

Generalizations

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Oh, how we love generalizations, such as blonds are dumb, men are chauvinist pigs, Poles are stupid, Romanians steal, and the Scots are mean. All non-Jews hate Jews. All Jews are money-obsessed. All Christians are missionaries. All Muslims are terrorists. All Israelis love humiliating Palestinians, and all Palestinians love killing Israelis. All blacks are rappers or welfare dependants. All Mexicans are drug dealers. The British are pompous. The French are arrogant. The Italians corrupt. The Spaniards are cruel. New Yorkers, Floridians, and Angelinos all exhibit specific and generic characteristics.

Each group or people or religion that is generalized about is then guilty of exactly the same offence in generalizing about everyone else! And if that were not enough, within each set there are generalizations too. All Reform Jews think all Orthodox Jews are fundamentalists who put the letter of the law above the spirit. All Orthodox Jews think Reform Jews are only stopping off for a minute on their inexorable assimilation out of Judaism. And all Conservative Jews are accused by both sides of being indecisive prevaricators whose left hands do not know what their right hands are doing.

When I first met Americans from Brooklyn, when I was a student in Israel many years ago, they had a scale of generalizations that declared that all Jews were automatically better than all non-Jews, all white non-Jews were automatically better than all black non-Jews, and the only exceptions were Lubavitch Hassidim who were worse than all black non-Jews.

Even within ultra-Orthodoxy, many Lithuanians make fun of Hassidim. And within Hassidim, some sects refuse to speak to splitters within the dynasties, let alone to other Hassidic groups outside. And yet generalizations are dangerous, wrong, and simply childish. Just because so many non-Jews use overly simplistic generalizations against us, why should we only pick up their worst habits?

It is a complete myth to think that all Charedi Jews are brain-dead fundamentalists. Just as it is rubbish to claim they are all lazy layabouts who do no work and rely entirely on charity. Some of course are and do, but not all by any means. Many I am close to are fully aware of the failings and limitations of Charedi life. But they are also protective of the many positive sides to the Charedi world, not least the incredible chesed (charity), and the intellectual brilliance and dedication to study for its own sake. But to believe they all think and act the same is just another crass generalization.

I spent quite a few years of my life in Meah Shearim, the hot core of Charedi life in Jerusalem. I loved it. I met saints and sinners. Overall I encountered a collection of caring, highly charitable, devoted, often saintly, and mostly nice people. True, there were madmen and fanatics, and no

doubt bitches too (but we yeshiva bochurim were never allowed to mix, so I couldn't tell). But I could tell you that often on hot Shabbat afternoons, when most people were having a Shabbes shluff, laid out by heavy dollops of cholent and cupfuls of cheap sweet wine, the youngsters would go out onto the streets to throw stones at passing cars.

During Beyn HaZmanim, breaks in the academic year (well hardly academic, but heavy study nevertheless), the numbers rose because for many this was the only recreation they ever got. Sure, there were a few mentally challenged adults in amongst them, but mainly they were very naughty boys out for fun. The cat was away and the mice went out to play.

Recent demonstrations against the current trivial issue, specifically a municipal car park, have angered the new [secular mayor of Jerusalem](#). I can understand. But his response according to reports in the press, is to [shut off all municipal services to Meah Shearim](#). The [idjit](#)! This is collective punishment of the silliest and meanest kind that will affect issues such as sewage and refuse collection, endangering the whole area. It will impact on the innocent as much as the guilty. It certainly will not help heal anything or rectify.

Spraying the demonstrators with water cannons of foul-smelling liquid might be a better idea (except, now I think of it, many of the Charedi youngsters smell pretty ropey to begin with). At least it would target the actual demonstrators. Unless, of course, the aim is to get the parents to rein in their errant offspring. But as England discovered when it tried to deal this way with its school truants, [charging parents makes no difference](#), because most of the miscreants are out of parental control anyway.

I am sorry to have to say that this practice of collective punishment has been used for years against whole Palestinian communities for the sins of a few. And it is a truism that if you get used to treating your enemies inhumanely you will end up treating your own this way too. The chickens have come home to roost.

Mayor Barkat's response is just typical of secular Jews who lump all Charedi Jews together. And if he does this with one group he will go on to do it with others.

I know I'm sometimes guilty of generalizations myself. The Charedi rabbinate is too strict, too out of touch, too insular, too political whatever. And there are indeed discernable patterns. My criticisms are often voiced by others within the Charedi world too. It is so important to be able to criticize and express a different point of view. But one must not give in to the easy tendency to generalize, and I guess this message is as much aimed at me as it is at others!