

The Underlying Truth of Cartoons (March 2006)

My sense is that for most of us the word 'cartoon' conjures up images of stick-figures or animated creatures doing human things, just as the notion of 'cartoonish' suggests a playfulness, something not to be taken seriously. But the truth is quite the contrary. The cartoon is perhaps the most elemental of art forms, often lacking (and usually intentionally) in sophistication, in matters of color or depth or perspective. For the cartoon, the message transcends the medium. This does not conflict with Marshall McLuhan's infamous dictum that "the medium is the message." Indeed, the cartoon's simplicity is essential to its function, but its function—and this would include even the comic strip—is nevertheless to stir the mind and the heart, not so much the eye.

Perhaps those Danish cartoonists used poor judgment in their depictions of subject matter deemed offensive to devout Moslems. Perhaps. We Jews, a people whose tradition gave birth to a religious sensibility of the inherent danger of visualizing the sacred (see Commandment #2), can—at least—appreciate the profound discomfort such images may evoke. By the same token, the overwhelming propensity of our tradition to challenge accepted beliefs, to openly question and even record dissenting opinion (see virtually every page of the Talmud) teaches us that even more sacred than not giving in to our weakness to portray the ineffable is the mitzvah to give voice to the truths we hear from within.

At the very end of the Anne Frank House tour in Amsterdam is an educational multi-media presentation designed to bring some of the underlying issues of the Holocaust into focus. Specifically it poses the question to visitors: Which is more important, the right to speak freely or the right to be protected from hate-speech? Just before this year's Confirmation Class left for our annual trip to Amsterdam, an Islamic newspaper—attempting to show the 'free world' what it feels like to have sacred icons trashed—published a cartoon of Adolf Hitler and Anne Frank lying together in bed with the caption: "Write this one in your diary Anne."

Talk about irony. How odd that Anne Frank has now become symbolic of the very society that begrudged her the right to live (which brings into clear relief the sad reality of how it is that Israel is hated in the Arab world as a symbol of the West albeit the reason Israel exists was to escape the Western world). And yet that Islamic cartoonist actually got it right (although I suspect for the wrong reason). Indeed, Anne Frank is the symbol of the West, but not because she died so tragically but rather because she and her diary embody the essential Western and modern value we place on the "unalienable" right of all human beings to freely speak their minds. No thought can be too dangerous; only the fear of such expression can destroy.

The 'Underlying' Truth: My wife tells me that just beneath those magnificent frescoes adorning the walls and ceilings of Europe's cathedrals are small dots, punched from pencil-drawn stencils that form lines in and around which the artist would then fill and cover with paint. Technically those stencils are known in the art world as 'cartoons'. Without them many of the great artworks of our world would never have been able to be. There's a lesson here.