

Confronting bigotry in all its forms: When is the word 'Jew' an offensive stereotype?

by Peter Dreier

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Cheryl Sanders, elected chairwoman of Franklin County Board of Commissioners

An elected official in a small Florida town last week used the word "jew" as a verb to mean cheap or stingy. This set off a minor controversy which I'll report below. This hardly rises to the level of outrage triggered (pun intended) by the acquittal of George Zimmerman in another Florida town, 330 miles away, but it does raise the

broader question of how our society deals with persistent and ugly stereotypes. And under what circumstances those stereotypes can explode into discrimination and even violence and murder.

Last week, the *Apalachicola Times*, a small weekly, published a [story](#) about the Franklin County Board of Commissioners meeting. It appeared to be a routine meeting, dealing with the mundane civic housekeeping activities of a rural government. Much of the story involved the commissioners' decision to hire a new superintendent of roads and a dispute among the commissioners over what salary to pay the person who was chosen for the position, a man who had worked for the county for 26 years.

During that discussion, Cheryl Sanders, the elected chairwoman of board, said that they were "not to be up here jewing over somebody's pay." (You can see Sanders' comment on this video of the meeting at 14:36 of Part 6 of the videotape).

The local newspaper simply reported her statement without comment. It printed the word "jewing" as a verb, in the lower case.

Then a respected media watchdog blogger, Jim Romenesko, [picked up the story](#) and wrote that Sanders, who apparently had received some criticisms of her use of the word "jew" in that context, had apologized for using the comment. She told Romenesko that she had apologized to people who were offended by her remark via email. But she refused to show Romenesko a copy of the email.

Sanders told Romenesko over the phone: "I am not anti-Semitic and there was no malice toward anyone." She added that "this has been blown out of proportion" and that county residents who questioned her use of the expression "have accepted my apology." She hung up when Romenesko asked if she would forward the apology email she claimed to have sent.

In a follow-up blog, Romenesko quoted the paper's city editor, whose byline appeared on the story, as saying that he had no problem with the word "jew" as a verb. Romenesko mentioned that the editor, David Adlerstein, is Jewish, and quoted him.

"I have heard the expression on more than one occasion around these parts in my dozen years at the paper," Adlerstein wrote Romenesko in an email. "It doesn't offend me, unless it's used to describe someone who cheats you. But haggling and dickering? To me, it's a proud trait of my tribe, and it's a solid cut above cold-hearted stiffing someone with a pious grin. But that's me."

It appeared that, in his comments to Romenesko, Adlerstein had unwittingly dug himself into a hole, appearing to defend an anti-semitic statement by a local official. The fact that he is Jewish may have compounded the controversy.

So I called Adlerstein to get his version of these events. He told me that he is a "proud Jew." "I'm the son of Hersch L. Adlerstein. He worked his entire life for the Anti Defamation League," an organization devoted to identifying and opposing anti-semitism. The elder Adlerstein "fought all his life against anti-semitism," his son said. The younger Adlerstein attended Brandeis University, a secular institution with strong Jewish roots and ties.

The 56-year old journalist told me that he has been editor of the *Apalachicola Times* for 12 years and that he loves living in the small community. He's known Cheryl Sanders the entire time. "She's a good lady," he said. Adlerstein acknowledged that the word "jew" can be a "rude, crude term" when used as a verb to connote someone who is cheap or is prone to cheat. "She knew what it meant," Adlerstein said. When Sanders used the word at the county commission meeting, she was criticizing several of her fellow commissioners for being stingy. He insists that Sanders "wasn't referring to Jews. She wasn't slurring the Jewish people."

Adlerstein said that as a journalist, he wanted to quote Sanders accurately, without editorializing. In quoting her, he put the word "jew" in lower case because she was using it as a verb, not a noun. "I handled it carefully," Adlerstein told me.

Today, the *Jewish Forward*, a widely-read and respected newspaper, ran a story about the Florida incident, without a byline, taken from the Jewish Telegraphic Agency. The headline over the story read: ["Florida Official Sorry for Using 'Jew-ing'"](#).

Despite the headline, the article provided no evidence of an apology. It relied entirely on Romenesko's blog which, as I noted earlier, could not confirm that Cheryl Sanders had, in fact, apologized to anyone. After the *Forward* story appeared, however, Sanders did apologize. Adlerstein told me today that at the Franklin County commissioners meeting this morning (Tuesday), Sanders opened the meeting with a formal apology. He said he intended to include her apology in his story that will appear in the paper that comes out Thursday. The video of today's meeting will be available later today or tomorrow on the [Forgotten Coast TV website](#).

What lessons can we learn - about bigotry, insensitivity, hatred, and journalism - from this incident? According to a [bio](#) on the internet, Cheryl Sanders grew up in Carabelle, Florida in Franklin County, located in the state's panhandle on the Gulf of Mexico. The county has slightly more than 11,000 people.

Unlike some other parts of Florida, Franklin County is not a major center of Jewish life. One [report](#) about the American Jewish population lists all the places in the U.S. with at least 100 Jews. Franklin County, Florida is not among them.

Alderstein told me that he estimates there are no more than 50 Jews in Franklin County and that there is no synagogue or Jewish organization. He mentioned that Danny Itzkovitz, who owns a popular restaurant in town, is Jewish.

But Alderstein said that people in Franklin County have little direct experience with Jews, and aren't familiar with Jewish holidays or Jewish rituals. If you look at the videotape of the July 2 county board of commissioners meetings, you'll see it began with a Christian prayer.

Cheryl Sanders is part of that culture. According to internet sources, she was born and raised in Franklin County, which gave 65% of its vote to Mitt Romney in the 2012 election. She graduated from Carrabelle High School in 1973 and attended Lively Vocational Technical School in Tallahassee. Sanders, whom Alderstein told me is a "conservative Democrat," was elected to the Franklin County Board of County Commissioners in 1998 and was re-elected in 2002 and 2006. She was appointed by Gov. Jeb Bush to the Northwest Florida Transportation Corridor Authority in 2005 to represent Franklin County. She is also on the boards of the Small County Coalition, the Florida Association of Counties, and the Alligator Point Taxpayers Association.

Caught like a deer in the headlights over her offensive remark, Sanders is unlikely to use the word "jew" as a verb in public again. Of course I have no idea what she is saying in private to her friends about being embroiled in this mini-controversy. Does she realize that using the word "jew" as she did is offensive? Does she realize that it connotes a hateful stereotype about an entire group of people?

Cheryl Sanders told Romenesko : "I am not anti-Semitic and there was no malice toward anyone."

She is probably telling the truth. As Alderstein noted in his interview with me, Sanders' use of the word "jew" was anti-semitic, but she may not personally be anti-semitic.

Is that a difference without a distinction?

Like most people of my generation, I grew up using the word "gyp" to mean "cheat" or "be cheap." I frequently used the phrase "I got gyped" when I thought I was being cheated. At the time I didn't even realize that the word referred to gypsies and that it was a stereotype of an entire group. When someone point this out to me, I

realized that it was offensive. I stopped using it. And when someone else uses it - usually unthinkingly and without malice -- I point out its offensive connotation.

Likewise, I have heard other people use the word "jew" to mean cheap, stingy, and cheater, but I don't think they realized it was a slur and a stereotype until I point it out to them.

About 35 years ago, I was visiting a friend in a small rural town in Wisconsin. We visited her neighbor, a dairy farmer. In the nearby field, a bull and a cow were having sex. The farmer remarked: "You can't separate them any more than you can separate a city Jew from his money." I pointed out that those words were offensive stereotypes about Jews. He honestly had no idea what I was talking about. He thought there was nothing offensive about this because he figured it was an accurate statement. He used it like he would use "knee high to a grasshopper" or some other cliché. I don't know if my attempt to educate him made any difference in terms of what he thought about Jews or about whether he'd continue to use the words.

I had no direct experience with gypsies, so when I used the word "gyp" it was something I'd picked up in the general culture, not something I knew first-hand. Similarly, the Wisconsin farmer I encountered 35 years ago had probably never met a Jew before. He got his stereotype about Jews from the broader culture. But such stereotypes have a life of their own once they are deeply ingrained into our heads. Stereotypes are, according to the dictionary, "a standardized mental picture" that "represents an oversimplified opinion, prejudiced attitude, or uncritical judgment." Stereotypes are typically images that we take for granted, so that we don't think they are offensive.

Stereotypes are harmful not only because they demean an entire group, but also because they can lead people to translate their mental prejudices into hateful behavior and various forms of institutional discrimination.

Stereotypes shape how we treat people individually, whom we seek out as friends, where we decide to live (or not live), how we vote, how we decide on guilt or innocence as members of a jury. Stereotypes also influence who gets hired and promoted, whether banks provide mortgage loans to certain groups or in certain neighborhoods, whether people participate in a lynch mob or whether people speak out against genocide in their own societies or someplace else.

So once we become aware that we hold these bigoted images in our heads, we should stop using the words associated with them and point out their offensive character when others use them.

There *are* virulent bigots who use offensive words -- about Jews, blacks, Latinos, Asians, women, gays, and other groups -- consciously and with intended malice. They are easy to spot. They wear their bigotry proudly.

Some of them use hatred and prejudice to stir people up, in mass movements and in elections. Father Charles Coughlin, the Depression era "radio priest," used anti-Semitism to whip up hatred and gain a large following. George Wallace used overt racism get elected Alabama Governor on a platform of resisting integration. George H. W. Bush used a slightly more subtle form of racism with his "Willie Horton" television commercials during his election campaign. Newt Gingrich was consciously using racist stereotypes when he referred to Obama as the "food stamp president" and then said "I'm prepared, if the NAACP invites me, I'll go to their convention and talk about why the African American community should demand paychecks and not be satisfied with food stamps." He knew exactly what he was saying. As I reported at the time in a [Huffington Post column](#), he was using an ugly racist stereotype to win votes.

But not everyone who uses stereotypes is a hater or a manipulator, because some do so unwittingly and unthinkingly. That doesn't make it acceptable. It opens up the possibility that once we recognize these stereotypes, we can change our attitudes. There are many examples of people acknowledging and then overcoming their own prejudices. One of my favorites is depicted in Lillian Smith's 1949 book *Killers of the Dream*, which describes her confrontation with her own racism, the product of growing up white in the South. Racial profiling is a form of stereotyping. Trayvon Martin was a victim of George Zimmerman's stereotype about young black males. Zimmerman isn't alone in carrying that racist stereotype in his head. Unfortunately, he was also carrying a gun with him. The combination of his stereotype and his gun became lethal.

The two recent examples of bigotry in Florida — George Zimmerman's racism and Cheryl Sanders' use of an anti-Semitic stereotype — are not the same. But they are both rooted in ugly and persistent hatreds that, if not challenged, can fester and explode into violence.

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