glad you said you're sorry, but you still have to endure your punishment."

One day, I hope we can study the whole story together, it's an interesting piece of literature, but I think it highlights that in relationships, it's often hard to determine who is the guilty party. "He started it!" But more often than not, we each share some part responsibility when a relationship sours and the complexities of dealing with the fall out from a painful exchange.

I could go on,

Spinoza's excommunication by the rabbinic court of Amsterdam in 1656 - boy, that one was a doozy! Spinoza embraced enlightenment philosophy which challenged the traditionalism of his day. In a ritual, the rabbis went into a basement and extinguished a candle issuing an edict:

"no one should communicate with [Spinoza] orally or in writing, or show him any favour, or stay with him under the same roof, or within four cubits of him, or read anything composed or written by him."

Talk about being cancelled!

As Jews, we've also been the targets of those who wish to cancel us! In every generation they rise upon us to wipe us out. And our response to those unrepentant haters who seek to cancel our people is solidarity, survival, and living our best Jewish lives. We *hope* to make friends out of our enemies, but some, unfortunately, are unwilling to engage us in authentic relationship and so to them, we stand together and say, you will not defeat us. Am yisrael hai .

But ideally, I would argue, cancelling is not the answer. It may encourage some accountability, yes, but it does little to change the cycle of hurt. In the Torah God realizes that this cycle of violence is not good - not for God and not for humanity. God is learning about us and what God can expect from us. Early on God keeps destroying (the flood, Sodom and Gomorrah) because God doesn't like what God has created. If I could psychoanalyze God for a moment (is that heresy?) perhaps God sees in humanity a reflection of God's own unpleasant attributes. And rather than deal with them in Godssself, God chooses to take out God's anger on people. Over time, God comes to accept that humans are beautifully imperfect, that we can be violent, and hurt one another, but also that we can grow and improve. And the goal then becomes not to cut people out of relationships every time we disappoint, but rather to learn how to live with us - with all of our imperfections.

At one critical moment in the Torah, God is angry with the people of Israel and is venting to Moses, and God is threatening to wipe out the people. "Stand back!" Says God "and let my anger consume them!"

But Moses responds, in a moment of utter courage and heroism - if this is how You choose to treat Your people then I'm out! "Wipe my name from Your book." I want no part of a religion in which when people make mistakes - even large ones - they are cut out. Moses appeals to God's compassion and patience. God's better angels, so to speak. And ultimately, God musters the courage to forgive and move forward.

Isn't that, after all, the message of these High Holy Days as well? That no matter how far we have strayed how broken we are or our relationships are, healing and repair are possible. Teshuva - repentance is possible. We spend a month engaged in heshbon ha-nefesh - reflection on our past deeds and consider how we could have done better. But what underlies the entire enterprise is a belief that with concerted effort, we CAN be better! We can change! None of us is without sin. None of us stands on solid moral ground. All of us have been hurt and have hurt others. But we come on the high holy days because of a belief that repair is possible.

So, on this Rosh Hashanah - I want to ask a few questions:

Instead of cancelling, what if we cured, cared, and connected?

Instead of hating and harboring anger, what if we heard each other and healed one another?

Instead of getting retribution, what if we repented, repaired?

Instead of taking down, what if we talked and transformed?

So how do we begin?

I think that cancel culture is a symptom of a larger problem in our society - a lack of concern for others and a lack accountability when people hurt one another. A lack of empathy for the pain that our words and actions cause. The loss of the art form of the apology. And a general lack of appreciation for the value of difference and diversity of thought and opinion.

If I don't like something you've said, I can "unfriend" you. I can curate my social media feed so that the only voices I have to hear are the ones that I like or agree with.

But when you do this, those voices and the people don't go away. Those voices, I believe, need to be engaged, with a willingness both to teach about who we are and what we believe and to learn about another's perspective and narrative.

If you doubt this is possible, I want you to tell you two true stories and if you need an easy way to remember them, just think of Black and White.

About 4 years ago, a member of the Washington DC city council, named Trayon White Sr. made some antisemitic comments on social media. He accused the Rothchilds of controlling the weather and some other inappropriate, hurtful and bizarre comments.

This is unfortunate and upsetting, but it's what happened next was really important:

- 1. There were some who called for his resignation and circulated petitions that he step down. They wanted to cancel him and I understand why - a person in a position of power who believes these things should be concerning to us as Jews.**
- 2. There were others including Louis Farakkhan who came to his defense and organized a rally to support him. White cancelled the rally, thankfully.**
- 3. And then, a Jewish member of the city council, his colleague, invited White to her seder. White accepted. Subsequently, a rabbinic colleague of mine, invited him to a Shabbat dinner. White accepted.**
- 4. And then what happened was truly remarkable - he apologized - sincerely, for the ignorance of his comments and he moved forward. And I hope everyone learned a bit.**

In some ways, it would have been easier if White would have just gone away. After all, he hurt us. That would have stripped him of his power on the city council and he

couldn't use that position to hurt us any more. But ultimately that path would have solved nothing in terms of relationships between the two communities - Black and Jewish- who live alongside each other and have overlapping intersections in the culture of Washington DC. White's openness to learn how his comments affected Jews and the courage of those Jews to invite him into relationship rather than simply cancel him transformed what could have been a moment of pain and conflict into one of healing and growth.

The second story is about Derek Black - remember I said Black and White? Maybe you've heard of him. His story was the subject of a Pulitzer prize winning book called, "Rising Out of Hatred." If you don't want to read the book, you can listen to the Terry Gross interview on NPR.

Black was the son of a grand wizard of the KKK. He was the heir apparent of the White Nationalist movement.

He had been homeschooled, but when he went to college at New College in Florida, he began to meet some Jewish students and gay students and they even became his friends. When it became known that Black was part of the White Nationalist movement, there were some on campus who were very upset and sought to shun Black. But a few Jewish students took a different approach, they started inviting Black to Shabbat dinners. And over a period of two years where they didn't talk about White Nationalism, but everything else they had in common, he began to rethink some of the ideas he was raised with and ultimately renounced White Nationalism in a very public essay.

In hindsight, Black attributes his transformation to the simple opportunity of getting to know Jewish people. He could no longer think about Jews as an abstract

concept and so some of the antisemitic rhetoric he would hear from home no longer made sense to him and the whole ideology crumbled in the face of the reality of real live Jews who he knew beyond a surface

It's an incredible story. But one that makes the point - had Derek Black been ostracised by his peers, he may have continued to be a hateful divisive voice in our society - one with a huge platform to do real harm. But through relationship across difference he was able to be a force for good and transformation.

Now these are extraordinary examples, but they have lessons for each of us on a more personal level. Somehow, it might be harder when the person who has said something that hurt you isn't a public figure, but instead is a member of your family or your synagogue community or is your neighbor in your town.

It's one thing to cancel public personalities, it's quite another when the hurt is local - with people who are close to us.

Harriet Lerner is a prominent American psychologist. She's published tens of books and her most recent is entitled "Why won't you apologize." It's an easy and quick read and I recommend it.

She talks about how most of us apologize poorly. I recommend the book or any one of her online interviews. Reading her book has made me more aware of how I can apologize better and I hope it's helped improve some of my relationships. We'll see.

In the book, she talks about how shaming never helps. She gives an example of a child who stole candy from a store. When the mother realized this she asked the child to go back to the store and apologize. "It doesn't belong to you. It's against the law and it's wrong." So far, so good - says Lerner. But when they go back into the

store and the child is silent, the mother scolds the child “I cannot believe you did this! I always thought you were an honest boy and now I can’t trust you. I am so disappointed in you.” The child musters an apology, but has he really learned a lesson? Lerner argues that the next time this child does something wrong, he will be more motivated to apologize by his desire to avoid the intolerable feeling of being shamed than by recognizing the hurt that he may have caused to another person. Apologizing becomes “a quick way to exit the situation” rather than a way to repair a relationship.

And isn’t that how many of us think about apologizing - a get out of jail free card.

“I SAID I WAS SORRY. What else do you want from me?”

Genuine apologies require courage and self-reflection. They’re the beginning of a process, not the end.

After reading her work, you’ll notice how inadequate so many of the apologies we hear these days truly are.

I’ll share a couple of examples.

“I’m sorry you feel that way.”

The problem with this one is that it puts the emphasis on the hurt party’s feelings rather than the offending party’s actions.

A better apology might be. I’m sorry that I made that joke. I realize now that it was inappropriate and hurtful and I won’t do it again.

Here’s another example.

“I’m sorry I didn’t call you, but I had a really busy day.”

Lerner says that we all have to work on getting our “buts” out of our apologies.

“But” in an apology is almost always followed by a rationalization.

A better apology would sound something like this:

I’m sorry I didn’t call you. I want you to know I was thinking about you. I would understand if you were upset with me for not reaching out and I’ll try to be better in touch.

Time for one more?

“I’m sorry if my comments offended anyone. That wasn’t my intention.”

This one’s a little trickier, let’s break it down -

I’m sorry “if” my comments offended anyone - this is vague and targeted at anyone.

The “if” shows that the person apologizing hasn’t taken the time to consider whether or not their comments actually did offend someone or some group and so the apology lacks the specificity necessary to really heal the wound.

“That wasn’t my intention.” That’s nice to know, but kind of beside the point. Most of the time we don’t intend to hurt anyone else. But the whole reason you’re apologizing is that someone was hurt.

Here’s a better apology that shows genuine remorse and reflection.

“I’m sorry I made that joke. I thought it was funny, but upon further reflection I recognize that it’s disrespectful to women and I understand that it’s hurtful. You’ve asked me not to make jokes like that before and I didn’t listen. I’m sorry. I’m not going to do it again.”

How was that?

Better?

I know these were only a few examples, but I’m sure you can fill in the gaps with your own.

If we had better apologies, better accountability, then I wonder if there would be less of a need for cancel culture. With better apologies and more empathy, people might be more willing to forgive and move forward. The book also has advice on how and whether to accept the olive branch when it’s extended to you. The short answer - not always, but when it’s sincere and shows remorse, even if it’s not a perfect apology there’s an opportunity to be generous and forgive. It’ll be good for you to let go of the anger and move forward.

We tend to spend a good amount of time focusing on public figures and their apologies. We debate, was it sincere? Was it enough? Did they deserve that consequence. But ultimately, I’m less concerned with Andrew Cuomo and Jeffrey Toobin. I am concerned with them, of course, they’re men with influence and power and their actions deserve accountability. But they’re not members of my community. You are.

There are husbands and wives sitting in this synagogue today, whose love for one another once filled their lives with beauty but who now live lives of estrangement

and alienation though they live under one roof - and they find it is so very difficult just to say "I'm sorry".

There are parents and children who talk to each other, but have ceased communicating with each other long ago. Parents and children whose harsh judgements about each other cover over the love that lies deeply buried beneath the surface, and they find it terribly difficult to express that love, and to say, "I'm sorry!".

There are members of the same families who sit in different parts of this same sanctuary who bear with them assorted hurts and jealousies and even hatred. They nurture their wounds and find it so very difficult to say the words that need to be said.

They'd rather cancel each other than take the first step towards reconciliation.

This has been a difficult year for relationships - many of us are stressed and feel distant from one another - socially and otherwise. The politicisation of everything turns the heat up on so many of our disagreements. Rosh Hashanah is a time to renew our covenants with one another - to begin again. This is not a call for less accountability, for forgiveness without genuine remorse or consequences. It's a call for more. But the kind of accountability that heals and transforms - draws us closer to one another - not farther apart.

There are times when someone is unrepentant. Refuses to see how their words or actions have hurt others. In some cases, they double down on the offensive behavior and lament "you can't say anything anymore without offending someone!" With them, perhaps the time is not right to forgive and reconcile, and I would never suggest that people willingly submit themselves to abuse. But perhaps will be a

moment when that person is ready to learn and ready to apologize. And maybe then, some healing will be possible.

You and I have a relationship and I know because some of you have taken the opportunity to tell me when something I said or did, or something I didn't say or didn't do hurt you. Or maybe less dramatically, it wasn't what you needed or wanted to hear. I hope that when you approached me I was non-defensive, I listened to your concerns. Trust me that those exchanges are the ones from which I learn the most - far more than when you tell me you agreed or liked what I had to say, although it's nice to hear that as well that too.

Adrienne Maree Brown is an American author and women's rights activist. She wrote the following in an essay and I think it beautifully sums up what I've been speaking about today today. She writes:

"Canceling is punishment, and punishment doesn't stop the cycle of harm, not long term. ...instead of prison bars we place each other in an overflowing box of untouchables - often with no trial - and strip us of past and future, of the complexity of being gifted and troubled, brilliant and broken...

We will not cancel us. But we must earn our place on this earth.

We will tell each other we hurt people, and who. We will tell each other why, and who hurt us and how. We will tell each other what we will do to heal ourselves, and heal the wounds in our wake. We will be accountable, rigorous in our accountability, all of us unlearning, all of us crawling towards dignity."

It's easy to cut people out of our lives, but ultimately will leave us bitter and lonely. But as ann marie brown says, "if you believe - as I do that - that no one is disposable

And if you believe — as I do — that no one is disposable, then we have to ask ourselves questions when we feel tempted to dispose of others.

God believes that no one is disposable - that's why we're here on RH and Yom Kippur. If God could cancel us, if God wanted to cancel us, synagogue would be a very lonely place on the high holy days.

So in this new year, let us strive to forgive and seek forgiveness. Let us cancel no one, but hold each other accountable in a beloved community. Let us do more listening than speaking. And when we hear that we've hurt another, let us find the courage to say the most important words that can be said, that must be said to begin the healing process. "I'm sorry. I love you. I forgive you. Please forgive me." And then maybe we'll be privileged to live in a society where no one is cancelled, no one disposable, all of us precious, flawed, trying to do our best in the eyes of God and our fellow person.

Shanah tovah.