

## Ridicule & Insult as Humor by Rabbi Michael Lotker

I was sitting in my dentist's chair yesterday as we were discussing some topics of the day. Of course this meant that he was doing the talking (my mouth being filled with various objects that I won't detail here) and I was doing the listening – and thinking. The topic was Don Imus and his now (in)famous comment about the Rutgers Women's Basketball team. The radio and TV "shock jock" claimed that he was only trying to be funny and everyone seems to agree that this kind of ridicule and insult exemplifies his particular brand of humor.

This is exactly the point that bothers me. I'm a big fan of humor, even a joke that may stretch the bounds of good taste in the interests of a good laugh, but humor that depends on ridicule, shame and insult is another matter. It is one of the reasons that I'm so bothered by many of our TV sitcoms. I'm thinking of shows like "Married With Children." It seems to me that virtually all of the jokes of the show are examples of someone insulting or ridiculing someone else – and I think this is increasingly true of almost all television humor. It is even true of other kinds of shows. "American Idol" purports to be a talent search show. So why do we need the gratuitous insults of the performers? What ever happened to the gentle "Bill Cosby" kind of humor?

In his wonderful book, *Words That Hurt, Words That Heal*, Rabbi Joseph Telushkin reminds us of an ancient Jewish teaching that "It would be better for a person not to have been born at all than to experience these seven things: the death of his children in his lifetime, economic dependence upon others, an unnatural death, forgetting his learning, suffering, slavery, and publicly shaming his fellow man." Note that it does not say that *being shamed* is the worst but rather that *shaming someone else* is. Also note that the experience of shaming someone else is compared to losing one's own child. Another rabbinic tradition compares publicly insulting someone with murder because both cause blood to drain (in the insult, blood drains from the person's face, turning them pale).

I think that the Imus case was especially egregious because it was (1) very public (not in the context of a private comment), (2) intentional (not just blurted out in stress or "under the influence"), (3) directed at wholly innocent young women (and not a public figure, for example), and (4) thought to be an example of harmless humor. I hope it will give Mr. Imus and the rest of us pause to think before we use language that hurts others.