

Women in the Park

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The last days of Pesach are associated with the narrative in Exodus of crossing the Red Sea. If any reader happens to be in Jerusalem, it is worthwhile making your way down to Rehov Mea Shearim to the Toldos Aharon "court" of the Reb Ahrele Chasidim. There, on the last day of Pesach, the rebbe has his faithful pack the bleachers and simulate the huge banks of the water on either side and then re-enacts the crossing, actually running up and down until he drops with exhaustion. So there is a tradition that the Red Sea crossing was not a leisurely saunter but a serious and even terrified run. So that's why I offer this thought this week.

I regularly walk, jog, and run around Central Park and I have observed an interesting phenomenon about women runners which leads me to a range of theories that I should like to share with you, for your consideration and response. And please do not pull your punches.

The main route around the park has lanes for cars, cyclists, and runners and they are marked with arrows and symbols indicating an anticlockwise flow of traffic. It is true that many users of the park ignore them, except for those restricted hours and sections when general motor traffic can use them. On weekends when there is no traffic it's very much a free-for-all, and anyway it is true that in general people seem to pay scant heed to the instructions, possibly because there are fewer police around.

For us Brits it takes time to adjust to the fact that in the USA (as in most of the world) traffic drives on the right-hand side. When I first arrived in New York and started to run, I found I got into trouble if I went against the flow. So I quickly adapted to running on the right-hand side of the lane, even if I noticed there were always contrarians.

In addition to the priorities of the road, I should add that I was brought up on an estate next to the River Thames and the law of the river, maintained strictly and policed by the launches of the Thames Conservancy, was that the faster craft always give right-of-way to the slower ones and motor power cedes to manpower. I automatically assumed such etiquette would apply to human traffic. So in the park, when I am faced with an oncoming pedestrian slower than I am, I give way, regardless of sex.

In general my "proper" English upbringing is very strict about giving way to women, which was what I usually do. But when it comes to running I treat athletic women the same way I do any other "competitor". In the world of female sport, as with male, the competition nowadays is so tough that many female athletes are now faster and stronger than most male athletes of my youth. Faced by an "equal" male or female I go according to the rule that whoever has the right-of-way literally sticks to his or her right. This works most of the time. When someone refuses to give way I am now the one who blinks first (though I wasn't originally), because I am fully aware of the

fact that I could be facing an armed lunatic who could pull a gun or a knife on me if he or she was minded to.

This is all background to my main point. In the runners' lane, at busy times runners pass within inches of each other. Often one closely misses or brushes or knocks limbs with opposing runners. Now I have observed that I am more than twice as likely to be struck by as female runner as a male. And I wonder why.

Assuming it is not personal, I have several theories to offer.

Evolutionarily speaking, men, as the hunters, developed a better sense of distance. Women who stayed at home looking after the kids, cooking, and preparing clothes had to develop a more focused and shorter range of vision. Therefore their judgment of distance is poorer than men's.

The style of many women runners is looser, more relaxed and less constricted than men, and therefore their wilder flailing arms are more likely to accidentally strike a nearby passing target.

Women who run concentrate much more than men on their running and therefore have less mental space available to consider oncoming traffic.

Women are more likely to be listening to their cell phones or iPods and less able to concentrate on what is going in around them.

Women who run are likely to be the more aggressive or physical of their species because they had to try harder to overcome prejudice and expectation and therefore are less concerned to avoid physical encounter.

Women who run have usually had to compete against men or overcome male prejudice and are therefore more likely to actually relish any possibility of knocking a male out of the way or making a male suffer.

So there you have my completely unprofessional opinions that doubtless would get me fired from any public job. I have overlooked one other possibility. The rabbis of the Talmud warn that men are particularly susceptible to females (you don't need to be a big Talmid Chacham to work that one out) and too many rabbis in recent times have been caught getting up to monkey business. So perhaps the fact is that I'm noticing women joggers more than men and all this is the Almighty warning me to be careful and get back to my Gemara!

Otherwise, any other theories or other experiences that might either enlighten or correct me or help me avoid collisions would be most welcome.