College Education, Imitation Bacon, Internet, Large Families--Answers from Rabbi Marc Angel to Questions from the Jewish Press

View PDF



Rabbi Marc D. Angel is Founder and Director of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

Is enrolling in a secular college ever appropriate in today's day and age?

The Talmud (Hagiga 12b) records a statement by Rabbi Yosei: “Woe unto people, who see but do not know what they see; who stand, but do not know on what they stand.”

Rabbi Yosef Hayyim, of 19th century Baghdad, interpreted this statement: “One who does not know what occurs on the earth below will not succeed in understanding what occurs in the heavens above. A lack in the wisdoms of the world is a bar to knowledge of the Torah”(Imrei Binah, 1:2).

Knowledge of the sciences and humanities enables us to see…and know what we see. It enlarges the scope of our thinking; it prods us to reach a greater “wholeness” in our religious worldview.

Today, the university is the institution that fosters advanced general knowledge among the young generation. By studying the humanities and sciences, students are exposed to the best that has been thought and said over the centuries. Moreover, a college degree is a prerequisite for many professions and occupations.

For observant Jews, negative factors exist—anti-religious professors, lax moral standards among students, difficulties in maintaining an Orthodox lifestyle.

I was fortunate to have attended Yeshiva College, where Torah and college education are conducted in an intellectually and religiously proper environment. But not all students can attend YU for various reasons.

Students may choose universities best suited to their talents, or best in line with their professional goals. Some opt for public universities where tuitions are more affordable.

It is appropriate—and necessary—for students to have access to university education. But choices should be limited to campuses with a thriving Orthodox Jewish community.

If we want Jews to function successfully in our society, college education is a sine qua non. The alternative is to condemn Jews to live in physical and spiritual ghettoes.

Is it appropriate to eat kosher imitation bacon, crab, or any other such food? (The question assumes the food is 100% kosher from a halachic point of view. The question is if there's anything wrong with eating fake bacon etc. from a hashkafic point of view.)

Some years ago, my wife and I were eating in a kosher vegetarian Chinese restaurant. A Hassidic couple sat at the table next to ours. When the waiter asked for their orders, the Hassidic man said in a loud voice: “I’d like the pork ribs.” His wife chimed in: “And I’d like the eel.”

Surely, everyone present knew that the food served by the restaurant was 100% kosher. There was no question of mar’it ayin. Indeed, we ourselves were eating there, albeit sticking to the vegetarian chicken options.

There is no halakhic problem with eating kosher food, even if the food looks and tastes like non-kosher food. The famous Gemara (Hulin 109b) cites Yalta, wife of Rav Nahman, who stated that for any item the All Merciful One prohibited to us, He permitted to us a similar item.

Kosher consumers have grown accustomed to non-dairy milk and cheese served with meat; and with vegetarian “meat” served with dairy products. In the not too distant future, we’ll be dealing with artificially produced “meat” that may be deemed to be kosher and parve.

Having said this, it still struck me as odd to see a Hassidic couple order pork and eel…and to order with an obvious sense of glee. On the other hand, why shouldn’t they have derived satisfaction from eating an otherwise forbidden product, as if to say along with Yalta: we are not deprived of the various cuisines and tastes available to the non-kosher world.

Although such foods are kosher, some will have a visceral negative reaction to being served “fake pork” or “fake crabs.” I think that each individual will make a personal decision on what is and is not comfortable to consume.

Should a G-d-fearing Jew have the Internet at home?

If a person indeed fears God and feels God’s presence at all times, he/she should indeed have internet access at home. Such a person will draw on the vast repository of Torah sources available on the internet and will have access to a tremendous array of information in a matter of seconds.

The problem is for a person who is not God-fearing, or for one who doesn’t trust himself/herself to use the internet in appropriate ways. The internet has much content that is antithetical to the values of Torah…and to the values of all honest and decent people. Moreover, it is possible to fritter away hours of life on nonsense…and surfing the net can be “addictive.”

Every effort must be made to use the internet in a God-fearing way.

Those who forbid the internet are essentially asking Jews to disconnect themselves from the major means of communication among the people of the world. They want to march us back into the pre-modern era, thinking that if we only close our eyes and plug our ears, all the evils of the modern world will somehow vanish. This approach consigns us to the backwaters of human civilization, living as an isolated sect with no message to and no engagement with humanity?

The internet is “neutral”—and can be used for good and for ill. The correct strategy is to take advantage of its immense powers and to avoid its negative

elements. To do this requires that we develop genuine yirat Shamayim!

Leaving aside any halachic considerations that may be involved, is it a Jewish value to have a large family?

It depends on who defines what a “Jewish value” is.

For some, it is a Jewish value to worry about over-population in the world. With 7 billion people and growing, the world population runs the risk of food shortages, environmental damage, water and air pollution etc. Some would argue that it is a basic Jewish value to safeguard humanity and the environment by having fewer children.

For others, it is a Jewish value for Jews to have large families in order to replenish our numbers after the Holocaust. Jews represent an infinitesimal percentage of humanity, and we need to vastly increase our numbers to offset assimilation, intermarriage etc.

And yet for others, it is a Jewish value to allow couples to decide for themselves how many children they want to bring into the world. Each couple should have the right to decide—free of external pressures—what makes most sense for them. Their decision will factor in their financial situation, their physical and emotional preparedness to raise children etc.

The Talmud (Yevamot 61b) cites the opinions of Bet Hillel and Bet Shammai as to how one fulfills the mitzvah of peru u’rvu. Both sides agree that the minimum is to have two children. Rambam and Shulhan Arukh follow the opinion of Bet Hillel that one fulfills the obligation by having at least one boy and one girl.

It is a Jewish value to be inclusive and respectful to others, regardless of the number of children they have. The non-judgmental approach applies to those who, for various reasons, are unable to have children, as well as to those who have smaller or larger families.