

What We Can Learn From Kit Kat

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Here's [a story I picked up from the Financial Times a while ago](#):

On March 17 2010, Greenpeace launched a social media attack on Nestlé's Kit Kat brand. In a YouTube video parodying the "Have a break; Have a Kit Kat" slogan, it highlighted the use of unsustainable forest clearing in production of palm oil, which is used in Kit Kat (amongst many other products). In the video, a person bites off a piece of Kit Kat that turns out to be the bloody finger of an orangutan, one of many species threatened by this practice.

According to the Financial Times, Nestlé's initial response was to force the video's withdrawal from YouTube. This led to a viral outbreak of criticism on social media. All this did was to make the video a sensation and far more people saw it. Soon Nestle realized it needed to limit the immediate damage as well as address the palm oil sourcing issue and turn the reputational risk into an opportunity. Nestlé suspended sourcing from the company that produced the oil. The company held meetings with Greenpeace in which it provided details of its palm oil supply chains. It audited its suppliers and it joined the Roundtable for Sustainable Palm Oil, a partnership of companies and other parties aimed at eliminating unsustainable production.

They set up a "digital acceleration team" to monitor social media sentiment 24 hours a day. Whenever there is a problem, the communications unit coordinates the company's engagement with the relevant parties. Executives from across the globe visit the digital acceleration team center at the headquarters to learn about managing social media communications and digital marketing. Nestlé discovered that engaging with its critics and addressing some of their concerns was more effective than trying to shut down discussion on social media.

What a graphic lesson in how to handle a public relations crisis. Immediately I think about our own problems. Whether it is the way Israel is regarded in general or closed religious communities pretending they have no corruption or abuse, the traditional attitude has been to close ranks, to dismiss the campaigns as anti-Semitism and to pretend that if, like an ostrich, one buries one's head in the sand the problem will go away.

You might argue that commercial companies have the resources and the organization to deal with such issues, while governments, communities, and religions are notoriously conservative, divided, and slow to act. Which is true. Such social mammoths do indeed move slowly, if at all. But it is no excuse for inaction when the situation becomes too obviously detrimental to avoid. And it is not as if there isn't the talent around. Even Al Jazeera has some Israeli bloggers.

The Muslim street refuses to humanize Israel or accept its right to exist. Israel has refused to try to understand Palestinian anger. Name me anyone who

likes being occupied. Of course I generalize about both sides knowing there are exceptions that prove the rules. But recognizing the challenge is the first step towards dealing positively with it, the way Nestle has. You cannot bury heads in the sand, censor forever, or prevent matters coming to light. Indeed you can't get away with lies either, because the internet now provides both archival and visual evidence. In the same way, you cannot ban the internet but you have to learn how to live with it and use it well. So closed societies must now come to terms with greater exposure and see the benefits as well as the dangers.

Israel is still a society in which the military censor has great power. But the more it uses those powers the more it backfires, and the publicity is multiplied and magnified. What has America achieved by hounding WikiLeaks or Bradley Manning for making documents available? At last, Israel's Defense Forces have realized the value of recruiting young bloggers and media savvy technocrats to respond to misinformation or to own up to errors. That takes maturity and wisdom. But the side effect is that one faces up to those actions that actually need explaining and justifying. That is the first stage of reconciliation. If only both sides did it!

So it is with the religious world. The truth is that the media, including of course much of the Jewish media, just loves to highlight religious shortcomings. It's a kind of guilt compensation to point out the failures of the religious world to feel better about one's own religious neglect. There is what to find fault with, of course. Where isn't there? And of course the interesting story is "Young Man Pushes Old Lady Off Bus", not "Young Man Help Old Lady Onto Bus". It's also true that the interesting story is not "Thug Gets Involved With Gang Violence", but "Guys Who Go Around Making Everyone Else Struggle Under a Burden Of Guilt, Poverty, and Oppression Take Whatever They Want for Themselves, Whenever They Want It". It's the hypocrisy.

But the religious world needs to fight back constructively. The game is played like this: Highlight the shortcomings of the Charedi world. In reaction the Charedi world excoriates the corruption and decadence of the secular. No one hears about the good qualities of either.

Just as once the religious communities employed "Shtadlanim", men who made contact with the non-Jewish powers and interceded with them on behalf of Jewish communities, now we have lobbyists in Washington and Brussels. And the process goes both ways. Both sides benefit. At last one is seeing blogs and articles by Charedim in the wider press criticizing their own shortcomings and taking responsibility for trying to change from within.