

# Hypersensitivity

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

I was in the Metropolitan Museum of Art the other day, standing in front of a painting by an artist I much admire, Giovanni Battista Caracciolo (not as good as Caravaggio, but a close second). The painting, entitled "Tobias and the Angel", is based on a weird story in the apocryphal Book of Tobit. Briefly, Tobit is a member of the tribe of Naftali exiled by the Assyrians to Nineveh. Horrible things happen to him. He gets blinded. His son goes off to try to collect a debt, and the angel Rephael sends him on a journey to Media to help a widow called Sarah who is possessed by the demon Asmodeus. Tobias is attacked by a fish as he crosses the Tigris. The angel tells him to use its innards to scare off the demon. He rescues Sarah and, back home, uses the miraculous innards to cure his father's blindness. Tobias and Sarah marry, and they all live happily ever after. Not really the sort of book you'd expect to find in the Tanach, and it isn't.

In the gallery the caption reads, "Based on the Biblical book." My hackles began to rise because it might be in the Catholic and Orthodox Bibles, which include the Apocrypha, but it is not in ours or in most Protestant Bibles either. Couldn't they get it straight? Then I got worked up about their calling it the Old Testament, for us primitive old fogeys, as opposed to the shiny New Testament for the good guys. And then I thought, "Am I crazy to get worked up by such a trivial issue?"

A few months ago a friend in London involved me in a complaint he sent to the director of the National Gallery about a painting called "The Rich Man being led to Hell" by David Teniers the Younger, in which the rich man is clearly painted as a Jew complete with kipa and beard, not to mention exaggerated features. The director replied amenably, and tried to put it in the context of the painter and his time. But I did think a few lines added to the blurb might have put the portrait in the context of say "The Jew of Malta", "The Merchant of Venice", or indeed "Oliver Twist", not to mention "Der Sturmer".

If I am so hypersensitive, why am I so surprised when other people are? I have always been very quick to take offense at any perceived slur against my religion and my people, even if I am myself amongst the first to criticize them when they are wrong. Doesn't Proverbs say, "Better the wounds of a friend than the sweet talk of an enemy"? Perhaps it was growing up in England where in my youth Jews and Judaism were indeed regarded as not quite acceptable. We were still called Christ Killers, Jew Boys, and Yids and were accused of being devious, rich, unpatriotic foreigners who should "go home". Except, of course, many Brits didn't want us to go "home" either!

Yet whenever people made fun of religion in general, pompous vicars or duplicitous priests, I enjoyed the fun. Jewish humor is predominantly self-critical and makes fun of God, Moses, rabbis, and the lot of us. But as society has changed we have been forced to become much more sensitive towards

those who suffered from racial discrimination, sexual discrimination, indeed any kind of discrimination.

This weekend the doyen of American writers, Joyce Carol Oates, has been mangled online and in the press because she tweeted, "Where 99.3% of women report having been sexually harassed & rape is epidemic—Egypt—natural to inquire: what's the predominant religion?"

Some of the criticism has been that Ms. Oates might have mentioned other factors such as social, economic, and historical. It was not fair to blame religion only. But why are some religious groups more prone to sexual assault and violence against women? Might it not be, in part, because of religious attitudes? We can all see that within religions there are extremes and fanatics and bad guys as well as good guys. If people set themselves up as spiritual leaders, we have every right to expect them to behave as such and take responsibility. Toleration of corruption or distortion must be excoriated. That, after all, is our tradition. The prophets, Mussar, and Torah require self-analysis, self-criticism, and self-discipline.

The Zimmerman affair is polarizing American society. One side argues that one must respect due process. The other argues that the victim was black and that proves discrimination. But it was Martin Luther King who fought discrimination like no other, yet called on black society to ask itself why its proportion of criminals and single parent families was so much higher than other minorities. In other words being sensitive should not prevent one asking questions.

So despite my hypersensitivity I do not get angry over reasoned criticism of Judaism (or of myself). I don't expect thinking Muslims to object to a reasoned critique of Islam. Is this insensitive? No, I don't think so. Religious leaders or authorities should expect criticism over mistakes or poor judgments. The Ethics of the Fathers declares, "Nagid Shmey Avad Shmey. [A Name Made is a Name destroyed.]" If you set yourself up above the crowd, you must expect scrutiny and criticism.

If American politicians like Spitzer and Weiner, who lost office through their own sexual misdeeds, choose to run for office again, they must expect the scrutiny and explain why they should be trusted with high office. They cannot be treated with kid gloves. It is not insensitive to challenge them about their past behavior. I recall John Profumo who in 1963 lost office against a background of sexual impropriety. But then he lived a life of good deeds, modesty, and charity. We all have choices. If we take the high ground, we must expect to have to defend it.

Of course there is still racism, anti-Semitism, and anti a whole lot of others. The Supreme Court opened up a debate over preferential treatment for minorities. New York is arguing over police profiling. All sides are getting their oars in openly and blatantly. That is the beauty of robust, open, contrary debate.

In Britain and Europe, where state broadcasting systems affect the narrative

and in practice dictate the manner of debate by imposing a wet blanket of political correctness and bias, it is much harder to find a fair, open, and honest hearing of a contrary point of view. Just read Melanie Phillips' blog to see what it's like to try to offer an alternative narrative.

The USA also contains different states with different laws and different biases. Some are pro-business and some are pro-union. Some impose State taxes, some do not. Some allow gay marriage , others reject it. If citizens do not like one state's laws, they can move to another. The freedom to insult in the USA often surprises Europeans. But in the end I believe its brutal openness is healthier. In other words, being sensitive ought not necessarily to mean you cannot say what you believe is right. If I am hypersensitive I need to get over it.