

Ham & High

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Sorry seems to be the hardest word – even for agony aunt Irma Kurtz

Writer admits guilt over date prior to JCC debate

by Georgia Graham

georgia.graham@archant.co.uk

Sorry is probably the most overused word in the English language – yet it is also one of the hardest to say.

With this in mind, it will be explored in *Who's Sorry Now? – An Evening On Apology* at the North London Tavern in Kilburn. The event is being organised by the Jewish Community Centre. A panel will look at the ins and outs of the act of contrition in private and in public a week after the Jewish festival of Atonelement.

Panellist and *Cosmopolitan* magazine's first agony aunt Irma Kurtz says a genuine apology is the essence of human existence. "I always say, 'I don't need a passport to get into the State of Apology – I was born there,'" the Bloomsbury resident said. "Apology is one of the great things that human beings can do – like dreams you can screw up – but other animals as far as I know don't apologise. It is a uniquely human attribute.

"It calls for empathy and sympathy and it also requires forgiveness, which is possibly an even greater virtue."

The writer believes apology and forgiveness are inextricably tied to guilt – something she has



■ Irma Kurtz

felt her whole life.

"People feel guilty for things which we have no reason to feel guilty for," she said. "When I was born, I was a girl, and my family wanted a boy because in those days you just wanted a boy – especially immigrants to America who still had the old traditional ways," she said.

"I think I entered a state of feeling guilty at birth and a lot of my own life is a kind of ongoing apology. It's silly apologising because I have nothing to feel guilty for – but tell that to someone who is feeling guilty."

And, even an agony aunt who has pontificated on the problems of young and old, male, female and transgender since the 1970s, recalls 'should-have-been' apologies that still haunt her.

"I was working in a PR firm and some French man was visiting and he wanted to take me

out," she said. "I was paying my way through university and I remember I just panicked.

"I had nothing to wear, he was in fashion. He was very cute and he was French and grown-up and I'm an innocent little character and I was pretty but I didn't know it.

"I had a dinky little flat which I shared with some other people and he was knocking at the door. I just pretended that I wasn't there and I have always felt guilty. I wish I could tell poor old Jean Pierre – I'm so sorry!"

Kurtz will be joined by rabbi Baroness Julia Neuberger and Gerald Mars, a professor of social anthropology at University College London. The discussion, starting at 7.30pm, is on Tuesday October 11 and will be chaired by historian and journalist Professor David Cesarani. Tickets from www.jcclondon.org.uk or call 020-7431 9866.

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Irma Kurtz