SAPIR

IDEAS FOR A THRIVING JEWISH FUTURE

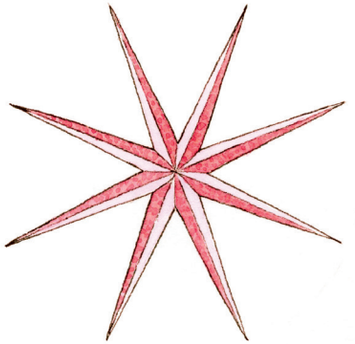
THE ISSUE ON

CANCELLATION

Volume Seven *Autumn 2022*

And they saw the God of Israel:
Under His feet there was the
likeness of a pavement of
sapphire, like the very sky
for purity.

— Exodus 24:10



SAPIR

Sapir, Ideas for a Thriving Jewish Future. ISSN 2767-1712. 2022, Volume 7.
Published by Maimonides Fund.

Printed in the United States of America.

WWW.SAPIRJOURNAL.ORG
WWW.MAIMONIDESFUND.ORG

CONTENTS

MARK CHARENDOFF

Publisher's Note

T IS HARD to overstate the role of *teshuva*, repentance, in Jewish thought. Yom Kippur, a day set aside in its entirety to focus on *teshuva* on an individual and communal level, is the culmination of the 10 days of repentance that begin with Rosh Hashana. The New Year is itself preceded by a month of buildup beginning with the advent of the month of Elul. That means that about 12 percent of a Jewish year is focused single-mindedly on repentance.

Repentance also enjoyed a central place on the biblical stage. The Temple in Jerusalem was built, in large part, to accommodate the sacrificial ritual as a mechanism for repentance. Certain sacrifices required the recitation of confession, *viduy*, as part of the ritual. Upon the Temple's destruction, much of rabbinic innovation was focused on how we could replace the animal sacrifices that were so essential to our worship with prayer and good deeds.

Why is *teshuva* so crucial to Jewish thought and observance? In part, it's because all people are going to get things wrong, and they are going to do it often. *Chet* is a common Hebrew word we use for sin. It means we missed the target. *Teshuva* means we recognize that misstep and we seek to return to the right path, to our true selves, to whom and to what we aspire to be.

And that is much of life. Missing the target and then getting back on track—in school, at home, at work, in our relationships. Life would be pretty hopeless if our mistakes, our sins, our *chet*, couldn't be corrected. Maimonides dedicates an entire section of his Mishneh Torah to *teshuva* because of its necessity in Jewish life.

One of the most destructive aspects of today's cancel culture is that it removes the opportunity for *teshuva*. That's not to imply that everyone who has been "canceled" by today's self-appointed judges of morality and correctness is guilty. Far from it. But even for those who have a measure of guilt, who have sinned, who have veered off the path, what is the mechanism for *teshuva*? For the sincere penitent, how do we bring him or her back? The mob won't allow for engagement, never mind forgiveness. While cancel culture is certainly unkind, this withholding of *teshuva* is also profoundly un-Jewish.

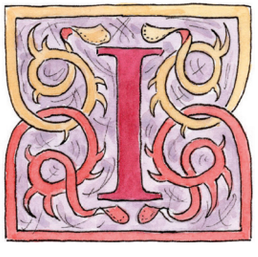
There is also a communal loss. If there is no return from cancellation, no *teshuva*, people will inevitably police their own writing, speech, even thinking. Discussion will become duller, less provocative. Must we forever exclude people from our communal deliberations because of past errors? No doubt we must, in some cases. But the denial of *teshuva* is rare indeed. According to the Mishnah in Sanhedrin, only three kings and four commoners, of all the characters in the Torah, will have no share in the world to come. A small club. It's hard to imagine that anyone is so blameless as to deny repentance to one who seeks it. ✳

PART ONE

JEWS AND CANCEL CULTURE

BRET STEPHENS

Jews and Cancel Culture



T MAY NOT BE obvious why Sapir should devote an issue to the theme of cancellation. Doesn't the phenomenon already get more than enough attention elsewhere? Isn't this a problem for liberal democracy in general, rather than for Jews in particular?

The essays in this volume aim to convince you otherwise. Cancel culture is a cancer at the heart of liberal society — and Jews, of all people, cannot safely be indifferent to the health of liberalism. Cancel culture also rests on a set of attitudes and practices that, whether from Left or Right, are uniquely anathema to Jewish culture, teachings, and habits of mind. Even statehood: Is it really such an accident that the enemies of free thought are so often the same people who want to cancel the Jewish state?

Let's examine these points in their turn.

What exactly do we mean by "cancel culture"? It's obviously not a matter of being fired for cause. Harvey Weinstein wasn't a victim of cancel culture: He's someone whose serial abuses were moral, professional, legal, and criminal. Nor is it cancel culture simply when private companies, universities, or other institutions discipline employees or students for violating long-established and widely agreed standards of professional and personal conduct. When actress Roseanne Barr tweeted in 2018 that Valerie Jarrett, the former Obama-administration aide, was the baby of the "Muslim brotherhood & planet of the apes," ABC had a legitimate reputational interest in giving her the boot.

A better way to understand cancel culture is to break it down into five component parts: an action, a method, a capitulation, a mentality, and a culture.

The *action* is cancellation. But cancellation doesn't simply mean losing a job, a book contract, a TV show, a speaking gig, and so on. It's more like erasure. A canceled person will lose not only his job but also his career. He will lose not only his career but also his reputation. He will lose not only his reputation but also many of the people he once considered friends. He will lose not only his friends but also, in some cases, his will to live. David Bucci was a 50-year-old professor at Dartmouth and a married father of three when he became entangled in allegations that, as a department head, he had looked the other way at a campus culture of sexual harassment. Though he was never accused of personal misconduct, the school's failure to declare his innocence sent him into a spiral. He committed suicide in October 2019.

The *method* is usually the social-pressure campaign — with the aim to not only destroy the intended target but advertise the destruction far and wide as a means of intimidation. Person X is deemed a malefactor for a statement or action that an exceptionally vocal minority of people consider immoral or that causes "harm" and makes people "feel unsafe." Sometimes these campaigns begin with an accusation that turns into a workplace whisper campaign;

at other times with a social-media post that quickly gains wide attention and descends on the designated target like a Himalayan avalanche. Employers, allergic to public controversy, seek to make the problem go away as quickly as possible, usually by extracting an apology from the targeted employee. That apology, often given under acute emotional distress, is seen as an admission of guilt. Termination swiftly follows.

Capitulation is an underappreciated but integral aspect of cancel culture. After David Sabatini, a renowned cancer biologist, was pushed out of his job at MIT on account of a non-disclosed consensual relationship with a younger colleague that went sour, friends of his who thought the charges against him were nonsense sought to bring him to New York University. When word got out of his potential hire, it led to public protests, to which the NYU administration, including university president Andrew Hamilton, promptly caved. Sabatini, once touted as a future Nobel laureate, is now unhirable in American academia. Cancel culture flourishes because coward culture allows it.

Then there is *mentality*. The best term I know of for practitioners of cancel culture is "cry-bullies." It captures the combination of self-pity and vindictiveness (the former providing limitless justification for the latter) that explains so much of the way cancel culture operates: the disdain for due process; the unlimited deference shown to the accuser; the indifference to the possibility of innocence or, at least, mitigating factors; the reputation-smearing; the foreclosure of any possibility of second chances or redemption; the demand for complete professional and personal excommunication. There's a reason, as Lionel Shriver notes, why today's cancel culture reminds people of Mao's Cultural Revolution or Robespierre's Terror (minus, for now, the bloodshed). Only those fully convinced of their utter righteousness can be so completely pitiless.

Finally, *culture*. Cancellation is awful, but it befalls relatively few. The broader impact is on a wider circle of people who fear that they, too, can be canceled at a moment's notice for saying or doing

So this is cancel culture: a highly effective social-pressure mechanism through which the ideological fixations of the aggrieved and truculent few are imposed on the fearful or compliant many by means of the social annihilation of a handful of unfortunate individuals.

the wrong thing. It's what leads to increasingly widespread habits of self-censorship, speaking in euphemisms, professing views one doesn't really hold, pulling intellectual punches, or restricting candid conversations to a close circle of like-minded and trusted friends. It is why more than 60 percent of Americans admitted in 2020 that they have views they are afraid to share in public, and another 32 percent fear that their job prospects could be harmed by speaking their mind. It's also why young undergraduates such as Olivia Eve Gross, a third-year student at the University of Chicago who is publishing her debut essay in this issue, thinks twice before raising her hand in class.

So this is cancel culture: a highly effective social-pressure mechanism through which the ideological fixations of the aggrieved and truculent few are imposed on the fearful or compliant many by means of the social annihilation of a handful of unfortunate individuals.

It's easy to see why this culture is such a threat to liberal democracy. It is a tyranny of the minority over the majority. It violates

ordinary expectations of fair dealing. It represents an aggressive intrusion of political ideology into workplaces that were once mostly free from it. It seeks to proscribe not just certain types of behavior, but entire categories of thought. It requires public endorsement of a controversial set of ideas as the price that must be paid to gain admission, employment, promotion, and social respectability. Past observers of tyrannical societies — Václav Havel comes to mind — would be familiar with the system: Ordinary people pay obeisance to political slogans in which they don't particularly believe just to be left alone.

A rejoinder to the argument that cancel culture is a threat to democracy is that none of these objections touch directly on our political and legal systems per se. Private institutions can, for the most part, set their own rules; people who don't like them, or who run afoul of them, are free to go elsewhere. The canceled still get to vote. Their professional lapses don't usually lead to jail time. They can find jobs elsewhere, even if they are lesser ones, which may be a pity for them but is no different from the fate of millions of other unfortunates whose career aspirations don't pan out.

In fact, there are many laws governing workplace environments, and at least some people facing cancellation have had their legal rights violated. But the larger problem with the rejoinder is that it misses the fact that politics is downstream from culture. Our schools, campuses, offices, and civic associations are the places where we are socialized for democratic life. Are we collaborative fellow students or colleagues — or suspicious ones? Do we accept viewpoint diversity — or do we demand conformity? Do we foster environments where people feel safe to express themselves freely and fully — or where it's wiser to remain silent? Should we respond with curiosity to arguments with which we disagree — or with contempt?

These are not small questions. Democracy is not an automatic watch that starts ticking at the first flick of the wrist. It's the soul in the machine that keeps the wheels turning.

For generations, Americans understood that a free country could function well only by producing citizens fit for freedom. It's why the public-school system was initially conceived with civic education chiefly in mind. It's why private universities, even when not bound by it, sought to adhere to the letter and spirit of the First Amendment in order to encourage open inquiry and an atmosphere of intellectual challenge. Outside of schools, Americans have (with obvious and notable exceptions) broadly understood the value of a wide latitude of opinion, of the dissenting voice, of give-and-take, of listening to the other side.

"The spirit of liberty is the spirit which is not too sure that it is right," Judge Learned Hand said in his memorable 1944 address. "The spirit of liberty is the spirit which seeks to understand the minds of other men and women; the spirit of liberty is the spirit which weighs their interests alongside its own without bias." It is the spirit of the generation that won World War II — and then raised the countries it had vanquished to become thriving democracies themselves.

Cancel culture is the enemy of this spirit. Nations that forget how to think critically — that develop intellectual climates dominated by groupthink, censoriousness, self-silencing, and the broad acceptance of politically correct lies — inevitably fail to evolve constructively.

This is obviously bad news for Americans. It should be beyond obvious why it's bad news for Jews, the world's most canceled people.

It's not just that Jews are heavily represented in professions and institutions where cancel culture has tightened its grip: academia and teaching, publishing and journalism, the tech and entertainment industries. If you are reading this essay, chances are that you or someone close to you has felt the pall, or worse, that cancel culture casts over so much of professional life.

There is also the fact that Jewish culture, as I've noted before,

"has a rich history of impishness, irreverence, skepticism, activism, and dissent." There are theological roots for this: We are the people whose founding father argued with God over Sodom and Gomorrah. There are historical roots: To be a people in exile, by its nature, is to be a nation of nonconformists. There are ethical roots: Atonement, forgiveness, and personal redemption are central to our value system. And there are ideological roots: Jews have historically been drawn to liberalism (in the broad sense of the word) because liberalism is the only concept of a political order in which differences of belief, religious or secular, are seen as an asset to a state's overall dynamism and health, rather than as a liability.

There's more. Jews prize irony and humor. Cancel culture is grimly literalist. Jews value argument for the sake of heaven. Cancel culture treats argument as heresy. Jews are interested in characters who are complex amalgams of good and bad. Cancel culture paints the story of humanity as one of faultless victims and irredeemable oppressors. Jews are drawn to liberalism because we excel when rights are equal and liberty universal. Cancel culture, inherently illiberal, substitutes equity for equality, and "safety" for freedom. Jews typically look for the good in people. Cancel culture is on a continual hunt for the bad — and will find it in an unfortunate word choice, a joke that fails to land, a friend with incorrect views, and so on.

Also notable, as mentioned before, is how closely cancel culture aligns with the anti-Israel caucus. Cancel culture is characterized by a form of vindictive aggrievement that has also typified Palestinian politics for decades. It shares other characteristics, too: the insistence on dictating terminology; the victim/oppressor binary; the refusal to countenance disagreement; the absence of introspection; the effort to eradicate its opponent. And envy. Jewish successes, whether in North America, Europe, or the Middle East, have always had a way of provoking fury among those whose animating impulse is resentment in the face of someone else's achievements. In this sense, cancel culture, though not intrinsically antisemitic, is prone to employing antisemitic tropes (for example, with its focus on the alleged "power" of the people being canceled), mimicking antisemitic patterns (relentless demonization based on wildly inflated accusations), and sometimes descending into antisemitism itself (the repeated cancellation of Israeli academics who refuse to take a public anti-Zionist pledge).

I should pause to note that there is a segment of the American Jewish community that not only accepts cancel culture as a defensible, even necessary, feature of American life, but also participates in it in the name of cleansing the broader culture. At times this is the cancel culture of the Right (the subject of David French's essay); at others, the cancel culture of the Left. This is nothing new. As Ruth Wisse observes in her masterly discussion of Isaac Babel's short story "My First Goose," Jews have often participated in political movements whose pitiless means were supposed to be justified by their lofty aims. In the long run, as Babel bitterly learned, such participation rarely goes well. We may be good at many things, but we make for lousy cultural commissars.

None of this is to say that cancel culture is the only or even the main threat to Jewish security and thriving in America. But it's absurd to suggest that simply because there are many threats, or because some of them emanate from the Right, Jews can afford to relax about this one. Cancel culture is the McCarthyism of our day, and it is shredding the fabric of liberalism, as both a political ideal and a daily practice, in ways that degrade American life and the Jewish experience within it. We need to fight it accordingly.

A few steps worth taking:

1. Jewish teaching on cancellation must be widely disseminated and understood in synagogues, day schools, and Jewish organizations. We are a people of argument, not excommunication. (Our most notorious venture with the latter, against Baruch Spinoza, was not exactly our finest moment.) We are also a people who

believe in providing avenues of repentance, not walling them off. Rabbi David Wolpe offers the theological and cultural groundwork for this teaching in his seminal essay.

2. We need to be outspoken in defending the basic rights of those facing cancellation, and compassionate to those who have been canceled. During my own close encounters with cancel culture, I was struck by the number of prominent people with large social-media followings who commiserated with me privately about the insanity of it all. But it was only a brave few who were willing to do so in public. In this issue, former Princeton professor Joshua T. Katz describes his own experience of discovering who his true friends were — or, more often, weren't — during his two-year cancellation ordeal. Jews should strive to be the true friends.

3. Many instances of cancellation involve he-said/she-said cases where the truth isn't easy to ascertain. We owe sensitivity, attentiveness, and respect to alleged victims — but not unbounded deference. We also owe the alleged wrongdoer a presumption of innocence that goes well beyond the pro forma nod to legalities. There have been too many cases of false, exaggerated, or seriously questionable accusations that have wrecked or ruined people's lives. As Jews, we should always stand against the politics, and culture, of personal destruction.

4. To oppose cancel culture, we should practice what we preach. As Samantha Harris wisely notes in her essay, that means putting up with expressions of opinion that most of us abhor: BDS petitions; anti-Zionist campus groups; speakers many of us believe lean too far to the left, or to the right. In my own speaking career, I have twice been disinvited, and both times the cancellations came from the political Right. The people who rescinded those invitations have forfeited their moral right to complain about left-wing cancel culture.

5. We have to step back from the zero-tolerance mentality that underlines cancel culture. Life is a long series of missed cues, missteps, miscommunications, misjudgments, misgivings, and dumb mistakes. There can be no learning from any of these if the default penalty for error is public shaming and professional ruin. It behooves Jews, both in our everyday and professional lives, to learn again that we can correct without harming, admonish without firing, and discipline without humiliating those who err. Jewish organizations can lead the way, with a pledge to encourage viewpoint diversity in their organizations, respect due process for those accused of wrongdoing, and refuse to bend to the demands of social-media mobs or whisper campaigns.

6. "Error of opinion may be tolerated where reason is left free to combat it." The line is from Jefferson, not Jacob, Judah, or Jeremiah. But it ought to serve as a standard for every American Jew who believes that we honor our country and our traditions best through open and vigorous conversation and argument, not speech codes and safe spaces.

Will any of this be enough to break the grip of cancel culture? Maybe not: The world has been moving in a broadly illiberal direction now for over a decade, and cancel culture is both a symptom and a cause of that trend. Then, too, as former University of Chicago president Robert Zimmer once observed, a taste for censorship and cancellation comes easier than an appreciation for freedom of expression, tolerance of objectionable views, self-scrutiny, and a forgiving spirit. Fighting cancel culture means educating people to know the value of not only their own freedom but also the freedom of others. That, too, is difficult to acquire in this civically coarse and combative age.

But none of that relieves us of the responsibility of holding up the banner of old-fashioned liberalism and even older-fashioned Judaism and Jewishness. If not us, who? ✳

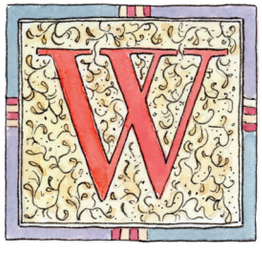
September 19, 2022

RABBI DAVID WOLPE

To Err Is Human; to Disagree, Jewish

The defects of the world, both material and the spiritual, all derive from the fact that every individual sees the aspect of existence that pleases him, and all other aspects that are baffling to him seem to deserve purging from the world. This thought leaves its imprint on individuals and groups, on generations and epochs—whatever is outside one's own is destructive and disturbing.

—Rav Kook, Orot HaKodesh 1:121



HAT IS THE QUINTESSENTIAL Jewish attitude toward controversy? Rabbi Abraham Twerski relates that, growing up in the yeshiva, his teacher would say to him, in accented English: "You right! You 100 prozent right! Now I show you where you wrong."

What kind of tradition insists both on the rightness and wrongness of the other? A tradition that, in the words of scholar Moshe Halbertal, "codifies controversy." A student of Talmud is a student of argument. On almost every page of that massive series of tomes is an argument. I remember one of my own teachers, Rabbi Ben Zion Bergman, telling us that when he grew up in the yeshiva, if you weren't paying attention and the teacher called on you, you always answered "there's a *machloket*"—a dispute—and you were always right. These were not empty or academic disagreements; alongside deeper questions, the rabbis wrestled with profound social dilemmas and urgent political issues.

We live in a time when words are called violence and differences of opinion are seen by one side as evidence of the moral degeneracy of the other. The wheel of inclusion has turned to exclusion, reminding us of the double meaning of "revolution." The revolution of exclusion is here.

The Jewish tradition powerfully addresses this dynamic. It teaches us how we can grow past and heal the cleavages rending our culture.

A story from the Talmud (Berakhot 27b, 28a): Rabban Gamliel, the patriarch (the leader of the rabbinic community), has a disagreement with Rabbi Yehoshua about whether the evening prayer is mandatory or optional. Rabban Gamliel summons Rabbi Yehoshua and not only challenges him in public, but forces him to stand during Rabban Gamliel's entire lecture, embarrassing Rabbi Yehoshua and emphasizing Rabban Gamliel's powerful position.

Rabban Gamliel had abused his authority before, quelling dissent and forcing his own views. He had mistreated other rabbis and limited the number of students who could study in the Beit Midrash, the House of Study. But the shaming of Rabbi Yehoshua is the last straw: The sages depose Rabban Gamliel from his position, elevating Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah in his place.

But the story does not end there. Rabban Gamliel apologizes to Rabbi Yehoshua—and one version says he apologies to each of the sages—for his behavior. With a less exclusionary leader in place, the sages add benches to the study hall to accommodate the many

new students who want to join. With all of these fresh perspectives, the scholars are able to resolve all of the legal debates in front of them. And seeing how many students have joined the Beit Midrash and the impact of adding so many voices to the debate, Rabban Gamliel regrets his earlier decision. He realizes that by limiting diverse perspectives, he has limited the spread of Torah.

The original dispute about the evening prayer is adjudicated through argument, and a conclusion is reached. And because he realized the errors of his ways and authentically repented and changed, Rabban Gamliel is offered a path back to social esteem. He and Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah rotate as head of the academy, thereby ensuring that no single view will dominate without challenge. Argument is vindicated as a way to achieve solutions, and a system of pluralistic leadership emerges.

What would become of Rabban Gamliel in our climate? There would be no road back. Cancellation in America is relentless. Your mistake or your crime or your sin defines you forever; it becomes the totality of who you are. We distrust regret or change. This is unfair and profoundly un-Jewish.

Another counter-narrative from the Talmud, this one even greater in its poignancy: When the great Rabbi Resh Lakish dies, his brother-in-law and intellectual sparring partner, Rabbi Yohanan, is inconsolable. The other rabbis seek to comfort Rabbi Yohanan by sending Rabbi Eliezer ben Pedat, a very fine legal mind, to engage and perhaps distract him. It does not go well.

Every time Rabbi Yohanan offers a teaching, the learned Rabbi Eliezer ben Pedat responds with "there is a *baraita* [rabbinic statement] that supports you." Finally, Rabbi Yohanan bursts out:

"Are you comparable to the son of Lakish? … [W]hen I would state a matter, he would raise twenty-four difficulties against me in an attempt to disprove my claim, and I would answer him with twenty-four answers, and the halakha by itself would become broadened and clarified" (Bava Metziah 84a).

Rather than excluding opposing views, Rabbi Yohanan seeks

The wheel of inclusion has turned to exclusion, reminding us of the double meaning of 'revolution.' The revolution of exclusion is here.

them out, since they improve his own thinking. There are few parallels in our own world of warring camps. We all know what to read, listen to, and watch to reinforce our views, rather than upset or challenge them.

Methodological pluralism — the practice of encouraging many views in an attempt to arrive at a conclusion — is central to the Jewish ethos. One justification for this is that truth is sometimes plural: While some inarguable realities exist, there are also many questions of life that are not reducible to a single perspective. In our political life, liberals blame conservatives for all of the problems of the world, and vice versa. But the Talmud rejects that binary: Rather, we learn, "both these and those are the words of the living God" (Eruvin 13b).

One cannot really understand the truth if one does not understand the arguments and views that can be urged against it. Just as we appreciate our blessings when we feel the lack of them, we sharpen our perception of truth when we are confronted by arguments that appear to contradict it. As we can see from the example of Rabban Gamliel above, openness to others, including those with whom we might vehemently disagree, is also essential for creating a robust and living culture. Totalitarian regimes strangle dissent; they produce, in Nabokov's memorable phrase about the Soviet Union, "poker-faced bullies and smiling slaves." Thriving cultures cannot draw narrow bounds to speech.

Moreover, how many statements that began as outrageous or seemingly ridiculous over time have proved to be not only true but commonplace? The person in the ancient world who said "slavery

Just as we appreciate our blessings when we feel the lack of them, we sharpen our perception of truth when we are confronted by arguments that appear to contradict it.

is wrong" would be seen as an outcast and a fool. The person in modern times who says "slavery is right" would be seen the same way. Jewish texts preserve minority opinions out of a recognition that circumstances change, and that answers to complicated questions can evolve over time. It's important to preserve elements of reasoning that might prove important in the future.

Even our most traditional ritual objects enshrine an understanding of the value of viewpoint diversity: The tefillin of the arm, we are told, has one compartment, since action must be unified to be successful, but the tefillin placed on the head has four compartments, because people's ideas will always be varied.

> *Therefore it is improper on the grounds of love of inquiry and knowledge to dismiss anything that contradicts your view… even if the words run counter to your belief or religion. One should not say to him, "Do not speak! Shut your mouth!" For otherwise the true religion would not be clarified.*
>
> —Maharal of Prague (Be'er HaGolah, Well 1:7)

How should we respond when someone promulgates a view with which we disagree, or one that we find offensive, repugnant, even dangerous? What is our approach?

First, we need to separate the view from the individual who espouses it. We can argue without attacking. Once you assault an individual instead of his opinion, or conflate an individual with his opinion ("you are an anti-Zionist"), you make it much harder to change his mind — he is even more on the defensive, even more entrenched, and his view is now his identity, not simply his opinion.

Second, we must engage. Instead of walking away, shouting down, or deriding disagreeable opinions, we must take the more difficult but more responsible course of listening and marshaling opposing arguments. Even if you think your opinion is obviously correct, arguing for it is productive and important, both to clarify your reasoning to yourself, and to expose your views to the scrutiny of others. Immediate rejection is less helpful in the long run than serious engagement.

"I'm the boss" is also not an answer. Argument from authority, including "lived experience," is never sufficient. Despite the reverence for teachers in the Jewish tradition, for example, there are limitations. The great Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin puts it this way: "A student must not accept his teacher's words if he has an objection to them. Sometimes a student will be right, just as a small piece of wood can set a large one aflame." Many teachers throughout history have refused to give their students the space to disagree, but Rabbi Hayyim realizes that to silence someone is not to answer him.

Third, we must take care to argue in the right way. How one argues is as important as the freedom to do so. The Talmud states: "Regarding two scholars who live in the same town and are not kind to one another, of them Scripture says, 'I gave them laws that were not good and ordinances by which they could not live' (Ezekiel 20:25)"(Megillah 32a). In other words, you can sour the very teaching itself if you do not present it in a way that can be heard. The rulings of the school of Hillel are preferred to those of Shammai not because they were more logical, but because Hillel and his students were "kindly and modest, studied both their own views and

those of the house of Shammai, and they quoted the words of the house of Shammai before their own" (Eruvin 13b).

Social media is the antithesis of such generosity. It might simply not be possible to use the medium for the messages we want to promote and for the arguments we want to have. People are regularly belittled, doxxed, called all sorts of names, and associated with views that are not their own, though their words can be twisted to accommodate them. We need to use such platforms as town squares, not firing ranges — more of a place where views can be civilly exchanged than a mechanism for target practice. This requires an elementary respect for the humanity of those who disagree, and the expectation that such respect will prove an ultimate good. As Talmud scholar Richard Hidary notes in *Dispute for the Sake of Heaven*, "the motivation directing attitudes of pluralism is peace, that is, communal unity through acceptance of diversity."

Social media is too powerful and ubiquitous to simply renounce. Instead we should subject it to the same rules we apply to interaction in real life: Would I say this to a person's face? Do I use the platform as a tool for connection or a channel for aggression? The medium is new and we need to learn, as a child learns socializing rules, what is permissible and what violates human decency. Attacks, snide mockery, and cruelty should be off the table.

Beyond that, a few simple rules to get us started:

- For anything controversial, argumentative, or angry, do not allow yourself to post until at least an hour has passed. "My moods don't believe one another," wrote Emerson. What seems justified in this moment can later be a cause of great regret.

- When someone is unkind or aggressive toward you, try to reach out with a soft tone. Often you will discover that the recognition that there is a person on the other end of the interaction changes it entirely. I have had this experience many times, including eliciting public apologies once I did not react angrily. (I have sometimes reacted angrily and almost uniformly regret it.)

- It is not wrong, unethical, or unwise to block people. Indecency has a cost in availability.

- There is indeed *cherem*, excommunication, a practice much more common in ancient and medieval times than it is today. However big the playing field, there has to be a line that declares one out of bounds. Judaism, like any other nation, tradition, or religion, is not without limits, and there are Talmudic precedents for removing people from the study hall (although exile was not permanent).

- As the '70s pop song put it, "I bruise you / You bruise me / We both bruise too easily." Harmlessness is a prescription for the anodyne and the inessential. Giving "offense" cannot be a reason to exclude someone, since our capacity to be offended is virtually limitless. The overwhelming Jewish ethos is that of encouraging multiple perspectives. But controversy is not synonymous with savagery; we can encourage robust argument without sanctioning insult, mockery, or cruelty.

What then happens when there is a deviation that cannot be ignored or dismissed? There are a few cases, the most egregious, where there is no way back. In general, however, Judaism knows that people transgress and has a lot to say about what to do next. Specifically, it offers a central concept too often neglected in our retributive age: *teshuva*, repentance.

Some Jews are under the mistaken impression that Judaism asks people to confess to their misdeeds once a year, on Yom Kippur. In fact, there is a confessional in each morning service. The tradition's assumption is correct not only psychologically but logically: There are more ways to get an answer wrong than to get it right, more possibilities to mess up in this world than can be avoided day in and day out. Therefore we need a constant mechanism of forgiveness.

Forgiveness is required in Judaism not only from God but from one another. The medieval scholar Eleazar ben Judah wrote that "the most beautiful thing a man can do is to forgive." It can be difficult. 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, but it is essential. Jewish law insists that once someone has been forgiven, you must never remind the person of that fact. To do so is to reestablish a hierarchy that true forgiveness disavows.

To forgive is to forswear vengeance. It is to recognize that we too are in need of forgiveness, and our venom toward the other is often less about justice than about the satisfactions of vented anger. There are things of which one should be ashamed, of course, and public disapproval is a powerful and important tool of social cohesion. But all of us are imperfect and seek compassion. A society that casts others out because they did something wrong will soon find that it has swallowed poison assuming that the other will die from it.

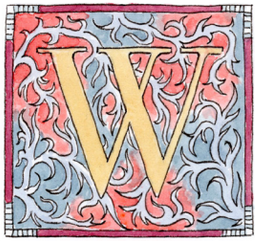
The fundamental Jewish teaching is that every human being is in the image of God. We are all deserving of respect, a word that comes from the root meaning "to look again." We deserve a second look and a second chance. Wider boundaries of condemnation and more expansive embraces of forgiveness — this is the Jewish teaching needed for our time.

Let us close by returning to the words of Rav Kook cited at the opening of this piece. How accurately he described the dilemmas of our age of cancellation: an inability to entertain one's own fallibility, a failure of humility, an excess of defensive self-justification. We throw others on the waste pile because *they* are flawed, but *we* are the avatars of what is right and true. We make no allowance for the changing of culture over time, or for the soul growth of human beings over their lives. We encase ourselves in a virtue that explains all and forgives nothing. We wield both the gavel and the axe, no matter how ugly, unproductive, and wrong.

We can and should do better. Jewish tradition, in its deep wisdom of both disagreement and forgiveness, can help. Both reason and faith should persuade us that listening and forgiving are more productive than disregarding and shaming. As the prophet says: "Have we not all one Father? Did not one God create us? Why do we break faith with one another?" (Malachi 2:10). ✳

FELICIA HERMAN

‘We’re All Just Waiting to Get Fired’



ORKING IN Jewish philanthropy affords me a 30,000-foot view of the communal landscape. I talk to a lot of people. Most are kind, generous, mission-driven Jewish communal professionals who have dedicated their careers to Jewish thriving. Many see their work on behalf of the Jewish people as I do: as a privilege and a gift.

So it’s frightening to hear the way some of the leaders I’ve been talking with have been speaking lately. Cancel culture, incivility, and illiberalism are taking a toll. Unchecked, it will lead to the loss of talented leaders just when we need them the most.

Like anything worth doing, leading Jewish institutions is not easy. It involves fundraising, board-building, figuring out ways to deliver services more effectively, making Jewish organizations great and rewarding places to work, and holding together diverse, argumentative communities while making them warm, welcoming, and inclusive. Responding to the restrictions of Covid-19 multiplied the difficulties, even as it demonstrated the passion, love, and commitment so many Jewish communal professionals have toward those they serve. As we emerge from restrictions, and institutions reopen and regroup, we’re faced with big questions about what the past couple of years have wrought and what we do next.

Given all of these challenges, how can we afford a culture that breeds stories like the ones below, all of which came from Jewish communal superstars — admired leaders of well-respected organizations, the recipients of millions of dollars of philanthropy and countless hours of leadership development and education?

- “We’re all just waiting to get fired,” one CEO said with a resigned shrug. The “we” in his sentence was, as he put it, the “normal” people in his organization and among his peers at other organizations. What they’re worried about is already happening: Employee and stakeholder complaints about behaviors, people, words, or policies they don’t like, complaints that quickly spiral out of control. Like the story that another leader told me of being accused by an employee of promulgating “white-supremacy culture” for reminding staff that they need to work regular hours — such language turns a normal work conflict into a radioactive encounter. (And it is unfortunately part of a broader assault on professionalism in the nonprofit sector that, if followed, will make it extremely difficult to run effective organizations.)

- “It’s impossible to lead right now,” another CEO told me, describing the demands from employees and core constituents that the organization issue public statements on the most controversial political issues of the moment, regardless of their divisiveness or relevance to the mission. Silence equals complicity, their argument goes, which also explains why employees at so many organizations are also constantly policing one another’s language and behavior, creating cultures where co-workers walk on eggshells rather than building

camaraderie. When the progressive magazine *The Intercept* published an exposé of the ways employees at many left-leaning organizations are derailing the missions of their organizations through accusations of racism, sexism, and the like, the article spread among Jewish social-justice leaders like wildfire. "It made me weep," one of those leaders said to me. "I felt so seen."

- Similarly: A passionately progressive CEO recounted with anguish a story of being falsely attacked as a racist in an online forum of Jewish professionals. She didn't argue back; it felt to her like a losing battle at a time of willful misinterpretation, online cruelty, and performative virtue-signaling. "It's hard to lead authentically when every mistake is magnified and ends up with you in the newspaper. You feel like a villain, even though you're not. Every day, leaders are trying to be morally courageous, but that's constantly threatened by public, external perception."

- Attacks come from the Right as well, especially around the traditional fault line of Israel. "Cancellation isn't new," one long-time Hillel director told me. "In the early days you'd get *schmeissed* [killed] for being too liberal on Israel stuff. Right-leaning donors would send spies to infiltrate conferences and meetings." Another leader who has worked in several national Jewish organizations agreed: "Israel is the key issue that causes professionals to self-censor. No one wants to be called a kapo."

- Then there are the "threatening, nasty, and vicious parents" who are "going to make our professionals quit," according to a leader in the Jewish summer-camp sector. "It's not helicoptering any more, it's bulldozing. They've lost a sense of commonality, of civility. They don't trust anyone." Anyone who has been part of a parents' Facebook or WhatsApp group for their kids' school or youth program knows precisely what he's talking about: the magnification of minor grievances and inconveniences by small groups of vocal critics who seem incapable of grace or compassion for hard-working staff—or of believing that their kids can put up with mediocre food or an uncomfortable bed.

In our desire to right old wrongs and fix imperfections both individual and structural, in our efforts to listen to victims who were long ignored, we let the pendulum swing too far.

- And, finally (believe me, I could go on), there was the colleague leading a major organization who told me that this would be, he was sure, his last job in the Jewish communal world: No one would hire a middle-aged, straight, white guy, regardless of his experience or merit. While he—and I—want the doors of opportunity open to all, how is it in our collective best interest to replace the old discrimination with a new one, against people like him? (Why do we expect that the Jewish communal professional class will reflect communal demography anyway? Is anyone complaining that 69 percent of Jewish communal professionals are women? And how can we move forward productively on these issues when even discussing questions such as "how many Jews of color are there?" gets you branded as a racist?)

Losing any of these stellar professionals would be a tragedy. But lose them we will, and many others with them, unless Jewish leaders change course and overcome what journalist Emily Yoffe has

called the "personal timorousness and collective mercilessness" that dominate our age.

What we are living through today are the unintended consequences of good intentions. A pendulum has swung in the past few years, inspired by efforts to build inclusive institutions and communities, elevate new voices, and change our definitions of unacceptable behavior, discrimination, and unethical abuses of power. But in our desire to right old wrongs and fix imperfections both individual and structural, in our efforts to listen to victims who were long ignored, we let the pendulum swing too far. We're now in the zone of grievance, hypersensitivity, self-silencing, pitilessness, and vilification.

It needs to stop. We have invested far too much time, energy, and money in individuals and institutions to continue to enable or ignore the forces making our professionals' lives so difficult. They are destroying Jewish communal value, taking leaders' minds off their critical work, and forcing their premature departures. It's time to call bullshit on oversensitivity, on public cruelty, on failing to differentiate between serious and unserious issues, on allowing baseless allegations to ruin lives, and on feeling compelled to respond to every perceived injury. It's time to go back to leading.

Giving in to cancel culture is not only un-American, it's un-Jewish. It's a dereliction of our duty as Jews and Jewish professionals to foster Jewish values, and it's shirking, as Jamie Kirchick put it in the first issue of Sapir, "our duty to be unimpressed"—to stand apart from the political and cultural and intellectual fads of the moment (especially the cruel ones). We don't need the newfangled religions of our day—fundamentalisms of the Left and the Right that substitute narratives for truth, slogans for reason, bombast for deliberation. We already have a religion—Judaism—and we need its tenets very badly right now. Jewish stories, wisdom, and history offer a treasure trove of lessons on human complexity, fallibility, diversity, debate, resilience, and the ability to repent. These must be our guideposts.

It's time to reclaim a moral high ground for our leaders and our communal ecosystem. Rabbi Mike Uram of Pardes North America talks about the need to articulate a "muscular middle" to help "take back a more pragmatic discourse" from the loud voices at the extremes. Let me offer some ideas to get us started.

Remember that everyone is created in the image of God— endowed, as Rabbi Yitz Greenberg puts it, with uniqueness, equality, and infinite value. This foundational principle of Judaism requires standing up for not only accusers, but also the accused. It means refusing to conflate allegations with guilt, issue statements before the facts are in, punish without investigation, and forbid repentance and return.

Insist on due process. We should not only refrain from issuing public statements about matters we may know little to nothing about: We should also be issuing full-throated statements in support of due process and the "innocent until proven guilty" standard. Leaders should act with restraint rather than amp up anger and hysteria. News articles are often wrong, biased, or poorly sourced, and stories spread on social media are even more so. The Torah's legal principles—the rule of law, due process, fair trials, equality under the law, and punishments that fit the crime—are the foundation of the Western legal system. We betray both Judaism and America when we issue condemnatory statements without evidence and believe allegations before they are proven.

Refuse to participate in online mobs. Knee-jerk likes and retweets, ill-considered comments, "hot takes," self-righteousness and virtue-signaling: Even were we not a people too often on the receiving end of the mob, we would know that these behaviors are profoundly wrong. As we all now know, viciousness festers online, where it is divorced from the humanity of face-to-face communication, freed

We betray both Judaism and America when we issue condemnatory statements without evidence and believe allegations before they are proven.

from the inconveniences of evidence and due process, fueled by the intoxication of publicity and virtue-signaling, and nurtured by a culture that glamorizes victimhood and powerlessness. Yet rabbis, Jewish educators, and Jewish communal leaders who should know (much) better still pile on, tossing around radioactive labels, rather than urging caution, patience, and grace. The internet in general and social media in particular have become the vascular system of the Jewish body politic through which the poisons of jealousy, oversensitivity, fame-seeking, and cruelty flow. We must refuse to participate in such behavior and stop giving credibility to those who do.

Keep our communal discourse open and embrace viewpoint diversity. As I wrote in the first issue of Sapir, I learned about "resilient listening" on an Encounter trip to the West Bank. Encountering the Palestinian narrative first-hand — one that viewed history, current events, and cause-and-effect very differently than I do — taught me that I was capable of listening to opinions with which I disagreed, even those I considered repugnant and dangerous. We need a community that lives by this principle, that welcomes many views, that refuses to call words violence, that encourages openness and civil discourse. We need full-throated exhortations to replace judgment with curiosity, as feminist psychologist Carol Gilligan puts it. We need to be continually opening, and changing, our minds.

Embrace a mentality of service. When the Jewish Communal Service Association renamed itself the JPro Network in 2014, it did so to emphasize good things, such as the increased professionalism of the field and the power of being networked. Yet something was also lost. I studied at Wellesley College, whose motto, *Non Ministrari sed Ministrare* — not to be ministered unto but to minister — took me a while to understand. As a young feminist, I thought: Haven't women done enough ministering? Shouldn't someone be ministering to *us*? It wasn't until I became a Jewish communal professional that I grasped what service meant. The work is not about *me* — it's about the Jewish people. My work is *in service* to the Jewish people, past, present, and future. It's not a job; it's a calling, a purpose, a mission. We must care for ourselves and our employees. But we cannot forget the higher purpose.

This calls for leadership, which includes standing up for organizational needs and not caving to every employee's demands. As Netflix's new employee-culture guidelines say, employees might need to work on things they "perceive to be harmful." If this is too hard, "Netflix may not be the best place for you." In other words, you're entitled to your view — but the company isn't going to change to suit you. When it comes to the current ubiquitous challenge of bringing employees back in person, the same rule applies. If leaders determine that their institutions work best in person, they need to respond as the CEO of United Wholesale Mortgage did to employees who pushed back: "They can work from home, they just can't work at our company from home. There's no hard feelings. It just means they weren't a great fit." We need to put the excellent functioning of our institutions first.

Listen to activists — in their proper context. Activists and their organizations play an important role in the ecosystem, but they need to be recognized for what they are: one set of voices, often ideological, revolutionary, and even utopian. They rarely represent the majority, and they're not always right. A CEO called me recently

seeking advice on creating a policy for vetting board members. One of his board members was in the middle of a mini scandal, and many people had recommended he seek the guidance of an activist organization. He did so, but they suggested policies he felt went far beyond what was necessary, and that his leadership would reject. My suggestion that he just hire a lawyer specializing in nonprofit governance to draft a policy took him by surprise: "Right — I totally forgot I could do that!" Being a leader means establishing and moving forward with a realistic, balanced approach that takes many stakeholders into account, regardless of external pressure.

Reject the narrative that our institutions are systemically broken. Calls to right particular wrongs and specific examples of truly bad behavior have morphed into a discourse that asserts that Jewish institutions are "unsafe" hotbeds of sexist, racist, homophobic, and ableist discrimination. This is ridiculous. Of course our institutions aren't perfect, but neither are they horrific. Jewish communal organizations and the people who work in them tend to be pretty liberal, politically and culturally, reflecting the dispositions of most American Jews, and they're animated by a desire to help people who are suffering. Such fervently good intentions can sometimes bleed into utopianism. "There's just an expectation that things have to be perfect all the time," a CEO told me. "But there's no such thing as perfect moral clarity." We've mistaken the aberrations for the whole, and we've made it impossible to celebrate our institutions and the people who lead them.

Reinforce messages of resilience. Our mission — sustaining the Jewish people, caring for the vulnerable, building thriving communities of meaning — requires a resilient, dedicated, engaged, and passionate communal workforce, not one that reifies a discourse of exhaustion. We should listen to and have compassion for the struggles professionals are experiencing. But we must also remind them that work carries responsibility. Institutions have needs, and they're not always compatible with those of employees. The Jewish people has needs, too: excellent, creative, and effective institutions. "Quiet quitting" — where employees, psychologically disengaged from their job, do the bare minimum — has no place in Jewish communal life. It is a betrayal of those the organization serves, the donors who fund its work, and the employers and fellow employees who trust and depend on their colleagues.

So many of the Jewish leaders I know speak with passion and deep emotion when they describe why they became Jewish communal professionals to begin with. "People are hungering for what we have — we get to wrestle with the mission of the Jewish people in the world, and to be in that debate," one said to me. Another said: "It's a privilege to be able to put your heart and soul into something that matters. I don't think it's so hard — sometimes the pay is lower, sometimes the behavior is worse. But if I were at a law firm, I'd have partners yelling at me, or I'd have to drop everything for a client or work all weekend long. There are tradeoffs everywhere, and I'd take the blessings of working on behalf of the Jewish people any day."

The ways Jewish communal organizations and funders pulled together in response to the pandemic is a shining example of the best that Jewish communal professionals can do. We should be shouting it from the rooftops. Jews are, fundamentally, a culture and a civilization of resilience, adaptation, and flexibility. We have endless examples of this to bring to bear.

The Jewish people will go on. But it's up to all of us to determine what that looks like. We have the power, the will, the strength, and the heart to infuse our communal institutions with honesty, authenticity, diversity of all kinds, respect, courage, excellence, and joy. So let's just do it. ✳

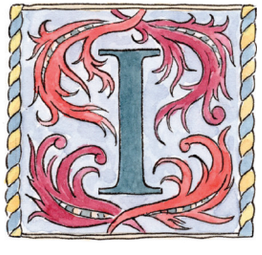
PART TWO

CULTURE VS. CANCEL CULTURE

EDWARD ROTHSTEIN

How We Got Here: An Intellectual Journey

You shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.
—Deuteronomy 25:19



N OUR ERA of cancellations and topplings, censorious declarations and virtue signaling, recantations and exorcisms, it's almost possible to feel nostalgic for the days when PoMo reigned supreme.

PoMo? Yes, or more formally, postmodernism—a set of suppositions about the world that once inspired the academic priesthood and shaped the cultural landscape. In its early phase, postmodernism rode in on the iconoclasm of the 1960s, rejecting reason as the fundamental arbiter of matters great and small. For PoMo, truth is an illusion; it is merely a form of opinion. "Objectivity," for PoMo, is a prejudice. "Truth," for PoMo, is a sociological phenomenon. The literary scholar Stanley Fish compared the establishment of scientific truth to a game of baseball: The outcome is determined by the game's rules. The spirit of postmodernism allowed no absolutes, no transcendent principles, no moral compasses, except for one: that there were no absolutes, transcendent principles, or moral compasses.

In the arts, postmodernism combined camp and comedy and irony and playfulness and even a bit of nihilism, creating an attitude of knowing negativity. In 1971, when Philip Roth first visited Czechoslovakia—then under Soviet domination—he was struck by how different that literary world was from his own. He noted, "I work in a society where as a writer everything goes and nothing matters," while for a Czech writer, "nothing goes and everything matters." Everything goes and nothing matters: Such was postmodernism, the spirit of the late-20th century.

PoMo didn't lose ground until the 9/11 attacks and their aftermath made its arguments seem somewhat quaint. Today, they seem almost grotesquely dated. No overarching standards? Nonsense! Race and gender are so fundamental that they govern cultural and political debates and guide the drumbeats of the media. No hierarchy of values? Ridiculous! Now, if you violate any of the fundamental principles of Woke religion, you are subject to a ceremonial exorcism requiring formulaic apologies and professional exile.

So absolute are Woke truths that they are projected back into history. Narratives and monuments must measure up to contemporary assessments: Educational curricula are upended, just as statues are toppled. Why bother reading Jefferson or Madison, who held slaves even as they posed as advocates of liberty? Why bother with any texts derived from an un-Woken world? That includes the works of Shakespeare (the author Geraldine Brooks recently attested that half her students at Harvard had never read a single play by the Bard). The King James Bible, too, has been stripped of the position it once had as a foundational text of English culture. Even in science and medicine, in which ideas can have mortal consequences, professional training is increasingly being guided by highly paid Woke consultants, who want to make sure not only that these professions "look like America" in distributions of race and gender, but that their practices are molded to fit Woke principles as well.

During the decades of postmodernism, I was active as a daily music critic and then as a broader-based culture critic for the *New York Times*. One thread that ran through my experience of thousands of concerts, opera performances, books, and museum exhibitions was how deeply postmodernism was entrenched in our culture — almost to the point of invisibility. Again and again, I would tease out the themes or attitudes governing these cultural activities, and I would suggest that a reconsideration was necessary in order to reconstitute a more coherent — and enduring — set of values and principles, ideals and ideas. In my criticism, I even endorsed a kind of Platonism, the backbone of my book *Emblems of Mind: The Inner Life of Music and Mathematics*: Human understanding is doomed to be inherently flawed, but there are truths to be found, which we devote ourselves to approaching over time.

Be careful what you wish for, I suppose: A rejection of PoMo's relativism and a return to an absolute seems to be precisely what happened — just not in the way I had envisaged.

How has such an inversion in the way we think about the world taken place, and with such rapidity and fervor? A close look at PoMo's approach may help illuminate the change and may even reveal some cracks in the new orthodoxies.

The first necessity is to consider PoMo's close cousin "postcolonial studies" — or PoCo as it has been casually dubbed. It is closely related to PoMo, which for all its relativism had a sharp polemical edge in its unwavering attacks on universality and objectivity. Postcolonial studies headed in a similar direction in its analysis of postcolonial cultures. Societies that had been colonized by European powers, in this view, were not just burdened by misuse of power; they were also burdened by Western claims of "superiority" and "universality." One definition put it this way: ''Postcolonialism is regarded as the need, in nations or groups which have been

In the effort — as the definition put it — to 'achieve an identity uncontaminated by universalist or Eurocentric concepts and images,' much is being exorcised: Enlightenment ideas; systems of governance; scientific inquiry; indeed, much of modernity itself.

victims of imperialism, to achieve an identity uncontaminated by universalist or Eurocentric concepts and images." The conclusions are stark: No culture could claim an objectively truthful vision of the world. And no culture could claim superiority because none had the "right" or even the ability to judge another. Cultural values are relative. There is no hierarchy. In this way, PoMo and PoCo shared fundamental ideas.

Those ideas included an ardent opposition: a rejection of the values championed by the Western Enlightenment. Enlightenment attitudes, which began to take shape in the 17th century, lay at the heart of modern Western science and philosophy, and they transformed Western societies. The Enlightenment led to the Industrial Revolution, advances in medicine, ideals of democratic governance, evolutionary theory, and exploration of lands as yet unknown to the West. But it also led to imperialism, which for PoCo and PoMo and some historians on the Left was nothing less than the West's Original Sin. So lasting have been its effects, that the 9/11 attacks were often seen as blowback; advocates of PoCo could barely bring themselves to condemn acts of terror without a loud "but" that went so far as to excuse them as "chickens coming home to roost."

Imperialism amplified the overall indictment: Enlightenment

ideas not only "contaminated" other cultures, they helped make imperialism possible, inventing the tools of conquest and expanding Western demand for natural resources. And because imperial conquests were of regions whose peoples were unknown in the West, they were often accompanied by racism, with its assertions of cultural and biological superiority.

PoCo thus established an identification between Western ideals and racism. The West, in addition to its other sins, is considered "systemically racist," as is now being asserted. In response, race is not eliminated; it is elevated. But in the effort — as the definition put it — to "achieve an identity uncontaminated by universalist or Eurocentric concepts and images," much is being exorcised: Enlightenment ideas; systems of governance; scientific inquiry; indeed, much of modernity itself.

Yoke these ideas to the PoMo notions that "objective" measures of competence are by definition suspect, as are ideas of "merit." And lo, we have entered the world of Wokeness, the heir to PoMo and PoCo.

Can we call it Woko?

So Woko ideology is not a reversal of PoMo relativism. It is a fulfillment of it.

On the surface, the Woko enterprise has a sympathetic cast, partly because in the United States the crux of Woko is slavery. There is no need here to reiterate American slavery's horrors and injustices, its grotesqueries and legacies. And there is much to be said for the ways in which it is addressed, memorialized, and analyzed. But, as filtered through Woko ideology, something peculiar has happened: Slavery is treated as the defining characteristic of Western societies in general and the United States in particular. Its creation is even deemed to be a product of Enlightenment ideals. How? Well, it reduces human beings to tradeable chattel, reflecting the exploitative economy supposedly shaped by Western rationality. And it asserts a racial and biological inferiority, a ranking based on supposedly "objective" criteria. Woko treats slavery as if it revealed the true essence of the Enlightenment, and it points for evidence to many of America's Founding Fathers, who argued for freedom and equality while holding slaves.

This denunciation of slavery, righteous and sweeping, would seem to be Woko's most potent polemical example. The problem is that, like almost everything else denounced during these decades of PoMo, PoCo, and Woko, history is being seen only through the eyes of the recent past. Slavery, far from being a defining characteristic of the West, has been an attribute of every known society. It was a consequence of warfare, trade, conquest, and tribal and racial enmities in every culture, race, geography, and time. Its horrors are as close to a universal aspect of human societies as can be imagined. The distinctive aspect of Western cultures within the past two centuries is not the continuation of slavery, but the *abolition* of slavery.

Abolition as a successful movement is distinctively Western. The elimination of slavery in the West — accomplished after great struggle and cost and trauma and outrage — is one of our civilization's greatest achievements. And why did it happen here? Because Enlightenment notions of transcendent human equality and universal law helped turn abolition into a necessity. The same values that are under mistaken attack for creating slavery are the ones that made it possible to eliminate it.

This achievement is related to one of the great *scientific* insights of the West: The same principles that govern, say, an apple falling from a tree also govern the orbits of the Moon around the Earth and the Earth around the Sun, and affect the interactions of whirling galaxies. The universe is not divided into different realms; it is a single cosmos, operating according to laws that can be discovered.

The great *human* insight of the West was that the same is true for people: Each differs from the others in important ways, but there is a universal substratum, a human essence perhaps, that allows us to begin to understand others. It was an insight that dovetailed

By rejecting the Western Enlightenment, Woko supplants a vision of humankind with a vision of identity. If there is no universal, and if every culture has equivalent claims, what we have are not human societies in which our varied experiences come into play but assemblages of jostling identities.

with the idealism of Western religions. Paradoxically, even those centuries of imperial conquest and exploration helped, by revealing vastly different societies and shaping new understandings of human diversity. This is also why anthropology — the study of other cultures and societies — developed in the West. The abolition of slavery was a consequence of these insights, applied for the first time across cultures and races and boundaries.

This is a triumph of the Western imagination. We learn to comprehend those who appear different from us by imagining how they, too, perceive the world. This was one reason, beginning in the 18th century, that the novel became a powerful new form of literature in which privileged access is seemingly given to the inner lives of characters.

But with the intellectual and cultural relativism of PoMo and PoCo and the narrow visions of Woko, not even this is possible. If no cross-cultural evaluation is legitimate, neither are claims to comprehend the inner lives of others. As a result, for several generations, readers have been taught that they should be reading about themselves, not others. Hence comes the cry of wanting to see or read about "people who look like me," as if there were essential ethnic and racial differences that divide our perceptions and control our imaginations. While there are, surely, aspects of experience that have not been broadly captured in fiction or portrayed on film, that is always changing as the histories of these forms demonstrate. What is different now is this obsessive insistence that what is essential for the novel is not an act of imagination, but an act of racial perception.

Someone who looks like me: By rejecting the Western Enlightenment, Woko supplants a vision of humankind with a vision of identity. If there is no universal, and if every culture has equivalent claims, what we have are not human societies in which our varied experiences come into play but assemblages of jostling identities. Identity is the source of true allegiance. It cannot be challenged. It is an atom: Irreducible and unchangeable by outsiders, every atom claims equality even if all it really knows is itself. The result is a society of conflicting or cohabiting atoms. Identities find common ground not by reason — not by trying to understand the "other" and engaging in conversation and argument based on shared ground — but only in their resentments, their intersectional overlaps. That is why there is such a strange uniformity in the middle of identity politics; every identity is different, but as far as Woko is concerned, they all see the world the same way, bearing the same resentments and struggling against the same oppressive forces.

What kind of historical understanding could possibly emerge out of this vision? Only one that traces contemporary priorities back through time — an act of ahistorical reduction, judging the past by the standards of the present. Cancel the very idea of "universal history." The only common ground in Woko culture is agreement on what must be opposed: the contamination created by the West. History becomes identity politics cast backward through time. Woko's vision of a world freed from the West, the Enlightenment, and the complexities of history is really anti-modern, or rather, ante-modern — a world of prehistoric tribal allegiances.

Given all of this, how could cancellation be avoided?

If you deny or question, that is seen as an attack on another's identity, which is supposed to be permanently protected. Criticism is taken personally because that is the nature of identity: The political is the personal. Any challenge is necessarily a travesty because you are asserting some "higher" perspective that transcends identity's claims. That is an existential threat to Woko. And it is treated accordingly.

And now, consider the Jews. Why? Because here is an identity that has weathered the millennia by developing a very different perspective on history and memory. In a Woko world of atomistic identities, surely we should find some archetypal characteristics here. Among Jews there are often regional physical resemblances that have remained stable over centuries. Male Jews have been given an indelible mark of their distinction for millennia. The identity has been maintained during extensive interactions with other civilizations and cultures. And if accompanied by religious observance, it affects every aspect of life. Moreover, as in identities celebrated by Woko, those who embrace this identity have also been singled out over centuries for hostility, massacre, and sometimes enslavement.

No surprise too that, as for any group that makes distinctions between "us" and "not-us," there are episodes of cancellation. In Judaism, cancellation is more like exile from a local community, not a verdict on one's eternal soul. There have also been degrees of cancellation, ranging from a one-day exile to the more complete *cherem*. Famous historical examples include the *cherem* meted out to Baruch Spinoza for "heresies" by the Jewish community of Amsterdam and the 1918 *cherem* reportedly enacted by the Rabbinical Council of Odessa against Leon Trotsky and other Jewish Bolsheviks.

The punishment is rarely and reluctantly used and now seems more symbolic than substantive. Nevertheless, given these commonalities with Woko identities, and given that Jewish identity is the longest-lasting historical example, you might think that Jewish identity would provoke a certain amount of interest in Woko circles. Yet Jews are not only irrelevant to Woko, they are generally written out of consideration. Usually, they are subsumed in the "whiteness" attributed to Western oppressors and colonizers. Sometimes — worse — through their support of Israel, they are deemed to be prime examples of the West's Original Sin, creating a stubborn outpost of Western colonialism (which indicates how readily PoCo and Woko are prepared to distort history in asserting their principles). Many contemporary Jews proclaim adherence to such beliefs, even though this does nothing to limit the ways in which Jewish identity can be excluded — at times, to the point of virulent hostility.

One reason, perhaps, may be that Jewish identity also creates a challenge to Woko identity. Consider one manifestation of Woko identity construction. In recent decades, several "identity museums" have opened, devoted to the histories of such groups as Asian Americans, Arab Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Native Americans. To an astonishing extent, these museums tell similar stories, as they recount a history in which oppression is suffered and redemption ultimately attained. The oppression comes from American racism. The redemption comes from the establishment of a proud, politically powerful identity.

This uniformity is bizarre, even within each example. Asian Americans have ancestors from countries as different as Korea, Japan, and China, which have long histories of mutual hatred and warfare. Asian-American identity is a recent creation, based entirely on the belief that the American experience of all these groups is uniform because of racism. Something similar can be said about the Hispanic-American identity: Varied and conflicting backgrounds are put aside for the sake of positing a single political group sharing a common grievance. Even an identity such as "Native American" subsumes vastly different tribes and nations under a single rubric, which is why it is almost impossible now to

find histories of Native Americans that allude to anything other than American oppression, let alone accounts of internecine wars or regional conquests or contrasting beliefs. Today, the notion of "People of Color" is an even more extreme example of a Woko identity that has no substance beyond polemics, so many groups does it gather into one bitter embrace.

These examples of surface identity are joined by one more profound example in the Woko playbook: black American identity. Here the polemical outline of oppression and the importance of identity formation to liberation are far clearer. Black American history incorporates slavery and Jim Crow, complex interactions with American life, and extraordinary influences upon it. But Woko ends up distilling even this complex identity to its narrowest terms, seeing it almost monochromatically as proof of the West's "systemic racism." Woko then uses a simplified black American identity as the model for all other Woko identities, rather than treating it as something distinctive, deserving its own careful interpretation.

But to all of these identities and the purposes to which they are put by Woko, the example of the Jews offers a profound systemic challenge. Jewish identity is not created in reaction to the Other or because of a shared fate in encountering the Other. It is based on a set of ideas and beliefs and obligations originating in the Hebrew Bible and the commentaries on it, including a commitment to the land from which the Jews were once exiled, but to which they began to return in numbers beginning in the late-19th century. There is really a different form of memory at work here — and a different kind of self-definition.

This makes it almost inevitable that the Jewish identity would be rejected by Woko. But what about the identity-forming powers of hatred? Over the millennia, hasn't the experience of antisemitism tended to strengthen bonds among Jews? And doesn't antisemitism

Jewish identity is not created in reaction to the Other or because of a shared fate in encountering the Other. It is based on a set of ideas and beliefs and obligations originating in the Hebrew Bible and the commentaries on it.

conform to Woko notions of systemic racism? Jewish texts recount efforts to destroy Jews, again and again. Every Passover, Jews are instructed to recall what Pharaoh did in enslaving the Israelites, and how the people were then led to freedom. In many ways, the Exodus tale provides the narrative model for today's identity museums.

The point of the Passover story, though, is quite different. The emphasis is not on the suffering endured. Nor is the end a celebration of the politics of identity. The emphasis is on a process of redemption, which is far from simple and actually imposes obligations on the people. Throughout the Hebrew Bible, Israelite autonomy is always unsteady, troubled, contested — an apt prefiguring of the disagreement and discussion that later characterized Rabbinic Judaism. Throughout the history of the Jews, we find bouts of self-criticism and self-scrutiny, revision and reconsideration, all given context by conviction and remembrance. This spirit leads, in fact, to the Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment, when Jewish identity and Western identity begin to intertwine.

By contrast, Woko's narratives of oppression and redemption insist that, redemptive though the assertion of an identity might be, the oppression is the real focus, for it is the oppression that creates the identity, and no end to oppression is in sight. Woko does not primarily concern itself with the redemptive element. Instead,

it resents, attacks, blames, and demands. It overturns, erases, and supplants. We have seen this in recent years as Confederate statues have toppled. Other removals have come about because the objects are interpreted as insensitive or racist — such as the statue of Theodore Roosevelt that once stood in front of the American Museum of Natural History in New York, which portrays the conservationist, explorer, and American president on horseback flanked by a Native American and an African tribesman. They guide him forward — figures that were, in the context of the larger surrounding memorial at the museum, originally designed as allegorical representations of two continents. Under Woko guidance they were treated instead as demeaning racial caricatures that had to be erased and forgotten, as should the figure on horseback.

Could things be any different? Perhaps. The first "nation" that the Israelites came in contact with after the exodus from Egypt was Amalek, a nation that immediately attacked the Israelites without provocation, targeting the feeblest among them. Its enmity recurs in the Hebrew Bible, and the extent of its hatred is indeed biblical in scale. In Deuteronomy, the command is to "blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven" — a curse often invoked by Jews when thinking of their most ruthless enemies.

Yet what a peculiar curse it is, because if it were really carried out, no references to Amalek would exist. It would be erased — canceled. The command to blot out is really a command to remember. Thus, Amalek endures the same fate as the villainous Haman (identified as a descendant of Amalek) during the reading of the Megillah scroll for the Jewish holiday of Purim: Noisemakers are used to drown out his name and blot it from the mind. But that makes listeners seek all the more intently for the sound of the name.

In this way, history is not torn up or rewritten. It always shows what is supposedly blotted out. It is impossible to remold the past in the image of the present. History is a domain of wrestling and imperfection in which utopia is promised but not attained. We see, too, that conflict is inevitable, that people and cultures will challenge one another, but there can be no retreat into relativism. There are distinctions to be made, obligations to assess, and restrictions to be accepted.

The Jewish example suggests that the defining of an identity is not a matter of political expediency. It is a historical project. We come to understand our own identity through self-reflection and study, including by reading about people who don't look like us or think like us.

As for corporations, museums, universities, elementary schools, politicians, media outlets, and community organizations that now swear fealty to a set of banal ahistorical distortions inherited from PoMo, PoCo, and Woko, they are doing a disservice to the very civilization that has made them all possible. It is a civilization that made slavery unthinkable and that offers more liberty and opportunity than any society in human history. We are privileged to live within it. ✳

JOSHUA T. KATZ

The Culture of the Canceled

On Monday, May 23, 2022, I went to bed around 11 p.m. and slept more soundly than I had in nearly two years. My easy rest may seem surprising. That day, Princeton University had fired me, a decision I learned in the late afternoon when a reporter for the *New York Times* called my wife to ask for comment. (In a move that was either inept or malicious, Princeton had sent the official letter of dismissal to someone else's email address. I never received an apology.) I then spent the evening juggling calls, meeting with a senior who was graduating the next day and his father, and writing a piece for the *Wall Street Journal*.

But, yes, I slept well. Finally I was well and truly canceled — free of the institution to which I had given my entire professional life, but most of whose administrators, rank-and-file employees, students, and alumni had turned on me from one day to the next in July 2020. I was done with them, and now they had announced, unambiguously, that they were done with me. It was a relief.

Don't misunderstand me: Cancellation is awful. I wouldn't wish on anyone the psychological, professional, and financial consequences of losing your friends, livelihood, and trust in the operations of the universe. Here are some ways in which my life changed, just like that, over two years ago. Colleagues who used to laugh with me every day no longer acknowledged my existence. Students who had previously asked for my attention around the clock removed me from the acknowledgments of their work. Professors across the country issued calls for right-minded people to stop citing my publications and for academic journals and presses to refuse to publish anything I might write, effectively obliterating my career. Is it a surprise that I had trouble sleeping when the husband of a psychologist I had been encouraged to see took to social media to denounce me?

The awfulness, of course, is the point.

Visibly ruining the life of one person pretty much guarantees that hundreds more will be reluctant to stick their head above the parapet. Among the braver cowards are those who wrote that they supported me but could not say so publicly because, alas, that might place them next in line for execution.

So how, then, to encourage people to speak up? I'm here to tell you that being canceled isn't *all* bad. Indeed, some of what happened to me is really quite good. Every situation is different, and I make no promises. But if what befell me were to befall you, I like to imagine that happiness would overtake the inevitable grief.

What is the greatest gift of cancellation? The answer is something my friend and adviser Professor Robert George has repeated to me many times these past years: The canceled are blessed with the knowledge of who their friends are. I used to believe I had lots of friends, plus lots of friendly acquaintances. I was wrong, and learning the truth was a huge blow. But over the past two years I have gained more friends than I lost — and these are real friends.

We do all the things together that friends do, including lifting one another's spirits when there are setbacks and, like normal people, revealing our disagreements and disappointments openly rather than knifing each other in the back.

It's not only that my new friends are numerous. They are also racially, ethnically, religiously, politically, socioeconomically, and ideologically diverse. They don't all live in the 08540 zip code. And, thank God, they are not all academics. They are schoolteachers and interior designers, psychiatrists and priests, guitarists and journalists, and stay-at-home parents.

I used to view the elite echelon of the academy as the pinnacle of culture. Recent years, however, have seen universities, museums, concert halls, publishing houses, newspapers, magazines, and other once-great cultural institutions expend significant resources amplifying and enforcing what is wrongly called "cancel culture"—wrongly because, whatever this revolting phenomenon is, it is not culture. It should not have taken me so long to realize that, in many cases, I find the greatest pleasure in the company of men and women who lack fancy credentials but who know perfectly well what culture is and value it.

Let me tell you about canceled culture—the culture of the canceled, I mean. We have culture in spades but do not share *a* culture, aside from the culture of believing in both the desirability of individual freedoms and the necessity of maintaining a civil society. Some of my friends voted in 2020 for Biden, others for Trump, still others for Jo Jorgensen, and at least two for Ben Sasse. As we talk and argue and tell jokes and poke fun at one another for our divergent tastes in art, music, and books, some are in T-shirts, others in ties. We get together without fear: without fear that our unscripted remarks are being recorded for use against us; without fear that we might be accused, for no good reason, of one or another -ism or -phobia; without fear of association. We have self-respect, we enjoy one another's company, and we revel in our different affinities.

In short, we are free. It's a wonderful feeling.

If what befell me were to befall you,
I like to imagine that happiness would
overtake the inevitable grief.

Now, you may be thinking that while I have been very fortunate, you, if canceled, would not be so lucky. I am convinced that you would be, though a few years ago, I could indeed not have said this with confidence. An early victim of cancellation was Mike Adams, a professor of criminology at the University of North Carolina Wilmington, who shot and killed himself in July 2020. I did not know Adams. But the beautiful and honest tributes to his life make me wish he had been able to hang on a bit longer.

Because things have changed. Nowadays, thanks to the depressing urgency of the problem, those of us who have been canceled have instituted a culture of care. We do our best to look after one another. Make a list of the people who have gotten into trouble in recent years. I'll help you out by naming four: liberal philosopher Peter Boghossian, centrist journalist Bari Weiss, conservative geophysicist Dorian Abbot, and libertarian legal scholar Ilya Shapiro.

Before July 2020, I didn't know any of them. Now they are friends, people who have helped me and whom I, in turn, hope and believe I have helped. If you get into trouble, these people and many others on that ever-growing list will help you. More to the point, *I* will help you. I mean this seriously: Get in touch with me, and I'll do what I can.

Did I just engage in name-dropping? Yes, but it wasn't gratuitous. My point is that the canceled are generous. We know all too well what the experience is like. We are acquainted with lawyers,

therapists, sensible pundits, people with the financial means to offer support, and the leaders of national and international free-speech organizations. (I am proud that Professor George and I cooked up the initial plans for the Academic Freedom Alliance in my backyard — in the spring of 2020, a couple of months before all hell broke loose in American society.) And we are creating both formal and informal networks of people who can help, even if it's only to send the occasional encouraging email or lend a sympathetic ear. Most of these people are not household names, but they have offered immense assistance to me and, I know, to so many others. They have my gratitude for life.

There are also professional benefits to being canceled. I won't lie: It's painful to lose a prestigious position at Princeton. But I have landed on my feet. The American Enterprise Institute, where I now work, might be called the Princeton of think tanks.

Again, you may be thinking that you would not be so fortunate if you were canceled. Put your mind at rest: The networks I have just described would help you find a new job, as they helped me and as they have helped others I know, across a range of professions.

And, scary as it is, there's something to be said for a change in career — especially, perhaps, for someone who lived his life, as I did, in an academic bubble. I was a single-minded denizen of the ivory tower for so long, and believed in the enterprise so strongly, that I was blind until too late to just how low higher education had sunk. Be that as it may, while I don't think I was growing stale as a classicist and linguist at Princeton, it is also the case that, after nearly a quarter of a century in the same place, I did sometimes go on autopilot. Now there's a lot of excitement to look forward to. It's not just the same old same old.

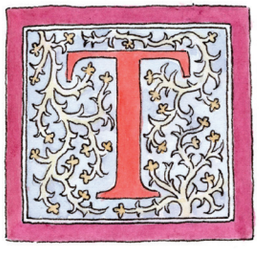
I have a platform now, and a large number of new opportunities. If my life hadn't changed, I wouldn't be writing for Sapir, wouldn't be the scholar-in-residence at the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, and probably wouldn't be involved with the nascent University of Austin. Living well really is the best revenge.

In the 2020–21 academic year, the University of Colorado Boulder hosted a topical lecture series: "The Canceled." Mine was the kickoff talk. The title: "Cancellation and Its Discontents." The next month, I gave a similar Zoom talk, "How to Lose Friends and Influence People," to the William F. Buckley, Jr. Program at Yale. Thereafter, on the advice of lawyers, I was mostly quiet for a long time. But now that I have a new life, it is time to be vocal again. For the first time in years, I feel free to say out loud — with responsible candor — what I believe. If some are celebrated for speaking their truths, the least the rest of us should be allowed to do is speak our opinions without fear of reprisal.

Speak your mind in good faith. You will discover that the vast majority of people are not the crazies who have succeeded with frightening rapidity in taking a wrecking ball to our cultural institutions and turning the mainstream media and big businesses into ridiculous echo chambers. You will gain friends as you influence people. You will discover that there is contentment in being canceled. And you will also find that those who cancel others are doomed to discontentment: Building is more satisfying than destruction, and, anyway, these very unkindly inquisitors (apologies to Jonathan Rauch) must live in fear that the mob will come for them as well. History will not look fondly on the cancelers. But it will be kind to you — as will the new friends you make in your happier and more fulfilling post-canceled life. ✳

SAUL ROSENBERG

My N-word Problem—and Ours



THERE WAS A FUSS earlier this year at Milton Academy, an elite Massachusetts boarding school. In a talk about free speech, Harvey Silverglate, co-founder of the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, mentioned Randall Kennedy's *N——: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word*, published in 2002 and reissued this year on its 20th anniversary with a new introduction. The dashes are mine: Silverglate spoke the full title of the book aloud.

According to an article in *Quillette* by Silverglate and Kennedy himself, who is black and who clearly wanted to signal that he stood by Silverglate's choice, Silverglate intended to note that if you aren't willing to use the N-word in full, you will "have to leave gaps in the writings and performances of, among others, James Baldwin, Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Toni Morrison, Eudora Welty, Mark Twain, Richard Pryor, and Lenny Bruce."

Before he could say so, however, "a substantial part of the audience walked out" in protest at a white person's use of the N-word. The student group that had invited Silverglate emailed the whole school to express how shocking and unacceptable Silverglate's use of the word was. David Ball, head of Milton's upper school, made no reply to two emails from Silverglate asking to explain Silverglate's position in a school-wide email.

Kennedy's book should be required reading for every American—and, as I shall explain at the end, every American Jew. He emphasizes in his new introduction that "certain efforts to expunge *n*—— have gone awry, lost perspective, abandoned essential norms of freedom of thought and expression, and degenerated into petty tyranny" (again the dashes are mine, not Kennedy's).

But what particularly caught my attention was Silverglate's point that the reluctance to use the N-word leads to gaps in the works of many famous American writers, political figures, and performers. Whatever your position on the matter, we should be clear that making the N-word verboten doesn't just result in leaving gaps. Changing the words of serious writers obviously creates gaps. The problem is that you sometimes can't understand their work at all without the N-word.

Take the example of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* and William Faulkner's *Absalom! Absalom!* Ernest Hemingway once said that "All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*." And *Absalom! Absalom!* is widely regarded as the greatest novel of America's greatest writer. You don't have to agree with these judgments to recognize that both are towering achievements; that their authors, both Southerners, thought the white South destroyed itself by establishing and seeking to defend slavery; and, crucially, that you cannot actually understand these books if you strip them of their most vile racial slur.

Huckleberry Finn, as even many Americans who have not read it know, is about Huck's trip on a makeshift raft down the Mississippi with "N—— Jim," a slave. Jim is on the run because he has discovered that his owner plans to "sell him down the river" to the murderous cotton plantations of the Deep South. Their trip is famously not just a physical one: Among other things, *Huckleberry Finn* is about Huck's inner journey from thinking of Jim as property to thinking of him as fully human.

About a third of the way through the novel, on one of Huck's forays onto land, Tom Sawyer's Aunt Sally asks Huck about a steamboat accident: "Was anybody hurt?" He answers, "No'm. Killed a n——," to which she responds, "Well, it's lucky; because sometimes people do get hurt."

The exchange comes and goes in a moment. But Twain is signaling that, in the "civilized" white society from which Huck has not yet escaped, for a "n——" to die is for nobody to get hurt. Just, presumably, for something to get damaged. It is only on their primitive raft — the irony is clearly a conscious one on Twain's part — that Jim, exhibiting a dignity greater than that of any other character in the book, can chastise Huck for shabby behavior and that Huck, ashamed, can humble himself to him. It is an unimaginable scene in the psychic economy of the "civilized" antebellum white South, and by far the most moving episode in the book.

If, however, we sanitize this scene — "Was anybody hurt?" "No'm. Killed a black man" — the educational journey of Huck Finn becomes one of developing from thinking of Jim as a man to … thinking of Jim as a man: that is, no journey at all. Twain understood that slavery could have been remedied only by recognition of the full humanity of black Americans by the white Americans who had enslaved them. He uses America's most famous and most terrible racial slur to help his readers understand what many white Americans did not understand in 1885, when the book was published: that the N-word is an explicit act of dehumanization designed to make it impossible to think of

In declining to use the N-word, as NewSouth Books did in 2011 when they reprinted the book using the word 'slave' instead, we make nonsense of the most important thematic development in the book.

black Americans as men and women like any others. In declining to use the word, as NewSouth Books did in 2011 when they reprinted the book using the word "slave" instead, we make nonsense of the most important thematic development in the book.

After the Civil War and 12 years of Reconstruction, white Southerners expressed, through the institution of Jim Crow, their violent resistance to black Americans' emancipation. It was an appalling attempt to reestablish the *s*tatus quo antebellum that necessitated the long-delayed Civil Rights Act of 1964. Southern whites' delusional nostalgia for a happy antebellum period destroyed by Lincoln's "War of Northern Aggression" rose to the level of mass hysteria during the period of the so-called Lost Cause in the first two decades of the 20th century. Membership of the Ku Klux Klan rose to as high as 3 million.

This was the period during which Faulkner grew up. In 1936 (the year the deeply racist *Gone with the Wind* was published — still, in real terms, the highest grossing movie in history), Faulkner devoted *Absalom! Absalom!* to making exactly the same point Twain had made. The novel climaxes emotionally, intellectually, and philosophically with the following exchange between Henry Sutpen and his best friend, Charles Bon. It comes shortly before Charles is to marry Judith, Henry's sister, but just after Henry has discovered that Charles is not merely his brother, but part black, too:

Our understanding of slavery remains paramount for our sense of the history and the future of America. Should we compromise two of America's most extraordinary writers' understanding of this question by bowdlerizing their books, erasing the very word on which their deepest meaning hinges?

> "You are my brother."
>
> "No I'm not. I'm the n—— that's going to sleep with your sister. Unless you stop me, Henry."

Which Henry does, with a pistol.

At the start of the book, we know nothing of this familial relationship. This is the puzzle Faulkner sets for us. Why would Henry shoot Charles, whom he loves, just before Charles's wedding to his sister, which he wants more than anything? By the time we arrive at this climactic exchange, we have worked exhaustively with the novel's two narrators through more than 100,000 words of alternative explanations for the murder. None satisfies, until this final possibility: Charles is the unacknowledged son of Henry's father, Thomas, from an earlier marriage. Because Thomas Sutpen's (unnamed) wife is part-black, the narrators theorize, she could, as Sutpen puts it, be neither "adjunctive or incremental" to his "design"—which is to create the grandest Southern dynasty yet seen. Suddenly, everything makes sense—if "sense" includes the elaborate, race-obsessed fantasies of the white South before, during, and after the Civil War.

How should we understand this climactic exchange? Why is Charles determined to go forward with an incestuous union, rejecting Henry's appeal to their brotherhood? Because Charles has been trying fruitlessly to get their father, Thomas, to admit for four years that he is Thomas Sutpen's older son. Thomas resolutely refuses to offer Charles even a flicker of recognition: His and the Southern "design" cannot accommodate the notion of a part-black inheritor, for it would bring the whole societal structure crashing down. So Charles, not surprisingly, refuses to honor a relationship that the society he lives in refuses to recognize. After all, if he is not his father's son, marrying his father's daughter can't be incest, can it? Hence his despairing reply: "*No I'm not. I'm the n—— that's going to sleep with your sister.*"

But do we *really* need the N-word here? Can we really not have Charles' say "No I'm not. I'm the black man who's going to sleep with your sister"? What about "Black man," capitalized in today's fashionable formulation?

The answer lies in the careful use of "that" instead of "who" in Charles's reply to Henry. For Thomas Sutpen and the white South, as Charles reminds Henry with his brutal and anguished reply, Charles is a *that* instead of a *who*, an object instead of a person—just as Twain's Jim was to Aunt Sally.

The slave economy of the South took metaphysical support from this that/who dichotomy. If we replace the N-word with any term that includes or implies a *man* and therefore a "who" instead of a "that," this dichotomy instantly collapses. For how can a man be a *that* rather than a *who*?

How, indeed? This is the central question of slavery, and it haunts Faulkner's pages as much or more than it does Twain's. Our understanding of slavery remains paramount for our sense of the

history and the future of America, because our vision of the past determines our possibilities in the future. Should we compromise two of America's most extraordinary writers' understanding of this question by bowdlerizing these books, erasing the very word on which their deepest meaning hinges?

Earlier, I spoke of understanding Twain's and Faulkner's novels. But novels pack an *emotional* punch, too, which is why they are, for all but the most rarefied intellects, far more powerful than any philosophical discourse. As Eudora Welty wrote, great fiction shows us "how to feel." In tacitly endorsing the idea that the N-word should be "verboten to whites no matter the context," Milton Academy is failing in its most fundamental duty—to help its students grasp both intellectually and emotionally the truth about the America that was and the America that might be.

The reader will notice I have myself used dashes or a euphemism, when quoting Twain, Faulkner, and even the title of Kennedy's book. But what does Judaism suggest about this issue?

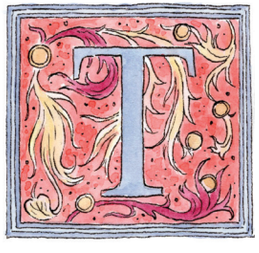
Judaism is famously text-obsessed and famously careful about textual transmission. There are several relevant discussions in the Talmud, including one in *Tractate Pesachim* about euphemisms. Its conclusion is that you must let an uncomfortable text stand if clarity demands it. I hope I have shown that is very clearly the case here.

However, it is also true that, in the Torah, Judaism's most sacred text, there is an important concept known as *Qere* and *Ketiv*, from the Aramaic קְרֵי (what is "read") and כְּתִיב (what is "written"). That is, there are a modest number of words that are *written* in the Torah, because we never change the text itself, but *read* differently. A very few of these are euphemisms employed for the sake of clean language. That tradition, applied to literature, would actually recommend against Silverglate's position: Nobody may *say* the N-word in full. But we do have to *print* it in its original form.

Of course, if we wish to avoid the "petty tyranny" that Kennedy laments we have fallen into, and remain a true community of readers, it could be only by making the word utterable by everyone or by no one. ✳

LIONEL SHRIVER

Can the Good Guys Win the Culture War?



HIS IS NOT in my interest to observe: Multiple pieces in my nonfiction collection out this fall, *Abominations: Selected Essays from a Career of Courting Self-Destruction*, take issue with what began as "political correctness gone mad" in the 1990s, but was more recently tagged "identity politics," morphed into "cancel culture," and morphed again into "Wokism" (a dizzying linguistic turnover that took place across only five years). By the time the collection was being copy-edited, I found a few of these essays' observations over-obvious.

Mind, they were anything but obvious at the time: that progressives have become illiberal, authoritarian, and hostile to free speech; that left-wing speech codes corrupt readable, original prose; that a taboo against "cultural appropriation" binds the artistic imagination and potentially reduces fiction to memoir. While these and similar assertions remain sound, readers in 2022 are unlikely to fall off their chairs. Perhaps such centrist truisms are well on their way to lame—a prospect that cheers me no end.

What my audience may fail to note is the dates. I staked out uncompromising opposition to the ludicrous "cultural appropriation" prohibition in September 2016—barely a year into the current period during which identity politics has been revved into overdrive. I enjoyed little ideological company when I told an audience in Brisbane that month,

> Not only as writers but as people, surely we should seek to push beyond the constraining categories into which we have been arbitrarily dropped by birth. If we embrace narrow group-based identities too fiercely, we cling to the very cages in which others try to trap us. We pigeonhole ourselves. We limit our notion of who we are, and in presenting ourselves as one of a membership, a representative of our *type*, an ambassador of an amalgam, we ask not to be seen.

On the other side of the U.S. election, a fellow traveler emerged. In a widely circulated *New York Times* op-ed, later extrapolated in *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics*, Mark Lilla warned that the Democratic obsession with the oppression Olympics was partially responsible for Trump's victory—a warning the party still fails to heed.

Lilla was very much an exception. In the short six years since, however, the population of commentators, politicians, and activists challenging the rigid, reductive tyranny of Wokism has gone through the roof. Anti-Wokism might rightly be accused of having become an industry—of which I am unapologetically a part, and from which I derive considerable personal benefit, thank you. Demand for my copy on these issues exceeds my ability to supply.

Because larger social patterns are discernible only in retrospect, whether we're past the apotheosis of Woke is not yet easy to detect.

Yet after an exhausting, beleaguering era of gender-bending and race-baiting, maybe it's time to celebrate the fact that the good guys in the culture war have been getting their licks in.

Douglas Murray's scathing dissection of Woke sanctities, *The Madness of Crowds: Gender, Race, and Identity* (2019), sold like hotcakes. Bloomsbury gave itself a big commercial shiner by allowing its febrile left-wing staff to bully it into passing on Murray's next book, this year's *The War on the West*, a raging bestseller in both the U.S. and Britain. Despite booksellers' efforts to suppress its availability (I know, that makes a lot of sense), Abigail Shrier's *Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters* (2020) has racked up handsome sales, even scoring recognition as *The Economist*'s Book of the Year. Although Helen Joyce's equally hard-hitting *Trans* (2021) was subject to the same blackballing, her nervy critique of a heavily land-mined topic found a large, enthusiastic audience. Robin DiAngelo, eat your heart out. There's money in anti-Wokism as well.

The ranks of the reasonable have grown so populous as to be impossible to cite in full. Some backlash commentators are overtly conservative: Joe Rogan, Ben Shapiro, Victor Davis Hanson, Jordan Peterson. Other outspoken voices have emerged from the left: Meghan Daum, Bret Weinstein, Glenn Greenwald, Jonathan Haidt. Refusing to jump on the post-Floydian gravy train that has enriched Ibram X. Kendi and Ta-Nehisi Coates, several black opinion formers have proved influential, particularly Glenn Loury and Coleman Hughes. (The black linguist John McWhorter is a special case—a fine social observer whose cooptation by the *New York Times* seems to have taken his edge off.) Ayaan Hirsi Ali is one of the few vocal critics of Islam, while Woke World draws a protective circle around the religion and won't hear a word against even Muslim terrorists. On Substack, Matt Taibbi, Andrew Sullivan, and Bari Weiss are making a tidy living off subscriptions (including mine). Their counterparts in the U.K.—Toby Young, Frank Furedi, Brendan O'Neill, David Goodhart, Julie Bindel, Rod Liddle, Eric Kaufmann—are also thriving.

The intrepid Heather Mac Donald has published a series of

After an exhausting, beleaguering era of gender-bending and race-baiting, maybe it's time to celebrate the fact that the good guys in the culture war have been getting their licks in.

lengthy, impeccably researched, and brilliantly written exposés about the wildly exaggerated perceptions of police killings of unarmed black suspects, the self-immolating fixation on diversity in classical music, and the literally lethal affirmative action run amok in the American medical establishment. Christopher Rufo has mounted what began as a one-man campaign against critical race theory in public schools and the biologically warped, sexually explicit gender ideology these schools are imposing on bewildered children.

Prolific contrarian outlets such as *Quillette*, *City Journal*, the *Babylon Bee*, *Spectator World*, the *New Criterion*, and *Persuasion* in the U.S., as well as *Spiked Online*, *The Critic*, the *Daily Sceptic*, *UnHerd*, and *The Spectator* in the U.K., have all grown substantial readerships during this benighted era, suggesting that the relationship between Wokism and resistance to it is becoming ironically symbiotic. I can personally attest to the volume of commentary battling identity-politics propaganda, because reading a mere fraction of this material occupies hours of my day.

Multiple high-profile victims of cancellation have landed on their feet. Pushed out of the University of Sussex over her views on gender, Kathleen Stock is now a founding fellow of the new University of Austin, which is formally dedicated to the "fearless pursuit of truth" as opposed to the pursuit of "your truth." J.K. Rowling's scandalous defense of biological sex can't have cost her 20 pence. Woody Allen's memoir, boycotted by hysterical editorial assistants at

Hachette, went on to make a small publisher's fortune. Railroaded out of Princeton on a pretext after objecting to an open letter that characterized "anti-blackness" as "foundational to America" as well as to the university, Joshua Katz has garnered so much more publicity than the average humanities professor that he can surely write his own ticket at a range of lucrative center-right think tanks.

There's more than a glimmer of hope on the popular level, too. In a YouGov poll from July 2020, 56 percent of Americans thought cancel culture was a "big problem." Given the fraught nature of the past two years, that proportion must have risen since. In a November 2021 Harris poll, 71 percent of all American voters agreed "strongly/somewhat" that "cancel culture has gone too far." Surprisingly, that included 70 percent of Democrats.

For me, the most promising development in recent times is what's allowable to say in print without being immediately disappeared. The Overton window has widened from a mere crack in the wall to a goodly slit. It's now commonplace to read that the organization Black Lives Matter is financially corrupt. That, while he certainly didn't deserve to be murdered, George Floyd was no saint but a violent petty criminal. That the agenda of "antiracism" is itself racist. That diversity, equity, and inclusion programs are self-serving generators of unproductive, grossly overpaid make-work jobs, and that DEI has become an industry unto itself (far more so than anti-Woke publishing). That "unconscious bias training" backfires: Rather than reeducate bigots, such courses create them.

The issue most belatedly permitted public scrutiny is the long-sacrosanct matter of transgenderism. When the Left first fetishized the practice of cosmetically swapping sexes, beginning in 2012, nary a soul uttered a discouraging word. I'm not proud of this, but for a good four years I kept my own journalistic mouth shut, despite an accelerating discomfort with a cultural infatuation that seemed unhealthy. Writing anything negative about the fad for medically sanctioned mutilation appeared to be career-ending.

At last, in 2016, I wrote an essay entitled "He, She, and It" for *Prospect*. "We are told that a trans woman may have been born a man, but 'feels like' a woman," I submitted. "I do not mean to be perverse here, but I have no idea what it 'feels like' to be a woman — and I am one." Having explained that my own deep sense of self has no sex, I advanced tentatively, "I realize I am getting myself into trouble here. Nevertheless, the whole trans movement does seem awfully to do with clothes. … 'Feeling like' a woman seems to imply feeling like wearing mascara, stilettos, hair extensions, and stockings," a superficial version of femininity that I found alien.

Real progress: Those passages are not nearly as dangerous today as they were in 2016. More recently, several other authors have observed as I did in that essay that the gender "spectrum" on which young people are now obliged to locate themselves is wholly dependent on crude stereotypes of what constitutes male and female behavior at its poles. Sensing a subtle shift in the political winds — a shift that courageous authors such as Abigail Shrier and Helen Joyce have influenced — these days I'm more daring still.

In a *Spectator* column this past July, I compared the notion of being "born in the wrong body" with the Victorians' credulous belief in phrenology — the study of the shape of the head as an indication of the mind within. I ventured, "Personally, whenever I'm confused about which sex I am, I pull down my pants." A couple of years ago, I'd have tippy-toed around this subject, and I'd never have felt free to be so flip. While the editors did anxiously shove that column as far to the back of the magazine as possible, perhaps in the hope that most readers would never get to it, in the wake of its publication, I've yet to walk out the door and get shot.

Events beyond mere commentary are beginning to reflect a rebellion against far-left orthodoxy. In the U.K., the Tavistock Clinic's Gender and Identity Development Service (GIDS) will be shut down for being "unsafe" for children, thousands of whom have been put on

We preserve freedom of speech by exercising it. Not only journalists but regular members of the public have to get braver: In social settings, let's express what we genuinely think.

an unquestioning conveyor belt of "gender affirmation," replete with puberty blockers, cross-sex hormones, and irrevocable surgery. Toby Young's Free Speech Union keeps clocking up wins for people fired over minor infractions of Woke doctrine. Red states in the U.S. are cracking down on critical race theory and radical gender ideology in public schools. The world's governing body for swimming has all but banned male-bodied participation in women's meets, protecting the integrity of female sport in defiance of frenzied trans activists who would gleefully destroy it. When staff threw a hissy fit over Dave Chapelle, Netflix didn't remove the comedian's controversial performance from the platform but ensured that the huffy employees were first in line for layoffs.

Yet, lest we get too excited, let's not kid ourselves. Writers for this niche market are preaching to the converted. The opposing teams of the culture war seldom mix, and practically no one reads the other side's stuff. Anti-Woke turns of the wheel on the scale of the GIDS closure are rare. A pseudo-religious dogma consumed with race and sexual preference, in denial of biology, and determined to caricature all social relations as a hierarchy of oppressors and the oppressed, has been percolating from universities outward since the 1990s, if not the 1960s.

This dismal, conflictual ideology has infested the highest levels of academia, elective government, the military, the civil service, the arts, charitable foundations, and private corporations — and that is not, for once, a conspiracy theory. The takeover has enjoyed widespread success in defiance of the fact that, were this dogma's tenets put to folks plainly — white people are born irredeemably evil; historical guilt is heritable; our sex is not between our legs but in our minds; the West is so corrupted by racism and an ever-lengthening list of "phobias" that the only solution is to plow our countries into the mud and start again — most publics would reject them wholesale in horror. While celebrities such as J.K. Rowling will survive intact, and writers like me can capitalize on the urgency of fighting back, most of this movement's victims are ordinary people with no voice who get chewed up and spit out for small perceived heresies.

In the U.S., too, anti-Woke advocacy gets entangled in party politics, although nothing about standing up for freedom of expression and bog-standard American meritocracy is necessarily Republican. Worse, we anti-crusade crusaders get entangled with Trump. (The prospect of, say, The Donald vs. Kamala in 2024 plunges many a moderate voter who opposes progressive identitarianism into a coma.) Any association with Trump weakens the anti-Woke counternarrative.

Critics have indeed made inroads, but the grip of this bizarrely self-hating catechism is fierce. Biden conditioned priority for Covid treatments on race. A private dormitory in Berkeley for "people of color" bars white visitors from its common areas, and no one bothers to point out that the practice is flagrantly illegal. Liberal media relentlessly promote and fawn over non-white, non-straight profile subjects, contributors, and artists. Now that we're into a third year of this shameless post-Floyd pandering, I've given up wondering when the moral showboating will ever peter out. The fate of the distinguished law professor Amy Wax is on a knife-edge over her dogged defense of Western culture and citation of politically inconvenient facts; should the University of Pennsylvania succeed in ejecting her,

tenure is effectively abolished for the ideologically noncompliant. During this last summer's *Roe v. Wade* turmoil, news anchors consistently referred to "pregnant people" or "people who can become pregnant" or, repellently, "birthing people," because the trans lobby has turned "women" into a dirty word. No less than the Royal Air Force has frozen the recruiting of white males, privileging racial and sexual quotas over Britain's military security.

This crap isn't over. Not by a long shot.

If the crap isn't over, the fight against the crap can't be over, either. The proportion of the public promoting this bleak, dehumanizing, and viciously unforgiving doctrine is absurdly small. According to the Pew Research Center, only 6 percent of Americans can be classified as "progressive left" ("very liberal, highly educated, and majority White; most say U.S. institutions need to be completely rebuilt because of racial bias"). Yet these self-righteous fanatics are bullies. They have succeeded in imposing a reign of terror that, even without guillotines or firing squads, is inspired by the same moral and intellectual impulses that drove the Jacobins, Stalinism, and Mao's Cultural Revolution. (Alas, most of the younger breed are ahistorical, so even comparisons to Cambodia's Year Zero don't faze them.) They have intimidated too many of the rest of us into cowering in fear, keeping our heads down and just hoping that these awful people eventually go away. They won't. Seldom do human beings willingly sacrifice power.

To reach for an expression now supposedly unacceptable but happily applicable to resilient males and females in equal measure, we all have to *man up*. That means we stop obeying fake rules. We do not say "birthing people" because PBS implicitly tells us to do so. My fellow fiction writers should take a hard second look at ostensible no-nos such as "you mustn't use food to describe the skin color of 'marginalized peoples.'" Oh, yeah? Who says? Really, who came up with this absurd prohibition against writing that a Pakistani has an "olive complexion," and why are we obliged to pay this self-nominated contingent any mind? The only thing that gives teeth to a silly made-up taboo like that is obeying it. Were literary novelists simply to laugh in the face of confected restrictions and carry on culturally appropriating their hearts out, the "rules" would be revealed as nothing but a pack of cards.

Rejecting the "rules" extends beyond language to content, and it isn't merely a matter for commentators and artists. Who says we can't criticize the fad of transgenderism, or affirmative action, or mass illegal immigration? We preserve freedom of speech by exercising it. Not only journalists but regular members of the public have to get braver: In social settings, let's express what we genuinely think. If we find the soaring rates at which young people are neutering themselves disturbing, we shouldn't bite our tongues. If we find the increasing racialization of political discourse destructive, we should say so. If we find the proportion of black people in the Arts section for a third year in a row bizarrely over-the-top, we should make a joke about it — because it *is* funny. And it's in groups populated with the "progressive Left" that speaking our minds counts. We imply that we're not afraid of them.

The targets of cancellation campaigns should also stop apologizing. These public apologies are almost always insincere, and they backfire into admissions of guilt. There is no clemency on offer from this movement, so it's pointless to ask for it. One of the reasons I'm still standing is that I have never apologized for an ever-loving thing I've said or written — on principle.

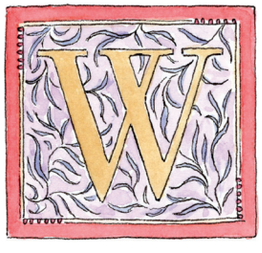
Most crucially, people in positions of authority have to start acting as if they're really in charge. I myself have prevailed as a writer because the folks who publish me have backed me up. That's altogether too rare. "Cancel culture" has been enabled by widespread cowardice at the top. For folks to be losing their jobs over tiny infractions of made-up rules, someone in an upper tier of management has to sack them. Publishing higher-ups, CEOs, university presidents, foundation directors, and museum boards have to stop quailing before Twitter and go back to acting like grown-ups. Man up! ✳

PART THREE

THE ROAD FROM CANCELLATION

JONATHAN RAUCH

Uncanceling Ourselves



WHEN I AGREED recently to appear on the *Sacred Tension* podcast, I assumed that the host, Stephen Bradford Long, was inured to controversy. After all, he is a leading spokesman for the Satanic Temple, which is pretty much what it sounds like: a religious group that venerates Satan as a symbol of freethinking dissent from an authoritarian god. Also, he is openly gay. Also, he has a cancellation-proof day job managing his family's grocery store. Given all that, I was unsure what to expect on his program, except that he would be fearless.

I was wrong.

"As a content creator, I live in terror," he told me. "I live in absolute fear that any time I hit publish on a podcast or an article, it will absolutely ruin my life for a month, or longer." Politically progressive himself, he yearns for dialogues that transgress progressive dogmas. "I've been doing this podcast for five years," he said. "I'm getting so tired of having the same type of conversation over and over again. I want to talk to people like Jordan Peterson and Helen Joyce and Jesse Singal. People who are genuinely interesting and compelling, whom I may have some strong disagreements with, or not. But I live in a lot of fear of my fellow LGBT people, and that's pretty distressing." He added, "There are situations where I just lie because I don't want to be hurt. And I just hate that."

Hiding your true self, pretending to be someone you're not, living in fear of being shamed and ostracized, and disliking yourself for that: I think I understand how Stephen Long feels. I am a generation older, an American homosexual born in 1960. I lied, covered up, and evaded for my first 25 years. I policed myself more ruthlessly than any outside parent or policeman could have done. (If that sounds overly dramatic, have a look at my memoir of those years, *Denial: My 25 Years Without a Soul*.) I am not saying that Stephen is as tortured or repressed as I was. Just that, in his fear and self-reproach, I recognize the territory.

Stephen had been canceled, not online but in his own mind. For him and for us, there is a pathway to freedom, and it begins with understanding how canceling empowers a kind of Stasi in our skulls.

Yes, canceling is a thing. No, it's not criticism.

In 2020, I joined a group of writers and thinkers in signing a public letter that decried "intolerance of opposing views, a vogue for public shaming and ostracism, and the tendency to dissolve complex policy issues in a blinding moral certainty." In other words, *cancel culture*. The letter received fierce rebuttals, mostly focused on two substantive points. First, so-called canceling amounts to a handful of incidents and is being blown out of proportion. In fact—this is the second argument—if canceling is anything, it's a talking point being used by cultural elites and political right-wingers to stigmatize legitimate criticism of themselves.

Is cancel culture overhyped, a culture-war bugaboo? If only. Polling evidence finds that discourse in America is broadly chilled.

Polls on the subject are numerous, and their findings are consistent. In March 2022, the *New York Times* published a poll finding that a majority of Americans (55 percent) held their tongue over the past year for fear of retaliation or harsh criticism. A 2020 poll by the Cato Institute found that 62 percent say that the political climate prevents them from saying things they believe because others might find them offensive. Most other polls agree, including surveys of college students, 65 percent of whom told a Knight Foundation poll in 2021 that "the climate at their school or on their campus prevents some people from saying things they believe because others might find it offensive"—an increase from 54 percent as recently as 2016. The chilling of expression has risen across the ideological spectrum. According to the Cato poll, the share of Americans who are afraid to share opinions grew by seven percentage points among liberals, moderates, and conservatives—to a majority of all three groups—in only three years (2017 to 2020).

If people were merely flinching from ordinary criticism, one might call on them to thicken their skin. But what many people fear is not being criticized but being canned. In the 2020 Cato survey, a third of Americans—again across the political spectrum—said they worry about missing out on career opportunities or losing their job if their political opinions become known. The fear is not unreasonable; almost a quarter of respondents supported firing an executive who donates to Joe Biden, and almost a third would fire an executive who donates to Donald Trump. Almost half (44 percent) of people under 30 would fire executives who donate to Trump! A particularly striking finding is that the percentage of people saying they don't feel free to speak their mind is at least three times greater than in 1954, the height of the McCarthy era. No wonder that in 2022, 84 percent surveyed by the *New York Times* said it is a "very serious" (40 percent) or "somewhat serious" problem that Americans don't speak freely.

To the objection that this chilling is an unwarranted reaction to an imaginary menace, the answer is again that the facts disagree.

The best way to think about canceling is not as part of the critical public discourse. Think of it, rather, as cognitive warfare.

Beginning with the firings of the public-relations executive Justine Sacco in 2013 and the Mozilla CEO Brandon Eich in 2014, after both were targeted by online mobs, cases have been legion. There are no comprehensive databases (nor would one be easy to create, given definitional difficulties), but examples of canceled speakers, shows, and jobs abound. One online compiler, Philip K. Fry, lists hundreds of examples ranging from the minor (a hearing-aid specialist who was fired after criticizing the Black Lives Matter movement) to the mighty (comedian Dave Chapelle's canceled concerts). There are people you have probably heard of, like James Damore, famously fired by Google, but many more you probably haven't, like Emmanuel Cafferty, a San Diego utility worker who was fired when a Twitter mob accused him (falsely) of flashing a white-supremacist hand gesture. There was the Portland, Oregon, coffee-roasting company that shut down after the owner's wife objected to #MeToo excesses; the Denver chain of yoga studios that closed down after being accused of "tokenism" in its promotional materials; the Palestinian-American-owned restaurant and catering business in Minneapolis that came under attack for racist tweets the owner's daughter had published eight years earlier as a troubled 14-year-old (to save the company, her father fired her). A San Francisco Museum of Modern Art curator lost his job after a petition campaign denounced his use of the term "reverse discrimination" ("violent language"); a choral composer was dropped by his publisher for condemning arson in the George Floyd protests; a political analyst was fired after accurately summarizing research

(by an African-American scholar) finding that violent protests can be politically counterproductive. Not imaginary stuff.

Is cancel culture, then, merely criticism that elites and right-wingers would prefer not to hear? Indeed, is the charge of canceling itself a form of canceling? Is it an effort to muzzle "marginalized people [who] have, for the first time, had unfettered access to talk back to institutions that for far too long were the gatekeepers defining acceptable discourse," as Erin B. Logan wrote in the *Los Angeles Times*? Again, no. As I argue in my book *The Constitution of Knowledge*, canceling is the opposite of criticism. Criticism targets *ideas* for elimination, avoiding ad hominem attacks; canceling targets *individuals* for elimination, seeking to destroy the reputations and livelihoods of those it attacks. Criticism seeks to frame and contest ideas fairly and in context; cancel campaigns exaggerate, mischaracterize, decontextualize, and outright lie about their targets' claims and character. (In fact, it's common for cancelers to boast of not even reading whatever it is they want suppressed.) The goal of criticism is to enable learning by expanding the territory of contestable ideas; the goal of canceling is to impose conformity by shrinking the realm of contestability. Criticism seeks to identify and correct errors; canceling seeks to punish and destroy the errant.

Above all, criticism uses rational inquiry to free the mind from its cognitive limitations; canceling exploits cognitive vulnerabilities to enforce orthodoxy. The best way to think about canceling is not as part of the critical public discourse. Think of it, rather, as cognitive warfare.

You're being manipulated

Since 2015, the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE) has documented 770 cases in which academics were targeted with demands for firing or other punishment as a result of engaging in constitutionally protected forms of speech. Almost 60 percent of the incidents resulted in sanctions including investigation, suspension, or (in a fourth of cases) termination or resignation. Skeptics have objected that in a country with 1.5 million full- and part-time college faculty, 770 is a small number, proving, if anything, that the alleged problem is trivial. FIRE and its allies retort that colleges are supposed to be our most robust defenders of intellectual freedom and that the punishment of controversial speech has escalated rapidly (since 2015, according to FIRE, the number of annual sanction attempts has more than quintupled). Both are valid rejoinders. Even so, the more meaningful response is that 770 attacks, shrewdly deployed, are more than enough to produce the widespread chilling that we objectively see.

Cognitive warfare manipulates the information environment to play tricks with our minds. It seeks to deceive, disorient, divide, and ultimately demoralize a target population, thus paving the way for the manipulators to impose their will. Cognitive warfare has been part of the state propaganda arsenal since time immemorial, but it can be used by non-state actors, too. It is certainly nothing new: In the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville, in his masterwork *Democracy in America*, warned that the use of ostracism and ignominy to enforce viewpoint conformity was the greatest danger to American liberty.

Tocqueville, however, worried about the tyranny of majority opinion. A peculiarity of cognitive warfare is that it can be, and often is, exploited against majorities by numerical *minorities*. This is what modern cancelers do so well.

The progressive, college-educated Left that does the bulk of today's cultural canceling is not a numerically large or ideologically representative group. According to opinion research by More in Common, "progressive activists" account for only 8 percent of the U.S. population. These ideologues are not only unrepresentative of the population: They are unrepresentative of the Left. "The strongest support for progressive illiberalism comes from the far-left fifth of America's political spectrum, with moderate leftists much more opposed," writes Eric Kaufmann, a University

You can manipulate what people say, believe, and even see by manipulating the apparent consensus in their environment. One way to do this is by inhibiting dissent; another is for a small group to project its views loudly and aggressively. Cancelers do both.

of London political scientist who studies Woke activism in the U.S. and the U.K.

How, one should wonder, has such a small and unrepresentative group managed to chill almost two-thirds of Americans and dominate so much of the discourse in universities, online, and in a growing number of newsrooms and corporate headquarters? The answer is: by hacking our hardwired consensus-seeking software.

We all like to think of our opinions and perceptions as our own, and of others' influence as being something we can reliably resist. On both counts, we are wrong. Going back many decades, research in social and cognitive psychology finds that we humans are tuned to harmonize our views and even our perceptions with those of our peers and tribes. In one classic experiment in the 1930s, people's perception of how far a dot moved on a screen was influenced by what others reported seeing. In a famous experiment in the 1950s, when experimental subjects were asked which of three lines was the same length as a fourth, the subjects of the experiment often denied the plain evidence of their own eyes when a group of actors chose the obviously wrong answer. Experiments confirm that fans of rival sports teams see the same plays in different ways, something we all know from everyday life.

The implication is that you can manipulate what people say, believe, and even see by manipulating the apparent consensus in their environment. One way to do this is by inhibiting dissent; another is for a small group to project its views loudly and aggressively. Cancelers do both. Activists form online mobs demanding that dissenters be fired; they launch burdensome investigations; they run online campaigns to besmirch reputations; they threaten that anyone who defends a targeted person will herself be targeted. "On campus, the angrier the voices, the more amplified they are," one undergraduate explained in a newsletter from the William F. Buckley, Jr., Program at Yale. "It might not be necessarily that the whole campus is pro-censorship or trying to create this self-destructive environment of an echo chamber, but the people who do speak are very publicized on campus; so there's a feeling that it's a completely hostile environment for anyone who doesn't conform to this one distinct set of values."

Once this dynamic sets in, it can become what social scientists call a *spiral of silence*, a self-reinforcing loop. I don't speak out because I feel outnumbered and isolated; because I don't speak out, others feel outnumbered and isolated. The spiral has two effects. The direct effect is simply to intimidate and chill the heterodox, even if they are in the majority. The subtler, more insidious indirect effect is to spoof our consensus-seeking antennae by making a fringe opinion seem prevalent and thus plausible or even true. In much the same way that manipulated consensus can lead us to insist that obviously unequal lines are the same length, it can lead us to insist that humans are not sexually dimorphic, or that vaccines are more dangerous than Covid, or that Donald Trump won the 2020 election in a landslide, or that the earth is flat, or an infinity of other manifest untruths. By spoofing consensus, small numbers of extremists hack our cognitive software to amplify their influence and credibility.

Cancelers have another cognitive weapon in their arsenal: unpredictability. It may seem odd that the level of chilling today

is higher than in the McCarthy era. But recall that, in those days, anti-Communists could be fairly certain of being safe from losing a job or being blacklisted. By contrast, cancelers deliberately keep the boundaries unclear. You never know what comment, jest, hypothesis, or even pronoun can trip you up — and you never will know. As a progressive graduate student told me: "The terms seem to change by the week and it's completely exhausting. People don't want to say anything because everyone's so goddamn scared of offending someone."

In this way, we become the police of our own minds, frightened, neurotic, demoralized. Ultimately, canceling allows minorities to dominate majorities by conscripting us to cancel ourselves.

Breaking the spiral

Canceling manipulates us by manipulating our social and cognitive environment. Disempowering it requires making ourselves and our environments less manipulable. Fortunately, there are many ways to do that.

One way is to take away or blunt cancelers' weapons. Social-media platforms might reduce the use and abuse of anonymity, sock puppets, and bots that make it easy to launch viral smear campaigns. They could also make their algorithms more transparent and pro-social, tipping them away from eyeball-attracting outrage. Employers could be discouraged, legally or socially or both, from firing employees who exercise their First Amendment speech rights outside the workplace in ways that don't directly affect their jobs. (This is not a big stretch; some states already bar employers from firing people because of their non-work-related political activities.) Universities could adopt the Chicago free-speech principles and, to give the principles teeth, create campus offices to assess and investigate free-speech violations. (The U.K. has done this, and Oklahoma's legislature has established a free-speech committee for its public universities.) Orientation programs for matriculating

> From my own intersectionalist perspective as a member of three of history's most canceled classes—atheist, homosexual, and Jew—I can say that nothing breaks my heart more than the rising consensus among social justice advocates that free speech is their enemy.

students could include education on the First Amendment and academic freedom, as universities such as Purdue and the University of South Florida are doing, and for which FIRE has created useful materials. Universities and employers could encourage that disagreements be aired face-to-face instead of on social media or in anonymous bias reports. (Yale's law school recently shut down an internal bulletin-board system that had become what one observer called a "cesspool.")

I could give dozens more particular suggestions (and do in *The Constitution of Knowledge*), and you can think of some of your own, suited to whatever institution and culture you're part of. What is most important is understanding that spirals of silence are not as strong as they seem. They can seem unbreakable, pervasive, inescapable; but just a handful of "reality anchors," people who are unwilling to be silenced, can alter the dynamic when consensus has been spoofed. In the famous experiment I mentioned earlier, where actors give an obviously wrong answer and subjects conform, the introduction of a single actor — just one — who expresses the right answer gives the experimental subject confidence to voice her true belief. As the Princeton University professor Robert George has said, to change a campus culture requires a handful

We have a special obligation to speak out against canceling. Often, if we do, we'll find the consequences less scary than expected.

of brave, savvy, dedicated dissenters, not hundreds. Once people look around and see that they have been fooled, false consensus crumbles and manipulators lose their hold. Each of us can anchor reality by speaking out and by demanding that others be heard, too. Each of us, somewhere in our lives, can break a spiral of silence by defending dissent. That goes especially for minorities.

Canceling is not minorities' friend

In 1957, after being fired from his government job for being homosexual, a Harvard-trained astronomer named Frank Kameny organized a handful of homosexuals to form the Mattachine Society of Washington, D.C. They began speaking out against a mighty edifice of discrimination by the government (which criminalized homosexuals), by the psychiatric establishment (which pathologized them), and by civil society (which persecuted them). They had no money, no voters, no public support; courts, Congress, and the media dismissed them with laughter and disgust. But they did have their voices and their arguments. Kameny, who had the mind of a scientist and the voice of a foghorn, punctured every anti-gay argument in sight. Were homosexuals security risks? Only because criminalization made them blackmail targets. Were they mentally ill? Research going back to the early Fifties proved otherwise. Were they unfit for the rights of citizenship? The Declaration of Independence said otherwise.

Kameny and his ostensibly sad, sick, and radical gang of perverts faced hopeless odds, or so it seemed. Yet in 1973, the psychiatric establishment removed homosexuality from its list of mental illnesses. (Kameny called this the greatest mass cure ever.) Two years later, the federal government dropped its ban on employing homosexuals. Twenty years after that, the gay-marriage movement took its first steps.

That campaign, too, seemed hopeless. Yet only two decades later, under federal law, I became husband to a man. I am often asked why the gay-rights revolution happened so quickly. The answer is multifaceted, but the core of the story is as simple as this: A canceled minority refused to accept its cancellation and broke an ancient spiral of silence. People like Frank Kameny in his generation and Andrew Sullivan in mine were the reality anchors who made it possible.

I don't think it is coincidental that Frank Kameny was a Jew. Or that so many other civil rights advocates have been Jews. Victims for centuries of pogroms, propaganda, and every other form of physical and psychological warfare, Jews have learned that the most embattled minority is always the dissident and that our place is at her side. We have learned that spirals of silence are no friend of minority rights.

From my own intersectionalist perspective as a member of three of history's most canceled classes—atheist, homosexual, and Jew—I can say that nothing breaks my heart more than the rising consensus among social justice advocates that free speech is their enemy. "Free speech, a right many freedom movements have fought for, has recently become a tool appropriated by hegemonic institutions," a group of Claremont University students said in a letter to the university president in 2017. At Williams College, a group called the Coalition against Racist Education Now declared in 2018, "We insist on recognizing the positioning of 'free speech' for what it has become: moral ammunition for a conservative backlash to increasing diversity." In 2017, a group of Middlebury College students published a manifesto contending that "retreating to the moral

absolutes of free inquiry cannot and will not insulate our community from the perils of injustice.... We mustn't be required to 'hear both sides' when one side seeks to undermine the core values of a free, democratic society."

Of course, the students were right; freedom allows bigots to speak. Hosea Williams, a lieutenant of Martin Luther King, was fully aware of that when, on national TV in the 1970s, he called for freedom of speech for the KKK. John Lewis, the civil rights legend, was aware of it when he said, "Without freedom of speech and the right to dissent, the civil rights movement would have been a bird without wings." Frederick Douglass, the former slave, was aware of it when he said, "To suppress free speech is a double wrong. It violates the rights of the hearer as well as those of the speaker." But they were also aware that the problem with hateful and ignorant speech is not the speech but the hate and ignorance, and that robust freedom of expression, combined with the discipline of fact, is the *only* proven remedy. As Douglass said: "Slavery cannot tolerate free speech. Five years of its exercise would banish the auction block and break every chain in the South."

Will the tide turn against cancel culture? I suspect it has begun to turn already, but I'm not sure. I do know this, though: Cancelers have armored themselves by claiming to speak for the weak and marginalized. Members of historically oppressed minority groups — people such as Jews, homosexuals, atheists, and, come to think of it, Satanists — need to pierce that armor by reminding ourselves and everyone around us that socially coerced conformity is not our friend. We have a special obligation to speak out against canceling. Often, if we do, we'll find the consequences less scary than expected.

A few weeks after my appearance on his podcast, as I was working on this article, I received an email from Stephen Long. "I've been surprised by the positive response to the episode and the enthusiasm at the prospect of interviewing more controversial guests," said the Satanist. Emboldened, he was writing with a follow-up question: "Do you have any suggestions for other potential guests? I'm currently scouting for more interview guests, and I'd like to invite thoughtful people from a broader swath of worldviews."

I sent him a list. ✳

LENORE SKENAZY

Quitting Coddle Culture

ONTRARY to popular belief, the problem with today's child-rearing culture is not that "everyone gets a trophy." It's that there's always an adult there to *give* the kid a trophy. And to organize kids' games. And decide whether the ball was in or out. And do pretty much everything kids used to do on their own.

Childhood has become an adult-run activity. No wonder some young people expect colleges to cancel speakers who upset them. From crib to campus, they have been overseen by well-meaning adults working hard to make sure they never feel hurt or uncomfortable.

This happened over the past generation or two, as parents were told over and over that kids couldn't do anything safely or successfully on their own. Fear, frustration, test-taking, bus-riding, sleepovers, spats with friends, even (seriously) adjusting to daylight savings time — every aspect of childhood came to be seen through the lens of how it could hurt a child physically, intellectually, or emotionally. One *Parents* magazine story told parents to keep their kids far from…*the laundry hamper*. Stand too close and it could slice a kid's cornea!

Bombarded by endless warnings, caring adults came to attend and intervene like never before, leaving kids with ever fewer opportunities to solve problems on their own, take minor risks, and grow resilient.

We're now seeing clearly what smoothing every step of the way creates: a cultural tsunami threatening to overwhelm efforts to preserve freedom and civil society. Microaggressions, trigger warnings, and cancel culture all have their origins in childhood, not freshman orientation. They're the result of raising kids to think that every one of life's challenges is just too much for them to bear.

What does college look like when students haven't learned to deal with any distress? Maybe one where the kids go to the provost to report each perceived slight.

What does the workplace look like when young people have been trained to outsource all problems? Maybe one where HR departments are overrun with demands for accommodation and anonymous complaints about co-workers.

What does democracy look like when young people grow up expecting someone else to direct them and protect them from discomfort? Maybe one that is continuously seeking solutions from government authorities.

It looks, in short, like a country that's losing its way.

That's the conclusion that Heterodox Academy's Jonathan Haidt and Daniel Shuchman, at the time the chairman of the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE), came to as they mulled the campus climate five years ago. Their organizations' excellent efforts, they realized, were late-stage interventions. Was there a way to stop young American minds from becoming coddled in the first place? A way to raise more flexible, open-minded kids?

They looked around for people fighting to give children more

chances to think and do things on their own — even (gasp!) to fail. They found me, the author of *Free-Range Kids* and founder of the movement by that same name that says our kids are *not* in constant danger. And they found Peter Gray, an acclaimed research psychologist who studies the importance of play. We joined forces to help get our children and country back on track by founding Let Grow, a nonprofit working to return independence and adventure to kids' lives so they can grow into capable, confident, and happy adults. Our efforts, and those of many other like-minded parents, teachers, and school administrators, are a vital intervention in the battle against cancel culture in America.

How did we get to this point? When did the kind of childhood most of us had — a stay-out-till-the-streetlights-come-on childhood — evaporate?

Social scientists agree that it was sometime in the 1980s that America became convinced that "stranger danger" abounded and that no child was safe unsupervised. This came on the heels of two shocking child kidnappings: Etan Patz from his bus stop in 1979, and Adam Walsh from a Sears in Florida in 1981. Both boys were six.

Their stories were not just heart-wrenching and horrifying; they also generated enormous interest, in part because they coincided with the dawn of cable TV and the 24-hour news cycle. TV executives noted the public's fascination with such tragedies and quickly catered to it. Pretty soon, missing kids' pictures were even on milk cartons, without anyone explaining that the vast majority of children who go missing are runaways or taken in divorce custody disputes.

With "stranger danger" and fear of extreme incidents ascendant, American childhood flipped. For most of the 20th century, experts had been admonishing parents *not* to hover. In her book *Adult Supervision Required*, Markella Rutherford quotes a 1956 *Parents* magazine article advising moms to let their five-year-olds walk to

> Kids are built to encounter the world, not shrink from it. To grow strong and learn to rebound, they need to experience some fear, confusion, setbacks, and frustration.

kindergarten alone, and a 1966 *Good Housekeeping* article saying six-year-olds should be expected to call home if they're going to be late — first, of course, having to find a phone booth. But by the 1990s, parenting practices had shifted so profoundly that ever leaving kids alone had become taboo. This adult takeover of childhood meant that age-old opportunities for kids to face their fears and solve their problems on their own dried up.

One tiny example: My friend's sister-in-law and niece were visiting for brunch. The girl, 14, picked up a bagel and was about to slice it when she asked, "Wait. Mom, can I cut this?" To which the mother replied, "I'd rather you didn't" and proceeded to cut it herself.

One bagel does not a generation destroy. But when it becomes the definition of "good" parenting to treat kids as helpless and fragile, a new normal is born. And the longer it goes unchecked, the more the culture forgets what kids are actually capable of.

I have met a mom who was investigated for child neglect because she let her eight-year-old walk the dog. I've met suburban 12-year-olds who have never walked beyond their own block, and heard from 15-year-olds still not allowed to wait alone at the bus stop. The American Academy of Pediatricians seemed to pull an age recommendation out of thin air when it officially announced in 2009 that no one younger than 10 should cross the street without an adult.

If you are over 35 or live in any country that isn't the USA, you know that it is quite normal for kids to cross the street alone at ages

much younger than that. Yes, we have crime, cars, and creeps. And yes, a global pandemic has just dialed many parents' anxiety up to 11. But to be a parent has always been to worry. (And to be a Jewish mom like me? Oy!) The problem is that lately, many parents have come to believe that they must wait until there is *zero risk* in the world before they can allow their kids to do anything on their own.

Since we can never live in a universe free of risk, these parents are waiting for a time that will never arrive. In the meantime, they're replacing childhood autonomy, agency, and adventure with an ever-deepening sense of fragility, dependence, and anxiety.

As adults step in to oversee ever more of kids' lives, children are losing an essential and profound element that they need for maturation: play. The kind of playing you probably remember, when kids ran around inventing games, arguing, laughing.

Peter Gray likes to say that when adults and kids are together, the adults are the adults, and the kids are kids. But when there are no adults around, the kids *become the adults*. They're the ones who have to figure out how to make the bike ramp or explain Monopoly to a bunch of seven-year-olds.

As adults became ever-present in kids' lives, that kind of free play was replaced by organized activities, or by coming home and hopping on electronics. For rich kids and poor, these shifts meant that afternoons were no longer a vast swath of free time to come up with things to do. They became a lot more like school, with an adult teaching a skill or sport, or with children sitting in front of a screen.

Kids playing travel baseball might look pretty similar to kids playing a sandlot game, but the ones playing on their own are doing a whole lot more. They have to figure out who plays which position, whether someone's cheating, and what to do about Zach's little brother, who keeps running onto the field. What looks deceptively simple — literally, child's play! — is actually full of lessons about compromise, communication, collaboration — even adjudication. And if the kids are bored, they can say, "Let's change the rules!" — necessitating new ideas and buy-in from the group, skills key to entrepreneurship and leadership. All of this is quite useful for being a citizen living in a democracy, too.

"Nothing we do, no amount of toys we buy or 'quality time' or special training we give our children, can compensate for the freedom we take away," Gray writes in his book *Free to Learn*. "The things that children learn through their own initiatives, in free play, cannot be taught in other ways."

Play has always been the way that kids have learned to solve their differences and get along. So you can see what might happen if kids barely have a chance to do this anymore because an adult is always intervening. You can see how kids might come to expect someone in authority to swoop in to fix things and make them feel better. And if that sounds suspiciously like cancel culture — demanding someone step in to make a problem just go away — you can also see how a lack of free play can lead to a lack of free speech and free thought.

It can also lead to an erosion of mental health. As Jonathan Haidt likes to explain, some things are fragile: Drop a wine glass, it breaks. Some things are resilient: Drop a ball, it bounces back, good as new. But some things are, to use Nassim Nicholas Taleb's phrase, *anti-fragile*: They get stronger when they encounter stress. The immune system needs to encounter germs. Bones and muscles need to encounter resistance. And kids?

Kids are built to encounter the world, not shrink from it. To grow strong and learn to rebound, they need to experience some fear, confusion, setbacks, and frustration. Constant adult assistance — overprotection — turns kids into Bonsai trees. Trimming their roots, their very foundations, stops them from growing to their full glory. When we eliminate opportunities for kids to play on their own, when adults are in charge of every activity, kids don't get the practice they desperately need to become well-adjusted humans in a diverse civil society. Anxiety rates are soaring at least in part because children are

not learning the skills to actually deal with life's inevitable challenges, including ideas and behaviors that they don't like.

Nu?

We need to return to raising robust and resilient children. I don't blame today's parents for where we are — helicoptering is practically demanded of them. But if hovering and helping are how we got here, how do we find our way back? We start to undo the social, cultural, and even legal interventions that have become our way of life over the past generation or two.

We need to consciously start taking care not to help kids when they can help themselves. We need to *not* assume that all downturns are disasters for them. We need to recognize the great value of unsupervised playtime and lavish it on kids as if it's tutoring. We need to let children flail and fail a little more, to develop some emotional calluses.

And then, as they get older, if there's a book, idea, or speaker that they find unsettling, we need to encourage them to grapple with the content — and their own reaction to it. We need to tell young people that we expect them to engage, to debate, to push through.

That means the adults in charge have to stop enabling — even ennobling — fragility. University presidents should be championing free speech and canceling cancellations. Editors and publishers and CEOs should do the same.

Shielding needs to be seen for what it is: stunting. Harm comes not from listening to ideas that challenge our kids' — or our own — worldview, but from failing to build the psychological and intellectual curiosity and agility that citizens in a diverse democracy desperately need.

Our assertion at Let Grow is that as we trust kids with some old-fashioned freedom, responsibility, and exposure to everyday life without a minder, their spiking anxiety levels will go down. Their tolerance for risk and discomfort will go up. Parents' confidence in their children will increase, too, because they'll see them doing all sorts of new things — even slicing their own bagels.

We've started to develop some resources that can be helpful to parents, kids, and schools. We offer schools a homework assignment, The Let Grow Project, that tells students to "go home and do something new on your own," gently pushing parents to step back and watch their kids finally walk to the park or run an errand. Our Play Club program encourages schools to stay open for mixed-age, device-free, before-or-after-school free play. An adult is on premises, but they don't organize the games or solve the spats, so the kids learn how to do this themselves. Our "Think for Yourself" essay contest asks high schoolers to write about a time they changed their minds, stood up for an unpopular idea, or learned something from someone they disagreed with. More than 5,000 students enter every year, vying for scholarship money and a chance to attract the attention of major media publishers. And we are re-normalizing and even re-legalizing childhood freedom by working to redefine childhood neglect as putting your kids in serious danger — not simply taking your eyes off them. Thus we are enshrining "reasonable childhood independence" into law. Utah, Texas, Oklahoma, and Colorado have all passed such laws with bipartisan, and often unanimous, support. We expect many more states to follow.

By allowing kids to experience, at last, the thrill that comes with overcoming rather than avoiding obstacles, they start to realize their resilience. Vaccinated against the fear of failure, they don't demand excessive protection. Conditioned by play to make things happen and try out new ideas, they don't passively await micromanagement. And encouraged to think for themselves, they engage. Our colleges, companies, and country all reap the rewards.

The kids themselves? They discover they don't need another trophy, because now they've got something better: a chance to spread their wings and fly. ✳

OLIVIA EVE GROSS

The Decline of Civil Discourse: Will the Next Generation Speak Freely?

HEN SAPIR invited me to write an essay on "cancel culture" at today's universities, I was reluctant to accept. Why? Because I was afraid that I would run the risk of being, well, canceled. But as an ardent advocate of free speech and the open exchange of ideas, I decided I had to practice what I preached. Let the clicks and cliques fall where they may.

As a high-school student, I thought cancel culture existed solely in the domain of celebrities and newsmakers, broadcast and social media, consumer brands and large corporations. I first became aware of the phenomenon in its original context: A television show was canceled in response to a backlash after its star made an abhorrent comment. In another case, a product-endorsement contract was canceled ahead of a public outcry over the spokesperson's reported behavior. As similar cases became more common, I assumed that cancellations took place only in the realm of the famous.

Then I went to college.

At the start of my first year at the University of Chicago, I learned that cancel culture had infiltrated campus life. Students were being shunned for voicing an unpopular view in class. Or sent into social exile over a harmless pun. Or shamed for asking a question simply because they were of the "wrong" identity for the subject matter. My campus wasn't unique — if anything, UChicago did more than almost any other university to defend principles of free speech. Friends at other universities recounted similar anecdotes.

This revelation was as bewildering as it was upsetting. The fundamental mission of a liberal-arts education is to promote diverse perspectives, thoughtful debate, intellectual growth, and, ideally, classmate camaraderie in the shared experience of it all. My university does a lot to support this objective. But students themselves are now stifling the university experience, using new forms of cyber-bullying that have terrible consequences for the targeted person and transform the campus community at large in intellectually crippling ways.

My first exposure to on-campus cancel culture began with a lunchtime conversation. A student at my table was describing the effects of gentrification on the neighborhood next to the one in which she grew up. A student at an adjacent table overheard the discussion. Rather than join in, she secretly recorded it. She then posted the video online with a caption deriding a "rich girl" for "talking gentrification," even though the speaker expressed views that, as later became evident, were consistent with the shamer's own opinions on the matter. What's more, the student who was recorded attends college on a scholarship. She isn't rich.

After the video was posted, the "rich girl" became a pariah. Students glared disdainfully as she walked by, acquaintances turned

their backs, and classmates gathered outside the lecture hall disbanded when she attempted to join them.

This kind of thing is not uncommon. Students can be targeted for something they said in a classroom or a social setting, censured online, and suddenly ostracized — or even accosted in person. And such character assassinations are usually committed in a "run-and-gun" fashion. A shamer quickly launches the attack via a mobile app or website and then moves on. Others see it, internalize the accusation, and also move on, now harboring and spreading scorn for the target. If cancel culture seems scary in professional settings, among (ostensible) adults, just imagine what it's like on campus: The targeted person can be a roommate, a friend, an acquaintance, or a classmate. Even if it's a stranger, the victims of campus cancellations are more visible, accessible, and therefore vulnerable to mistreatment than cancel-culture victims beyond the campus.

Then there is social media, which amplifies the harm of cancellation beyond the initial ambush, as everybody piles on online. Because the shamer's social-media posting can be anonymous and disappear automatically, the target usually has no chance to respond directly with an explanation, a defense, or a correction. Even when such responses are posted, those already biased against the student are rarely interested in considering the other side of the story.

Worse are accusations that remain forever in the internet ether, ready to resurface with a simple Google search. We now live in a grim era where students face potential life sentences — whose penalties include social ostracism or academic and professional rejection — based on allegations that might be distorted or baseless. Even when they are true, they are usually in response to things the student wrote or said that were immature, ill-considered, or easy to misconstrue — these are young people, after all. Rather than serving as a learning opportunity, with the incident forgiven and soon forgotten, these mistakes become a digitized mark of Cain. It's terrifying.

Devastating to the individual, cancellation also damages

If cancel culture seems scary in professional settings, among (ostensible) adults, just imagine what it's like on campus: The targeted person can be a roommate, a friend, an acquaintance, or a classmate.

the academic environment. Fear of being canceled has a chilling effect on students in the classroom, extracurricular pursuits, social events, and everyday interactions on campus. Students have become hesitant to offer an opinion, pose a question, or take the other side of an argument — whether in earnest or just to explore an issue — lest they say something "wrong." I count myself among them. I often raise my hand to weigh in on an engaging seminar topic, then quickly self-censor, lower my arm, and sheepishly slouch back in my chair. It isn't worth the risk.

This dynamic takes on a life of its own. The shamers see that shaming works, so they become more aggressive, pushing for greater conformity. The rest of us are increasingly fearful, afraid to deviate from a norm whose boundaries, arbiters, and enforcement are shrouded in mystery and ever-shifting. It's like navigating a minefield overlaid with trip wires: You gingerly tiptoe around the mines to keep on the correct path but still risk brushing against a hidden thread that triggers a blast of contempt.

The more that students are fearful about venturing beyond their comfort zones and cliques, the more the educational experience is degraded. Opinions aren't challenged in classrooms or common spaces the way they should be. Trust between students erodes. The great banquet of ideas that a world-class academic experience is

meant to provide deteriorates into a diet of flavorless clichés and low-calorie conversations. It's not what college is supposed to be.

This situation is particularly disconcerting to me as a great-granddaughter of Holocaust survivors. I was raised to recognize and speak out against propaganda, groupthink, and public shaming. As a child studying Talmud, I came to appreciate the questioning form of its text, its embodiment of the principles that opposing views are entitled to receive full consideration and that people can agreeably disagree. These are the roots of my passion for constitutional law, especially its core tenets of free expression, due process and equal rights.

So how can cancel culture on campus be countered?

Outspoken contrarian voices by people in leadership positions — including, quite admirably, former University of Chicago President Robert Zimmer — are commendable, inspiring, helpful, and necessary. But they alone are insufficient to remedy the kind of deep-seated problem that a pervasive campus culture presents. They are, frankly, too few and too remote. Frightened students silently cheering them on won't change anything. Students who want a different, more robust, richer intellectual experience need to stop whispering among themselves. They need to speak out and come to one another's aid when anyone is attacked for speech that deserves dialogue and certainly is within the protections of the First Amendment.

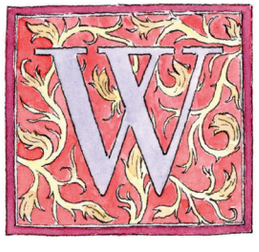
The response to campus cancel culture will have to come from the ground up — from the students themselves. Speaking up, sharing opinions, debating ideas, and challenging prevailing norms must become not only allowable, but expected, respected, and rewarded. I don't mean this as an accommodation of unmistakable bigotry or as an incitement to violence. But the "Overton window" of acceptable discourse needs to become considerably wider. And that, in turn, will require cultivating the skills of listening closely and giving others the benefit of the doubt, practicing agreeable disagreement, and fostering constructive dissent. In short, we need to replace cancel culture with what might be called "curiosity culture."

This won't be easy. As students, we are busy enough getting through school, planning for our summers, and thinking about what we want to do after graduation. And it can certainly seem that the rewards might not be worth the risk. Even as I finish this essay, I harbor serious doubts about hitting the "send" button. There may be consequences, and that makes me uncomfortable. But the people who have made me the person I am keep telling me that it's my turn to convert my fundamental beliefs into action.

They are right. It's time to raise my hand. ✳

DAVID FRENCH

When Right Cancels Right



HEN YOU HEAR the phrase "cancel culture," what immediately comes to mind? If you follow the online discourse, you're likely to think it's one of the intolerant products of "Wokeness." It's the culture of the new Left asserting its dominance in the academy, the media, and pop culture.

There's no question that left-wing intolerance is real. There's no question that progressive shame campaigns have destroyed reputations and careers. But cancel culture isn't exclusively left-wing. Though it's difficult to quantify, it may not even be mainly left-wing. There is a cancel culture on the Right.

In August 2021, my friend Daniel Darling appeared on MSNBC's *Morning Joe* to discuss why he chose to get the Covid vaccine. He was there to discuss a piece he wrote in *USA Today* called "Why, as a Christian and an American, I got the Covid vaccine." In neither the piece nor the television appearance did he condemn Americans who made a different choice. In fact, he went out of his way to note that institutions had failed America, and he refused to shame anyone who declined to get the vaccine.

Within days, he was out of a job. Darling was the national spokesperson for National Religious Broadcasters (NRB), an "international association of Christian communicators." Darling's sin was violating an alleged policy of neutrality on the vaccine (an organization official had previously praised Covid vaccines as "stunningly effective," but the NRB president later wrote that the organization "stays neutral"). Darling lost his position after refusing to accept a demotion and sign a statement admitting to insubordination.

America's conservative Christian broadcasters are keenly worried about cancel culture. Spend any time watching or listening to Christian media, and you'll hear an outpouring of concern about Woke censorship. Yet the NRB was all too willing to cancel one of its own.

Let's turn to another conservative institution that's focused on progressive intolerance — Fox News. My *Dispatch* colleague Chris Stirewalt worked at Fox for a decade and was a key part of the team that called election results. That's the team that called Arizona for Joe Biden, disrupted Trump's victory narrative on Election Night, and infuriated the former president and his supporters.

In his new book, *Broken News: Why the Media Rage Machine Divides America and How to Fight Back*, he writes, "I got canned after very vocal and very online viewers — including the then-president of the United States — became furious when our Decision Desk was the first to project that Joe Biden would win the former GOP stronghold of Arizona in 2020."

Fox disputes Chris's story. It told the *New York Times*, "Chris Stirewalt's quest for relevance knows no bounds." Yet the termination reeks of cancellation. It fits the classic pattern. A public figure infuriates a segment of an organization's base, and the organization reacts by terminating the offending employee.

Sometimes, however, cancel culture doesn't require an actual

termination. Instead, relentless cruelty can make life so intolerable within institutions that its victims thus choose to leave. And so it was with Beth Moore and Russell Moore (no relation), two of the most prominent members of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), the nation's largest Protestant Christian denomination.

They had both publicly opposed Donald Trump, the candidate of choice for the overwhelming majority of Southern Baptists, and they both were outspoken about condemning sexual abuse within the SBC. They demanded reform and accountability. And they endured years-long campaigns of scorn and harassment.

By 2021, they were done. They publicly left the denomination. In a letter that Russell Moore wrote more than a year before he resigned his position as head of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, the SBC's public-policy arm, he described being "attacked with the most vicious guerrilla tactics."

If you think conservative cancel culture is reserved for policing conservative institutions, think again. It's leaking into the academy as well. The Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE) maintains a "scholars under fire" database that recorded 537 attempts since 2015 to target scholars for their constitutionally protected speech.

There's no question that the Left leads the way in academic cancel culture. Most attempted cancellations have come from the Left—a statistic that makes sense when one considers that the American academy is an overwhelmingly left-wing institution. But while fewer come from the Right, they are responsible for most of the cancellation attempts that included violent threats.

That last part is crucial. While threats of violence and acts of violence are hardly confined to the Right, they are spreading across the Right. Writing in *The Dispatch*, Georgetown University professor Paul Miller compiled some deeply disturbing data:

> Death threats to congressmen doubled by May of last year, compared to the year before. "These are not one-off incidents," according to *Vox*, "surveys have found that 17 percent of America's local election officials and nearly 12 percent of its public health workforce have been threatened due to their jobs during the 2020 election cycle and Covid-19 pandemic," respectively. Reuters tracked more than 850 individual threats against local election workers by Trump supporters last year, up from essentially zero in previous elections.

If you think conservative cancel culture is reserved for policing conservative institutions, think again. It's leaking into the academy as well.

In some instances, the threats are so pervasive and terrifying that they fundamentally alter the lives of their victims. In June, an election worker named Ruby Freeman testified before the January 6 Committee and described what it was like to find herself at the center of a right-wing conspiracy theory that centered around false claims of mishandled ballots in Fulton County, Georgia.

"I've lost my name," she said. "And I've lost my reputation. I've lost my sense of security—all because a group of people…scapegoat[ed] me and my daughter, Shaye, to push their own lies about how the presidential election was stolen."

Even at the most grassroots level, a culture of intolerance pervades the Right. I'm thinking of a good friend, a longtime Republican and staunch Trump supporter who suddenly realized he could no longer remain a county GOP chairman simply because he had publicly condemned the violence on January 6. He didn't even condemn Trump. Simply condemning the attack itself was too much for his grassroots GOP friends. He had no choice but to resign.

"Cancel culture" is a term that's famously hard to define. There's

> While there are certainly examples of Right canceling Left, and Left canceling Right, the reality is that when out-group opponents attack, allies tend to rally in support.

an element that's reminiscent of the late Supreme Court justice Potter Stewart's frustratingly vague definition of obscenity — "I know it when I see it." When we hear about a reasonable person facing extreme social sanction or termination for expressing mainstream views, we immediately think "cancel culture."

I'm partial to Yale professor Nicholas Christakis's definition of the term. In a Twitter dialogue, he described cancel culture as "1) forming a mob, to 2) seek to get someone fired (or disproportionately punished), for 3) statements within [the] Overton window."

There were "extra points," he said, if the "'mob' willfully misinterprets" the original statement or "narrows" the window "beyond all recognition."

The term "cancel culture" is distinct from conventional legal censorship — the kind of government action you see in university speech codes or public-school-library book bans. Instead, it tends to refer to excessive and punitive *private* action. It's when individual citizens try to close the marketplace of ideas.

The Overton window is a common online term for what is deemed the legitimate range of public discourse. Cancel culture enrages and alarms Americans not because they're particularly focused on letting *anyone* say *anything* without consequence, but because they're afraid that even the most mainstream of conversations can now trigger an intolerable online ordeal or perhaps even derail their careers.

Outright white supremacy and explicit antisemitism are outside the Overton window. As a result, few people weep when an antisemitic, Holocaust-denying, racist such as Nick Fuentes loses access to Twitter. But think of the cancel-culture examples above. Is vaccine advocacy beyond the pale? How about opposition to Donald Trump? Or making an early, accurate call of election results? Is it too much to condemn the MAGA riot on January 6?

Why is it that segments of the American Right (and Left) react against even mainstream speech with extraordinary ferocity?

The answer lies in the dynamics of political polarization, but with an important twist. Note that in many of the cancel-culture incidents above, the cancellation is fratricidal. They represent Right-on-Right aggression, with radicals taking aim at perceived disloyalty. Likewise, many of the most famous left-wing cancellations were aimed at fellow leftists.

For example, the progressive data analyst David Shor lost his job as a response to left-wing anger when he noted that race riots tended to diminish support for Democratic candidates. When Keith Christiansen, a curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, resigned after posting a defense of monuments on Instagram, he was hardly a Fox News conservative. He'd been at the Met for 43 years.

When I was researching my book *Divided We Fall* — which makes the case that American polarization is so profound that it risks splitting the nation — one of my most illuminating conversations was with Rachel Brown, executive director of Over Zero, an organization founded to study and prevent "identity-based violence." Rachel told me that in times of extreme polarization, radicals often target so-called in-group moderates with greater ferocity than that reserved for the other side.

The reasons make sense, on reflection. First, in-group moderates represent a far more immediate threat to any radical enterprise than out-group opponents. The in-group moderate is often speaking to the same constituency as the radical, and the battle for hearts and minds of a party or an institution is immediate and tangible.

Second, in-group moderates are vulnerable in a way that out-group opponents are not. While there are certainly examples of Right canceling Left, and Left canceling Right, the reality is that when out-group opponents attack, allies tend to rally in support. Thus, as we've seen, a conservative can be "canceled" by the Left yet see his power and stature only rise on the Right.

But when Right cancels Right? Or Left cancels Left? Then, the danger to your reputation and career is far starker. The Left won't truly embrace conservatives who remain conservatives, and the Right won't embrace progressives who remain progressives, so when in-group moderates face persecution from their own tribe, the result can be a sense of overpowering isolation and vulnerability.

The pressure to conform or to switch sides entirely can be overwhelming. We are, after all, built for community, and when we lose one community, it's entirely natural to seek out another — often as an act of sheer self-preservation.

Third, in-group moderates often trigger a visceral sense of betrayal. On the Right, terms such as "RINO" or "grifter" signal that a person has divided loyalties, that he can't fully be trusted or that he's ready to sell out his friends to the highest bidder, or for a dash of elite approval.

The result is a toxic environment in which internal debate is stifled, dissent is greeted with outrage, and increasing numbers of individuals feel as if their careers and public reputations depend on public conformity to radical demands. Yes there are those who possess a public profile big enough that they're able to lose a job and land on their professional feet — like Dan Darling, Chris Stirewalt, Russell Moore, and Beth Moore — but often at great personal cost.

Those who don't have the same profile, meanwhile, live with a heightened sense of vulnerability. They know that even their most precious relationships are at stake. Fathers will turn on sons. Friends will turn on friends.

Moreover, one can feel at the mercy of forces beyond one's control. The more polarized our politics, the less tolerance for internal dissent. And who among us has the power to depolarize our politics? The end result is a collective-action problem. Individuals make rational decisions either to fall silent or fall in line. After all, is it really worth the pain to speak up? Especially if you can't see your words making an impact?

But the collective effect of those countless individual decisions is plain to see — on both the Left and the Right. Millions of more moderate voices step back. The radical voices surge forward, and even though most Americans are deeply discontented with our polarized discourse, their concerns remain unvoiced, and unvoiced concerns are by definition unheard. The radicals reign.

What is the solution to right-wing cancel culture? It's the same as the solution to left-wing intolerance. Reform has to come from within. Right has to reform Right, and Left has to reform Left. And that means that the in-group moderates have to find their voices. They have to confront the scorn and the threats and respectfully but firmly make their dissent known.

Cancel culture feeds on its own victories. It is drained by its defeats. There is no better way to end intimidation than by refusing to be intimidated. The collective action has to reverse — away from individual retreat and toward individual advance. There is no path toward free expression and a healthy discourse that doesn't require personal courage.

There are few challenges more difficult than confronting friends, but absent those respectful confrontations, the tolerant voices will fall silent, and the public square will be lost to the radicals who are tearing this country apart. ✳

SAMANTHA HARRIS

Practicing What We Preach

NE OF THE HARDEST challenges for a free-speech advocate is to hold to your principles when speech you encounter hurts you to your core. That's where the rubber meets the road. As an observant Jew and a committed supporter of Israel, I personally struggle the most with my own reflexive "hey, you can't say that!" reaction when it comes to antisemitic and anti-Israel speech, which often overlap. Those are the moments when I most understand the urge to cancel speech and speakers whose odious ideas feel, in real ways, to be personally threatening.

Ultimately, though, I believe deeply in the right to free speech — including deeply offensive speech — because I believe that it promotes freedom and tolerance. Censoring words and ideas because they are hateful gives them far more power than allowing them to be aired in the marketplace of ideas. No one captures this idea more eloquently than author and scholar Jonathan Rauch, who argues, "The answer to bias and prejudice is not to try to legislate bias and prejudice out of existence or to drive them underground, but to pit biases and prejudices against each other and make them fight in the open. That is how, in the crucible of rational criticism, superstition and moral error are burned away."

While Rauch focuses on the importance of unfettered debate and discussion, including hate speech, to the struggle for gay rights, we can apply the same ideas to antisemitic and anti-Israel speech. Punishing such speech can have the unintended consequence of strengthening its impact.

Aryeh Neier, whose family fled from Nazi Germany to England when he was an infant, was the executive director of the ACLU when that organization defended the right of a Nazi group to hold a demonstration in Skokie, Illinois, which at the time was home to a large number of Holocaust survivors. In a 2016 interview, Neier explained that the efforts to censor the Nazis' planned demonstration gave them much more publicity than the march itself: "When they finally were permitted to march in Skokie, they never turned up.... And then the little group of Chicago Nazis seemed to dissolve and wasn't heard from again."

As for why he believed that the Chicago Nazis were entitled to free speech, Neier wrote: "It is dangerous to let the Nazis have their say. But it is more dangerous by far to destroy the laws that deny anyone the power to silence Jews if Jews should need to cry out to each other and the world for succor."

Research illuminates a clear gap between support for the idea of free speech and support for its reality, which requires individuals to contend with speech that may personally offend them. This seems to be increasingly true among college students. A recent Knight Foundation study found that 84 percent of college students agreed that "free speech rights are critical in our democracy," yet only 59 percent of them agreed that "college campuses should allow students to be exposed to all types of speech even if they may find

it offensive or biased." Between 2016 and 2022, the percentage of students who felt that free-speech rights in America were secure declined from 73 to 47 percent, while the percentage of those saying that their institution stifled free speech rose to 65 percent from 54. Without a culture that robustly supports the right to speak freely and even offensively, the principle will wither away.

An important corollary of free speech on college campuses is academic freedom, which the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) defines as "the freedom of a teacher or researcher in higher education to investigate and discuss the issues in his or her academic field, and to teach or publish findings without interference from political figures, boards of trustees, donors, or other entities." Most universities — even private institutions not legally bound by the First Amendment — have policies guaranteeing faculty members the right to academic freedom.

Despite these alleged protections, faculty face an increasing risk of punishment for speech and even for research that conflicts with the dominant ideology at their institutions. A March 2022 report from the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression found that in 2021 there were 111 attempts to target faculty for their constitutionally protected speech and research, compared with just 30 such attempts in 2015. And these are just the efforts that were public enough to document. My experience as an attorney who defends free speech in higher education leads me to suspect that the actual number is much higher than that, since many of these cases are resolved quietly before they become public.

Students voicing support for Israel on campus are suffering mightily in the current environment, as the frequent targets of efforts to shut speech down. Rather than responding by engaging in similar tactics to prohibit anti-Israel speech, it is precisely these students who should be standing up for the principle of free speech. They,

> Research illuminates a clear gap between support for the idea of free speech and support for its reality, which requires individuals to contend with speech that may personally offend them.

and we, must resist the hypocrisy of "free speech for me, but not for thee."

Attempts to shut these students down are by now well known. Supporters of Israel are demonized and marginalized, sometimes banished from membership in campus organizations. Those who serve in student government have been harassed and even impeached. The U.S. Department of Education is currently investigating a complaint from Rose Ritch, a Jewish student at the University of Southern California, that the school ignored hostility toward Jewish students in violation of federal anti-discrimination laws. Ritch had resigned as vice president of USC's student government, citing health and safety concerns after relentless bullying over her support for Israel. Similarly, in 2021, a Jewish member of the student government at Tufts University faced an impeachment campaign over his support for Israel, while other university student governments have refused to recognize pro-Israel student organizations. Events featuring pro-Israel speakers or viewpoints are routinely disrupted at universities around the country, including the University of Virginia, the University of Texas, the University of Chicago, UC Irvine, and many more.

Defenders of illiberal and disruptive efforts like these often justify their behavior with the principle of "anti-normalization," which argues that even engaging in debate and discussion with

There simply is no principled way to support pro-Israel speech without also tolerating anti-Israel speech.

supporters of Israel should be disallowed because it legitimizes pro-Israel positions. This type of principle is simply incompatible with a free society.

Those of us who believe in freedom and who defend the right of pro-Israel students to express their views must take the difficult tack of also arguing for the very same rights for those who criticize and even condemn Israel. If the principle of free speech is to survive, it has to be authentically applied to all sides. Unfortunately, several high-profile incidents in recent years suggest that pro-Israel students and their allies are failing the free-speech test, calling for censorship and cancellation of ideas they find offensive and dehumanizing.

One of the most high-profile cases was that of Professor Steven Salaita. In 2014, the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) withdrew its job offer to Salaita after he posted offensive tweets about Israel that drew the attention of UIUC donors, students, and parents. UIUC's justification for withdrawing Salaita's job offer — after he had already given up his previous job and moved his family — was that the school could not tolerate "personal and disrespectful words or actions that demean and abuse either viewpoints themselves or those who express them." Salaita sued the university and ultimately obtained a large settlement. This did not, however, prompt UIUC to distance itself from the broader, illiberal speech policy it had established in order to rescind Salaita's job offer.

Some prominent supporters of Israel in academia supported UIUC's decision. Among the most surprising was Cary Nelson, the former president of the AAUP, one of the principle defenders of professors' academic freedom. Critics accused Nelson of hypocrisy, arguing that "he would not say the same thing about an Israeli making statements that were hyperbolic about Palestinians." (In fairness to Nelson, the AAUP itself has also been accused of hypocrisy on issues of academic freedom at times.)

Supporters of Israel have continued to demand that Salaita be treated as a pariah. This past spring, Jewish students at Virginia Tech demanded that the university rescind a speaking invitation to him, claiming that the university "failed to provide a safe and inclusive environment for minority students by inviting that speaker."

This approach is a mistake. Pro-Israel students (and the organizations and funders who often support their efforts) must avoid falling into the same censorship traps that are so often used to try to silence and deplatform them. If they want their own views to be safely expressed and heard, they must stand up for the principle of free speech itself. Once a policy like UIUC's is in place, it's only a matter of time before it is used to silence pro-Israel voices, which will be accused of being disrespectful of the Palestinian perspective. There simply is no principled way to support pro-Israel speech without also tolerating anti-Israel speech.

While many Jewish students and their supporters were outraged when schools such as Tufts and Williams refused to recognize pro-Israel student groups, too many of them stood silent — or even cheered — when Fordham University refused to recognize a chapter of Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP). While Fordham's student government had voted to approve the group, the dean of students reversed the decision, stating that he "cannot support an organization whose sole purpose is advocating political goals of a specific group, and against a specific country" and that "the Israeli-Palestinian conflict… often leads to polarization rather than dialogue."

The dean of students' decision led to a lengthy legal battle. SJP sued, and a New York State trial court ordered Fordham to

recognize the group; this was then overturned by an appellate court. During that legal battle, attorneys from some Jewish groups, including the Zionist Organization of America and StandWithUs, filed amicus briefs in support of Fordham.

Distress over the prevalence of antisemitic speech (and much anti-Zionist speech is also antisemitic) on campus is completely understandable. But it's also the case that the Fordham dean's rationale for refusing to recognize SJP — "an organization whose sole purpose is advocating political goals of a specific group, and against a specific country" — could just as easily be used to deny recognition to certain pro-Israel student groups.

So why this blind spot? In part, the impulse to demand that antisemitic speech be shut down comes from an appropriate sense that universities tolerate awful speech about Jews and Israel that they would never tolerate about other minority groups — and that this itself is a symptom of antisemitism. Defending the firing of Salaita, for example, Liel Leibovitz wrote in *Tablet* that "anyone still wondering whether Salaita ought to have a teaching job should play the parlor game of reading his tweets and replacing references to Jews and Israelis with blacks, gays, or women."

I think Leibovitz's hunch is right — that those who rushed to Salaita's defense would likely have been the first to call for his ouster if his speech had been about any minority group other than Jews. Professor Judith Butler, for example, signed a letter demanding that UIUC reinstate Salaita, but she has been on the record elsewhere as suggesting that the right to free speech should take a back seat to "Title IX, the Equal Protection Clause," and even "the Berkeley Principles of Community."

There may very well be a double standard at play. But even this cannot allow us to stray from our principles. We must oppose and call out double standards while calling for *more* speech to be permissible, not less — in other words, standing up loudly in defense of the right to free speech for ourselves, and for those who criticize and even insult us. If we cannot stand on principle, then we lose credibility when we ask others to do so. And we erode the very values that will ensure our own rights are there when we most need them. ✳

DEPARTURES

Shivim Panim

with

RABBA YAFFA EPSTEIN
& RABBI DAVID WOLPE

NOTE FROM THE PUBLISHER: One of the hallmarks of Sapir is its connection between theory and practice. We ask our authors not simply to make arguments but also to offer policy prescriptions. In Shivim Panim (referencing the 70 faces of the Torah), we ask two leading Jewish thinkers to apply Jewish wisdom to ethical dilemmas faced in Jewish communal life. The dilemmas are real, as are the people who pose them. We invite you to send your own queries to us at info@sapirjournal.org.

Rabba Yaffa Epstein serves as the senior scholar and educator in residence at the Jewish Education Project.

Rabbi David Wolpe is the Max Webb Senior Rabbi of Sinai Temple in Los Angeles and the author, most recently, of *David: The Divided Heart*. He is a senior adviser at Maimonides Fund.

I am a foundation leader. The chief executive of one of the organizations we support is the subject of a #MeToo-related whisper network (as distinguished from a full and public news story). The rumors could be true, but there is no real way to adjudicate it, and no actual evidence has been brought forward. What is our responsibility to investigate, and to respond to or push back on the allegations, as the case may be?

Rabbi Wolpe: Several important questions have to be addressed. How serious are the allegations? How credible are they — given the individual, his or her opportunities, the reliability of the accuser, the past work history of the accused? What sort of damage might befall the organizations involved if the allegations prove true and remain unaddressed? How feasible might the investigation itself prove to be? How disruptive? Above all, is there an ethical way to handle the situation that neither ignores the allegations and pain of the potential victim, nor reinforces the charges in a way that might besmirch the name of an innocent person?

An important variable is whether the individual is aware of the accusation, and whether he or she has responded. The Shulchan Aruch (Even HaEzer 2:4), following the Rambam, says that if someone accuses a family of illegitimacy and they do not respond, one should be wary of marrying into that family. In other words, not responding to insulting rumors about oneself might be taken as a confession of culpability. It also preserves the Rama's disagreement: He argues that sometimes there is wisdom in silence,

while at other times, silence is understood to be consent. Today, people are often concerned about speaking up because the legal questions are so complicated and difficult to untangle. They may even be getting legal or PR advice to stay silent.

According to Maimonides (Hilchot Deot 7:1), "A person who collects gossip about a colleague violates a prohibition as [Leviticus 19:16] states: 'Do not go around gossiping among your people.' ... [I]t is a severe sin." And the anonymous book of Jewish ethical teachings Orchot Tzadikim (25:7) elaborates by prohibiting the assent to gossip: "If one who hears gossip endorses what he has heard, then he is just as guilty as the gossiper." An investigation may be required to quell the insinuations, but there should also be a culture of not gleefully promoting rumors.

In an unforgiving age, it is important to decide as well, perhaps in advance, whether there is a redemptive process if the accusation proves true. Can the person apologize, go to therapy, be given another chance? These days we have a tendency to lead everyone, whether monster or merely maladroit, to the guillotine. As Jewish organizations, we should do better.

Rabba Epstein: Whisper networks are commonly understood to mean lists or social-media postings, often anonymous, created to warn others about individuals who are dangerous and harmful and should be avoided. These warnings can include a range of offenses from inappropriate speech to sexual harassment, unwanted sexual advances, sexual abuse, and even rape. How should Jewish organizations and their funders relate to these whispers when they surface?

First, we need to examine the reasons such lists exist. Whisper networks are a tool of those who have less power in a given situation and in society in general. They are an avenue for people to tell the truth about their experiences and to bring this truth to the attention of those who might otherwise not listen. They provide victims with a protective service, something society often

In an unforgiving age, it is important to decide, perhaps in advance, whether there is a redemptive process if the accusation proves true. Can the person apologize, go to therapy, be given another chance?

does not offer them when they come forward. They push back against the strong taboo that still exists in many quarters around issues of sexual misconduct.

What does Jewish tradition have to teach us about rumors regarding inappropriate sexual behavior?

On the one hand, whispers can be corrosive and destroy lives and reputations. They contain anonymous accusations: uncorroborated, unsubstantiated, and likely uninvestigated. As Rabbi Wolpe notes, Maimonides teaches us that we need to be extremely careful when speaking negatively about individuals, even when the things said about them are true. How much more so when we are dealing with rumors!

But there are also Jewish texts stating that not only are we allowed to share these rumors, but that we actually have an *obligation* to do so, to protect more people from falling victim to dangerous individuals. (The Collegiate Moot Beit Din, supported in part by Maimonides Fund, produced an extensive source packet on this topic in 2019.)

There is a remarkable story in the Babylonian Talmud Moed Katan 17a of a brilliant young Torah scholar who had developed a bad reputation based on anonymous rumors about his sexual conduct. Rav Yehuda, the prominent sage of the time, finds himself

in a similar predicament to our questioner's: On the one hand, the accused is a great scholar who is very much needed by the community. On the other hand, what is at stake is nothing less than *Hillul HaShem*, the very desecration of God's name. Rav Yehuda humbly consults with another rabbi, who explains that we must hold religious leaders to the highest standards and that we cannot allow for any hint of scandal. And so, at great cost to the Beit Midrash and the community, Rav Yehuda excommunicated the young Torah scholar.

This story teaches us how seriously we must take rumors about sexually inappropriate behavior and the high standards we must set for our leaders, especially those who teach Torah. And yet, this story is also problematic, in that there is no mention of due process — Rav Yehuda moves straight to excommunication.

Funders and Jewish organizations should act like Rav Yehuda, seeing themselves as protectors of victims and — through protecting these victims — protectors of the Divine. And we should go further than Rav Yehuda did and also create due processes that protect the accused.

We must face taboos about sexual harassment and assault head-on.

We must establish appropriate protocols that ensure victims can come forward safely, and we should have designated staff people who have undergone the necessary training to handle these complaints.

We must take every rumor seriously and investigate it thoroughly and professionally — utilizing either in-house human resources or availing ourselves of the many organizations currently acting to make Jewish organizations safe. We will not always need to have a full-scale investigation, but we should seek professional counsel about what steps are necessary in a given situation.

Investigating all claims allows us to hold both truths — taking the pain and suffering of victims seriously and treating the subject of the whispers fairly. This is how we protect the Divine Image present within all of us.

How do we deal with pressure to cancel a speaker at an event or conference based on claims by a group of stakeholders that the speaker's ideas pose a threat and cause harm? In particular: My diverse synagogue has been asked to invite an activist from a Jewish LGBTQ+ organization to talk about the importance of "gender-affirming care" for children and teens who are experiencing gender dysphoria. We have also been asked to bring in a speaker to talk about whether the enormous recent increase in gender dysphoria, especially among adolescent girls, is at least in part a function of social contagion, and whether medical and surgical responses for children should be more heavily regulated. Both sides argue that the views of the speaker on the other side are causing literal harm to children and transgender people.

Rabbi Wolpe: Any speaker who promises first-order harm ("I exhort you to go out and hurt blond-haired people") should never be invited to speak. Short of that extreme, to the extent that is possible, I believe organizations should resist any attempt to legislate by polemical, political pitchforks.

When I was in eighth grade at Akiba Hebrew Academy (now Barrack Academy) in Philadelphia, my teacher brought in a Baptist preacher who said to us, in a kindly and sorrowful manner: "Boys and girls, you seem nice enough, but you are all going to hell." I imagine that today there would be calls for the heads of the teacher, the principal and — probably — the preacher. But this proved to be among the most important classes we had. It

Are Jews incapable of hearing varied political opinions? Have thousands of years of braving our way through hostile societies left us at the mercy of an ill-judged sentence?

expanded our understanding and, not surprisingly, reinforced our sense of pride in our Jewish identity.

Are Jews incapable of hearing varied political opinions? Have thousands of years of braving our way through hostile societies left us at the mercy of an ill-judged sentence? The robust do not cower.

Granted, questions about gender, LGBT, and trans issues are particularly sensitive. But some framing: First, the Talmud speaks in many places about complications of gender, including those born with both male and female sexual characteristics, those identified as one gender at birth and later identified as another, those with an ambiguous biological gender, and so on. We cannot evade those sections because they might offend. Indeed, they present an opening for more frank conversations about the various ways of being human. Second, the Talmud does not shy away from difficult deliberations: The schools of Hillel and Shammai even discussed whether it was preferable for humans to exist or to not exist — and the side arguing yes did not prevail (Eruvin 13b)! Surely such a conclusion could lead to despair and a sense of worthlessness.

In the case posed by the questioner: Either of the speakers may well say things that are wrong or hurtful. *But we are grappling with this together*. These questions are new, and they have hardly been adjudicated or fully settled, which is precisely why they remain controversial. In traditional communities, even discussions about women's rights are still considered scandalous and damaging. The only way forward is to hear the different arguments. You cannot know you are right until you have heard and refuted the best arguments against your views. The suppression of disagreement will not cure, help, or heal.

We need most of all to model this for our children, who will find themselves as adults in an uncensored world and who need to be prepared to hear opinions and ideas that will discomfit or challenge them. If words are too easily equated with harm, we will have a timorous and vapid discourse and will never move forward. Hearing uncomfortable ideas is one way we grow.

Rabba Epstein: The issue of gender identity and expression is an incredibly complex one. First and foremost, the Jewish community must recognize the very real mental health risks that trans and gender-nonconforming children are experiencing. The Trevor Project found that more than half of trans and nonbinary youth have seriously considered suicide in the past year. Protecting the vulnerable among us must be our first priority.

We can't fully explore the tension between protecting freedom of speech and condemning harmful speech here, but we can ask whether Jewish organizations have a responsibility to expose their constituents to ideas they find challenging and even repugnant.

The Mishna in Avot 2:14 provides a helpful framing. Rabbi Elazar states, "Be diligent in the study of the Torah and know how to answer an *Apikorus* [heretic]." This is actually quite a radical suggestion! Wouldn't we assume that students of Torah would be expected to run as far away as possible from heresy?

Maimonides says no. He emphasizes the beginning of the Mishna, which asserts that a person must study her tradition diligently to be able to distinguish between Torah and heresy, and he argues that we are obligated to study and deeply engage with ideas that are counter to our own beliefs. Rabbi Yitz Greenberg teaches that this Mishna is an argument for reasoned faith: "One should teach students by intelligently refuting the wrong views rather than

by training them to close their minds and reject wrong views out of conformity, obedience to authoritarian instruction, or ignorance and stereotype."

The Mishna is warning us against the dangers of deepening our echo chambers by engaging only with those people who believe what we believe. Instead, we must equip our followers with complexity, nuance, strength, and the capacity to engage in rigorous debate. What if Jewish organizations took on this challenge and saw themselves as responsible for exposing their constituents to ideas that are problematic?

Of course, this still raises the question of whether we need to invite speakers to present in person to our communities, or whether it is enough to engage with their ideas through books, articles, podcasts, or videos. While we have a duty to educate, we also have a duty to ensure that we are protecting our constituents from undue harm.

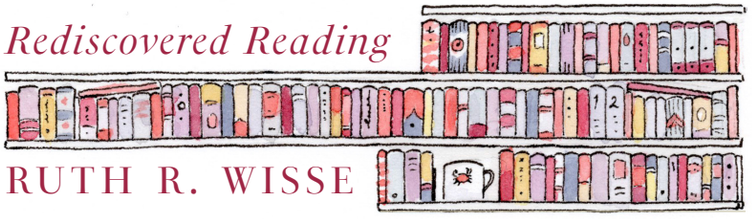
The rabbis of the Talmud knew this. When they were establishing the practice of public Torah reading (Babylonian Talmud Megillah 25a), they discussed whether they should leave out verses that contain challenging theological and moral ideas. They then categorized a long list of texts in three ways: those that can and should be read, those that should be read but not translated (i.e., not made accessible to the masses), and those that should be neither read nor translated. They thereby acknowledged that there are indeed times when a community may decide that content goes beyond the pale and should not be discussed in public forums.

We must ensure that any speaker we bring to our community understands the audience, has been briefed on their concerns and sensitivities of this community, and does not intend to cause harm or offense. No matter what views one holds, speakers we invite cannot be allowed to deny the experience of any members of our community.

The organizers should also set the educational tone long before the event. They can explain why they feel it is important to engage with a given speaker, while also explaining that they might not necessarily agree with every point being made. They should be communicative about what might be said and what might be deemed offensive or harmful. All of this allows people to choose to attend the event or opt out. The organizers should also consider how controversial speakers are introduced, and what work must be done with the community before and after the speakers present, perhaps providing facilitated conversations to help people express their views and get support as needed.

We must create communities of understanding, depth, and nuance that can approach complicated issues with intellectual honesty and rigor, while also supporting people through difficult, and even painful, conversations with sensitivity and care. ✳

Rediscovered Reading



RUTH R. WISSE

Isaac Babel: ‘My First Goose’

In 1916, a year before the Bolshevik Revolution, 22-year-old Isaac Babel foretold another imminent revolution — this time, in literature. “If you think about it,” he wrote, “doesn’t it strike you that in Russian literature there haven’t been so far any real, clear, cheerful descriptions of the sun?” Paying due homage to a handful of Russia’s great modern writers—Turgenev, Dostoevsky, Gogol, Gorky—he nevertheless finds their descriptions of life to be cold, gray, and gloomy, and insists that it is high time for new blood:

> We are being stifled. Literature’s messiah, so long awaited, will issue forth from the sun-drenched steppes washed by the sea.

Babel emerged as a writer during the revolutionary surge that culminated in the formation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, led by Vladimir Lenin as the first head of government and by Leon Trotsky, a known Jew, as commissar of military affairs. Who, then, could better serve as that long-awaited messiah of Russian literature than a great writer who, too, was a Jew by the name of Babel, born in sun-drenched Odesa? What better proof could there be that tsarism had given way to a nondenominational, egalitarian society?

Babel’s life moved in two directions: He married a cultivated, well-to-do, and very companionable Jewish woman named Yevgenia Gronfein. But rather than moving to Western Europe with her, as she wished, he plunged into the heart of the new Soviet experiment. Apart from several visits over the years to his wife and their daughter in Belgium and France, he would remain in Russia.

In 1919, when the Soviets launched their first foreign war against Poland, Babel saw his opportunity to be at the center of Russia’s history-in-the-making. For the new regime, this war was a means to consolidate control over its very diverse population. The newly formed Red Army, led by Trotsky, conscripted into its ranks numerous Ukrainian Cossacks whom it allowed to fight in their customary manner — that is, as horsemen under their own leaders. Within the army were also embedded a number of so-called war correspondents, functioning as internal propagandists. To serve as these “information officers,” the army recruited many Jews, the best-educated sector of the Russian public. Thus Jews, once the chief victims of Cossacks and still the prey of both contending armies in this Polish–Soviet war, were now the delegated agents of the new Soviet regime.

In 1920, the Bolshevik party in Odesa issued war-correspondent credentials to Isaac Babel. Joining the Cavalry Army under the command of General Semyon Budyonny, Babel spent that summer on the front lines under the assumed name of Kiril Vasilievich Lyutov. In the aftermath, basing himself on the diary he had maintained on the front, he compiled a series of 34 stories that would appear in 1926 as the book *Red Cavalry*, which made him famous — and controversial.

Our story, "My First Goose," is the eighth of the 34. It opens when the war is already in progress, requiring the narrator's — and therefore the reader's — quick orientation to the circumstances:

> Savitsky, the divchief six, rose when he saw me, and I was struck by the beauty of his giant body. He rose and — with the carmine of his breeches, the raspberry of his tilted cap, the medals pressed onto his chest — split the cottage in half as a standard splits the sky. He smelled of perfume and the sickly sweet freshness of soap. His long legs were like girls sheathed to the shoulders in shining riding boots.

There are at least five English versions of this story — I am using Peter Constantine's — and every one of them makes you want to check it for accuracy. Isn't "sickly sweet freshness" a contradiction in terms? How do the legs of a commander who is obviously a model of masculinity resemble girls wedged up to their shoulders in riding boots? If the narrator is so at home with military jargon as to refer to the commander of the Sixth Division as "divchief six," shouldn't he be focusing on something other than this giant's "beauty"?

But just as commanders run wars, so writers determine how wars will be rendered. In the collection's previous story, the reader will have learned that the narrator with the Russian-sounding name Lyutov is himself a Yiddish-speaking Jew embedded in a Cossack regiment of the Red Army fighting through towns where his fellow Jews have been victims of both sides. It follows that his narrator, a Jewish chronicler of Cossacks, will offer an unconventional view of what he sees: This is why Lyutov's style is as striking as the man he describes. Instead of using adjectives like "dashing," "impressive," and "commanding," he conveys the erotic force of Savitsky's masculinity, "the beauty of his giant body." This has the incidental benefit of letting us know that the narrator is not the only intricate character here. Savitsky is no less complex a creature — a point worth remembering when, further along, we meet his cruder soldiers.

Lyutov has arrived at his assigned post just as the commander is dictating orders for a certain Ivan Chesnokov to advance and destroy the enemy of a designated town. Savitsky writes out the last part of the order in his own hand: Should the lieutenant fail, he will "pay the full penalty" on the spot. Turning then to propaganda, the other side of the war, he asks Lyutov, "You read and write?"

> "I read and write," I replied, envying the flower and iron of that youthfulness. "Graduated in law from Petersburg University."
>
> "Well, don't you stink of baby powder!" He burst out laughing. "Glasses on his nose, too. Look at the mangy little fellow! They send us your kind without asking, but here, glasses get you killed. Think you'll manage with us, eh?"
>
> "I'll manage," I said.

And so begins Lyutov's test. Aware of what awaits Chesnokov should he fail in *his* assignment, Lyutov is sent off with the quartermaster to where he will be billeted, advised that his "glasses" may get him killed — by, that is, the soldiers on the Soviet side, his side.

We are by now aware of the weirdness of the situation. For "mangy little fellow," Savitsky uses the Russian word *parkhatyi* — or "scabby," a modifier commonly hurled as an insult against Jews. A man like Savitsky would never before have had to put up with such a "powderpuff" (as a different translation has it); indeed, only a decade earlier, thousands of young Jews like Babel had left Russia to avoid compulsory service in its armies. Yet here a young Jewish writer volunteers for the Russian front, admiring in the commander the very qualities that his Jewishness disallows. The new Soviet society, whose writer he aspires to be, espouses a set of values opposite to his own: Cossacks are valuable for how well they can fight wars, and Jews for whether they can reeducate the society as Leninists. The traditional Jewish emphasis on literacy that

formed him is now to be exploited in the service of propaganda.

The quartermaster who accompanies Lyutov amplifies Savitsky's warning that his soldiers are perfectly prepared to destroy persons of high distinction. And sure enough, when he comes among them, a young soldier tosses Lyutov's small trunk out the gate and then turns his rear end toward him to emit "a series of shameful noises." But our narrator, having already lived through this insult, is now the one in charge of telling the story. The following passage shows how a writer may control a situation he could not control in real life.

> The young man [the farting soldier] walked off, having exhausted the limited resources of his artistry. I went down on my hands and knees and gathered up the manuscripts and the old, tattered clothes that had fallen out of my suitcase. I took them and carried them to the other end of the yard. A large pot of boiling pork stood on some bricks in front of the hut. Smoke rose from it as distant smoke rises from the village hut of one's childhood, mixing hunger with intense loneliness inside me. I covered my broken little suitcase with hay, turning it into a pillow, and lay down on the ground to read Lenin's speech at the Second Congress of the Comintern, which *Pravda* had printed. The sun fell on me through the jagged hills, the Cossacks kept stepping over my legs, the young fellow incessantly made fun of me, the beloved sentences struggled toward me over thorny paths, but could not reach me.

Ernest Hemingway, who prided himself on the spareness of his own prose, famously said of Babel's sentences: "Even when you've got all the water out of them, you can still clot the curds a little more." As cheesemakers get a superior product by squeezing out moisture, a writer may do likewise. To characterize farting as a Cossack's form of *artistry* registers Lyutov's bemused contempt for the contempt shown him, as well as his use of wit as a weapon. The phrase "manuscripts and old tattered clothes" reveals that he's been writing privately and is less concerned for his appearance than for

Ernest Hemingway, who prided himself on the spareness of his own prose, famously said of Babel's sentences: 'Even when you've got all the water out of them, you can still clot the curds a little more.'

the pages (which might become the story we are reading). Pork was of course the cheapest and handiest meat in the countryside; with no supply lines to feed them, this army must "requisition" its own food from the people it is occupying. But the very sight and smell that foretell a comradely supper for the Cossacks "mix hunger with intense loneliness" inside Lyutov, the outsider. Pork is forbidden to the Jew, who conducts an internal escape from his surroundings by turning his "broken little suitcase" into a pillow.

With a touch of self-pity, Lyutov/Babel comforts himself with reading, like the child he once was, but see what he has at hand: "Lenin's speech at the Second Congress of the Comintern, which *Pravda* had printed"! This historical anchoring point, at almost the exact middle of the story, was the opening speech at the Second Congress of the Communist International, which had been convened by Lenin to export the revolution to the whole world. Titled "Report on the International Situation and the Chief Goals of the Communist International," it was published in *Pravda* on July 20, 1920. This is now the literature that Lyutov is expected to impart to the men around him. With the approach of evening, "the sun," he writes, "fell on me through the jagged hills," and as the harassment continues, "the beloved sentences struggled toward me over thorny paths, but could not reach me."

Jagged, thorny: The insults of Lyutov's new companions prevent

the beloved sentences from bringing him the comfort he seeks. He may glorify the new Bolshevik literature as he does Savitsky's gorgeous strength, but how could this sensitive Jew with his exquisite intelligence be expected to win over these rude pork-eaters to Lenin's International?

Our narrator takes the quartermaster's cue by joining those he cannot beat. The poor woman in whose yard they find themselves appeals to him as an ally against the thugs, but Lyutov makes his move against *her*. Her goose is waddling around the yard "placidly grooming its feathers," evoking the still-bourgeois world that respects private property, honors women, shows compassion for the elderly and consideration for all living things. There will be no more of that!

> I caught the goose and forced it to the ground, its head cracking beneath my boot, cracking and bleeding. Its white neck stretched out in the dung, and the wings folded down over the slaughtered bird.

Implicit here for his Jewish readers are the violated laws of kosher slaughter ensuring that Jews could never behave this way. Our narrator ingratiates himself with the Cossacks by ordering the woman to roast the dead bird for him. Since she has already told him that "all of this makes her want to hang herself," by his actions, he is symbolically killing her as well.

Lyutov's show of Cossack manliness works as intended. While he waits for the woman to roast his goose, the men invite him to eat with them. Illiterate, they ask him what's in the paper, and he reads them the speech, "rejoicing in the mysterious curve of Lenin's straight line." Like a teacher who takes pride in his students, the narrator quotes the squadron leader who responds to the reading by saying, "Truth tickles all and sundry in the nose. ... It isn't all that easy to wheedle it out of the pile of rubbish, but Lenin picks it up right away, like a hen pecks up a grain of corn."

The Cossack's wholesome, homespun appreciation of Lenin's prose corresponds to that of the Petersburg University graduate. Once the men see that Lyutov can be as pitiless as they, he is able to initiate them into the Communist catechism. They all fall asleep together in entangled male camaraderie.

This would appear to be a proper Soviet story. The squeamish Jew does what he must do to win the trust of these men, and, for all their profound differences, Jew and Cossack independently recognize the truth of the new regime. Babel was writing this under Lenin's rule in the early 1920s, before Stalin imposed political correctness as a required rather than preferred literary standard. Yet in his writing, as opposed to his actions, Lyutov remains quite independent of the political program he endorses. "Hidden" behind his narrator Lyutov, Babel the writer knows that his changed behavior cannot change what he is made of. As he sleeps among the men, their legs now intermingled, his dreams reclaim him:

> I dreamed and saw women in my dreams — and only my heart, crimson with murder, screeched and bled. [trans. Peter Constantine]

The sacrifice of Jewish (and Christian!) conscience was a requirement of the new regime, which had seized power by killing the tsar's entire family, shutting down democracy, and ruling by dictatorial decree. The extreme conditions of war had imposed still harsher demands. But Babel, who became an agent of this government, does not ascribe Lyutov's actions to *necessity*. In this story as in all of *Red Cavalry*, the narrator claims full responsibility for everything he does and declares through the story's title that this was only his *first* goose, his first such transgression against the old values and his commitment to the new.

Translator David McDuff says his heart "squeaked and overflowed"; Val Vinokur that it "oozed and groaned." But for all his translators,

that sound of screeching, squeaking, groaning, or cracking, and his heart's oozing, overflowing, and bleeding echo—and mirror—the butchery he has committed. His conscience monitors his deeds, and the story makes sure that we know it. Earlier, after killing the goose, he went out of the yard to clean the sword of its blood and felt the moon hanging overhead "like a cheap earring." He has cheapened the universe to win over the Cossack soldiers, even as he scrupulously registers civilization's stifled qualms and protests.

Babel wrote many initiation stories, recalling experiences that irrevocably changed the narrator. This one simultaneously captures the society being remade, with several voices in the mix: the Cossack commander charged with winning the first Soviet war, the men of limited speech under his command, the Jewish intellectual charged with instructing these men, and the voice of Lenin that dominates the action, though it is heard and absorbed only indirectly. Lyutov describes himself reading Lenin aloud "like a triumphant deaf man"—that is, like a deaf man who has triumphed over his disabilities—and so, too, these horsemen have presumably come to appreciate the value of someone who can read and thereby induct them into this brave new world.

On a larger scale, Babel turned the 1919–21 war, which Russia actually *lost* to Poland, into a classic work about how the Soviet Union came into being. Tolstoy's *War and Peace* had put the Russian stamp on Napoleon's campaign of 1812. Just so, *Red Cavalry*—on a different scale, for an altered public—rehabilitated the sordid conflict of 1919–21. By filtering its brutality through his Jewish conscience and literary sunlight, Babel endowed it with qualities it never had.

Naturally, not everyone saw it this way. None other than General Budyonny himself would charge that Babel "invents things that never happened, slings dirt at our best Communist commanders, lets his imagination run wild, simply lies." Implying that Babel could never understand the Cossacks, the general also mocked his petty-bourgeois outlook as a betrayal of the Communist cause. This prompted Russia's most prominent writer, Maxim Gorky, to argue the opposite—namely, that Babel brought to life "the heroism of an army which is the first in history to know what it is fighting for and what it is going to go on fighting for." With as fine a defense as any writer could have wished for, Gorky explains that "the contradictory present" needed a writer who lived by the truth and could reorient people who had been brought up with religious views on ownership. Babel's way of engaging human sympathies was the ideal way of changing people's deepest beliefs.

This exchange reminds us of the heightened importance of literature in Russia, where writers competed for allegiance with generals, and rulers tried to make their mark as writers. But the ranks of Babel's defenders shrank as the regime hardened. When he could not become the apologist for Stalin's murderous regime, he was arrested, tortured, and executed. The reader's heart cracks and bleeds for him. Yet he did become the great writer he set out to be. He gave Russian literature a unique record of that transformative moment when those who made the Revolution thought they were changing humankind. He supported the Revolution, leading many to transform themselves just as Lyutov desperately tries to do in this story. With his uncanny literary powers, Babel also shows us that Lyutov doesn't quite succeed, just as Babel's brutal authenticity never allowed him to entirely transform himself.

As for the Jews, the most serious moral and political question facing us as a people is how and why so many of us—a small minority, yet so many—championed modernity's most brutal social experiment. A people that forever awaits the Messiah has been prone to follow false messiahs, but those who embraced Communism allowed themselves to commit crimes they could never have committed *as Jews*. No one felt this contradiction as keenly as, no one ever described it as forcefully as, and no one ever paid a higher price for having done so than Isaac Babel. In stories like this one, he shows how a writer of genius can make fiction into the most comprehensive and unflinching interpreter of reality, leaving an honest record of an age of deceit. He is our writer of the sun who most clearly illumined how he, and his generation, were seduced. ✳

ANSHEL PFEFFER

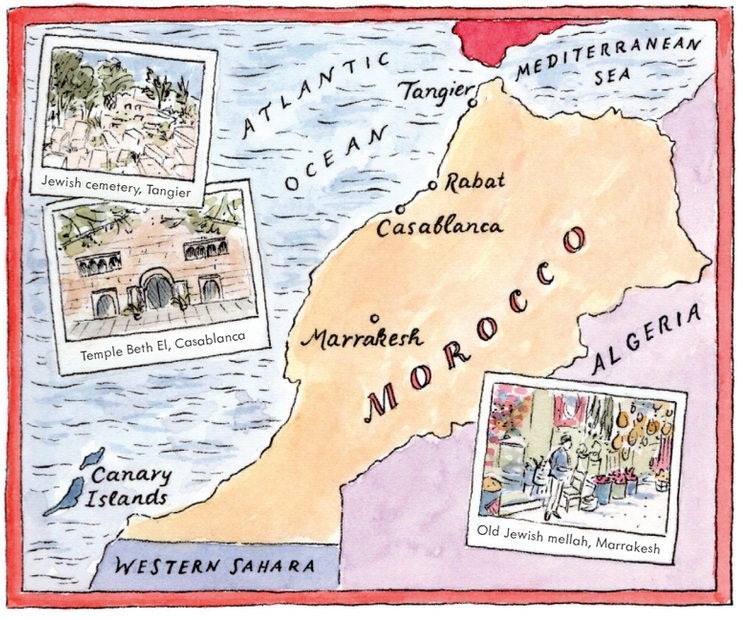
Postcard from Morocco

TWO PARISIAN MEN are sitting in the Beth El synagogue on the edge of the old Jewish Quarter of Casablanca. Shabbat is about to begin, but they and a journalist sitting behind them are the only people there.

"Is this really the biggest synagogue in Morocco?" one of them asks, incredulously. His friend responds with a Gallic shrug.

A few minutes later, Yisrael Hazout, the short, portly rabbi who, though born in Morocco, has spent much of his life in Israel, arrives by van with a couple of other elderly members. A group of American tourists follow. A few elderly Moroccans and a couple of Israeli expatriates make up the rest of a congregation that at its peak, by the start of maariv, reaches about 20 men and two women.

Beth El is the main synagogue in use in the largest city in the Maghreb, which is also home to the largest Jewish community in the Arab world. It is spotless. The community employs an Arab cleaner who is on the premises throughout the day. She also opens the gate during the week to the small but steady stream of tourists. Even so, there is a certain air of neglect.



No one has gone to the trouble of updating the prayer times on the noticeboard, and Covid-19 regulations put up for Rosh Hashana two years ago are still there. Two-thirds of the seats remain cordoned off to maintain social distancing, which ceased to be mandatory long ago. As one community member says, "we can maintain Beth El. We can't force anyone to go and pray."

The Jewish community of Casablanca, which formally claims to have 1,100 members, is in a curious position. On the one hand, this remnant of one of the proudest centers of Jewish life in North Africa is in terminal decline. On the other, it has just received a lifeline in the shape of a significant influx of Israeli tourists and entrepreneurs, as well as Jews from other countries, all enthused by the idea of Morocco's opening up.

The Abraham Accords that Morocco joined in late 2020, establishing full diplomatic ties with Israel, were the formalization of a trend a couple of decades old, in which King Muhammad VI and his government encouraged members of the Jewish Moroccan Diaspora

to return and invest in its economy, and they also safeguarded and renovated Jewish sites, synagogues, shrines and cemeteries, even in places where Jews no longer live. But the king came to the throne too late to reverse a process of departure that had already progressed so far.

At the community's peak in the mid-20th century, some 270,000 Jews lived in French and Spanish Morocco and the Tangier International Zone. It was downhill from there, when mass emigration took off, given the attraction of living in newly independent Israel or Western countries, combined with fears of the antisemitism that might emerge with the end of colonial rule — fears that some accuse Zionist organizations of exaggerating. Belated attempts by King Hassan II to protect the remaining Jews were unsuccessful: By his death in 1999, only 5,000 Jews or so remained. In the past two decades, that number has halved.

In one important respect, however, the kings' efforts succeeded. Reports of antisemitic attacks in Morocco are exceedingly rare. Israeli tourists who began visiting long before the Abraham Accords were signed are welcomed without a hint of hostility. But the Jewish Morocco they discover when they arrive is a combination of history, nostalgia, and kitsch. About 200 synagogues and shrines of rabbis are meticulously preserved, and the government is constantly working to open up new ones. Just this August, another synagogue-cum-museum reopened in the Casbah of Tangier, in a tiny street near two others (in Tangier, wealthy Jewish families liked to each have their own synagogue). But no one prays there. As a French-Jewish fashion executive who has a holiday home nearby told me, "I love the fact they are there, it makes me feel good. But I've never seen a *tefilah* there."

Jewish history in Morocco often seems to be in much better shape than contemporary Jewish life. In Tangier, the beautiful, ancient

The Jewish community of Casablanca is in a curious position. On the one hand, this remnant of one of the proudest centers of Jewish life in North Africa is in terminal decline. On the other, it has just received a lifeline in the shape of a significant influx of Israeli tourists and entrepreneurs.

Jewish cemetery in the touristy old town overlooking the sea is in immaculate condition, though no one has been buried there since the 1940s. The cemetery in the new town, still in use for the tiny, aging community that remains, is weed-grown and dilapidated.

But there are those who see opportunity in a community with many assets and few members. For example, Yeshivat Shuva Yisrael, led by Rabbi Yoshiyahu Yosef Pinto, has opened a branch in the Beth El building in Casablanca. A few of Rabbi Pinto's followers, distinctive in their white pants and caps, sit there during the week and study, though when Shabbat comes, they pray elsewhere.

Rabbi Pinto has moved to the capital, Rabat, where he styles himself as the *Av Beth Din* — president of the rabbinical courts of Morocco. Not that those courts actually exist, but it's a nice title. Rabbi Pinto and the group of followers he has brought along with him from Israel, with promises of a stipend and being part of a "spiritual revolution," are a sensitive issue for the Jews of Casablanca. He held a ceremony in Beth El proclaiming his appointment in 2019, but most of them seem relieved he has moved to Rabat.

"I can also decide tomorrow that I'm the chief rabbi of Morocco,"

says one member of the community dismissively. "He saw he can't take control of the community in Casablanca and left." But another member admits, "We need Pinto's young men for the kashrut supervision and other services."

He has a point. A tiny community of middle-class families doesn't have the human resources for much of its spiritual needs. But there is a reluctance to allow Rabbi Pinto, who, as a young charismatic kabbalist, led a large, star-studded movement with thousands of followers in Israel and the United States, before being convicted in the Tel Aviv District Court in 2015 of bribery and obstruction of justice as part of a plea bargain; after spending eight months in prison, he was released on medical grounds. He announced at the time that he was retiring from public life but has since decided to rehabilitate himself as the new spiritual leader of Moroccan Jews.

"We are here for the sage," says David Elyashar, one of the students at the yeshiva in Casablanca, who moved there from Modiin Illit. "Until he came, the situation here of kashrut and Judaism in general was terrible." He can't explain, however, why the rabbi has moved to Rabat where only a few dozen Jews still live, instead of living in the main Jewish community.

Morocco has become a convenient haven for Israeli criminals, including those who have already served time in prison, as well as those on the run. Among the more prominent in recent years have been Amir Mulner, Shalom Domrani, and Gabi Ben Harush, leaders of some of Israel's largest organized-crime groups, and Rabbi Eliezer Berland, leader of a group of Breslav Hasidim, who was on the run from charges of rape. One of the chief advantages of the Abraham Accords for the local Jewish community is that it will be more difficult for Israeli criminals to hide in Morocco.

"At one point we had 10 Israelis arrested in prison. That's not something that the Jewish community ever had to deal with," says Georges Sebat, a real-estate developer in Casablanca who is also an assistant to Serge Berdugo, the 83-year-old former government minister who has been president of the Casablanca community for decades. "It was a taste of the bad things that can also come from Israel. But there are of course a lot of good things we can get from Israel. And now it's not just people leaving for Israel, but also Israelis coming here, and we have to know how to balance."

There are Israelis, too, who want to come to Morocco, but not to Casablanca, a city of 4 million. As the country's main business center, it was natural that most of the remaining Jews of Morocco would concentrate there, even though it was not historically one of the main Jewish centers. Today, with the exception of the Tunisian island of Djerba, it is the only city in the Arab world that still has Jewish schools, though they are small and struggling, and two of them now have a mixed Jewish-Muslim student body. And after graduation, nearly all the students fly off to study in France, Canada, or Israel, many never to return.

But Israelis complain that the community is not always welcoming. "I do a lot of business in Casablanca now," says the CEO of an Israeli agri-tech company. "The government is very helpful, and the business environment is great. But though I've tried, I haven't found any partners in the Jewish community. They don't seem to want to work with Israelis."

Kobi Yifrach, an Israeli who emigrated to Morocco with his wife and daughter to learn about his parents' heritage, put his misgivings about the city in a different way. "Casablanca is a much newer community, it doesn't have the Jewish history of places like Marrakesh and Meknes. And it's less open to Israelis." Yifrach has dedicated himself to preserving Jewish sites in Marrakesh and building a museum there. About a hundred members of the original Jewish community live there, but a small Israeli community has sprung up by their side in recent years. Marrakesh was also chosen over Casablanca by El Al as its new Moroccan destination after the Abraham Accords were signed.

Had the Abraham Accords been signed earlier, when the community was larger and a decade or two younger, they might have revitalized Jewish life in the city.

"Israelis can be too aggressive when coming here," admits Yifrach. "I hope they can understand how we need to preserve the history here for there to be a Jewish future. We're in the last few years of having any Jews at all in the smaller communities, like Meknes, Rabat, and Tangier. In the future, there will be communities only in Casablanca and Marrakesh, and I think you'll see Israelis and probably also French Moroccan Jews coming to live here for the quality of life. Some for business, others as pensioners, at least part-time."

What the Jewish community in Morocco will look like then is anyone's guess. Will any young Moroccan-Jewish families remain, or will it mainly be colonies of wealthy Israeli and French expatriates and second-home owners? Will Jewish Casablanca retain its cosmopolitan character, or will it become the fiefdom of Sephardi-Haredi rabbis such as Pinto?

Quite likely it will be a mixture of all the above. Something like the octopus bruschetta on toasted challah that is served in French-Israeli chef Mike Uzan's excellent restaurant, Dar Dada, a Moroccan-fusion restaurant in the old Jewish mellah of Casablanca.

Had the Abraham Accords been signed earlier, when the community was larger and a decade or two younger, they might have revitalized Jewish life in the city. In another decade from now, the community will still be around. Perhaps it will even have grown. But it will almost certainly be very different — more itinerant and international. Most members will probably be of Moroccan origin, but as one Moroccan Jew described the newcomers: "They will not have the experience of having lived all their lives in a Muslim and African country. They may speak French or even Arabic, but Haketia and Darija will be totally foreign languages to them."

Like many places in Central and Eastern Europe, which were once thriving centers of Jewish life but simply didn't have enough Jews to rebuild by the time Communist repression ended, Casablanca and the other cities and towns of Morocco will continue to boast elegant synagogues and offer facilities to the kosher tourist. But it seems nevertheless destined to be more of a museum commemorating the Jews who once lived there than a living community in its own right.

The Israelis may yet save Jewish Casablanca at the expense of its soul.

Not every Israeli restaurateur has found success in Morocco. Shimon Ben-Hamo arrived in Casablanca a year ago and has done some business supplying Shabbat meals to tour groups at their hotels. But his shiny new restaurant has remained empty most of the time. He's about to close shop and move to Marrakesh, where the Israeli tourist trade is more dependable. Just like any other small-business owner about to go under, he's full of complaints about the authorities — in his case, the Casablanca community's kashrut committee.

But his main mistake was opening just around the corner from a beloved Jewish landmark that isn't a synagogue or a cemetery.

There are some excellent Jewish-Moroccan restaurants in Paris and a few places in Israel, but Casablanca's Cercle de l'Alliance is unlike any kosher restaurant anywhere in the world. It's not just

the kitchen, which permits itself no compromises because it has to conform to kashrut; or the menu, of typical but rare Jewish-Moroccan dishes such as calf's-brain tajine; or even the prices, which don't add any hidden "kosher tax." Cercle de l'Alliance is wonderful because it's the very rare kosher restaurant — is there an equivalent anywhere in the Jewish world? — that has been serving the same Jewish community for the better part of a century, not just as a restaurant, but by providing an intimate venue for special occasions and a social club for regular hangouts.

You feel it long before the old, experienced waiter takes your order — from the handful of three-or-four-generation families quietly sitting down for Sunday lunch; to the men wearing kippot (which they remove upon leaving); to the old-timers on the floor above, silently sipping tea and playing cards at green baize tables, staring balefully at anyone they don't recognize. This is *their* place, which you have the privilege of visiting. They have kept it going for all these decades when everyone else left and before Jewish tourists began returning to these shores. You can buy a meal, but don't forget whose place this is.

The only person speaking Hebrew was the obviously non-Jewish waiter, and yet it was the most Jewish experience I had in Morocco. I whispered to my lunch companion that I wished every Jewish community had a place like Cercle de l'Alliance, but she answered: "The waiter is being much nicer to us because he understands that the only chance this place has of surviving in a few years is Israeli tourists."

No sooner had the families paid their bills than the waiters began pushing four large tables together and setting more tables. A bus drew up outside, disembarking 30 middle-aged Israeli tourists, who immediately began debating the merits of the menu. There's nothing more tiresome than Israelis complaining about the way their fellow countrymen behave abroad; you can imagine for yourself how the decibel level inside changed immediately.

Then, a large Israeli woman with red-dyed hair got up and began walking around the anteroom with tears in her eyes. "This is where my eldest sister of blessed memory got married," she proclaimed loudly in Hebrew. Sobbing and laughing, she brandished a smartphone, showing everyone the black-and-white photographs of a wedding in the long-lost Casablanca of her birth.

For a moment, even the old card players allowed themselves a smile. ✳

CONTRIBUTORS

RABBA YAFFA EPSTEIN serves as the senior scholar and educator in residence at the Jewish Education Project.

DAVID FRENCH is a senior editor at *The Dispatch* and a contributing writer at *The Atlantic*.

OLIVIA EVE GROSS is a third-year student at the University of Chicago.

SAMANTHA HARRIS is a partner at Allen Harris PLLC, where she concentrates her practice in the areas of campus free speech and due process.

FELICIA HERMAN is the chief operating officer of Maimonides Fund.

JOSHUA T. KATZ is a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. He spent nearly a quarter of a century on the faculty at Princeton University.

ANSHEL PFEFFER is a senior correspondent and columnist for *Haaretz* and the Israel correspondent for *The Economist*.

JONATHAN RAUCH is a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and the author of *The Constitution of Knowledge: A Defense of Truth*.

SAUL ROSENBERG is a writer and editor who holds a Ph.D. in American literature from Columbia University. He wrote his dissertation on William Faulkner.

EDWARD ROTHSTEIN is the critic-at-large for the *Wall Street Journal* and was formerly the critic-at-large for the *New York Times*.

LIONEL SHRIVER is the author, most recently, of *Abominations: Selected Essays from a Career of Courting Self-Destruction*, published by HarperCollins in September.

LENORE SKENAZY is president of Let Grow, a nonprofit promoting childhood independence and resilience, and founder of the Free-Range Kids movement.

BRET STEPHENS is the editor-in-chief of SAPIR.

RUTH R. WISSE is a senior fellow at the Tikvah Fund and a columnist at *Mosaic*.

DAVID WOLPE is the Max Webb Senior Rabbi of Sinai Temple in Los Angeles and a senior adviser at Maimonides Fund.

MAIMONIDES FUND

Maimonides Fund is a private grantmaking organization inspired by our namesake's commitment to Jewish faith, Jewish peoplehood, citizenship, and science.

וַיִּרְאֹּו אֵת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְתַחַת
רַגְלָיו כְּמַעֲשֵׂה לִבְנַת הַסַּפִּיר
וּכְעֶצֶם הַשָּׁמַיִם לָטֹהַר׃

— שמות כד:י

The most promising development in recent times is what's allowable to say in print without being immediately disappeared. The Overton window has widened from a mere crack in the wall to a goodly slit.

LIONEL SHRIVER · 70

Canceling is the opposite of criticism. Criticism targets *ideas* for elimination, avoiding ad hominem attacks; canceling targets *individuals* for elimination, seeking to destroy the reputations and livelihoods of those it attacks.

JONATHAN RAUCH · 82

Students voicing support for Israel on campus are suffering mightily in the current environment, as the frequent targets of efforts to shut speech down. Rather than responding by engaging in similar tactics to prohibit anti-Israel speech, it is precisely these students who should be standing up for the principle of free speech.

SAMANTHA HARRIS · 118

Cancellation in America is relentless. Your mistake or your crime or your sin defines you forever; it becomes the totality of who you are. We distrust regret or change. This is unfair and profoundly un-Jewish.

RABBI DAVID WOLPE · 128