

Words may express anti-Jewishness just as do fire bombs

By SYLVIA HART
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Someone who throws a rock bearing a note, "Kill Jews," through a synagogue window is demonstrating his anti-Semitism, or anti-Jewishness, by acting atrociously.

ANTI-SEMITISM is not limited to such atrocities but often is more subtle, according to Robin Miller, a young Jewish woman who is a private consultant in human relations from Philadelphia.

Ms. Miller spoke in a program sponsored by the Mobile Area Jewish-Christian Dialogue at the Baptist Student Center at the University of South Alabama.

The subtlety of anti-Semitism was demonstrated during a brainstorming session by members of Ms. Miller's audience, who listed stereotypes of Jews.

THE AUDIENCE called out such expressions as "profiteer," "tight as a Jew," "big nose," "rich," "aggressive," "God's chosen people," "religion," "humanitarian," "cultured," "intelligent," "shrewd" and "friendly."

Ms. Miller said those persons in the audience who named only positive stereotypes were making "a very conscious effort not to be offensive."

The speaker said that "generating a list that possesses the negative stereotypes is easier than we might think."

IN DEFINING the word "stereotype," Ms. Miller said, "It's an arbitrary assigning of habits, abilities, traits or expectations to a person or a group of people on the basis of their group membership regardless of their attributes as individuals."

Stereotypes, Ms. Miller said, "often possess an element of truth. They're usually taken out of historical context. They're denied in self or named differently and used against another group."

Giving an example of how a stereotype is used against a group, Ms. Miller said one group might be called "clannish" while another group might be referred to as "close-knit."

MS. MILLER said, "There's a painful necessity of recognizing and owning stereotypes in ourselves. Whether or not today I choose to speak in stereotypes, nonetheless I've learned them."

The speaker said, "It prevents a personal contact when all we can see is a label."

"Personal contact is the essence, the absolute essence, of how we combat oppression and how we prevent anti-Semitism."

According to the speaker, "It prevents further learning about the person or group when we think there's no more to learn."

STEREOTYPES, Ms. Miller said, "play a very important part in maintaining and perpetuating oppression."

The speaker urged members of her audience to become involved in "taking action to interrupt oppression."

That action might take various forms such as pointing out to another person he is making anti-Semitic remarks, writing a letter to the editor when anti-Semitism is expressed in the news media, or openly demonstrating against anti-Semitic activities in a community.

EARLIER in her speech, Ms. Miller defined oppression as "prejudice plus power."

She said, "Prejudice is a conscious or unconscious negative attitude toward another social group."

Power, she said, "has to do with the privilege, social sanction or institutional enforcement to do something about that prejudice."

Continuing, Ms. Miller said, "Oppression is the systematic denial of power and rights to one social group by another social group and consciously or unconsciously maintained to be assumptions, attitudes and actions of individuals, institutions and culture."

THE SPEAKER also defined a social group: "any group set apart by socially defined boundaries, race, gender, sexual orientation, age, physical ability" and the like.

In acts of oppression, Ms. Miller said, those who are in the dominant groups, or have "the upper

hand," include males, white people, Gentiles, middle-aged people, heterosexual people, people with money, and physically able people.

Those in subordinate groups, or the targets of oppression, include females; people of color; Jews; very young and very old people; lesbians, gay men, bisexual, asexual and undecided people in terms of sex; poor people; and physically disabled people.

MOST PEOPLE, Ms. Miller noted, fit into some dominant groups and into some subordinate groups.

"All of us learn the rules of how we're supposed to behave as a member of any one of these groups and also how we're supposed to behave toward other people of our group and toward other groups," Ms. Miller said.

SHE SAID that the way groups behave is supported by history, culture and institutions.

Those people in dominant groups, the speaker said, "define what's human and what's normal. No power struggle there because you're putting out the information. You're defining who is OK. You create the stereotype, but you know very little about the subordinates nor do you know it's OK to ask about the subordinates."

THE EXISTENCE of dominant-subordinate groups is painful for people in both groups, Ms. Miller said, "because the bottom line is that the stuff separates us from being able to talk to each other, and I'm talking about on a one-to-one basis."

The speaker said persons are "born innocent with no choice about our social-group membership. We can't say, 'Hey God, could you make that white, male and rich, please?'"

People are "born innocent, and we inherit the stereotypes, the misinformation and biased histories."

Being free from prejudice "is not a matter of birth. It's a matter of a lot of hard work because prejudice is the stuff we've been spoon-fed," Ms. Miller said.



Mobile Press Register photo by Victor Calhoun

Robin Miller speaking in Mobile