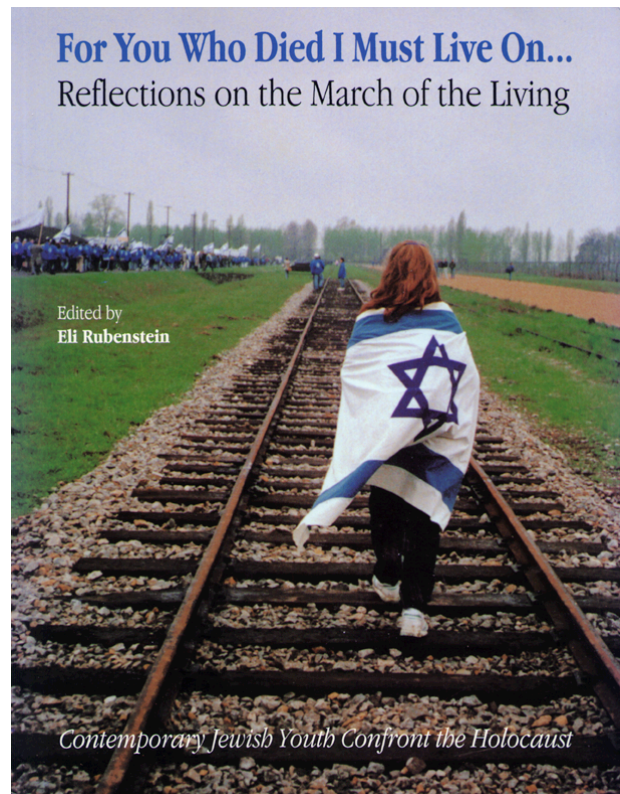


The Big Chill

by: Eli Rubenstein

Did you hear the one about.....? Chances are you will be hearing that phrase less and less in the future. Why? The arena of public discourse is constantly being narrowed by a culture that feeds off a feeling of victimization, and an over acute sense of being wronged. There are almost no boundaries to items that manage to offend, even when it is clear that those who have authored these 'offensive' items bear no malicious intent, and even when it can be argued – objectively – that the item is not necessarily offensive. In short, the **big chill** has set in.

Glance over at the picture in the centre of this article. It was taken during the 1992 March of the Living from Auschwitz to Birkenau. (The March is a biannual educational program that brings thousands of Jewish youngsters from around the world to Poland (on Holocaust Remembrance Day) and Israel (on Yom Ha'atzmaut) every two years.) I chose the photo for the cover of an award winning anthology of the prose, poetry, photos and art created by past participants in the March. To my mind, the moving photo captured the image of a Jewish teen, draped in a flag bearing the symbol of the Jewish people, marching down the tracks that once carried so many of her ancestors on a terrifying journey into the heart of darkness. And I'd wager that most people who viewed the cover saw something similar.



Once the book hit the stands, however, the most bizarre complaints made their way to me: One individual grumbled that the photo was too nationalistic; and nationalism, Jewish or otherwise, had no place in Auschwitz. Another caller criticised the cover of the book because its underlying message to teens told them it was permissible to walk down railroad tracks, an extremely unsafe behaviour.

In my own synagogue, I found myself in trouble after making the point that Judaism is a religion that has historically stressed intellectual pursuit and academic excellence over other pursuits. To this end, I recalled the classic joke: What's the thinnest book in the world? Famous Jewish sports heroes.

The complaint, in letter form, stated the joke was racist as it suggested that Jews were better than non-Jews, in that all Jews were cerebral while all non-Jews were jocks. Never mind that a devotion to intellectual pursuits does not, necessarily, make the Jewish people better than other cultures. Never mind that virtually every history of Judaism states that one of Judaism's unique features is its emphasis on study. (Hence, the 'people of the book'.) By suggesting that Judaism – for better or for worse – is a culture that places study among its highest values, one is hereby declared a racist – case closed.

My most jarring experience with the big chill occurred over an encounter with Jewish feminists after a short speech I delivered at a US conference. During my presentation I related what I thought, and still think, is an innocent joke concerning Jewish guilt.

As part of my speech at the conference, in reference to a discussion of what is the Torah's most oft repeated commandment, I humorously suggested it was the one that stated: "Thou shalt feel guilty". And I told the following joke: How do Jewish mothers differ from most? Most mothers tell their offspring: If you don't finish your lunch, I'll kill you. A Jewish mother informs her emaciated charges: "I'll kill myself!"

After the conference, I was taken to task by a prominent American Jewish feminist, and other feminist activists whose opinion I later solicited on the issue. Their view was that the Jewish mother joke was a contemptuous insult, on a level with JAP jokes, that was unquestionably offensive to Jewish woman. My argument, that the joke was a loving and humorous reference to Jewish motherhood and had nothing to do with largely mean spirited JAP jokes, fell upon deaf ears.

When I protested that a number of women actually thanked me for injecting an element of humour into an otherwise serious evening, I was informed that deep down these women were offended, even if they didn't realize it. My rejoinder that deep down my feminist critic actually liked the aforementioned joke was met without even the slightest comedic appreciation. Further, I was even accused of being responsible for the high rate of intermarriage – as the Jewish mother jokes I was telling were the reason why Jewish men did not want to marry Jewish women.

While my opponents sought to invest every joke told in which Jewish women appeared with intense political significance, I argued, unsuccessfully, that 'sometimes a cigar is just a cigar' (Freud), 'a rose is a rose is a rose' (Gertrude Stein) ...and a joke is just a joke. Equally unpersuasive was my contention that that they underestimated the resilience of Jewish women, most of whom would listen to the above jokes, have a laugh and move on with their lives.

On a gut level, on a "what I really believe" plateau, I was convinced that they were mistaken in their criticism. Yet, life is about learning, and, so I

offered to reconsider my position. However, when I asked one of the individuals to entertain the possibility that she might be mistaken – I was greeted with a flat out, “No, there is no possibility I am wrong.” It is a frightening phenomena to be confronted by anyone who is acquainted with the truth in such immutable terms.

Intrigued by their criticisms, and genuinely wondering if I was really that obtuse as to the offensiveness of my remarks, I shared the above dialogue with my female co-workers in Canada and Israel. Most insisted that the feminist critique did more harm than good in the effort to combat sexism.

In the feminist case, the damage being done is the very development they would most hope to avoid. There are numerous bone-fide feminist issues in both the secular and Jewish world that cry out for attention. Yet when the dialogue focuses on a joke about Jewish guilt, a “girl cries wolf” scenario is created. Almost invariably it strains the credibility of these same social critics when they do begin to address critical women’s issues.

The big chill in public discourse, as seen in the examples above, reflect a chilling mixture of a number of phenomena: of political correctness, of the culture of complaining, of ‘if I feel this way then it must be true’, of looking through the world only through the narrow prism of one’s own particular sensitivity, cause or political movement.

Who loses in the big chill in public discourse?

In the first place, democracy. Individuals will become increasingly reluctant to say anything slightly controversial for fear that it might offend someone – somehow, somewhere. Thus, we are engendering a new age of totalitarianism in the free expression of ideas.

The second loser is rational, logical thought: There is no need for objective standards, no argument that there are other interpretations to a given statement – I am offended, ergo you and your remarks are offensive...

The third negative result of this phenomena is that we lose opportunities to learn...Take two classic light bulb jokes: How many Orthodox Jews does it take to change a light bulb? Answer: None...they never change anything! How many Reform Jews does it take to change a light bulb? Answer: Thousands – they don’t want to change just one light bulb, they want to change every corner of the house. Orthodox and Reform Jews may hear these jokes and become offended. Or, they may laugh at the underlying truths that Orthodoxy changes slowly (perhaps too slowly) and Reform Judaism changes rapidly (perhaps too rapidly) – and still maintain trust in their respective systems, or, conversely, re-evaluate their beliefs.

The point is, the defensive response in both the cases of the Reform and Orthodox jokes inhibits an individual from reflecting on his or her culture and perhaps trying to effect change within its confines. The prospects of having to deal with the above mentioned defensive response acts as a powerful disincentive for those who would have otherwise used this material in a public setting. The result? The big chill sets in and everyone loses.

The last negative result – perhaps the saddest aspect of this whole debate – is that we are creating a society that immediately imputes the worst motives to those we disagree with. There are probably not many worse feelings than being suspected of something you are not. Yet, we strike like lightning, with an almost religious zeal, to brand individuals with names like ‘racist’, ‘chauvinist’, and ‘elitist’.

In a way, we are witnessing an inversion of Anne Frank’s famous statement, “I still believe, in spite of everything, people are really good at heart.”, and of the Mishnaic ideal of the rabbis who ask us to “judge all people by giving them the benefit of the doubt”. The new fundamentalism argues that despite everything, let’s give the worst possible interpretation, let’s attribute the least noble motives, to a statement subject to multiple interpretations. In short, let’s build a society where suspicion and mistrust are promoted as ethical ideals.

A wise man from Galicia once said: When someone tells me that he is 60% sure about something I am happy. When I am told by an individual that he is 70% certain about a given subject I’m even happier... 80% and I begin to worry... 90% I’m even more concerned. But when someone tells me that he is 100% certain about a given belief, I consider the man to be a scoundrel, a rogue, an agent of the devil. Because it is precisely these people who are so arrogant about their beliefs that they will commit any act, no matter what the cost, no matter who is harmed, in the name of their ideologies.

After all is said and done, here is my plea: Next time you read, hear or come across something that doesn’t sit well with you, that “presses your buttons”, ask yourself the following questions: Is my interpretation the only one applicable to this given statement? Is my view necessarily an accurate reflection of what this person meant to impart? Is my view representative of what most people would feel? And, finally, am I ready to enter into a dialogue with the author of the statement, or is my position so infallible, that all I seek to do is to muzzle another with my vehemence?

As the wise man from Galicia admonishes, never be certain about ideology – less so about a subjective interpretation to a given event. Certainty is arrogance. Rather, show a measure of humility about the religious or philosophical positions you stake out. In the process, your position may become more persuasive, or you may step closer to the position you previously criticised. Either way, we will have moved in the direction of a more truthful and tolerant society, one that values the genuine learning that blossoms from real dialogue. Moreover, we will have begun to effect a thaw in the big chill, that is in danger of freezing our public spaces into a permanent state of mistrust, resentment, condemnation and the rush to accuse.

Note: This article first appeared in the Canadian Jewish News in the fall of 1992, and then re-appeared in the Ottawa Citizen and other publications.