

What Censorship Means to Me



People have tried to cancel me. At least twice. I've discussed the second time because it was about this very podcast. I'm not going to rehash that now. But I do want to discuss the first time because it was very instructive to me as an individual and it shaped my feeling for and understanding of cancel culture. Like most misery in my life, it began with a tweet.

On April 11th, 2012 at 10:19PM I tweeted "Movies I would recommend if it weren't inappropriate to admit I have watched." That wasn't such a smart move, but that wasn't what got me in trouble. I then proceeded to recommend the movie. And, in fact, it was not appropriate. It's not something I want my kids watching and it's certainly not a movie, for all of its moral lessons about relationships, that I should have been broadcasting on Twitter. I was clearly wrong. Of course, there are excuses I could make. Twitter then certainly wasn't what it is now, I was single, in my late-twenties, depressed, and felt like an imposter in the educational role I occupied. But the excuses don't really change the facts: I publicly recommended a movie that was inappropriate.

So, let's pause for a moment.

Allow me to ask you, at this point in the story, what is the correct reaction? You see someone who occupies an educational role who tweeted a recommendation for a movie that was inappropriate. Should they be fired? Would you reach out to them and explain why they were wrong? Would you call their supervisor? I know what you're thinking. "It depends which movie." Sorry, folks, not gonna share that here. This much I can say: It was a major motion picture (meaning not pornography) shown in mainstream theatres that had inappropriate scenes. So what is the right response?

A few months later, anonymous letters were sent to the leadership of the organization where I worked. My boss called me in, looked at me. Smirked. Told me to delete the tweet and try to be more careful. He was right. I was still learning what it meant to present as a role model and I, as I wandered my lonely twenties, was still very much growing in my own personal religious sensitivities. I deleted the tweet.



On June 27th, another batch of correspondence was sent. The envelope, like the previous ones, had a red stamp marking them "confidential." Included was a brief note with a follow-up:

Please find enclosed a publicly posted Twitter message and related reference material. Your organization's web site notes that the person from whose account this was posted is an education director. As a group who works closely with youth and seeks to promote Orthodox religious values, the enclosed would seem to merit serious concern.

The following papers were mailed to your office last week. Very shortly after they should have reached you, the Twitter message was deleted. To verify its original existence, see the screenshot of a cached copy of the posting.

Along with the letter, the sender included the IMDb page which explained why the movie had the rating it did. While the letter doesn't say this explicitly, it seems clear they wanted me fired. In today's parlance, we would call this "being canceled."

Canonization is Jewish, cancelation is not. There's a difference.

I never discovered who sent the letter and Lord knows it is not for lack of trying. What was probably the hardest thing for me at the time was knowing that whoever sent in these letters likely knew me personally. I didn't have too many Twitter followers at that time that I didn't actually know, and it seems a drop far-fetched that someone would see that tweet and do all the research on the movie and my position if they did not know me (and not like me) already.

I took one of the copies of the letter and keep it with me to this very day. I used to keep it in the drawer next to my bed, now it occupies a drawer in my office. Why keep a letter that tried to end my employment? For a few reasons, actually. First and foremost, it is an important reminder of the importance of being a role model. I try to conduct myself decently and honestly in both public and private settings. But the standard of being an educator is rightfully higher. It's easy, especially for me, to forget that. Oftentimes under the guise of relatability or authenticity, I will share something that will at best be misunderstood or at worst lead to a *chilul Hashem*, a desecration of God's name. Personal expression, this letter reminds me, need not be the final arbiter of all of my disclosures.

The letter also makes me think about what would have happened if things went differently. What if I did get fired? I would have likely secured employment elsewhere, but I am nearly certain I would have left Jewish education. That thought makes me sad. I hadn't written much at that point in my life. So much of who I was had yet to unfold. If I had a different boss, a more persistent letter writer, or a dumber tweet, the trajectory of my life could have gone a different way. I like to think I am more mature now because of this incident—it is certainly an apt reminder not to take the work that I have done for granted. And this letter in my office drawer reminds me of that every day.

So having been almost canceled (twice), one would expect that I hate cancel culture. Well, not entirely. As I mentioned, I think in many ways the person who sent that letter was right. I did share something that was inappropriate and I think the right thing to do was to call me out. But there is a big difference between sharing emphatic criticism and trying to get someone fired. You can usually spot the difference based on to whom the criticism is addressed. When the goal is to make someone become a better person, then the address of the criticism is the person you are trying to help improve. When the goal is to get someone fired, then the address of the criticism is their employer. This was obviously an example of the latter.

My dear friend, a former guest on 18forty, Rabbi Daniel Feldman, once shared with me an important distinction: it is not the canceling that is the problem, it is the culture. I think he is right. Every community—whether a religious community, or political, or a geographic neighborhood—has the

ability and right to cancel or push aside people who they do not think reflect their values. Certainly, people who represent the community—whether a leader, a rabbi, or an educator—need to have the community’s confidence that they embody the values they are purportedly meant to perpetuate.

That is why the Jewish take on cancel culture is so complicated. I have seen a lot of instinctive hand-wringing about cancel culture, but I am not so sure that it’s so foreign to Judaism. Too often, we confuse our political preferences for an outright objection to cancel culture. Nearly the entire edifice of rabbinic Judaism is founded on the notion of boundaries and cancellation. As I shared with Lilly Gelman for her piece, “What is Cancel Culture—and What Does Judaism Say About It?” the very act of canonization in some senses is an act of cancellation. Some books are in, others are out. Moshe Halbertal writes in his absolutely essential book, *People of the Book: Canon, Meaning, and Authority*:

Canons are both exclusive and inclusive. They create monopolies and define who is worthy of being heard and who is not. In some situations, disagreement about what is included in the canon can divide a community.

But this is also where I think the notion of cancellation in the Jewish tradition differs in some important ways from its more modern manifestations. Canonization is Jewish, cancellation is not. There’s a difference.

Canonization forms the explicit or implicit boundaries of acceptability in a community. That doesn’t necessarily mean that what is outside of the canon disappears. The Talmud cites books from outside of the canon. We specifically include non-authoritative opinions in the Mishnah because we still have what to learn from them—even if they are clearly not authoritative. Rav Yaakov of Lisa, in his introduction to his work *Nesivos HaMishpat*, compares the communal process of canonization to scuba diving. A scuba diver looking for gems gets better at spotting value every time they go under water—whether or not they actually find the gem. The very process of deciphering truth among a variety of opinions is what makes us better equipped as a society at identifying truth.

Cancellation, however, particularly when followed with the operative qualifier “culture” is less concerned with truth than providing spaces of absolute ideological purity. They don’t want opinions with which they disagree. Now this may be an overly broad caricature of cancel culture, but the term has become so broad that it is nearly impossible to pin down. My objection, as I mentioned, isn’t the notion of canceling, it is the culture that surrounds it. The idea that someone who does not espouse the exact party line must immediately and summarily be exorcised from the party doesn’t seem to me to be a healthy ingredient for any community. And allow me to say this clearly: I don’t think cancel culture is associated with any particular ideology, politics, or religion—despite how it is presented—it is something that occurs across the board in different ways. When we define ourselves by what is *not* included rather than the values and ideas that *are* included, it makes you wonder if the boundaries we erect around the ideas we’re trying to protect are for our appreciation of what’s inside or just to scorn what is now outside.

These are undoubtedly murky waters. The definitions are not all that clear and when you throw politics into this word *cholent*, it seems everyone is just using the term “cancel culture” to demonize those they oppose. That’s not the angle that interests me much. What interests me is how values-

driven communities transmit ideas. What interests me is how we preserve history even when it doesn't completely cohere with our contemporary values. What interests me is how to react to your own mistakes and productively help other people realize their own. And what interests me is preserving values in a way that is both authentic and edifying, factually grounded and communally uplifting. It's not simple, but that is a culture I hope we can create together. In the meantime, keep sending letters.