

Please Don't Cancel Me, Or Anyone Else!

Kol Nidrei 5781

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Of all the unusual, unfathomable, unpredictable consequences of this year, there is one part of our lives that has grown and increased substantially since we were all here together at this time last Rosh Hashanah. And that is, our vocabularies! Think of all the new words, terms, and phrases you have picked up in 5780:

Of course the global health crises has given us Covid, Covid-19, Coronavirus, or Novel Coronavirus, and if you're feeling particularly chummy, just Rona.

We've learned the differences between endemics-epidemics- and pandemics; quarantining versus isolation versus sheltering in place; we know about contact tracing and clusters; how to tell the difference between being pre-symptomatic or asymptomatic; some of us have gotten viral tests while others have gotten anti-body tests; we've availed ourselves of telemedicine and drive through testing; we do our best to avoid droplet transmission so that we can flatten the curve, and achieve herd immunity; God forbid anyone should be a super-spreader. Our vocabulary has grown in length of words too, like the 18 letter long hydroxychloroquine! We've got a whole new repertoire of abbreviations like PPE and N95; and we've even inventing new words this year, like "Blursday" when we can't remember what day of the week it is. Even Yiddish has been marshalled to coin new words, like my favorite one *Oisgezoozt*, meaning, over zoomed, or all zoomed out! That's when you might need to pour yourself a "quarantini," which I have learned is basically any mixed drink to that takes the edge off! But this year has given us words that are not only virus related. We have learned about colorism, and "microaggression," and being "woke." We have struggled with defunding and performative activism. There is one phrase that I have personally been wrestling with because I think it raises some challenging Jewish questions. That is: Cancel Culture.

Cancel culture is a phrase that describes the attempt to obliterate people's reputations, brands, shows, movies, books, careers due to what those doing the cancelling deem to be problematic or offensive remarks, content, or ideology.

Some of the cancelled may be temporary, like Ellen DeGeneres, who came back on the air this week for her 18th season with an apology for the toxic work environment at her show. Amy Cooper, of Central Park infamy, who called the police on a bird-watching black man who politely asked her to put her dog on a leash was fired from her job and publicly ostracized on television and social media. Even the adoption agency where she got her dog took the animal back. Whether her apologies are accepted or deemed genuine still remains to be seen. Others like Harvey Weinstein, Charlie Rose, Kevin Spacey, and Bill Cosby may well be cancelled for good. Now you may be thinking, what's the big deal? Haven't we always "cancelled" people or things we don't like or agree with? Don't we regularly decide what kind of entertainment, information, goods and services that we support or avoid? Of course we do, but the mutation that we call "cancel culture" calls for the all-out de-platforming, firing, silencing, or bankrupting of those who are cancelled. Now, I mentioned that I'm wrestling with this whole cancel culture thing, because on the one-hand I agree with the wholesale rejection of people or organizations

that traffic in anti-Semitism, overt racism and hate speech, not to mention serial attackers of the vulnerable and less powerful. On the other hand, the silencing of people with whom a certain group disagrees without any opportunity for discourse or debate also strikes me as deeply problematic. Also, relevant to this night in particular, it seems to make tshuva practically impossible.

The truth is that Jews have had our own internal history of cancelling others. We used to do this thing called *herem*, better known as excommunication. I know that sounds like something straight out of the medieval church, but Jews have “cancelled” other Jews who expressed opinions are considered beyond the pale of its very broadly constructed boundaries, not to mention for behaving badly in the world. In the 12th Century, the Rambam excommunicated a Jewish tax collector in Egypt, Sar Shalom ben Moshe Ha’Levi for keep too much of the money for himself! The messianic pretender Shabbetai Zvi was excommunicated for misleading huge parts of the Jewish community, duping them with his messianic claims. The Dutch Enlightenment philosopher Baruch Spinoza was excommunicated by the Jewish community of Amsterdam for spreading “evil opinions” and “abominable heresies.” The Sages also decided what books they deemed admissible into the canon we call the Tanakh or the Hebrew Bible, and which books did not meet their ideological or communal standards. There is a whole library of those cancelled books called the Apocrypha. We have many, many cases of cancel culture in Jewish history.

There is a famous midrash that says that there are *shivim panim la’Torah*, seventy faces to the Torah. That’s a metaphor for many different ways, many different approaches to understanding the meaning of the Torah. I used to think that meant that there are infinite ways to understand the Torah. But then I heard the famous Israeli Bible scholar Nechama Leibowitz say, “Yes there are 70 faces to the Torah, but not 71!” What did she mean by that? She meant that while there is a huge range of possible interpretations to cull from Torah, it is not possible to cull anything or everything from the Torah. How did our Sages both celebrate diversity while at the same time creating certain boundaries that if you trespassed them you were no longer in territory that could be identified as legitimately Jewish?

The answer is, they set up rules for debate. I think this country, our society is lacking this critical ingredient that the rabbis built into their system at its very foundation. If you want to be part of the conversation, you have to abide by the rules. And the first rule is that while nearly any opinion may be considered valid, all opinions must be backed up by evidence. If you want to present an argument, you have to ground it in proof, in facts, or in precedent. In this way the rabbis neutralized the fringes; extremists who express unverifiable, knee-jerk opinions. You can’t just spout whatever you want. You can’t just demonize your opponent for disagreeing with you. You can’t make accusations or denounce others without proof. To wit, you can’t just cancel people you disagree with. Number two, the system is based on building consensus. As an idea is vetted, debated, submitted for “peer review,” and argued over, in the end the will of the community wins the day. Again, minority views are preserved for posterity and future study, but the overarching values are harmony and unanimity. In one of the most celebrated excommunications in the Talmud, the great Rabbi Eliezer was excommunicated not for having heretical views or beliefs, but for being a renegade. By disregarding the welfare and unity of the Jewish people, his colleagues had no choice but to remove him from their fellowship. Rabban Gamliel, another rabbinic luminary, was dethroned for publicly humiliating his opponents. Can you imagine if these rules of discourse were applied today? How much extremist speech, unsubstantiated accusations, and personal defamation would be declared off-limits?

In this past year I felt that I was on the receiving end of cancel culture. When I publicly supported the consensus decision of our synagogue leadership, in what was indeed a controversial decision, I was told that I had “abdicated” my title of rabbi; that I was acting in accord with those who seek to harm the Jewish people. That was probably the most hurtful slur of all. My entire life, every fiber of my being is dedicated to the perpetuation of vibrant Jewish life. There is no higher value for me than *ahavat Yisrael*, the loving dedication to my fellow Jews. Yet, people threatened to resign from the synagogue or to withhold contributions at a time when we need them the most, and to attack me in directly personal ways in order to bully me into submission. How did that violate the rabbinic norms of civil discourse? Well, there was no real opportunity for conversation. Only one person actually agreed to sit down over a cup of coffee and have a meaningful conversation. A few others engaged in some email exchanges, but most just fired off a barrage of internet links supporting their particular dogma. But the idea of a rational, evidence-based, interpersonal exchange of ideas was extremely rare. Furthermore, there was no appreciation that any community has to operate based on consensus versus fiat. There has to be a meeting of the minds, a genuine discourse, and then, ultimately a vote. But in the all too often toxic environment we live in, there is little patience for any sort of learning process, listening, thinking, praying. Much more popular is what journalist Helen Lewis calls the “cheap sugar rush of tokenistic cancellations.”

This seems to fly in the face of the words we say on this holiest night of the entire year: *El, Erekh apayim Atah*: God, You are patient...In the 13 attributes, we chant *Adonai, Adonai, El rachum ve’chanun, erekh apayim ve’rav chesed ve’emet*...God you are merciful and compassionate, patient, abounding in love and faithfulness. Change, repentance, growth, progress in both people and institutions sometimes requires patience. It is that godly trait that allows us to really listen, to learn, to stretch, and to grow. Cancelling people or institutions usually short-circuits that process to everyone’s detriment. As the great Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who never backed away from the pressing issues of the day once said: "Real change, enduring change, happens one step at a time."

I think our Mahzor got it right when it added its own take on cancel culture. *Avinu Malkeinu*, we chant, *bateil machashavot soneinu*...Our Father Our King, Our Parent Our Sovereign, cancel the evil plots of our enemies. Truly harmful, hateful, destructive plots should indeed be cancelled. But people are not plots, and most of us are not so thoroughly corrupt or wicked. In the New Year, I hope we do a lot less cancelling of each other, and a whole lot more engaging with each other. And as our Rabbis taught us long ago, may that engagement always elevate the welfare, the health, the peace, the **unity** of the **community** above all other considerations and interests. *Kein Yehi Ratzon*...