

The Power of the Mob in an Unforgiving Age



WE LIVE IN AN AGE of “cancel culture,” when online voices increasingly aim to shut down debate and dissent, and ad hominem attacks have replaced legitimate disagreements. In a time when nothing is forgotten, forgiveness seems nearly unattainable. The online mob has the power to destroy the foundations of our liberal society, and to destroy lives.

We need moral models for navigating these challenges, which threaten the core of our free society. I would like to suggest we look to the most recent reflections of Natan Sharansky and the late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, two of the most eloquent spokesmen for Judaism and Jewish identity in recent decades, whose writings touch on these topics in ways both explicit and oblique. In origin, experience, and public persona, they could not be more different; yet at the core, their central concerns are united. Throughout their talks and writing, they manifest a deep devotion to the flourishing of the Jewish people and to the moral

future of the free society. And while their worldviews are deeply rooted in their own Jewish experiences, the perspectives they put forward are universal in intent and application. They speak to the future of democracy itself.

On March 1, 1953, Joseph Stalin, at the height of his postwar power and while planning a genocide of Soviet Jewry, was suddenly felled by a stroke. Three days later, he was dead. In Moscow, young Anatoly Sharansky was taken aside by his father, a journalist in a society where truthful reporting was illegal, who told his son to celebrate secretly, while outwardly feigning sorrow. Thus Sharansky recounted later:

I remember the day when I became a loyal Soviet citizen. It was the day when Stalin died, and I was five years old. My father explained it to me, making sure that nobody heard, that it is a great day for us, for Jews, because Stalin died. Probably we are safe now, because he was going to persecute Jews, but I should never tell it to anybody. I should remember that it was a miracle which saved us, but I should do what everybody does. The next day I went to kindergarten, and was crying, together with all the children, about Stalin, and was singing together with all children about the great leader of all the people of the world. And I remembered that it's a great miracle, and that you have to be very happy that he died.

“That,” Sharansky further reflected, “is how I started my life [as a] loyal Soviet citizen, who lives simultaneously in two worlds...that is how my life [as a] Soviet slave started.”

In his memoir, co-written with Gil Troy, Sharansky later borrowed a term from George Orwell for his experience: “doublethink,” or the act of hiding one’s emotions and views in order to survive. A Soviet citizen always lived a masked life, eternally divided between what was in his heart and his public posture, ever aware of “constant probes, some subtle, some direct, to determine [his] loyalty.”

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Although saved from Stalin, Sharansky was nevertheless initiated into living a lie:

The end of Stalin's life, therefore, marked my entry into the Soviets' deceptive order of doublethinkers. This round-the-clock public charade defined the typical life of a loyal Soviet citizen. You knew to be politically correct in everyday life. You said and wrote and did everything you were supposed to do, while knowing it was all a lie. You only acknowledged the truth with your family and a very close circle of trusted friends.

As Sharansky himself notes, his father's celebration of Stalin's death was especially fitting, for it was on the day marked around the Jewish world as the holiday of Purim that the tyrant suffered his stroke. The calendrical coincidence has been seen — rightly — as a hint to God's providence, an echo of the Book of Esther, where an earlier genocidal maniac was also defeated and killed.

But in Sharansky's description of doublethink, we also find a profound irony. The Purim story, described in the Book of Esther, unfolds in a Persia dominated by fear, in which a mercurial king would summarily execute all who defied him. The hero and namesake

of the biblical book is one who feels forced to disguise her own identity, keeping her innermost thoughts entirely concealed until, in a moment of profound courage, she steps forward on behalf of her people. This idea of disguise is behind the penchant for donning costumes and masks as part of the Purim celebration. It is often assumed that this is done in order to remember Esther's original concealment of her identity, but of course, no one would mistake a masked man reading a Megillah or conspicuously celebrating Purim as anything other than a Jew. Rather, the intent is the opposite: In hiding our true selves, we remember the fear that pervaded Persian society, and then, in dramatically declaiming and celebrating the Purim story, we emphasize that despite any attempts to obscure us in the present, we will still proudly proclaim all that we believe.

Sharansky's uniquely Jewish Purim tale is thus also of enormous importance to the entirety of the free world. Today, Americans are not hunted by the KGB, nor do we come close to enduring the terror and tyranny that marked Sharansky's childhood. Yet Sharansky himself suggests that many decades after his Purim experiences, much of America leads a masked life, one in which we feel forced to hide what we truly believe, who we truly are, for fear of social ostracization, or worse, professional or personal retribution for offending the wrong people. The terrible irony is that the digital medium, invented to further facilitate communication and the expression of one's views, actually often encourages the opposite. We are bowing to the power of the online mob. As Sharansky writes:

In the West today, the pressure to conform doesn't come from the totalitarian top — our political leaders are not Stalinist dictators. Instead, it comes from the fanatics around us, in our neighborhoods, at school, at work, often using the prospect of Twitter-shaming to bully people into silence — or a fake, politically-correct compliance. Recent polls suggest that nearly two-thirds of Americans report self-censoring about politics at least occasionally, essentially becoming a nation of doublethinkers

despite the magnificent constitutional protections for free thought and expression enshrined in the Bill of Rights.

This is the sobering warning from a man who, with the Purim “miracle” of 1953, was initiated into the art of doublethink, and who later sat in a Soviet prison, hearing reports of Reagan’s speeches and yearning for American liberty: America is in danger of losing its own identity as a genuinely free society, not from a powerful government but from the perceived power of a vocal minority intolerant of dissent. We are succumbing to the mob’s power instead of demonstrating the moral clarity and courage needed to resist it.



The warning issued by Rabbi Sacks was of a slightly different sort, delivered in one of his last great public speeches. The talk was delivered in October 2019, prior to the penitential prayers known as Selichot, marking the onset of the High Holy Day season. Selichot sermons usually focus on uniquely Jewish themes, but Rabbi Sacks chose to utilize the central motif of the season — forgiveness — in order to indict the direction of the West. The eagerness to condemn others online, the social-media mob, and the Twitter-shaming that for Sharansky marked the dawn of doublethink were, to Rabbi Sacks, the onset of the “Unforgiving Age.”

Examples, of course, abound. Rabbi Sacks cited several: A British scientist made one inappropriate joke, and despite his profuse apologies “was condemned without trial, without consideration of the evidence, without due process, without appeal, without mercy, without regard to his lifetime of service to science, without regard to the simple fact that he was a human being and human beings make mistakes.” Jordan Peterson, the prominent psychologist, posed for a photo with someone attired in an inappropriate T-shirt, and he was immediately let go by Cambridge University’s Divinity School, where Peterson had been hired to serve as a visiting fellow. In this

case, Rabbi Sacks noted the irony whereby a religious institution, purportedly dedicated to the biblical heritage, ignored scriptural teaching in condemning what was likely a simple response to yet another photo request from a fan:

Have they heard of the word “forgiveness” in the Cambridge Divinity School? ...Or, maybe they’ve heard of the word “justice”? Here is a man condemned because of somebody else’s selfie with him, somebody else’s T-shirt, with no trial, no evidence, no judicial process, no reflective moral judgment, no “vedarashta vechakarta ve’sha’alta haytayve” (thou shalt seek and interrogate and inquire thoroughly) as the Torah tells us to do, to examine the evidence well, and see “emet nachon hadavar” (in truth the fact is correct). [Deuteronomy 13:15]

While Rabbi Sacks focuses on attempted cancellation of public figures, his point can be applied, perhaps even more profoundly, to the way that mistakes made by young people have been used against them years later. We have seen expulsions, school acceptances withdrawn, jobs lost, lives ruined because of an irresponsible comment someone made on social media years before, as a teenager. In our current environment, no apologies for fallibility are accepted, and no allowance is made for the maturation process. Strikingly, Maimonides argues that parenting is an important preparatory experience for one who sits on the Sanhedrin, ancient Jewry’s supreme judicial body; for it is through the very experiences of fallibility and learning from error that parents learn to be merciful (Mishne Torah, Laws of Sanhedrin, 2:3).

It is the very refusal to be merciful that marks our age — an ethos that, Rabbi Sacks shows, is profoundly un-Jewish. He shares the biblical tale that could be considered the origin story of the faith known as Judaism: when Jacob’s son Judah first suggested selling his brother Joseph. There are few greater crimes. Yet the Torah recounts in *parsha* Vayigash that Judah later came to openly

admit, and then repent, the horror of his offer. His repentance took concrete, physical form: When the vizier of Egypt (Joseph in disguise) declared his desire to take another of Judah's brothers, Benjamin, as his slave, Judah stepped forward and asked to be taken instead (Genesis 44:33). It was Judah's transformation that suddenly stunned Joseph, convincing him to cease his charade and forgive his family.

This story is often referred to as that of "Joseph and his Brothers," but Joseph is not the person in this plot who undergoes the most interesting character development. We might instead consider this saga as "Judah and his brothers," for it is as much the story of Judah: sinner then penitent, betrayer then savior, coward then hero. Once the very embodiment of brotherly betrayal, he comes to personify family loyalty.

The tale of Judah reminds us of human nature itself, in all its grandeur and flaws. It reminds us of our capacity for sin—and also of the power of repentance. It is a radical reminder of human freedom, of our ability to change, and therefore of the foundation of forgiveness, both God's and our own.

Judah has profound importance in the history of our people. Not only is he central to this biblical tale, but he also ultimately becomes the namesake of its faith. Following the destruction of the northern monarchy and the disappearance of 10 of Israel's tribes, the southern kingdom of Israel, known by its most prominent tribe, Judah (Yehudah in Hebrew), bequeathed its name to all its inhabitants. Thus Mordecai and Esther were descendants of Benjamin, but were nevertheless known as *Yehudim*, Jews. For Rabbi Sacks, this is especially striking and significant in our uncompassionate age. Judah, he writes,

became the ancestor of Israel's Kings....We are called Jews because we are *Yehudim*, because we are named after Yehudah. Why? Because he was forgiven. And why was he forgiven? Because he owned up. He said, "Aval asheimim anachnu" (we were guilty)...(Genesis 44:16). What's more, he changed: From

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the person who sold his brother as a slave, he became the person who was willing to spend the rest of his life as a slave so that his brother Benjamin could go free. He became a *Ba'al Teshuvah*. Joseph, his brother, forgave him. God forgave him, and it is his name we bear.

What are we to make of the striking fact that all Israelites are now known by the name of this fallible child of Jacob? Is it mere historical happenstance that the name "Jew" developed, that the faith that began with Abraham and was revealed to Moses is not named for one of them? Perhaps; and yet it is significant that this is a moniker accepted and embraced by Jews themselves. Perhaps one can add to Sacks's point the suggestion that the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the followers of Moses, embraced the appellation *Yehudi* because *Judaism* is genuinely *Judah-ism*: Before it informs us about God, Judaism is a faith that wishes to inform us about man. It proclaims, idealistically but realistically, that most men will not be Moses, but they can be Judah; it asserts, critically but optimistically, that mankind is not inherently good but is capable of goodness. It is a faith whose namesake is not perfect—and therefore he is an inspiration to us all. Judah was not Abraham, the knight of faith; he was not Moses who spoke face-to-face with God. He was, instead, a man who struggled, faltered, and failed. He repented, improved, and overcame. This, then, is our aspiration—not perfection, but the moral life well lived. This is our ideal: to be like Judah, to be a *Yehudi*—a Jew.

The Jews have a unique calling to make the case for an understanding of human nature that names good and evil, yet recognizes the inherent ability of human beings to repent and grow.

Yet it is precisely this notion of the imperfect, forgivable human being that contemporary culture rejects. What we have been left with is a strange form of moral Puritanism without faith, and therefore without forgiveness. For Rabbi Sacks, it is the West's abandonment of its biblical heritage that is the source of its warped perspective. At the center of the biblical vision is a God who created the world yet is outside of it, and is therefore free. When the Bible insists that man is created in God's image, it means to emphasize that we, too, are free. Our very freedom allows us to sin, and that same freedom allows us to earn forgiveness, to make manifest our capacity for change. All of this has been lost in our current moment. "What happens when an entire culture loses faith in God?" asks Rabbi Sacks.

I'll tell you all that's left. All that's left is an unconscious universe of impersonal forces that doesn't care if we exist or not. In the other direction, all that's left is a world of Facebook and Twitter and viral videos in which anyone can pass judgment on anyone without regard to the facts or truth or reflective moral judgment. And by the time the person accused has had the chance to explain, or the truth has emerged, the crowd has already moved on. They're not interested anymore. And what happens in an unforgiving culture? In an unforgiving culture, the people who survive and thrive are the people without shame.

In the end, the insights of Sacks and Sharansky complement each other. It is those without shame who take pleasure in destroying the lives of others; and the witnesses to this destruction, the other members of society, become all the more afraid to voice their views, lest they too be destroyed. The unforgiving age explored by Sacks produces the digital doublethinkers described by Sharansky.

The culture of cancellation presents American Jewish leaders with a daunting challenge but also, perhaps, with a historical

calling: in the face of online abuses of power, to reflect a scintilla of the courage embodied by Sharansky, and to exhibit the compassion counseled by Sacks. Although neither of these men is American, the message they bring us is critical for the future thriving of America itself. Not long ago, the digital age dawned with so much optimism about its potential. Today, as we understand many of its dangers better than ever, we must let the wisdom of Sacks and Sharansky cut through the cacophony of online condemnation. We must heed their warnings and, inspired by the wisdom of their words, embrace the imperative of preserving the moral future of a free society. *