



## Cancel Culture

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The latest symbol of the American culture wars is a can of beans. In case you missed the political scuffle, last week Robert Unanue, the CEO of Goya Foods, the largest Hispanic owned company in the U.S., stood next to the President in the Rose Garden and declared his support.

The response was swift and severe: a massive outcry that took social media by storm with clips of Hispanic celebrities flushing Goya beans down their toilets, tweets of tutorials for how to hand-soak beans, calls to boycott Robert Unanue and Goya Foods for what he had said. No question of why he was there or what his words meant to him.

A similarly swift response came from the right – a “buycott.” No question of why so many were so hurt.

Boycott or buycott, one thing was clear. Goya had just taken center stage in what has become the template for how we in America engage with each other today – through what is colloquially called “cancel culture.” The concept of “cancel culture” is a political flashpoint, often attributed only to liberals on the left. But the truth is that both on the left *and* the right, we in America today are quick to “cancel” those with whom we disagree.

How many of you have seen something like this appear on your Facebook feed at some point? “If you think *this* is ok, unfriend me immediately. I have nothing to speak to you about.” The “*this*” can be anywhere on the political map from racism, to abortion, to support for Israel or disagreement with it. The common thread is that if you support someone or something that is seen as unacceptable in a broader group, you are “cancelled.”

We like to think of this as unique to our time, but, as New York Times columnist Ross Douthat pointed out, “All cultures cancel...Reputational cancellation hung over the heads of

Edith Wharton's heroines; professional cancellation shadowed 20th-century figures like Lenny Bruce."

Indeed, even as far back as Talmudic times we Jews have our own version of cancel culture. It fell hardest on a young scholar who could not wrap his head around God in a world of injustice and did not refrain from saying so – Elisha Ben Abuyah.

According to stories told about him, even as a young student, Elisha could not resist secular scholarship, music, and the culture of the Greek world around him. He used to keep forbidden books hidden in his clothes and could often be heard humming a Greek tune. But he dutifully learned and taught, and he became an esteemed rabbinic leader – until one day when he witnessed the death of a child in the process of fulfilling a mitzvah. That broke his faith. He never returned – even going so far, according to one account in the Jerusalem Talmud, as to drop by houses of study to convince young men there not to waste their time on Torah but to pursue careers in the trades instead.

For his apostasy, Elisha Ben Abuyah earned the name "*Acher*," Other, and became the ancient poster child of cancel culture. You might say from the very notion of "*Acher*" that Judaism stands firmly on the side of cancel culture.

But there is a coda to Elisha Ben Abuyah's story – and the Talmud makes sure to tell it. Elisha had a student, Rabbi Meir, who did not cancel Elisha. Indeed, he went out of his way to keep seeking him out as a teacher, to keep learning from him to his dying day. When asked why Rabbi Meir would do such a thing, the rabbinic voice famously says, "Meir ate the date and threw away the pit." By remaining in conversation with the "*Acher*," the Other, Rabbi Meir chose to do something tremendously hard, something that he learned not from the cancel culture, but from an alternative ethos that also emerges from our tradition: *chevruta* culture.

In *chevruta* culture, a pair of students are encouraged to disagree in order to mine the truth. In *chevruta* culture you stay in conversation, you keep pushing, keep probing, keep trying to convince the person who feels very differently from you of the merit of your perspective.

Indeed, *chevruta* culture is best exemplified by the word used to describe a study partner – a “*bar plugta*,” a sparring partner or adversarial colleague – reflecting the truth that there is always something to learn, especially from those with whom you most vehemently disagree.

Cancel culture is seductive in its clarity and in the satisfaction it brings of feeling morally in the right. That is exactly why it should give us pause.

Today we mark *Birkat HaChodesh* for the upcoming month of Av, most famous for the mourning we will do together on *Tisha B’Av* for the fall of the ancient Temple. Our rabbis could have made the observance of *Tisha B’Av* about an evil empire who wantonly destroyed that which was most sacred to our people. But they did not.

Instead they focused on *Sinat Chinam*, which is defined not only as baseless hatred but as the inability to speak to each other. They tell a story about a party invitation gone astray, delivered inadvertently to the wrong guy. The host meant to invite his friend Kamtza, but his enemy Bar Kamtza showed up instead. Rather than allow this enemy to enter, the host refused to speak to him and publicly cancelled him – which led Bar Kamtza to go off to the emperor and plant the seeds of ultimate destruction.

In other words, on *Tisha B’Av*, our rabbis chose to assert that the collapse of society is directly linked to the moment when we stop being able to engage with those with whom we disagree. And just to make sure we do not miss the point, they report in the name of Bar Kamtza that the biggest sin of the whole ordeal was that of the rabbis who saw and sat there and were satisfied with Bar Kamtza being cancelled.

What happens when we cancel people or ideas? We think of it as a “mic drop,” a “win.” But more often, not only do things not get better, they can get worse. The people who cancel stop listening. The “cancelled” often entrench. Hatred builds. Destruction follows. That is the *Tisha B’Av* path.

But there is also Rabbi Meir's path – the harder path, the more troubling path, the more demanding path. Also, the more generative path.

Last week was a big week for hatred. Philadelphia Eagles wide receiver DeSean Jackson kicked it off with a vile antisemitic screed. Many rightly condemned him immediately and vowed to shut him down.

Patriots wide receiver Julian Edelman made a different play. "I know he said some ugly things," Edelman said about Jackson, "but I do see an opportunity to have a conversation... It's really hard to see the challenges a community can face when you're not a part of it...what we need to do is we need to listen, we need to learn, we need to act. We need to have ...uncomfortable conversations if we're going to have real change."

"So, to that end," he said, "DeSean, let's do a deal. How about we go to DC and I take you to the Holocaust Museum, and then you take me to the museum of African-American History and Culture. Afterwards we grab some burgers and we have those uncomfortable conversations." DeSean Jackson agreed.

Although the museums are not yet open for visitors due to the pandemic and the burgers will have to wait, their conversation has already begun.

Cancel culture or *chevruta* culture? It is our choice.

Shabbat Shalom.