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## Should Jews Cancel Cancel Culture?

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*As part of the Hartman Fellowship for Emerging Jewish Thought Leaders, fellows were given a deceptively simple task: write a short persuasive essay or create a persuasive piece of multimedia that grapples with big Jewish ideas. The fellows proved themselves equal to the challenge and responded with an array of remarkable and powerful projects on a vast array of subjects, representing a wide array of political positions. We have highlighted a number of the pieces which showed particular originality or writing and production excellence.*

## Should Jews Cancel Cancel Culture?

The act of cancelling refers to a form of protest in which popular opinion turns against a public figure due to that individual's objectionable words or actions. In recent years, "cancel culture" or "call-out culture" has made national headlines on a regular basis, with the media condemning Michael Jackson, R. Kelly, JK Rowling, and numerous other celebrities. Notably, this phenomenon itself has sparked immense controversy as society hotly debates the ethics of such censorship. In 2019, former president Barack Obama voiced concern about the mentality of many young people that "the way of making change is to be as judgmental as possible," a sensibility perpetuated by social media. "That's not activism," he explained, adding that this approach prevents people from finding common ground, hindering actual change. Others, however, consider cancel culture a just response to problematic behavior and a valuable tool for bringing about social advancement.

So which is it? Is cancel culture activism or merely what journalist Sara Horowitz termed "feel-good judgmentalism?" As with many aspects of life, Judaism offers some insight into this nuanced debate.

On one hand, our religion values dissent as reflected in the Talmud, which is filled with entire books of debate that we are encouraged to study. Furthermore, we know our tradition supports pluralism, as Eruvin 13b teaches us. The famous source says, "For three years, the House of Hillel and the House of Shammai argued. One said, 'The halakha is like us,' and the other said, 'The halakha is like us.' A heavenly voice spoke: 'These and these are the words of the living God.'" The Bat Kol's words signify the existence of multiple truths, but Judaism is not always as accepting of different positions as this quote suggests. In fact, the Torah is sometimes criticized for its seemingly intolerant response to dissenting opinions.

This is exemplified in Deuteronomy 17:11, which declares, "According to the law which they shall teach you, and according to the judgment which they shall tell you, thou shall do; you shall not turn aside from the sentence which they shall declare unto you, to the right hand, nor to the left." This well-known verse states that one must do exactly as directed of them, but the Torah goes even farther. The text goes on to say that if someone deviates from the ruling of a priest or judge, that person "shall die; and you shall exterminate the evil from Israel" (Deuteronomy 17:12). Not only is disobeying laws considered improper, but it is described as a "sin" that is

punishable by death and expulsion. However, the Torah seems to justify the severity of this treatment by viewing it as a fear tactic to prevent future sin, which is very similar to a common practice of cancel culture. “And all the people shall hear and shall fear, and do no more presumptuously,” states Deuteronomy 17:13. We see this intense form of punishment implemented throughout the Bible, with some key examples including the stories of Noah and Tsdom, two tales of mass murder as a consequence for sin. We are also told to remember the evildoings of Amalek, even thousands of years later. In Exodus 17:14, God tells Moses, “Inscribe this in a document as a reminder, and read it aloud to Joshua: I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.”

At the same time, Yom Kippur, a day that is dedicated to atoning for sins and being granted forgiveness, is widely considered the most holy day of the year.

So where must we draw the line? How do you decide that a person should be “cancelled” as opposed to simply respecting their different opinion or giving them an opportunity to apologize and change? The record of the Rabbis’ debates and the heavenly voice’s declaration that both Beit Hillel and Beit Shamai’s views are valid teaches us that disagreement is okay, even valued. Beyond that, we should allow individuals to recover from their mistakes if they are open to acknowledging them and growing as a result. However, when people act in a cruel, unethical manner, like the inhabitants of Tsdom, Noah’s generation, and Amalek, it speaks to their character and is much more difficult to uproot.