



❖ PROF. LEO LIEBERMAN, Jewish Times Staff Writer

Of Hamlet and Sticks and Stones

Recently I called to mind teaching the Shakespearean tragedy Hamlet and I recalled how he once responded in a semi-satiric, semi-playful manner when someone asked him what he was reading, and he said, "Words, words, words." It was then that I remembered how words had affected me when I was very young.

Remember back when we were all kids and some of us were the butt of nasty comments. For example there were those of us who needed to wear glasses and were called, "Four Eyes." Then there were some who had a little more weight than was needed and think of all the names that they were called. I didn't even care

for being named a "cheerful chubby," although this was far better than some of the words that were used.

And there was a multitude of appellations for those who were not as intellectually adept as they might have been, not to mention all the other words that were used to designate those who were either physically or mentally "challenged."

Now if truth were to be told, and why not, many of these off-color expressions were reserved for the times when it was just between "us kids" and out of the earshot of adults. And when we complained to our parents, they often just told us to recite the poem, "Sticks and stones can break my bones, but names will never harm

me."

I have to admit that this was not much solace since even though physically we may not have been harmed, certainly our feelings were bruised. The one exception to this was when Mama spoke of the Nazis or of

their henchmen. Then she used words that could not be used in "mixed" or any other company. But all these words were in Yiddish, perhaps to protect the tender ears of the children, although I saw Papa blush, and he very seldom blushed, but he did not challenge Mama on her choice of expressions since he probably agreed wholeheartedly. And when she used some epithets to describe Hitler – that always concluded with "pu-pu-pu."

And so to the present day. My grandson the NBC producer of news on the west coast of Florida (here I go bragging again) informed me that he received a memo from the powers that be, informing

all in the broadcast studio that there was a word that was not to be used. My mind raced with all the raunchy and off-color expressions until I was informed that the word was "elderly." This was no longer politically correct. Mature was

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So why should I have been surprised when I tried to make a hotel reservation and when I asked if they had a special rate for "senior citizens," I was told that they no longer used that term, but now they called us "recycled juniors." And one of my favorite organizations the "Elder Hostels" now has informed me that they are going to change their name to eliminate the age-related term!

But I have to confess that once when the local newspaper reported on my having won the Poetry Contest of Atlantic County I was described as "frail and elderly with a powerful voice: and I was

more taken aback by the term "frail." When I read the article I was going to recite the "sticks and stones" comment, but then I thought of how derogatory words were so often used to make fun of people of various religious and ethnic groups and I thought again of how when these uncomplimentary words were directed against my friends when we were in elementary school, there were so many hurt feelings. I thought too of how the Ku Klux Klan and the White Supremacists and the Anti-Semitic no-goodniks used language and words to disparage people.

It was then that the words of Chaim Ginot, that fine historian, came to my mind. He pointed out how the Nazis first started with words and then they went on to make laws and finally the Concentration Camps were established and innocent people went up in smoke.

So it is today that I think that maybe sticks and stones, which break the bones, start with words.

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