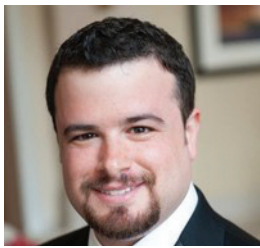


Does Cancel Culture Defeat the Possibility to Learn and Evolve?

Zachary Benjamin | Chief Executive Officer, Jewish Long Beach

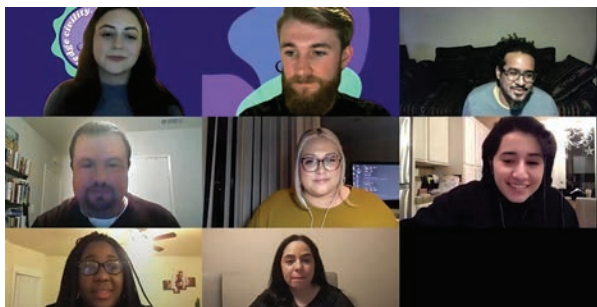


Zachary Benjamin

Last month, I had the honor of participating in a panel discussion between Long Beach-based professionals organized by Civility LB. Civility LB is a California State University Long Beach student organization that hosts conversations, designed for an audience of college-aged students but open to all, that challenge how we disagree, aiming to demonstrate that a variety of perspectives can coexist within a given social or professional environment. Its mission is to lead by example in communicating that we are capable of disagreeing without being disagreeable.

The conversation in which I participated addressed issues ranging from how to manage bias in the workplace to questions of when it is warranted to boycott an organization due either to its support of destructive ideologies or its inaction in opposing them. Perhaps inevitably, the discussion turned to the phenomenon of “cancel culture.”

Cancel culture is the colloquial term for the practice of boycotting, eliminating, or canceling media, organizations, or individuals that may be perceived as biased or problematic. It is a timely topic on which strong convictions exist across the spectrum of perspectives on its useful or destructive qualities. Cancel culture has become a subject around which those committed to civil discourse necessarily tiptoe. Thus, it seemed a natural item for Civility LB to address head-on.



One of the session’s moderators posed the question of whether “cancellation” of any entity that either expresses bias or does not actively oppose it, is an appropriate response to prejudice in an era in which we are acutely aware of its potentially lethal capabilities. One-by-one, panelists affirmed their support for the practice, with some reporting that they keep lists of people and organizations that

are acceptable to support, as well as lists of those that are not. Others reported that they are as likely to refrain from doing business with companies or organizations that are silent on issues of bias as they are to boycott those that are perceived to actively perpetuate it.

I questioned whether cancellation might deprive us of opportunities for teachable moments and growth, but I stated that I generally agreed that it may be an effective practice. In that moment, I figuratively stood at a dais from which I should have made an important broader statement, and I failed to do so. My reluctance was rooted in a sense that this audience of students and fellow panelists were fierce advocates of an approach to addressing bias that differed dramatically from my own. I feared that the nuance of my message might be lost or misinterpreted, and so I opted to stay largely silent. This scenario was a case in point of why Civility LB’s work is so important, and yet so challenging.

The reality is that cancellation should be an absolute last resort, rather than a knee-jerk response to perceived bias. It is a practice that both sows resentment and releases us from our obligation to not simply reject bias, but to seize opportunities to eradicate it through education and challenging conversations. I firmly believe that we must draw an important distinction between unintentional bias and active prejudice.

Unconscious bias can be as harmful and dangerous as intentional prejudice if it is left to fester. However, when a person is willing to address unconscious bias through education and conversation, that person not only adjusts their behavior, but also serves as a role model for others.

Prior to joining Jewish Long Beach, I served as executive director of the Jewish Federation of New Mexico. At the crescendo of the 2018 midterm election season, a local candidate for high office – an individual who now holds one of the nation’s most elevated political appointments—made a series of deeply misguided tweets to thousands of social media followers in support of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement against Israel. These tweets perpetuated destructive false narratives on Israel and the Jewish people, threatening not only to politicize the Jewish community itself, but also to drive a partisan wedge through New Mexico’s cultural and economic ties with Israel.

Rather than cancel this candidate or work to undermine her credibility, the state’s Jewish

agencies and institutions privately invited her to join Jewish communal leaders in mutually respectful conversation. We offered her an opportunity to listen to our concerns and help us guide her in educating herself on an issue that, by her own admission, she had not deeply considered. The candidate proved thoughtful and open to



evolution on a brand of bias that she had expressed unconsciously and without intent to harm.

She ultimately won her election and became not only a friend to the Jewish community, but supportive of Israel in the deliberative body to which she was elected.

Indeed, some prejudice may be incurable, and time spent attempting to educate or change the minds of its perpetrators could be wasted. However, whether we realize it or not, we all struggle with unconscious, inadvertent, and inherent biases that we express unintentionally. To cancel those who do so is to throw the babies of education and personal growth out with the bathwater of vicious, violent, intentional prejudice. It also ignores the nuanced, complicated nature of how identities and cultures interact, and how the relationships between them evolve.

The fact that I felt reluctant to express my perspective to the audience of students attending the Civility LB panel is emblematic of why this movement is so important. Civility LB’s work fully embodies the principles of tikkun olam, and I sincerely hope that their efforts result in an environment where reasonable people can exchange nuanced ideas without fear of reprisal, attack, or cancellation. 🕊️



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