



THE BLOG 11/30/2009 05:12 am ET | Updated May 25, 2011

Lord of the Gingers



By Marty Kaplan

Now that our nation has observed “Kick a Ginger Day” and “Kick a Jew Day,” can “Kick a Liberal Day” be far behind?

In case you’ve been taking a tryptophan nap, a Los Angeles County sheriff’s investigation has found that at least four redheaded girls and three redheaded boys at the A.E. Wright Middle School in Calabasas were assaulted on the Friday before Thanksgiving because they’re “gingers.”

In case you don’t watch *South Park*, a ginger, according to the Fox Comedy Central cartoon show, is someone with red hair, freckles and fair skin. A 2005 episode — a parody of the *Children of the Corn* horror movies based on a story by Stephen King — substituted redheaded elementary school kids for the zombie teens in the original. Ginger kids are vile disgusting soulless monsters, and the earth should be rid of them: so says racist fat kid Eric Cartman in a presentation to his fourth-grade South Park class. If you think of Cartman as Archie Bunker on steroids, you can imagine how his hate speech could be obnoxious, instructive and funny all at once.

Eight Calabasas boys have so far been identified as having taunted, shoved, kicked, punched, bruised and bloodied their redheaded classmates. According to the father of one 12-year-old victim, 15 seventh-graders “surrounded him like a wild animal” at school and kicked him in the groin, stomach, shoulder, legs and head.

The bullies were apparently acting on the advice of a Facebook page announcing that Friday was “Kick a Ginger Day.” (In case you don’t know what Facebook is, I can’t help you.) “Get them steel toes ready,” the page said; some 5,000 people joined the online group. A 14-year-old from Vancouver who created the group apologized, explaining that — like “South Park” — it was just a joke. Redheaded kids in British Columbia, Alberta and Ontario were also reportedly assaulted.

Across the country from Calabasas, on the day before “Kick a Ginger Day,” word spread at Florida’s North Naples Middle School that Thursday was “Kick a Jew Day.” Said one parent whose daughter was attacked,

“Many kids, all Jewish, were kicked. I was furious and attempted to call the parents of the girl who initiated this hatred.” The school district determined that 10 students should be punished.

So whose fault was it?

South Park? I don't think so. Some studies say that violence in media begets violence in kids, but anyone who's watched more than ten minutes of that show knows it's no more dangerous than *All in the Family*.

Is it Facebook's fault? Spokesman Barry Schnitt says hate speech violates Facebook's terms of service; the network relies on users to report problems to Facebook. No one reported “Kick a Ginger Day.” When you have 300 million users, like when you have 300 million Americans, stupid things inevitably get said — some of them meant to be funny, some of them malicious and pretending to be funny. It would be easy to ban both. In a democracy, though, it's harder, but necessary, to figure out how to tell the difference between them.

Is it the fault of the kid who posted the “Kick a Ginger Day” page? I can believe it was done in the same subversive spirit as the *South Park* episode: outrageous, to be sure, but not remotely intended to be taken literally. You may not like the scabrous place where pop culture is today, but you can't pretend that context doesn't exist.

Is it the fault of the kids who did the kicking? Absolutely. Above the age of four or so, “I jumped off the Empire State Building because he did it first” just isn't a credible defense.

Is it the fault of the parents of the kids who did the kicking? Yes. And also the fault of any of us insufficiently freaked out by the debased discourse and corrosive politics of our times.

“These are not new issues for us here in Naples,” said Rabbi James Perman of Temple Shalom in North Naples. “These 10 kids did not invent anti-Semitism. They found a sympathetic response that was already there on some level.”

America's airwaves are crackling with demagogues demonizing Democrats, liberals, Nancy Pelosi, Barack Obama and anyone else who gets on the wrong side of Glenn Beck, Rush Limbaugh and the other bully boys making money off of hate speech. Beck says he's just a “rodeo clown.” Limbaugh, says Republican National Committee chair Michael Steele, is just “an entertainer.” That's why the ugly, incendiary stuff they're spewing isn't supposed to scare us.

Unfortunately, there are people listening to these loons whose moral development never make it north of middle school, and who don't think that Obama-hates-white-people and liberals-hate-America are jokes, unless you mean “punch line” literally. They may not hold signs saying, “Kick a Jew Day,” but they do carry placards reading, “Obama takes his orders from the Rothchilds” [sic]. They also think that strapping on firearms is a fine way to dress for a protest rally.

Just as troubling, though, are the people who are economically hurting, scared by the future and bewildered by the change all around them. They would be appalled to learn that their kids had

participated in “Kick a Ginger Day,” but they can’t be blamed for wanting to give the bankers who are getting obscene bonuses funded by debt their kids will carry a steel-toed kick in the keister.

These people are our neighbors, and ourselves. The message of *Lord of the Flies* is that the vaunted civilization that separates us from savagery is only a thin veneer: just below the surface, we are all ginger-kickers. The message of “Kick a Jew Day” is that we are all gingers.

This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and e-mail me there if you’d like.

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