

Earl Raab

NOW WE CALL A JEW "A JEW."

A San Francisco Jew called the other day to chastise me for a word I had used on a TV program. What was the offensive word? "Jews." What should I have used instead? "Jewish people." /p

That complaint may sound peculiar to some of you. But it struck some old memories. The complaining lady, of a certain age, argued that the unadorned word, "Jew," was rude, even anti-semitic. I remember a time when it was not so uncommon for certain American Jews, especially in the tell-tale areas outside the big-city ghettos, to avoid using the short form of the word./p

There was even an occasion, in a fancy restaurant in Virginia, when a prominent member of the local Jewish community kept referring to "O.P." Finally, I figured out that the initials stood for "Our People;" he did not want to emit the word, "Jews" into the public atmosphere./p

That was another era, worth remembering as we approach a new year. We've come a long way, bubbi. Jews now say "Jews" out in the open, loudly and clearly. We've got Jewish Pride. Or have we?/p

There's a difference between being proud and not being ashamed. When we went around avoiding the word, "Jew." We were ashamed -and afraid, of course. We had accepted the verdict that we were outcasts. /p

We don't as often think of ourselves as outcasts today, partly because others don't as often think of us as outcasts. In a way it might be said that other Americans have a good measure of pride in us as Jews. When asked, about 9 out of 10 Americans today say that "Jews are usually hard working people." About 9 out of 10 say that "Jews have a strong faith in God." About 9 out of 10 say that "Jews are warm and friendly people." And about 4 out of 5 say that Jews have contributed much to the cultural life of America./p

In other words, other Americans think pretty highly of us as a group. That's something to think about when we get hit by an anti-semitic incident, or by a TV program about anti-semitic groups in the Midwest. All such incidents and all such groups are intolerable and need to be dealt with seriously and forcefully. But their existence doesn't mean that the mainstream of America is waiting around the corner for us with a brickbat. Of course, as we well know, there's no guarantee for the future, and vigilance is everything the maxim says it is, but at least today we're not generally considered the outcasts we once were./p

So there's not as much Jewish shame around. But, beyond that, do we have Jewish pride? And what are we proud of? Oh, most of us are proud of the state of Israel- but that's a pretty vicarious pride. We can certainly be proud of any sacrificial support we give to Israel; but most of our support is really not very sacrificial. /p

Rabbi Abraham Geiger once said, "It is not birth which makes the Jew, but conviction, the profession of faith." Is that what we're proud of, our Jewish conviction, born of strong faith? That's how other Americans see us and they are impressed. Perhaps we don't quite live up to their image of us. Perhaps we're all not that clear about the nature of our Jewish convictions and faith. /p

However, one can't help but feel that it is more than mere lack of shame that prevents younger generations of American Jews from going around these days murmuring blushing about "O.P."