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1/6

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My Word: Emojis, signs and mixed messages

Will emojis take us back to the days of cavemen's drawings? This is where the new "dodo" or "mammoth" emojis might come in useful.

By LIAT COLLINS FEBRUARY 7, 2020 03:06



New in Emoji 13.0: Pinched Fingers, with skin tone support [#Emoji2020 emojipedia.org/pinched-finger...](https://emojipedia.org/pinched-finger...)



Pinched fingers emoji
(photo credit: TWITTER)





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2/6

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The phrase “there must be a word for it” might soon be on the endangered list. Today, it seems more applicable to say “there must be an emoji for it.” As I was wondering what to write about, I was sent a sign. Actually there were 117 signs, but I ignored 116 of them and focused on the one that spoke to me, as it were.

Unicode Consortium, the arbiter of emojis, on January 29, released its list of new, approved images for 2020. These are the symbols that will be zapping their way around the global village via smartphones, tablets and laptops – punctuating emails and messages on all social platforms.

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One particular image created a wave of excitement in Israel, even in a time when the country didn't exactly lack major news stories, including the Trump peace plan. Among the new crop is what Emojipedia and others are calling “the [pinched finger](#) gesture which is commonly referred to simply as ‘Italian Hand Gesture.’”

Some things get lost in translation: It's sometimes known as the Italian “ma che vuoi (what do you want?)” gesture or Italians might use the sign to



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3/6

THE JERUSALEM POST

express a “just you wait and see what’s coming”-type threat. Hebrew-speaking Israelis interpret it as a call for patience. In the non-virtual world, the gesture here is usually accompanied by the Hebrew call: “Rak rega!” (Just a minute), “Savlanut” (patience), or the Arabic “Shway, shway,” (slowly, slowly.)

In Twittersphere – where such things matter more than in the real world – news of the emoji kicked off a battle over cultural appropriation: Was the sign – which comes in a range of skin tones – Italian, Arab, Israeli or generally Mediterranean? And what did it actually mean? A tweeter called Fatima declared: “Italians are happy with this emoji. Little do they know about arab moms.” A tweet by Emile Hokayem explained: “This emoji represents several things in the Arab world, including two extremes... slowly, wait, calm down, patience etc... or you will see what will happen to you, as in a threat.”

In other words, use this type of sign language with care. Misinterpretation due to different cultural practices could be more than embarrassing. On World Emoji Day – yes, there is such a thing, in July – among the discussions on how to use the ubiquitous symbols was a warning to avoid them in work-related environments as you can’t be sure how the recipient is going to perceive them. The symbols are enigmatic rather than subtle and literally convey mixed messages.

The pinched figure gesture comes instinctively to Israelis. During my IDF service, I even saw UNIFIL and UNDOF forces who mimicked it and/or adopted it. It was much easier than trying to pronounce the double “resh”





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4/6

THE JERUSALEM POST

of “rak rega” for those for whom the Hebrew language does not trip naturally of the tongue.

I shy away from using emojis. I’m sure that whatever I use is going to leave someone looking for the facepalm symbol. Emojis are meant to clarify a person’s true emotions – feeling sad, stupid, surprised, sarcastic and so on – but they will never be as effective as a phone call in which you actually communicate, using words. Expressing sympathy via the new emoji of hugging, blue-colored, entwined body-like drawings doesn’t quite say it all.

A few years ago, another versatile – but enigmatic – emoji gained strength in the virtual world: The “smugshrug” or “shruggie, raised shoulders often in conjunction with raised arms and flat hands. This, too, is a very Israeli gesture but what it actually means is anyone’s guess. For some, it’s simply a way of saying “I don’t know” – the visual version of the annoying abbreviation “IDK”. For others, it’s a big “I don’t care.” Israeli toddlers use it even before than can speak; Israeli adults use it instead of speaking.

IT’S IRONIC that Israelis love the “Rak rega” sign considering that patience is not one of our national characteristics. For me, the sign came as a “Stop and smell the roses,” slow-down message ahead of Tu Bishvat, the Jewish New Year for Trees, which starts on Sunday night.

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A language of symbols won’t get you very far if it doesn’t include a full range





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5/6

THE JERUSALEM POST

of verbs, syntax determining sentence structure, and grammar. While graphic books are enjoying a comeback, the cartoon media will never be able to replace literature. The Bible will not translate well into emoji form. It's a narrative, not a cartoon strip. A caricature version can be attractive for children but without the language, there is no depth – no complexities or deeper meanings – to be found.

But it's a new world out there. Several symbols released for 2020 seem aimed at wiping out gender distinctions. One emoji that debuted was a symbol for "Mx. Claus," a gender-inclusive alternative to Santa Claus and Mrs. Claus. On a podcast by Jeremy Burge and Keith Broni on the Emojipedia site, they noted the difficulty of knowing how to pronounce "Mx." There's something symbolic in that.

In the "if you can't beat them, join them" category, many acknowledge that emojis are, if not here to stay, certainly part of our lives today. JTA's Marcy Oster reported, "Sefaria, the online free Jewish library, last year designed a Torah emoji that it planned to submit to the consortium for consideration. In May, the Conference of European Rabbis called on the consortium to add new emojis to represent Jews – namely, a man wearing a kippah and a woman wearing a head covering."

I'm not sure how I could drop the new emojis for bison, bubble tea, or Swiss fondue into what counts as a conversation when it's conducted by symbols. But, animal welfare activist that I am, I could employ the black cat now and again – with due caution. Having grown up in England, for me a black cat symbolizes good luck but I have learned the hard way that it means the





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6/6

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exact opposite in many other cultures. Let me just spell it out: Please consider adopting a black cat or dog. It's shocking how many are languishing in local animal shelters unwanted due to superstitions from times long gone.

The world has changed drastically over the last few years. Just two decades ago, much of the terminology used on social media would have been literally inconceivable. I hope to find time to visit the Israel Museum exhibition titled Emoglyphs: Picture-Writing from Hieroglyphs to the Emoji and discover how much is a natural development and how much regression.

Emojis are symbolic of an era when diplomacy is conducted via Twitter and other social media. (Where's the "I despair" symbol when you need it?) They have their place but that is not – yet – a significant one in my world. Eventually I might transition from talking animatedly with my hands to messaging with emojis, but, hey, just imagine I'm giving you the pinched fingers sign.

I "meme" what I say. For me, emojis are usually the last resort, when words fail. Yet even I can see why the "rak rega" symbol got the thumbs up.

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