CORRECT NOT CANCEL
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Last night I spoke about the controversy surrounding Whoopi Goldberg's false characterization on Monday of this past week that the Holocaust was not about the Jews as a race. She argued, incorrectly, but from her own perspective as a person of colour that since the Jews were not a people of colour they could not be the target of racist violence. Instead, she said the Holocaust was an example of "man's inhumanity to man", she continued "Well, this is White people doing it to White people, so y'all gonna fight amongst yourselves,"

As I taught last night, Whoopi's view comes from her own lived experience, and a naïve and simply incorrect understanding of the origins and reality of the Holocaust for Jews. I spoke about why it is so complicated to define the Jewish people as a race and still why it is so dangerous that in today's hyper-racialized, marginalized and polarized societies to not include Jew Hatred amongst, and perhaps chief amongst the greatest scourges of society.

The sermon is online and if you missed it, I invite you to take a look as its relevant to what I promised last night would be part two today.

Whoopi apologized, publicly, expressively and I think sincerely. She invited ADL Chief Jonathan Greenblatt on the show the next day and had a lengthy and informed conversation about why she was wrong to say what she said and how it was both offensive and dangerious to the Jewish people.

However, even after the Monday apology, and the appearance with Greenblatt on Tueaday which gave the ADL perhaps is biggest global audience in history; ABC News President Kim Godwin announced Whoopi's suspension later that day. In announcing the suspension, ABC said it was asking Goldberg "to take time to reflect and learn about the impact of her comments."

On Wednesday, former GOP communications director Tara Setmayer sat in as guest co-host and nobody said anything about Jews or the Holocaust.

Isaac de Castro, editor of Jewcy, an online platform for young Jews, said on Twitter that Goldberg's offensive comments reflected the inability of many Americans to understand race and racism outside their prism. But he also said in a tweet that "putting a grown woman in a time-out" does little to advance a reckoning with Jewish identity.

Then he made what I think is a particularly important observation about what the suspension has done. He wrote:

"Now we're talking about whether Whoopi should be suspended or not, instead of talking about the issue at hand… and having a larger conversation about antisemitism and racism and the complexity of Jewish history,"

I attempted to address that larger conversation last night; but I think there is still more to learn from this controversy, even if as de Castro correctly points out it's a side issue at best; should Goldberg be canceled or counseled?

I ask this not so much for the resolution of this particular social media sideshow; but because the dual issues of Cancel Culture and Tshuvah (opportunities to correct and repair the harm you have done) are fundamental to Judaism and ultimately to how we live our own lives as Jews in community and as individuals.

There is wonderful story in the midrash tells how one night Abraham was visited in his tent by someone passing by who sought to take refuge from a terrible sandstorm. After they spoke for a while, the man revealed that he did not believe in one God, but worshipped fire. When Abraham heard this, he cast the old man out of his tent into the darkness of the night. According to the story, God appeared to Abraham in a dream and said to him, "Abraham, my son, I have put up with this man's ignorance for 70 years. Don't you think you could have tolerated it for one night?!"

This attitude is consistent with a message found in the Talmud and throughout the liturgy of the High Holidays – like God we should be forgiving and understanding; we should not cancel another human being.

Judaism position in general, there are exceptions is that Cancel Culture does not offer the possibility for one to change, to admit they were wrong, that they regret what they said or did. Jumping to quick unequivocal draconian conclusions eliminates the possibility of giving a person the chance to acknowledge, learn and grow from their mistake. This approach contrasts with the concept of teshuva – that we can repent, that we can make amends, and that we can change our ways.

The term Canceling Someone is relatively new, but the questions surrounding canceling are not. They have surfaced in Judaism just as they have in other religions. "The most drastic type of canceling is when we say Yemach Shemo—blot out their name."

Brandeis University sociologist Sylvia Barack Fishman teaches that. "Jews traditionally use that phrase for the Nazis. So, when something is a moral monstrosity, that's when one cancels [it]." Even then, Jewish tradition usually stops just shy of complete cancelation, she adds. Deuteronomy commands us to "blot out the memory of Amalek," yet the same verse instructs us to "not forget." That's why every Shabbat before Purim, we read the Torah portion reminding us of Amalek's sins against the Israelites; and its why the catch phrase for Holocaust education is "Never Again, Never Forget".

But the Jewish response goes beyond not forgetting; we take these painful and often tragic experiences with human failure as opportunities for learning and understanding.

The Talmud — the 1,500-year-old proverbial scrapbook of Jewish legend, law and rabbinic debate — has something profound to teach us about what we've come to call cancel culture. As the text was compiled in the fourth century, the ancient rabbis decided to leave the dissenting opinion in, rather than edit it out. As the great 20th-century rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, "Is it possible to have a living Torah without the struggle of opposites, without disputes, without the many permutations of ideas and outlooks?" Debate and dialogue, not dogma, is foundational to the Jewish way of learning and thinking.

The Talmudic rabbis challenged us to "Make your heart into many chambers," so we can hold opposing views and see from another person's perspective. A July 2020 letter in Harper's Magazine entitled "A Letter on Justice and Open Debate and which was signed by more than a hundred intellectuals, academics, and authors states, "The way to defeat bad ideas is by exposure, argument, and persuasion, not by trying to silence or wish them away." Yes, some ideas edge toward the extreme, to say as Whoopi did that the Jews were not murdered by the Nazi's because they were Jews; is wrong in the extreme, dangerously so but that only makes a meaningful conversation about what she said more important. Better than a conversation about what she said is a conversation with her; as she had with Greenblatt; but a conversation that stopped the moment they suspended her from the show.

The late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks (z'l) teaches that, "The way to become moral is both simple and a great challenge: We need direct encounters with other human beings. We have to be in their presence, open to their otherness, alert to their hopes and fears, engaged in the minuet of conversation, the delicate back-and-forth of speaking and listening." You can't do that with someone who is cancelled. You can't educate them, and they can't learn from you. Its not the Jewish way.

Cancel culture is at odds with Judaism, which places teshuvah, or repentance as the true sign of human growth and piety. Judaism does not expect human beings to be perfect, there are no saints in Judaism. It expects us to try continuously try to be better. In the world addiction recovery this Jewish idea of teshuvah is rendered as "progress not perfection".

In our social media, hyper-judgy world where simple human errors and complex human perspectives, like those expressed by Whoopi based on her own lived experience are broadcast around the world in an instant and live on in tweets and retweets, tiktoks and posts for what might be the rest of your life at the very least. In such a world there is seldom forgiveness, and forgetfulness is remedied with a simple google search. Those who have been canceled are rarely given a chance to apologize or make amends. This inability to be forgiven is, as Jonathan Krasner writes, "antithetical to Judaism's ideas of teshuvah. Teshuvah is an opportunity to right whatever wrong. But in cancel culture, there is no repentance. You're blacklisted and that's it."

“And what if you are the one who has been hurt? Jewish tradition urges us to consider why it is so hard to forgive.

Nothing good comes from Goldberg’ suspension, in fact it makes a bad situation much worse. It makes it worse because we are not talking about the core issue that prompted her remark, which was her rejection of a Tennessee school board’s banning of the Pulitzer Prize winning Holocaust graphic novel Maus. We are not talking, except in Jewish circles about the underlying bias that many people of color have toward Jews with regard to how we experience racial injustice. It is bad because as Rabbi David Wolpe writes, “There is a savage self-righteousness to public shaming. If I forgive you, truly forgive you, then I must restore moral parity; I am no better than you. Accepting that steals the satisfactions of resentment.”

Some in our community are community are figuratively dancing on Whoopi’s grave for getting caught (and cancelled) for saying what she truly thought to be right, but has now learned was fundamentally wrong.

If we truly accept her apology and forgive her as I argued last night, we should then Jewish law insists that once someone has been forgiven, we must never remind the person of that fact. To do so is to re-establish a hierarchy that true forgiveness disavows.

And lastly cancelling Whoopi is bad because it goes against the grain of everything Judaism is about. “It is undignified, coarse and models to people of all ages that owning our misdeeds and apologies have more negative consequences than ignoring them does.” (Rabbi David Seth Kirshner)

We need to talk with Whoopi and those who see the origins of the Holocaust as she does; cancelling them changes nothing, educating them could in time change everything.