

Hillel and Cartoons

Did you notice the editorial cartoon about Asians in last week's San Francisco Chronicle?

It had drawings of three characters, stereotypically Asian, complete with Charlie Chan drooping mustaches: one marked Genghis Kahn, with the comment, "Conquered China;" one marked Kublai Kahn, with the comment, "Conquered Asia;" and one, in modern dress, marked "Hong Khan," with the comment "Bought up San Francisco."

What did you do? Did you laugh? Did you skim it without any particular reaction? Did you write an angry letter? Would you judge "over-sensitive," or "without a sense of humor" a Chinese community protest against the cartoon?

Did you also laugh, or maintain indifference when a Chronicle editorial cartoon featured a stereotypical Israeli Jew in negative fashion? A JCRC delegation which went to see the editor on one of those cartoons, was told: "Gee, we thought it was funny. We didn't think it would be offensive."

This sort of ethnic caricature is more than offensive; it is socially irresponsible. Stereotypes are not going to create a racist movement overnight. But as projected by public figures or media, they tend to establish standards of what is acceptable or -- to be more precise -- what is not unacceptable. If the media want to protest that they do not have the power to help set standards, they might as well go out of business.

To protest such cartoons is not to be humorless or prudish. There is a demonstrated relationship between such standards, such images, and organized malevolence. For some groups that history is still fresh. Hitler used Jewish stereotypes to whip up his audience. Stereotypes were used in San Francisco when Chinese were lynched on our streets.

In general, stereotypes in the media scarcely help to promote the quintessential

American idea that ethnic groups are not to be seen as homogeneous lumps, but as associations of many quite different individuals, each of whom is to be treated on his or her own merits. That is also why there has been so much concern about the method our U.S. Attorney recently chose in his otherwise valid pursuit of voter fraud. He pinpointed registered voters of Chinese and Latino ancestry. There are some investigative methods for which alternatives have to be found, just as there are some "jokes" which are better left alone.

It is of course natural that people tend to be most sensitive to their problems and their group's problems. If, as Hillel suggested, you don't start with your own problems, you're not going to be able to deal with anyone else's. But he also suggested that one can lose important perspective if too self-immersed.

It is, for example, a matter of over-selective perception when the chief and constantly anguished complaint of Americans of Arab descent is that the American media are almost completely slanted towards Israel -- at the same time that some Jews feel that the media have become slanted against Israel. That's the kind of cross-perception which is difficult to correct. But the failure to perceive that the stereotyping of one ethnic group is a matter of concern to all others, should not be so difficult to correct.

There is a new and healthy mechanism in San Francisco, called the Intergroup Clearinghouse. The Mayor helped set it up, and it is an independent coalition of the various ethnic, racial and religious groups in the city, bent on becoming more sensitive to each other's needs. The Jewish community is, of course, a part of it. On the occasion of that recent editorial cartoon in the Chronicle, all of the groups in the Intergroup Clearinghouse jointly registered a protest -- just as they had earlier reacted jointly to a flurry of anti-semitic swastikas in the city. Hillel would have liked that.