

Shaking Hands

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

I was brought up in Britain at a time when civility and good manners were regarded as next to godliness. This applied to how you dressed, cut your hair, comported yourself, spoke and ate at table. Not knowing which fork to use relegated you to the level of barbarians. In a world of royals and aristocrats, you needed to know how to address the Queen, Dukes and Duchesses, Barons and Baronesses, Lords and Ladies, and, not to mention, Bishops. When to bow or nod, half-curtsy or full-curtsy. Whereas everybody shook hands as a polite form of greeting, if the Queen extended her hand to the lower classes it was always in an impeccably laundered glove!

Females had to be treated with respect. A male rose when they came in to a room, offered them seats, opened doors in buildings, motor vehicles or horse drawn carriages. Seniors were treated with deference. These were all markers of a socially acceptable person. Of course we know they often masked venality and hypocrisy. Knowing "your place" was one of the cardinal principles of life in Great Britain in the 1950s. The Class System was still the order of the day. This was still a time when one talked proudly of the British Empire although it was well into its decline. I inhabited one world where shaking hands was expected. But in another it was taboo.

Orthodox rabbis were not supposed to shake hands with women. Why? The Torah only forbids having sex with certain prohibited people. It is called *Gilui Arayot* – revealing what should not be revealed. The Torah phrases the command in an unusual way: (Leviticus 18:6) "Do not approach a woman in order to reveal what should be covered." Many authorities think that this "approach" is not meant literally. Or, at most, is a rabbinic fence around the law. However, Maimonides, living in a strict Muslim society, said that the Torah meant that we should not even touch someone we are not allowed to have sex with. Any physical contact other than between close relatives was forbidden. And that is the majority opinion nowadays. Even if there are plenty of other sources (most obviously the Shach, Shabbetai HaCohen in the Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah) who say that if it is just formal and not salacious it is perfectly acceptable to shake hands.

A very modern term used in Orthodox Judaism to describe the ban on touching is "*shomer negiah*." Which means "I am strict about touching." But in my youth, we never heard of such a phrase. In "normal" society the idea of not

shaking hands seemed weird. Rabbis who refused to shake hands were regarded as extreme and a little bit crazy. Some used to say in jest that you would never know what trouble you could get into when shaking hands. It might lead you to mixed dancing and that would lead to marrying out!

Being a career rabbi, often in communities where the rabbi may be orthodox but most of the flock are not, presents many challenges. How does one offer a human, humane and friendly persona if, at the same time, not shaking hands might actually create a psychological barrier – especially if a lady finds her politely offered hand hanging in space and feels embarrassed.

In some ways, not shaking hands might interfere with pastoral and outreach work. It can be very difficult, even emotionally trying, having to go to funerals each week and houses of mourning most evenings. One wants to comfort people yet is expected to “say a few words” when the bereaved really want a little warmth such as a hug or a touch of reassurance. The same goes for hospital visits.

But physical contact can be very problematic. In recent years, there have been many cases across the religious world of clergymen abusing congregants. Cases such as the “saintly” Martin Luther King Junior and Catholic priests. And even in Orthodox Judaism. We’ve seen cases from Australia, Jerusalem, London, Los Angeles, Scandinavia and South Africa where orthodox rabbis have taken horrific advantage of women who have come to them for pastoral advice only to be seduced.

There is a danger that one might think one is in control and can withstand temptation and therefore ignore the protocols necessary to avoid dangerous situations and wrong behavior.

Yet the more one gets involved in the community’s social life, the more one interacts socially and the greater the dangers of letting down one’s guard.

Over the past few years things have changed dramatically in the outside world. As Islam spreads into western societies we know that strict Muslims will also not touch hands. In the words of Islamic Hadit (Legal tradition) Maqil Ibn Nasser: “according to the Prophet...it is better to be stabbed in the head with an iron needle than to touch the hand of a woman who is forbidden to you.” And if one is covered from tip to toe it is rather difficult to free a hand altogether.

Everyone has heard of #MeToo. Of complaints from women about sexual impropriety. Of men taking advantage of women everywhere – in businesses, schools and in sport. Lives and careers have been destroyed. Now, everyone has to be very careful. New York and other states require courses on what constitutes unwanted or inappropriate sexual behavior and how to avoid it. Doctors and lawyers are advised not to meet patients or clients alone or behind shut doors. The upshot is don't touch and you will be safe.

Recently a friend, who happens to be a psychiatrist in New York, told me that his professional association had just issued new guidelines on doctor-client relations. Because there is often a relationship imbalance between doctors and patients and because actions intended platonically can be taken to mean much more, they were now advised not to touch – even to shake hands. Because even a handshake can be misunderstood.

So, lo and behold, to my great surprise something I had once laughed at and thought ridiculous, was now becoming not only respectable but advisable. Outside of Orthodoxy too! Amazing how times change. The circle is constantly revolving. What was once the preserve of the ultra- Orthodox is now the professional norm for everyone who wants to avoid prosecution in our modern free world – which has perhaps been too free.