From the Rabbi's Desk
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D'var Torah for the Second Morning of Rosh Hashanah

5783

We all know what a cancelled check is. While cancelled checks might be needed for some record-keeping, they are basically useless in the sense that there is no practical use for them in the future. When a flight is cancelled, by definition, that flight is gone, it evaporated into the past. The same holds true about cancelled appointments or a cancelled show.

We basically used the word *cancelled* to refer to some item (a check, for example), or some event (an appointment, or a show, or a flight) that did exist in the past, but for which we don't have a use any longer.

Given the above use of the word *cancellation*, one we are all familiar with, it should take us by surprise to know that nowadays the expression is being applied to human beings as well.

Cancel culture or call-out culture is a phrase contemporary to the late 2010s and early 2020s used to refer to a form of ostracism in which someone is thrust out of social or professional circles – whether it be online, on social media, or in person. Those subject to this ostracism are said to have been 'cancelled'. Cancel Culture, or "Call-out culture" has been in use as part of the #MeToo movement. The #MeToo movement encouraged women (and men) to call out their abusers on a forum where the accusations would be heard, especially against very powerful individuals. After numerous cases of online shaming gained wide notoriety, the term cancellation was increasingly used to describe a widespread, outraged, online response to a single provocative statement, against a single target. Over time, as isolated instances of cancellation became

more frequent and the mob mentality more apparent, commentators began seeing a "culture" of outrage and cancellation.[1]

Through the overwhelming power of the internet, modern day cancellation is merciless and relentless. In other words, your sin is out there, a click away, for everyone to see, for all eternity, and there is nothing you can do about it.

In addition, though cancellation was used originally as a tool against powerful and ruthless abusers, it rapidly morphed into a pervasive culture of public shaming used against any person, institution, or ideology that didn't fit the prevalent ideology and practices of a particular group of people or an anonymous mass.

And since cancellation really works, many people these days are walking on eggshells, afraid of sharing their opinions, asking questions, or making jokes, for fear of being cancelled, which almost immediately is translated to isolation, loss of social networks, and in many cases, loss of a livelihood.

I confess that lately I have found myself at rabbinical gatherings silently acquiescing to statements or opinions expressed by teachers or colleagues which I found objectionable, for fear of being socially punished, excluded, or cancelled.

According to Jonah Engel Bromwich of The New York Times, this usage of the word "cancellation" indicates the "total disinvestment in something (anything)".[2] It is on this "total disinvestment" in something that I would like to focus.

When the behavior of the people around us fluctuates between walking on eggshells trying to guess what the right thing to say is, and disinvesting ourselves from those who hold different thoughts or practices, we are not in a good place.

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[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cancel_culture

[2] Ibidem.

At the outbreak of COVID-19, Israeli singer Hanan Ben Ari composed a song called Ga'aguim L'bnei Adam ("Longing for People")[3]. In his song, Ben Ari addressed the newfound longing for other people brought on by the pandemic.

Hanan ben Ari was not alone in seeing the unwelcoming pandemic as a unique opportunity for finding light in the darkness, for finding love in a time of despair.

I as well was among those who declared that facing sickness, death, and isolation was going to transform us into kinder, more compassionate, more sensitive, and more accepting human beings.

Yet, I am afraid that two and half years after the outbreak of COVID-19, we are less compassionate, less sensitive, and less accepting. By and large, we surround ourselves only with people who think like us and cancel everybody else. If anything, many of us walk through life full of righteous indignation against anybody who has the impertinence to think differently.

If 4,000 years of Judaism can teach us something, it is that while we could find particular practices and ideologies to be unacceptable, objectionable, or even questionable, the individuals behind them, each of them, each of us, were created בצלם , in the image of God. You don't have to agree with every single individual or enjoy their company, but we all need to work on the core idea that every person, and especially every person we usually come into contact with, has redeemable points.

Love your neighbor as yourself was not limited to the individuals who think and act like yourself. After all, I don't need a commandment to love people who think and act exactly like me. The commandment was issued having in mind people who <u>don't</u> think and act like we do, who have different values,

[3] https://lyricstranslate.com/en/%D7%92%D7%A2%D7%92%D7%95%D7%A2%D7%99%D7%9D-%D7%9C%D7%91%D7%A0%D7%99-%D7%90%D7%93%D7%9D-gaaguim-libney-adam-longing-people.html-0

who think differently than we do when it comes to American politics, the State of Israel, the future of COVID-19, the types of books our children are required to read in school, the role of law enforcement in our country, the selling of the shul building, the war in Ukraine, and the list goes on.

The Torah could have cancelled Adam and Eve for their sin of disobedience in the Garden of Eden; it could have cancelled Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob for their shortcomings as parents; it could have cancelled Joseph's brothers for selling their own flesh and blood into slavery, among countless other cases. Thank God it didn't. Our ancestors, not unlike us, were full of imperfections. Some of them, like King Saul and King David made huge mistakes and paid the consequences for their mistakes, and yet they were not cancelled.

Our flawed ancestors were not eradicated from history without a trace – making mistakes does not make you worthy of being cancelled.

Yesterday I spoke about regrets and mistakes. Cancel culture is problematic because you are not allowed to make mistakes and if you make them, you are ashamed to admit it. If you can't make mistakes, how can you learn from them or have productive conversations?

Perhaps, the best way to "fix" cancel culture is to assume best intentions, and recognize that everyone has their own story, stemming from a particular set of circumstances and experiences. This includes both our ancestors and the individuals we interact with daily.

Endeavoring to be more compassionate, more sensitive, and more accepting human beings never goes out of fashion. It was a noble goal two and a half years ago, and it remains a noble goal today. We can and should do better. All of us. No exceptions.

So let me conclude with a renewed commitment for me, and for all of you. Paraphrasing a well-known prayer:

Dear God,

Let me be an instrument of your everlasting, unconditional, love.

Where there is cancellation, let me bring inclusion.

Where there is intolerance, let me bring acceptance.

Where there is darkness, let me bring light.

Where there is hatred, cynicism, cruelty, and sarcasm, let me bring kindness, empathy, healing, and compassion.

May the following Rosh Hashanah find our world, our country, our society, and all of us, in a better place.

And may it be your will, dear God, to bless me, and my family, and my friends, and everybody in this wonderful congregation, those who agree with me and those who don't, with a good, joyous, healthy, and sweet year. Amen.