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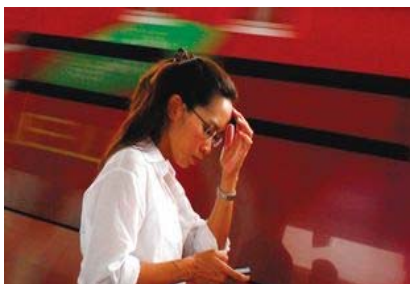


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## Real Israel: No rude awakening

By LIAT COLLINS  
01/10/2010

In a manner of speaking, when it comes to politeness we're not so bad.

How can I put this politely? Courtesy was never exactly common in Israel so we shouldn't be too surprised by the results of Israel's first national survey of politeness.

Still, the findings of the survey published mid-September by the Jerusalem Institute for Market Studies under the eye-catching title: "Is it worth it to be polite?" underscored a few new points. The most salient findings of the study indicates that being polite "has a large payoff in terms of income" and that, contrary to what you might expect, "there is no correlation between education and politeness."

The study, commissioned by JIMS and carried out by the Dahaf Institute, included questions on various aspects of public behavior, including driving, speaking on cell phones, treatment of the elderly and use of foul language.

The findings have been quite extensively covered in *The Jerusalem Post* and are available in full at [www.jims-israel.org](http://www.jims-israel.org). Suffice to say the average score was 2.94 on a scale of 0-4, nothing to boast about even if boasting were acceptable behavior.

JIMS president Robert Sauer summed up: "Rudeness, based on the results of the survey, seems to be a significant social problem for which no one seems to take responsibility. The Ministry of Education should take responsibility and adapt its curriculum so that it gives students important social skills in addition to the ability to pass matriculation exams."

The idea of bringing manners into the classroom is not new. In 2001, I wrote about the intention of then-education minister Limor Livnat to literally teach pupils some manners. A course was to be given to sixth-graders with plans to expand it. I'm not sure how many Israeli schoolkids ultimately were taught to mind their Ps and Qs, but let's face it: How many super-courteous 21-22-year-olds have you bumped into lately? And when you bumped into the others, what was their reaction?

Of course, the problem is not unique to Israel. The JIMS found that in many cases, the results were similar to or even lower than the level of impoliteness reported in the US. A few years ago, British writer Lynne Truss published a book called *Talk to the Hand: The Utter Bloody Rudeness of Everyday Life (or Six Good Reasons to Stay Home and Bolt the Door)*. Truss, who previously got worked up enough about missing commas and absent apostrophes to write an entire book on the subject – the entertaining and educational *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* – became positively apoplectic as she pondered such questions as: "What ever

happened to ‘please’ and ‘thankyou’? Why does the consumer have to do all the work? [And] Why do people behave in public as if they are in private?”

Nor is the phenomenon of impoliteness – or being inconsiderate, in a manner of speaking – something new. It’s just that there are far more annoying ways of being rude available than in the past. Indeed an entire generation sees this as progress.

For example, survey respondents reported that the most frequent phenomenon of rudeness they encounter is loud talking on cell phones in public. As someone who rides a bus to work daily, I have heard my unfair share of “then she said...so I said...”-type conversations. I have, however, also witnessed some typically Israeli responses to overheard phone calls. In one case, a lad complaining about unemployment was referred to a potential job opening by the passenger next to him, and a woman who discussed her fears of the anti-flu vaccination kicked off a discussion in which about a third of the No. 13 bus took part.

Much quieter, but no less annoying, are the chronic SMSers who have no sense of time and place and shoot messages at you night and day wherever you may be.

For real rudeness, rather than the infamous queue in the average Israeli supermarket, look to the World Wide Web. The very term “talkback” smacks of what would have been called insolence not that many years ago and the contents, even after censorship, leave no doubt that the average talkbacker agonizes a lot less over their words than the writer they are trashing.

Judge for yourselves, too, a world where *American Idol* spawned a whole genre of reality shows based as much on the cruel personal putdowns of panelists as on talent. Who is more rude: superstar Simon Cowell or the Israeli who barges ahead of you in the bank with “just one question”? Many years ago, I attended an event hosted by Tami Lancot-Liebovitz, unofficially crowned as Israel’s Miss Manners since the death of her mentor, Hanna Bavli, in 1993. Having been born and raised in Britain, I was no stranger to the idea of being polite: I have an inbred aversion to being late and I knew what silverware to use for what course by the time I could handle a knife and fork (start from the outside and work in).

I say “please,” “thank-you,” “excuse me” and “bless you,” even to my sneezy, old dog.

Nevertheless, I picked up a couple of rules on the finer points of etiquette. Unfortunately (or not) I’m so Israeli that a decade or so later I haven’t managed to master any of them: Never bring your hosts wine without consulting with them in advance; suffer in silence rather than ask that the air-conditioning be turned down; keep out of the kitchen; don’t clear the table at the end of a meal unless specifically asked to help. And – the hardest of all – don’t talk politics. In Israel?

There are also unwritten rules that are culturally biased: I recently found myself having to politely point out to a recent arrival in the country that she was about to commit a social gaffe by obliging a nine-year-old to write thank-you notes for birthday presents. (Less than bar/bat mitzva gifts, it’s not only not expected, it could provide the topic of conversation at the average Israeli dinner table somewhere between the discussion on the settlement freeze and the peace talks.)

As the newcomer explained, “In the States you almost have to write a thank-you note if someone gives you a tissue.”

It’s a whole different world – but is it necessarily a better one? The American-style shopkeeper telling me to “have a nice day” a minute after failing to find anything in the size or color I want is far more irritating than the over-familiar bystander who comments on what I’m wearing but genuinely seems to care.

Maybe it's not so much that we're lacking in good manners, but we just have a unique way of showing them. It might be considered shocking in the outside world, but there is something very *heimish* about being able to address a cabinet minister by his first name (or even nickname, in Fuad's case), for example.

I can see the charm of living in a state of grace but somehow it just wouldn't be our dugri state. And I hope I haven't offended anybody.

[liat@jpost.com](mailto:liat@jpost.com)



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