Back to the drawing board

Rutgers exhibit explores cartoonists' depiction of Jews

Eddy Portnoy earned his PhD in Yiddish from the Jewish Theological Seminary.

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The course of Jewish history can be traced not only through the hundreds of thousands of words in history books and newspapers. The one-panel cartoons that appeared in the Yiddish press can also reveal a graphic mother lode of information.

Prof. Eddy Portnoy, an instructor of Yiddish language and literature at Rutgers University and an expert on cartoons in the Yiddish press, and Robert Mankoff, cartoon editor at *The New Yorker*, will examine how Jewish messages and imagery have changed since the late 19 century at "Cartooning Jewish New York" on Thursday, April 7, at 7:30 p.m. at the school's Cook Campus Center in New Brunswick.

The event is sponsored by Rutgers' Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life.

While Mankoff's portion of the program will examine contemporary Jewish humor, Portnoy, who wrote his PhD dissertation on "Cartoons of the Yiddish Press," will turn back the clock a century so.

"The Yiddish press was an all-encompassing phenomenon," said Portnoy, who described himself as the language department's "go-to guy when it comes to this material."

"When you think of Jewish papers today, they tend to just focus on Jewish issues. The Yiddish press focused on everything. There was a strong concentration on Jewish issues because of the audience, but generally, they supplied *all* the news to their readers."

No topic was considered off-limits for skewering, Portnoy said. He likened the publications "to the *Daily Show* in magazine form" as the papers' cartoons critiqued the news of the day, from local issues like garbage collection on the Lower East Side to Tammany Hall to making fun of President Teddy Roosevelt.

"The cartoons and the satire magazines were pretty brutal in attacking whatever their subject was. They didn't pull punches," he said.

One problem modern audiences might have with the humor is context. "When you have some sort of local scandal that has become a major conflagration in the community, a reader today isn't going to know," said Portnoy. When doing research for his dissertation, he would frequently have to sift through the entire publication to learn what a particular cartoon was referring to and why it would be considered funny or damning.

Even though "the Yiddish press existed pretty much everywhere Jews lived," for a religion and culture that have been around for thousands of years, Portnoy said, "Jewish cartoons are a pretty new phenomenon. The first appears in 1844. And it actually took a couple of decades before they got going, whereas in the English, French, and German [press], cartoons had been popular for many years. Graphically, Jews were very much behind the times."

Some of the early graphic depictions actually portray Jews in an unfavorable light. If they were produced currently, Portnoy said, no doubt many readers would consider the caricatures anti-Semitic.

A historic cartoon from the early 20th century shows an elderly Orthodox Jew with a large nose and wearing the traditional ritual fringed garment cajoling a youngster whose head is an enormous baseball. "That was published at a time of a meeting of Orthodox rabbis in America," said Portnoy. "They were concerned that American-born children had no interest in going to Hebrew school or synagogue — something that's pretty much true to this day. They didn't know how to deal with it. So in the cartoon you have the rabbi standing there saying, 'Come here, little boy. If you come to synagogue, an angel will throw you a penny.' This is the old-fashioned way to lure a kid in."

The rabbi figure is also holding a whip. "In the traditional *heder*, they used corporal punishment," said Portnoy.

“What the cartoon shows you is how rabbis didn’t understand American-Jewish youth at all. He’s saying, ‘Come here, little boy,’ and the *little* boy is giant and has a giant baseball head. It shows what American kids were really interested in.”

Portnoy, 45, developed his interest in Yiddish culture from his grandparents, with whom he spent lots of time while growing up in Detroit. “They spoke Yiddish to me but I never answered in Yiddish; I would answer them in English,” he said. He was always asking them about the Yiddish terms for household items, writing the answers in a notebook. “It was just sort of a hobby that I turned into a low-paying career.”

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