

# Sorry

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

You are walking down a crowded New York street minding your own business, careful to avoid bumping into anyone else. And an oncoming body smashes into you. He or she will ignore you or perhaps say "sorry" and you might say "sorry" back. Why? The offender doesn't care. Otherwise he or she would have been more careful. And why are you sorry if they bumped into you? It wasn't your fault. "Sorry" is just a meaningless exclamation that conveys no truth on either side. Yes of course there are exceptions. But I can't recall when that happened to me.

If I accidentally bumped into someone, I hope I would stop and check that he or she were all right, instead of just mumbling sorry and proceeding on my way. I might say "sorry." But I would mean it. A variation is when the same events occur but this time it is "excuse me" instead of "sorry." As if that makes any difference. And if I said "No I do not excuse you" would that make any difference either? "Excuse me" is American for "Get out of my way! I am coming through." Just as "How ya doin?" or "Have a nice day" really mean "I know I am supposed to say this, but honestly, I really don't care."

You might say that this is just the etiquette, the formality that is supposed to oil the wheels of interhuman contact. And that's true and I guess I applaud it. But there comes a moment when such conventions need to be re-examined for their usefulness or sheer stupidity.

I was brought up at a time and in a place where etiquette mattered, and I still think it should. It was regarded as very important to know how to behave. To say "please" and "thank you." "I beg your pardon" if your body did something it should not have (or at least not in public). One did not raise one's voice. Polite people did not shout. Or act in a wild aggressive way. One raised one's hat to ladies and opened car doors for them and walked on their outside.

Then at the tender age of sixteen I was catapulted into Israel. I arrived at Haifa port to find myself pushed, shoved and insulted. I was told not be so British. The Brits at that stage were still hated for the way they exercised their Mandate. They had tried their best to stop Jewish survivors of Hitler coming to Israel. They were seen as supporting the enemies of the Jews. Being polite was associated with outwardly civilized polite but scheming British

colonialists. Who played one side off the other with complete duplicity. Smiling but plotting your downfall. Hypocrites, even if they were polite hypocrites.

In contrast the Sabra (in theory) might have been prickly on the outside with none of the smooth politeness or polish of the British. But at least he claimed he was honest, saying things he believed, being straight and not devious. "Dugri" was the word. Say it as it is, as you feel. To hell with politesse. And of course, the Sabra was really very sweet and caring inside! Or so they claimed. This was the new unapologetic Israeli Jew. And everything I did rubbed them up the wrong way. Particularly if they asked me what I thought of Israel and I dared express any reservation whatsoever.

Who ever heard of lining up, of not pushing and shoving to get on a bus in this young, egalitarian, pioneering socialist utopia? Young muscular, tanned men in shorts and simple leather sandals, short sleeved shirts and *Kova Tembels* (an Israeli version of beanies) strutted their way even in cosmopolitan Tel Aviv. And the healthy, buxom tanned, liberated wenches swanned around as if the only thing necessary for happiness was to dance the hora. All of them looked down on a wimpy Englishman who said, "excuse me" and would not push. And it wasn't just the Secular Zionist pioneers who despised the Diaspora Jews with their pathetic apologetic good-mannered affectations. The ultra-Orthodox world is not known for its polite manners either.

My first introduction to a Hassidic Rebbe's Friday Night *Tisch* was in Jerusalem. I had been packed off to a Yeshivah in Bayit Vegan, a suburb of Jerusalem. There were two other English students there and they decided to induct me into the mysteries of Hassidism. Late one Friday night we walked the five miles or so down into the Machaneh Yehudah home of the Gerrer Rebbe. The hall was teeming with men, tall and portly short and squat with large black fur hats proudly strutting around the communal hall waiting for their Rebbe to arrive. At midnight the door opened and in came the Rebbe. A small person with a phalanx of body guards all dressed in the same uniform, walked in majestically. He looked around. Wherever he turned his gaze the mass of black bodies struggled to get out of his line of vision like waves of plankton escaping the whales. He eventually retired behind a wooden crash barrier and sat down at the top table flanked by his senior followers. He proceeded to dispense *shirayim* wine, bread and fish via his major domo to the faithful. The Hassidim rushed the barrier to get as close as possible to hear his holy words.

I was shocked. To see hundreds of grown men hurl themselves at and over each other to get closer to their saintly Rebbe. I stood back in a mixture of awe and revulsion. One of my friends who had taken me there, was David Lincoln who later became a well-known Conservative Rabbi in New York. He was a six-

foot-tall rugged rigger playing Englishman who was familiar with the local scene. He turned to me and said "Don't just stand there looking stupid. Follow me." And off he hurled himself like missile into the fray, burrowing, fighting and clawing his way to the front, with me in his slipstream. I reached the barrier. I got to see the great man. To hear his brief but very holy words. Heard some lively, marching songs and then soaked with perspiration, suffocating under the weight and smells of sweaty bodies, I pulled myself out and escaped into the warm but clear Jerusalem night air. So much for good manners. And I warn you. If you ever go to Ger on a Friday night, and get shoved around, saying "Sorry" will definitely not help.

I don't like hypocrisy and two-faced slimy obsequiousness. I don't like being rude and aggressive and thinking it is being honest. But neither can I bear this false convention of saying "sorry" all the time. In our tradition if we have done something wrong, we really should apologize, ask for forgiveness and determine not to do it again. Nowadays Israelis might say *Mitztaerto* mean sorry. But the more common and biblical word is *Slicha*. Which really means to forgive. But if you don't mean it don't say it.

And while I am complaining, I just can't get used to the American habit of calling everyone "Sir." Even as they snarl and are about to slap you in handcuffs for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. In my days in Great Britain (as they once liked to call it) you only called someone "Sir" if he was a Knight of the Realm, a Baronet. Otherwise it was plain Mister. And his wife was a Milady. Now everyone is a Sir. And most ladies are not ladies. And why are lawyers called Esquires when they have nothing to do with ancient squires serving their lords or carrying their arms?

Are you still with me? Offended? Sorry.