

How are you?

• DR. BATYA L. LUDMAN

As a teenager, I remember my mom being upset that someone would pass her on the street and say “Hi, how are you?” and not wait for a response. She’d often wonder why they even bothered to ask her if they didn’t really care, and never appreciated the question as simply a polite gesture.

I think that there are two kinds of “How are you?” questions: the “How are you?” that is merely a form of the social platitude “Hi, how are things?” and the more probing, “How are you?” which signifies a desire to ask the question because you truly want to know how the other person is doing. Hopefully, it is because one cares, and it is not merely out of nosiness.

I commented to a friend that while I say “Hi,” I typically don’t ask people in public how they are, because somehow my “therapist” tone, coupled with the fact that I make eye contact, can be perceived as my being intrusive and may inadvertently convey that they have to say more than perhaps they may want.

Witnessing this once happen while accompanying me, she commented that no one ever answered her like that, and she felt like she was listening in on a therapy session. We discussed why that was so and concluded that clearly it must be in the way I asked it. One can say the three words all in one breath – “How are you?” – or say “How are you?” with the emphasis on the “are.” How you ask the question clearly helps determine what the response will be.

Similarly, asking “How are you?” can be met with the response of “*Baruch Hashem*” (thank God). This works on the street, but when clients give this same response in my office, while I appreciate their gratitude, I am left wanting to follow up with “Yes, thank God”; and “how are you, really?” Ultimately, they go on to tell me how they are and fill me in on their week.

WORDS AND gestures are ever so important and convey so much to others, even if we don’t actually ask that three-word question. In these very difficult times, I’ve watched a very strange progression in the street when I would walk in the early morning.

Previously, people I did not know would often smile, and we’d give each other a big “*Boker tov*” (good morning) as we’d pass. It was as if we became friends, although strangers, as we were partners in nature.

But as COVID-19 crept its way into my walk, people started to move further away on the sidewalk from me (even before restrictions), began looking down, and ultimately avoided eye contact and speech altogether.

Once masks began to appear, people could no longer read facial expressions, even if they did make eye contact, and with everyone wearing a mask, any conversation seemed almost prohibited. It is often not easy to recognize someone wearing a mask, no one could see me smile beneath it, and people seemed more detached and withdrawn, even before social distancing was actually imposed.

Grateful to be outside for my 100-meter walk and ecstatic when it went to 500 meters, I wanted to plaster a smile on the outside of my mask with bright red lipstick, which if nothing else would encourage people to smile back, or at the very least acknowledge me, even if we both moved further away from each other.

Psychologists know just how important the facial muscles are for social engagement, and one of the most helpful ways for hospital corona unit staff to bond with their patients and vice versa has been to attach a photograph of themselves on their personal protective suit.

When asked by the radiologist at my yearly mammogram appointment how I was, I’d often respond with a half-smile and suggest that I was waiting for him to tell me after he looked at my test results. I think this year the answer will be different. It might even be a “*Baruch Hashem*, thank God, in this moment, with all that we have been through, I am more than fine. I am actually great.”

The other day, as details of a senseless set of murders involving at least 22 people, including a Royal Canadian Mounted Police officer, unfolded in my native Nova Scotia, I reached out to a retired RCMP officer friend of mine to check on his well-being after this traumatic incident. I needed to know that emotionally he was okay.

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‘PSYCHOLOGISTS KNOW just how important the facial muscles are for social engagement.’ (TNS)

Now, as we, too, slowly emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, we may all need to rethink how we would like to answer or ask that simple three-word question – “How are you?” as we continue to check in with each other.

Do we answer with a list of complaints, or say all is good? And is that predicated on who asks the question, when and where they ask the question and, perhaps most important of all, why they are asking the question? Perhaps they are simply saying “How are things?”

While we may hope that many things go back to the way they once were, hopefully now when we ask “How are you?” we will do so with sincerity, in a way

that suggests that each of us will have learned to be there and be more present for the other person.

We will have learned that there is almost nothing more important in life than social contact with one another, with the exception of good health. And if we have these, we really do have everything. ■

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