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Jewish Women Campaign Against 'Princess' Jokes

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Jewish-American princess jokes may be nothing new, but at the American Jewish Committee's Conference on Current Stereotypes of Jewish Women last week, concerned Jews said it was time to stop laughing.

While the jokes may seem innocuous, according to Susan Weidman Schneider and other speakers, they represent a resurgence of sexist and anti-Semitic invective masking what Ms. Schneider called a "scream of misogyny."

"What had started as humor has escalated into attacks," said Ms. Schneider, editor of the Jewish feminist magazine *Lilith*.

"There is nothing funny about a putdown of Jewish women that has become a generic term for materialism, self-indulgence, loudness and so on," said Francine Klagsbrun, the author of "Married People: Staying Together in an Age of Divorce" (Bantam, 1985). "We are eating away at our own community."

Society's View of Jewish Women

The conference in New York was held to address the prevalence of the Jewish-American princess, or JAP, stereotype on college campuses, television commercials and greeting cards, and to consider how it affects society's perspective on Jewish women and their image of themselves.

"Imagine for a moment that you are an 18-year-old female Jewish student at a college football game," said Ms. Schneider. "And when you get up to get a soda you hear someone yell, 'JAP! JAP! JAP!' Then the cry is picked up by everybody sitting in the stadium."

Ms. Schneider cited this and other examples of harassment that are in-

'What had started as humor has escalated into attacks.'

cluded in a special report, "JAP-Baiting on Campus," appearing in the autumn edition of *Lilith*.

When it comes to perpetrating such jokes, Sherry M. Merfish, a lawyer who is co-chairwoman of the women's issues committee of the American Jewish Committee's chapter in Houston, said greeting cards provide "a graphic illustration of the pervasiveness of the Jewish-American princess stereotype, as well as how it has been popularized for public consumption."

Ms. Merfish displayed a greeting card in which five Olympic Games rings are represented by five diamond rings, and a girl wearing a Star of David jumps over a hurdle in high heels toward a clearance sale, while filing her nails. The text of the card is about "cross-country kvetching," a "chutpah-thon" and defines kvetching as "an irritating whine made by a spoiled 3-year-old, or a Jewish-American princess at any age."

'Easy Targets' in Literature

Ms. Klagsbrun criticized various authors for perpetuating these stereotypes in literature with such "easy targets" as the title character in Herman Wouk's "Marjorie Morn-

ingstar," whom Ms. Klagsbrun described as "the great-grandmother of Jewish princesses," and Brenda in Philip Roth's "Goodbye, Columbus."

Although such characterizations may be intended in fun, said Ms. Schneider, the consequences must be taken seriously. "Jewish women's self-esteem is being critically damaged by the stereotypes," she said. To escape these labels, Ms. Schneider said, young women especially often try to distance themselves from their Jewish identity.

Insecurities May Be Reflected

In addition, Ms. Klagsbrun said, the jokes interfere with romantic relationships between Jewish women and Jewish men, and inhibit coalition-building between Jewish and non-Jewish women. "Why do we women label other women JAPS?" asked Ms. Klagsbrun. "It reflects our insecurities and self-doubts. We are setting ourselves apart from the others and that is a form of self-hatred."

The term, Ms. Merfish said, connotes idleness and dependency, and is not only derogatory but old-fashioned, undermining women's recent ambition and achievements. "It flies in the face of Jewish women who have con-

tributed so much," she said.

"What better put-down of a woman than to label her a princess," said Ms. Klagsbrun, "a never-never person from a fairy tale, a lightweight, a bubble head, indulged for and cared for by her daddy, the king."

Although these stereotypes derive from a basic anti-Semitism, Ms. Schneider said, they are also specifically anti-woman. "The common assumption is that the term JAP refers to someone who is materialistic, spoiled and demanding, but we all know that these characteristics can be found in people of all groups and both sexes. So we have to wonder why Jewish women in particular have

been singled out for derision in this way."

Will Harsher Jokes Follow?

Because of their humorous presentation, said Ms. Schneider, the stereotypes have gained widespread acceptance among Jews and others, giving "permission for more direct and classic anti-Semitic graffiti, jokes, comments, other kinds of verbal abuse."

But these slurs are by no means benign, according to the director of the American Jewish Committee's national affairs department, Irving Levine. "The history of prejudice should tell us and teach us that they are lethal," he said. ■



Francine Klagsbrun



Susan Weidman Schneider

NEWS FROM THE Committee



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The AJC protects Jewish interests the world over; combats bigotry and promotes human rights for all; defends pluralism, enhances the creative vitality of the Jewish people, and contributes to the formulation of American public policy from a combined Jewish and American perspective. Founded in 1906, it is the pioneer human-relations agency in the U.S.

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NEW YORK, Sept. 2 . . . Vicious humor that demeans and stereotypes Jewish women is increasing and getting nastier. Nevertheless, both the Jewish and the general American community apparently fail to recognize that this "humor" -- seen most frequently in jokes, graffiti, greeting cards, and other verbal attacks on the so-called "Jewish American Princess" -- seems often to represent serious anti-Semitism and serious misogyny.

Furthermore, many of the swipes against the "Jewish American Princess" ("JAP") apparently are begun and broadcast by Jewish men, who by telling and spreading these "jokes" unwittingly legitimize and encourage anti-Semitic stereotyping and behavior.

These were among the central charges made by speakers at a "Conference on the Impact of Current Stereotypes of Jewish Women" held today at American Jewish Committee headquarters here. Sponsored by AJC's National Women's Issues Committee, the conference was scheduled to coincide with the publication, in the autumn issue of the New York-based Jewish feminist magazine, Lilith, of a special investigative report on stereotyping of Jewish women. The Lilith report is titled "JAP-Baiting on Campus."

Speakers at today's conference were Susan Weidman Schneider, editor-in-chief of Lilith and author of several books, including Jewish and Female: Choices and Changes in Our Lives Today; author Francine Klagsbrun, editor of Free to Be...You and Me and author, most recently, of Married People: Staying Together in an Age of Divorce, and Sherry Merfish, a Houston, Texas, attorney and chair of the Women's Issues Committee of AJC's Houston chapter.

Ruth Septe, chair of the AJC Women's Issues Committee, presided at the conference.

Voicing one of the conference's key themes, Ms. Schneider pointed out that "the common assumption is that the term 'JAP' refers to someone who is materialistic, spoiled, and demanding, but we all know that these characteristics can be found in people of all groups and both sexes. So we have to wonder why Jewish women in particular have been singled out for derision in this way, for this clearly represents stereotyping and prejudice."

Among the examples of "derision" described in the Lilith investigative report and cited today by Ms. Schneider were these:

- * At one university's varsity games, whenever a stylishly dressed woman was seen near the front of the stands during a lull in the games, members of the university band would point at her and loudly chant "JAP! JAP! JAP!"

- * Library tables at a large university were found by a researcher to be "covered" with graffiti attacking "JAP's" in obscene and violent terms.

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* Students at still other universities have held "Biggest JAP on Campus" contests; worn T-shirts saying "Slap a JAP," and displayed posters and dummies bearing obscene remarks about "JAPs".

"All of these incidents," continued Ms. Schneider, "target Jewish women to be sneered at and disparaged -- and there has been no outcry about it from the organized Jewish community. Yet these incidents -- along with 'JAP' jokes, greeting cards, and the like -- are clearly anti-Semitic, and there would be an outcry if Jewish men were assailed in this way."

Charging that verbal attacks on Jewish women had been increasing in both number and intensity in recent years, Ms. Schneider said also that Jewish men were frequently participants in "JAP-baiting."

"As Jewish women have become stronger and more visible," she said, "Jewish men increasingly use the jokes to insult Jewish women. No other ethnic group allows its women to be disparaged in this way; no other group publicly humiliates its women in this way. There is no similar body of jokes about Black women or Baptist women or Anglo-Saxon Protestant women."

One of the problems caused by the stereotyping, continued Ms. Schneider, is that "the slurs against Jewish women affect the women's self-esteem and can result in their being made to feel ashamed both about being Jewish and about being women."

Ms. Klagsbrun, whose analysis of the background of the stereotype appears in the current Lilith, said: "How odd it is that the term 'JAP', referring to a spoiled, self-indulgent woman, should be so widely used now, at a time when women are working outside their homes in unprecedented numbers, and struggling to balance their home lives and their work lives and to give as much of themselves as they can to their husband, their children, and their jobs."

It is precisely these developments, Ms. Klagsbrun went on, that have led to the prevalence of the "JAP" stereotype.

"As women have moved into the workplace, and into the mainstream of Jewish and secular life," she said, "their newfound -- or newly accepted -- drive for achievement threatens many men. What better put-down of the strong woman than to label her as a princess? She is not being attacked as a competitor: that would be too close to home. No, she's called a princess, and that label diminishes her, negates her ambition and her success."

"I also think that the label 'JAP' carries an underlying anti-Semitic message," continued Ms. Klagsbrun, "a message in which all the stereotypes of Jews come into play. In this day when Jews have made a firm place for themselves in American life, polite society would not openly make anti-Jewish slurs. But 'JAP' is an acceptable code word and nobody protests its intrinsic anti-Semitism -- mainly, I think, because women are still fair game for attack."

Moreover, she said, "I believe the term is a code word for self-hatred as well, for when Jews call someone a 'JAP,' they're setting themselves apart from that person, hanging their own self-doubts and insecurities on those 'other' Jews."

Ms. Merfish, relating both her own experiences and those of her community, said she had long been aware of the stereotype on a personal level

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because "whenever someone I had just met learned I was Jewish, I often had to rebut the presumption that I was a 'JAP'."

Then, she continued, a few years ago she saw the "JAP Handbook" on display at a Jewish Book Fair in Houston.

"I realized how far the 'joke' had gone and I was outraged. I tried to make the community realize that the book was anti-Semitic, and initially they failed to see it; many rabbis called the book 'Jewish humor' and said we should be able to laugh at ourselves.

"But when they looked into it more closely they did see the anti-Semitism, and the Houston Rabbinical Council passed a resolution addressing the matter. This was clearly an example of consciousness-raising, and it ultimately succeeded."

AJC's Houston Chapter, she said, is now developing an educational packet on "JAP" stereotyping to be distributed to rabbis throughout the country.

Continuing with Ms. Merfish's theme, Ms. Septee said that AJC was "concerned that what some view as 'humor' very easily becomes 'permission' to demean Jewish women -- and by extension, all Jews."

"We are equally concerned," she continued, "that the Jewish community, by not recognizing the seriousness and the anti-Semitism of 'JAP' stereotyping, in effect abets the problem. The Jewish community must seriously examine this subject, and we must all recognize that 'JAP' jokes are not funny: they are ugly, and they must end."

[For copies of the fall, 1987 issue of Lilith, write to Lilith Magazine, 250 West 57 Street, Suite 2432, New York, NY 10107.]

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