

Selfie

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The Oxford University Press is the nearest thing to an authoritative arbiter of the English language. English speakers, unlike the French, do not have an Academie to impose a centrally mandated straightjacket on language. Each year, however, they do decide on "Word of the Year." This year it was "selfie" (or, as others claim, "selfy").

The word hit the news last week when President Obama took a selfie cuddling up to the Danish premier Helle Thorning-Schmidt, with the British PM desperately trying to get into the picture. It was at the memorial service for Mandela. OMG, as local teens love to say, (Google it if you don't know) what has the world come to? Was he so bored he had nothing better to do?

Definitions of a selfie vary slightly. The Urban Dictionary describes selfies as:

"pictures taken of oneself while holding the camera at arms length, also known as being camera raped, where one person takes many pictures of themself on anothers camera."

(Note the grammatical mistakes.)

More comprehensively, the Macmillan Dictionary says:

"A selfie is a picture of yourself that you take using a camera on a mobile phone or other hand-held device, usually composed of no more than head and shoulders. Selfies are often taken with a pose and/or camera angle that attempts to add a little something unique – not just a conventional picture of someone looking straight at the camera. The domain of the selfie is almost always digital – they are not printed, framed and put on the mantelpiece, but circulated via mobile phones, tablets, etc., for consumption by fellow partakers of social media. Arguably this is the key to their appeal – we can use them to remind each other of what we actually look like, or to put a face to names where acquaintance is restricted to the online universe. But of course another possible reason for the emergence of the selfie is practical – in the analogue era of photography, it was awkward to take a photo of yourself, and potentially rather wasteful to use up one of your precious exposures on a roll of film for a picture that would more than likely be out of focus. Today by contrast, we can snap away, bin anything we're not happy with, and edit and titivate to our heart's content to get that all-important image we're so keen to circulate."

Experts on the media have jumped in to advise against taking selfies against a background of crime, catastrophe, or irresponsible behavior, as damaging to one's own image. Uploading such stuff to the various social media options could have a disastrous impact on one's social life, job, and college applications, not to mention marriage prospects. Certainly Obama's did not do him any favors.

Other contenders for this year's "Word of the Year" honors were "twerk" (to wiggle your bottom and other body parts provocatively in public and pretend it's a dance) and "binge-watch" (to sit mindlessly in front of the television for long periods of time). MY expert advisor assures me I am wrong and it's specifically to watch multiple episodes (like one or more seasons) of a show in succession. Well, there you go. Perhaps we do need an Academie after all to tell us definitively who is right. Either way, they are symptomatic of our current cultural malaise.

This narcissistic preoccupation with self is a sign of our times. Humans have always killed other humans, but modern technology has multiplied the death toll exponentially. Humans have always been self-centered egoists seeking instant gratification. The digital age has allowed many more of us to indulge and exaggerate the amount of self-publicity we scatter around the place like litter (or bird droppings). It does not show humanity in its best light, any more than the embarrassingly bad reality shows or those that allow boring people their two minutes of TV fame. It all proves Rev. Jonathan Swift right. We are a race of Yahoos. Even horses come off as more attractive.

Naturally the very religious world, be it Christian, Jewish or Muslim, jumps at such examples of cultural decadence to bolster their claim that only they are safe, moral societies with waterproof and airtight morals and standards. If only it were true. For all the outward piety of secluded or protected ghettos or enclaves, we are constantly being made aware of the disgusting sexual abuse of minors, followed by cover ups on the part of major authorities and pressure on victims to remain silent. Cheating, deception, and corruption are constantly bubbling to the surface and being outed, precisely because the very modern media tools that allow us to behave so badly, also reveal the dirty underbelly of ghettos of every kind. Closed societies allow problems to fester and their denizens to think that if they excoriate the outside world, that will make their inner worlds safe and secure.

So yes, the internet, television, phones with cameras, all the trappings of modernity do indeed allow for abuses and misuses. Prostitution and pornography have always existed. If now one can get it all on cellphone, that doesn't change the pathology. But at the same time these very tools have allowed us to take the lid off the heavy layers of hypocrisy that much of the religious world has used to keep itself pure and untouchable. The attempted ban by some very Orthodox on the internet, which is manifestly failing, might for awhile help prevent such new words as these reaching the top of the list: mikvahrape, ghettobully, koshertaxfiddleifitsforayeshiva, or glatwaysofrefusingaget. But that doesn't mean these are not problems. And if this true of us, how much more so is it true of much bigger and more dangerous religious hierarchies.

I need to add this line to preempt the usual response I get if I ever criticize religious communities. I am NOT, I repeat NOT, saying all, or most, or much of the Charedi world is like this. It is not. But small parts and some individuals really are. It does us no good to pretend all is perfect in our garden and let them get away with it.

Information, publication, dissemination, and revelation, these are our best safeguards against the tyranny of the closed and narrow-minded. But we need to learn how to use them responsibly, ethically, and morally. Happy is the person who can sleep tight at night knowing he or she has nothing embarrassing that might appear on Facebook in the morning. A little less selfie-ishness and rather more consideration.