Cultural Differences in Emotional Expression

Understanding Why Israeli Clients May Display Frustration in Court —
and Why It Matters for Counsel, Court Reporters & Judges

Attorneys routinely encounter clients whose language and culture differ markedly from their own. When that difference is significant enough, an interpreter becomes essential — not merely to convert words, but to convey meaning. Israeli clients are a frequent example. Many speak limited English in daily life and, in the high-stakes environment of a deposition or courtroom, prefer to communicate through a Hebrew-to-English interpreter.

Note on terminology: Professionals reserve “interpreter” for spoken communication and “translator” for written work. Lay usage often confuses the two. This case study uses “interpreter.”

The Phenomenon: Open Expression of Frustration

Some clients may express frustration more openly under stress. This is a culturally specific pattern, often part of everyday Israeli discourse. What may appear as impatience or agitation is frequently simply a more direct emotional register.

In a U.S. courtroom or deposition, this can produce two common situations:

Demands for clarification from counsel.

A frustrated client may feel lost amid rapid-fire questioning and loudly ask counsel why certain matters are being raised. The intensity can catch the attorney off guard if they are not prepared for this cultural difference.

Direct appeals to the interpreter.

Because the Hebrew interpreter is the only person the client fully understands, the client may turn to the interpreter to vent or seek reassurance. As an officer of the court, the interpreter must remain strictly impartial and is required to:

- Interpret statements made as part of the proceeding accurately and completely
- Disclose any clarification or response the interpreter makes as part of the proceeding

Privileged attorney–client communications must remain confidential and are not reported to the court.

When Culture Collides with the Record

Without cultural context, open displays of frustration can be misread as hostility, lack of respect for the process, or even unreliability. In reality, the behavior is often an automatic cultural response under stress. An experienced interpreter can help counsel anticipate these moments, de-escalate when necessary, and keep the focus on the substance of the testimony.

Key Takeaway for Legal Professionals

If you represent, depose, or examine a native Hebrew speaker — or interact with Israelis in any formal setting — be aware that cultural norms around emotional expression differ. An Israeli client may be more inclined to openly express frustration than a native English speaker would be in the same situation. This is rarely deliberate disrespect.

An experienced interpreter does far more than render words. In courtroom, deposition, hearing, and meeting settings, a skilled Hebrew interpreter also serves as a cultural disambiguator — preventing misunderstanding among client, attorney, judge, and court reporter.

Ready to eliminate cultural blind spots and communicate with precision?

Engage a professional Hebrew interpreter and translator who understands both the language and the culture.

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