

passion when the human ruler falls short. As the season approaches wherein we once again proclaim the kingship of God, let us take this our calling soberly, yea awesomely, to heart.

"Jew" as defamation in the dictionary

David B. Guralnik

In 1969, Marcus Shloimovitz, a textile merchant of Manchester, England, and a member of the Board of Deputies of British Jews, filed a class libel suit against Clarendon Press, publishers of the famed *Oxford English Dictionary* (for short, OED), the famous thirteen-volume repository of the English language. In his suit, Shloimovitz charged that the entry for the word *Jew* in that work contained the following defamatory noun definition: "a person of Hebrew race; an Israelite. . . as applied to a grasping or extortionate money-lender or usurer, or a trader who drives hard bargains or deals craftily," as well as a verb definition: "to cheat or overreach, in a way attributed to Jewish traders or usurers." Shloimovitz indicated that he was not claiming damages, but was "seeking an injunction to stop this defamation of Jewish character" by a correction in the appropriate volume of a forthcoming supplement to the dictionary.

The suit moved slowly through the British legal system, finally being scheduled for a hearing by the High Court on July 5, 1973. During the four intervening years, the Clarendon Press refused to make any public statement about the charge of the suit. On June 10, 1973, an item appeared in the *Sunday Times* of London reporting a speech given to the Philological Society at Oxford by the editor of the OED, Robert Burchfield. In his talk, according to the *Times*, Burchfield took a stand "against politicians, nationalists, religious bigots, and zealous hordes." In effect, he said that the OED had no intention of altering the definition of *Jew* except, perhaps, to add an explanation of how these usages came about. Burchfield used the occasion to "caution icily against 'Guralnikism,' a word denoting the modern equivalent of bowdlerism whose etymology derives from one David B. Guralnik, editor-in-chief of *Webster's New World Dictionary*, Second College Edition 1970." The report went on to state that "Guralnik deemed that words like *dago*, *kike*, *wog* and *wop* should be excluded." The article made no reference whatsoever to the pending libel suit.

Defining the obscenities

As the less-than-honored eponym of that Burchfield coinage, I must here explain our practices, past and

present, in this connection. In the first College Edition of *Webster's New World Dictionary* (1953), we followed the prevailing dictionary custom of including common terms of racial and ethnic opprobrium, except that we alone carefully noted the derogatory and offensive nature of each such term. For example, for the use of *Jew* as a verb, we added: "vulgar and offensive expression, in allusion to methods attributed to Jewish merchants by anti-Semites." In the years following the publication of that work, I had reason to doubt the wisdom of our decision. Letters from users of the dictionary showed that some misapprehended the adjectives in such a note as that at *nigger* ("a vulgar, offensive term of hostility and contempt, as used by Negro-phobes") as applying to the victim of the epithet rather than to the term itself. And despite my regular quotation of Montefiore's dictum that the dictionary should not be blamed for a recorded usage any more than a thermometer should be blamed for a fever, I found myself wondering whether the very inclusion of such terms in the dictionary, with or without notation, did not, in fact, lend respectability to them and tend to perpetuate their usage.

During the planning conferences for the Second College Edition in 1963, staff and consultants debated the question of whether or not to include the so-called obscenities, the taboo English terms dealing with sex and excretion, which were only just then beginning to surface in some publications but had not yet reached the present flood stage. It was decided that the objection to such terms which still prevailed in many quarters, especially in schools, made it unwise to risk the ban that would keep the dictionary out of the hands of students for whom it had been primarily prepared. Having made that decision to exercise our prerogative of selection in one area, I then proposed that we take the next logical step and dispense with those true obscenities, the terms of racial and ethnic opprobrium. After some discussion, it was agreed that we were well within the limits of our lexicographical responsibilities to ignore these terms, which, as I later pointed out in my Foreword to the book, were appearing in print with decreasing frequency these days.

I met Robert Burchfield at a lexicographical conference in 1972, at which time he chided me for our failure to include the taboo sexual terms. I explained the thinking behind our decision and called his attention to my statement in the Foreword. At that time he made no reference to our concomitant decision on the racist terms, nor did he reply to my question about why it took the OED over one hundred years to decide to enter the taboo terms, for which the Oxford editors

had long been amply supplied with citations going back to the fourteenth century and earlier.

An explanation is offered

Upon reading the report of Burchfield's speech to the Philological Society, I promptly dispatched a letter to the *London Times*, in which I outlined the principles of vocabulary selection for a desk dictionary of limited scope. On the basis of our own citational evidence, I disputed Burchfield's contention that the use of *Jew* as a verb is frequently met up with in print these days, adding that H.L. Mencken had written in 1945 that the verb, by that date, "seldom appears in any save frankly anti-Semitic writings." I then went on to offer gratuitously my views on how I would handle pejorative terms in a vast, "unabridged" work, such as the OED:

I would, of course, enter all terms for which I have sufficient citational evidence. I would also make certain that the record of usage was complete and that, for example, the verb "to jew" was properly identified as the offensive term that it is, to spare an innocent but insensitive user of it from a social gaffe. I would not treat such a term as dago as it is dealt with in the OED. The original entry (Vol. III): "U. S. . . . A name originally given in the south-western section of the United States to a man of Spanish parentage; now extended to include Spaniards, Portuguese, and Italians in general." And the expansion in Volume I of the recently published Supplement: "For U. S. read slang (orig. U. S.) . . . (Now a disparaging term for any (sic) foreigner) . . . 2. the Spanish or Italian Language." No indication of opprobrium on the part of the user, except as applied to "any foreigner," and no indication of the offense that could be taken by the reader. In effect, a term that might properly be used in such a sentence as "The Divine Comedy was the first major work written in Dago."

I would not define Jew as: "A person of Hebrew race," for although I, like most of my lexicographical colleagues, am neither anthropologist nor sociologist, I am sufficiently well-read to know that the Jews are not a race, despite observations to the contrary by such as Houston Stewart Chamberlain and Alfred Rosenberg.

The *Times* regretted that it would not "have space available in the Letters page to publish it (my letter)." One does not, *khas vesholom*, make space available to criticism of a national institution. The *New York Times*, whose ox was not being gored, printed in its entirety a shorter version of the letter, which I had sent to them.

On July 5, 1974, High Court Justice Sir Reginald Goff dismissed the suit against Clarendon Press on the legalistic grounds that no personal damage or actionable offense against Shloimovitz was done by the dictionary listings. The defamatory matter should and must be construed as a reference to him as an individual. Sir Reginald added with majestic benevolence, in what must rank among the leading bench fatuities of British jurisprudence, "It must, of course, be absolutely apparent to everybody – and I am happy to say this in open court, that there are many fine persons who are Jewish by birth or creed, persons of utmost integrity, honesty, reputation, skill, and ability." And then in a burst of generosity, "If there be Jews, and no doubt there are, who do not in fact measure up to that standard, there are many people not Jews who are just as bad or worse, and there are many non-Jews to whom these derogatory words could very properly be applied."

'To jew' or not 'to jew'

Shloimovitz said he would not carry the case to the Court of Appeal, but would leave the matter to public opinion. Clarendon Press promised not to collect the court costs awarded against Shloimovitz.

But that is not really the end of the matter. Shortly after the publicity attending the OED court case, I received from a correspondent a reproduction of a letter appearing in *The Chicago Tribune* on March 13, 1872, from G. & C. Merriam, publishers of the Merriam-Webster dictionaries in Springfield, Mass. The letter was in reply to a complaint from a Mr. Solomons (note the coincidence – Solomons is the English equivalent of the Slavic Shloimovitz) about the inclusion of a verb *jew*, "to cheat or defraud; swindle" as unjust and unsanctioned by good usage. The publishers conceded that his complaint was justified; that, in fact, a search of earlier British dictionaries reveals no record of such a usage; that they "do not recall ever seeing it employed in literary composition;" that "we fear it must have been drawn from Worcester, where we first find it;" and that it was their intention to drop the term from future editions of the dictionary.

Joseph Worcester was the editor of an American dictionary competing with the Merriam's in the middle of the 19th century. It is a fact that no citations for a verb *to Jew* have yet been uncovered antedating its appearance in Worcester. Is it possible that my fears about the influence of dictionaries are well-founded and that we have here the instance of a usage not only promulgated by dictionaries but actually initiated by one? More research is clearly called for.

A postscript: the current offering of the G. & C.

Merriam Co. includes the verb *to Jew*, as do all other dictionaries of that scope, with the exception of *Webster's New World Dictionary*, Second College Edition.

Feminism, a cause for the halachic

Rachel Adler

Arlene, I was very disappointed to read your denunciation of the Jewish feminist movement (*Sh'ma* 4/73). I can understand and sympathize with your feelings. When we explore feminism, we are in territory which presents serious challenges to our *halachic* commitment. That is frightening to us in a way non-traditional feminists can never fully understand. Our *halachic* commitment is as much a part of us as our feminism, so that when the two clash, we are internally at war.

I have always refused to choose between my adherence to the *halachic* process and my dignity as a human being. That leaves me with many problems. What can I say to the fact that vast areas of the laws of witnessing are based on the assumption that, except in severely circumscribed situations, I cannot be trusted to answer truthfully whether or not I have received a *get*, whether or not my husband has died, whether or not I or another woman have been raped in captivity? What can I do with the fact that if my husband went insane, I would not be able to obtain a *get* from him, but if I went insane, the consent of a hundred rabbis would make it possible for him to take a second wife? How can I reconcile myself to the fact that when nine male Jews and I gather to pray, we do not comprise the basic unit of the Jewish community, but if another male Jew just stands there without participating in the service, he can make that collection of individuals into a *minyan*? How does it feel to be one of those who "neither learn nor teach?" (Kiddushin 29b).

Can a woman be a total Jew?

I once asked someone, "If God did not want me to have the mitzvah of *talmud torah*, why didn't He make me a cretin, so I wouldn't understand what I was missing?" The man replied, "Did it ever occur to you that God might want you to suffer?" My answer is, "Not in that way, He wouldn't." The God I worship wants Jews to fulfill themselves through His *Torah*. I do not believe He gave a *Torah* so narrow that people have to limit and deform themselves to squeeze into its confines. Nor do I believe that God degrades or humiliates His creatures through *halacha* or requires them to deny their own natures or destroy the gifts He created in them.

It is painful to ask the dangerous questions feminists must ask about the nature of *halacha* and its application, to risk the shattering of faith and subsequent life in an empty, silent universe. But for me it would be worse to stop, to try to persuade myself that injustice is really justice, that lack of fulfillment is the only true fulfillment, that our greatest offering to God is a stunted, starved little soul which comes before its Master saying, "You see what I did not become for Your sake."

Nevertheless, I can understand your concern, Arlene. What I can neither understand nor excuse is your intolerance and lack of generosity toward Jewish feminists. You accuse women of attempting "to remodel the *halacha* according to their *whim*" (*italics mine*). While it is true that many feminists do not understand the process by which *halacha* may legitimately be re-applied, it does not follow that their intentions are frivolous. You and I might disagree with some proposed "new *mitzvot*," but how dare we doubt that they were conceived *b'kedusha u'v'taharah*, out of someone's longing to serve God. I have never met a woman who served as a *chazzanit* or *baalat tefila* simply to prove that she could, just as I never met a woman who put on *tefilin* or learned *gemara* for "political" reasons. Wouldn't it be more charitable to assume that a Jew desires to do *mitzvot* because the soul is drawn to them? If one simply wants to be a feminist, the easiest way is to join NOW. If Judaism discriminates against women, the logical response is to reject Judaism. I must conclude that women who attempt to harmonize their Judaism and their feminism do so because Judaism is precious to them.

Conflicts of orthodox feminists are real

You charge that the feminists do not respect the Orthodox woman's right to oppose reforms. "Let them read *torot*, preach sermons, chant services — as long as they do so in their own temples." Are you not ignoring the fact that there are *Orthodox* feminists who are troubled by *halachic* role-stereotyping? Or have we been relegated to the temples too?

You suspect the feminists' "sincerity" because Blu Greenberg and Saul Berman were criticized at the Network Conference last year. I also recall getting a few hisses for some ideological "sin," but I understand that people are not always polite when discussing what is very important to them. We traditionalists are often very impolite to non-traditionalists, except that we call it "zeal." I think we all learned a lot from the Women's Conference, thorns and all. Certainly Saul Berman's recent article in *Tradition* displays far more insight into the real problems of Jewish feminism than his speech at the Conference did.