

# CAN TESHUVA HELP US “RIGHT SIZE” CANCEL CULTURE?

## Overview

This resource unpacks the issue of **Cancel Culture** through the value of **Teshuva**.

## At-a-Glance

*This resource provides an opportunity to explore the value of forgiveness in the context of responding to cancel culture. It uncovers insights into how Judaism views our obligations to respond to those who have done wrong. Learners will engage in a personal exercise to explore one’s capacity for inviting and/or accepting teshuva from others. It concludes with an opportunity to strengthen our own capacity for both holding others accountable while exercising compassion, and prompts us to consider how this might play a role in healing from the harmful effects of cancel culture.*



## MATERIALS AND SET-UP

**Time estimate:**  
60 minutes

**Best Uses:**

- For in-person settings
- For virtual settings

### Materials Needed:

- Pens
- Printed copies or virtual access to handout
- Phone or speaker to play music



## FRAME THE ISSUE (10 MINUTES)

Cancel Culture is a phenomenon that has become more prominent over the years. We often see celebrities get canceled in the public arena, but the notion of canceling takes place in more personal spaces too. While canceling is an extreme measure, there may be both positive as well as damaging aspects depending on the circumstances.

- ▷▷ Cancel Culture has played an important role in that it has allowed people with little power to make much needed social change (e.g. Me Too movement, Black Lives Matter) and on a personal level, has given us permission to hold people accountable for hurtful and harmful behavior.
- ▷▷ But ... the way in which cancel culture is currently practiced has also eradicated our ability to be more tolerant, compassionate and forgiving. We have become quick to judge and shame others. When it goes unchecked, it can lead great harm to those cancelled, bystanders and even those doing the cancelling.

### For Discussion:

- ▷▷ What are cancellers seeking? Where has that been successful?
- ▷▷ What are the downsides of cancel culture? Who stands to be harmed?
- ▷▷ What other associations do you have with canceling? What words come to mind?

### Conclude this section:

When people go too far, it's natural to want to hold them accountable, and perhaps, even cancel them. The question we'll be exploring together is what role does forgiveness play in situations when canceling has taken place?



## ANCHOR IN JEWISH WISDOM (15 MINUTES)

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### Share the following idea about what Judaism has to say about our obligations when someone causes harm:

As is often the case with complex circumstances, Judaism has guidance to offer, both in making amends and accepting them.

Judaism teaches us that we are forbidden from shaming a person who has done wrong. Instead what we can do is offer the opportunity for Teshuva.

Teshuva, literally meaning to “return” and commonly translated as “repentance,” is a process for seeking forgiveness, and is rooted in the fundamental belief that we have an obligation to go above and beyond to allow someone to “return.”

The famous Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides, often referred to as Rambam, [1138-1204] wrote a whole section of his legal code dedicated to the laws of Teshuva. In his teachings, we can find two different values he emphasizes: Accountability and compassion.

Guidance for the one who harmed: Steps to complete Teshuva:.

- ▷▷ Remorse: Verbally confessing to one's wrongdoings
- ▷▷ Regret: Actively demonstrate regret for the wrongdoing
- ▷▷ Resolve: Commit to never engage in this wrongdoing again
- ▷▷ Repeal: Abandoning all thoughts and actions that led the wrongdoing
- ▷▷ Refrain: Confronting the same situation and not doing wrong again (Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah/Laws of Repentance 2:1-2)

Guidance for the one who was harmed:

- “When the one who sinned implores [a person] for pardon, he should grant him pardon wholeheartedly and soulfully. Even if one persecuted him and sinned against him exceedingly, he should not be vengeful and grudge-bearing.” (Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah/Laws of Repentance 2:10).

**Reflect in pairs on these texts and ask:**

- What do these two texts tell us about forgiveness? Where does accountability and compassion show up in Rambam’s texts?
- Does the current climate of cancelling allow for the values of accountability and compassion to show up?

**Conclude this section by leading into the values exploration and posing the question:**

Let’s explore a little more deeply the value of forgiveness, using the idea of teshuva as a guide: Can we hold others accountable to their wrongdoings (accountability) and sincerely forgive (compassion) so they can “return?” Might this be a way to help us ‘right size’ cancel culture? Let’s take a look at a situation that recently took place in the public arena.



## EXPLORE THE VALUE (10 MINUTES)

**Share the background:**

Not too long ago, actor Will Smith made a public apology for an action he took that he felt was wrong. The incident took place after the comedian award show host Chris Rock made a joke about Jada Pinkett Smith’s short hair. Jada went public earlier in the year with her struggles with alopecia. Jada’s husband, Smith, walked up to Rock, who was center stage, and slapped him across the face.

Subsequently, the Academy banned Smith from attending the Oscars for the next 10 years and several of Smith’s movie projects were postponed indefinitely. In effect, Smith was cancelled, at least temporarily.

In July of 2022 Will Smith posted a YouTube video apologizing to Rock. As we take a look at this video, pay attention to where do you see examples of accountability or compassion reflected. Share video.



**Following the video, prompt with the following questions:**

- What did you hear Will Smith say in his apology?
- Where did you see Will Smith taking accountability?
- As a viewer/fan/bystander, where do you see the opportunity for compassion?



## ACTIVITY (15 MINUTES)

### Introduce the activity: Exploring our own capacity for forgiveness (5 mins)

We looked at an example of a celebrity; now let's focus internally. Each of us has different inclinations. Some of us are prone to pursue justice/ accountability whereas others are more prone towards reacting with compassion.

Yet to make ourselves, our community and our world better, we must activate both. This exercise is to strengthen the muscle of yes/and...Yes, we need to hold people accountable for harmful actions. And yes, we need to recognize that people are human, will mess up and deserve a chance to make things right.

- ▶▶ Pass out the handout and prompt the group to think about where they fall on the scale. Have them indicate it with an "X."

### FORGIVENESS STYLE SCALE

I lean towards  
accountability

I lean towards  
compassion

### Letter writing exercise (10 mins)

To explore and develop our own abilities to forgive, we are going to put this into practice by spending the next 7ish minutes writing a letter of forgiveness. Here's how:

- ▶▶ Think of someone specific who has wronged you in some way. Now is an opportunity to reflect on our mandates for accountability and compassion.
- ▶▶ Write a letter to them. If you were quick to judge, consider how you might exercise more compassion. If you were quick to forgive, now is your chance to share with that person how their actions impacted you.
- ▶▶ You will NOT be required to send this to them, nor will you be required to share with this group. Challenge yourself to use language that is both honest and that leads to greater connection.

While people are writing, play reflective music. Suggestions:





## MAKE MEANING & TAKE ACTION (5 MINUTES)

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**Offer the group an opportunity to share their experiences writing their letters. Explore the following prompt questions:**

- ▶▶ What did this exercise reveal to you about forgiveness? Where do you see elements of accountability and compassion reflected in your own approach?
- ▶▶ Now zooming out back to the issue we started with, how can forgiveness be an antidote to cancel culture? What do we gain, and what do we lose, by forgiving?



## CLOSE WITH INTENTION (5 MINUTES)

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In the exploration we have just experienced, we took a contemporary issue – cancel culture and explored it through the value of forgiveness. Doing so offers an empowering way to think about “right-sizing” our responses to people who transgress and cause harm, rather than just applying a one size fits all - “cancelled” - to everyone. Today’s conversation provided a chance to explore where you fall as it relates to capacity for forgiveness. Strengthening the capacity for a “yes, and” approach provides us with an opportunity to both hold people accountable and give people a chance to change, or “return.” And that may just may be what the world needs as it contends with the harmful effects of cancel culture.

**Go around the room and ask everyone who wants to share a reaction to one of the following prompts:**

- ▶▶ As a result of this session, I now realize.....
- ▶▶ To exercise the value of forgiveness in the face of canceling, I will....