English First Names; Super-Stylish Clothes; Loud Wedding Music; Singles Events--Rabbi Marc Angel Replies to Questions from the Jewish Press

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Is it appropriate for a Jew in America to have an English first name? If yes, is it appropriate for him or her to use this English name in daily life?

If American Jews have English first names and use them in their daily and business lives, that's fine. If they prefer using Hebrew names, that's also fine. No one should stand in judgment about how people are named or what names they prefer to use.

Throughout Jewish history, Jews have had non-Hebrew names. In Talmudic times, great sages went by the Greek names of Antigonos, Avtalyon, Tarphon, Dostai, Dosa, Pappa and others. Akiva is the Greek form of the name Yaacov. Alexander was a popular name among Jews of antiquity.

Gaonim had non-Hebrew names such as Saadia and Natronai. Maimon is an Arabic name. In the modern period, rabbis with non-Hebrew first names have included Rabbis Abdullah Somekh, Joseph B. Soloveitchik, Herman Adler… and many others.

If all these learned and pious Jews had non-Hebrew first names, it would be chutzpah to cast aspersions on them.

People name their children (or adopt names of their own) for a variety of reasons. One should have the decency to respect the choices of others.

A Midrash teaches that each person has three names: the name given by parents, the name given by fellow human beings, and the name which one acquires for him/herself.

The name given by parents represents their hopes for the child and reflects their values and traditions. The name given to us by fellow human beings represents our reputation in our community and world. The third name is what we acquire for ourselves. Inside each of us is our own "name", our own real being. Whatever name we are called by others, our main concern should be to acquire our own good name in the eyes of the Almighty. And that name transcends any particular human language.

Is there anything wrong with a frum Jewish man looking super stylish?

The way people dress is a reflection of their own psychological makeup. Some people like to appear sloppy and unkempt as a way of showing disdain for “middle class” values. Some like to dress to impress others with expensive designer clothes, thinking that by so doing they demonstrate their level of “success.” A man (or woman!) who seeks to be “super stylish” probably has a lot of personal issues to sort out, including feelings of insecurity, competitiveness, arrogance, and exhibitionism. This is true whether they are “frum” or not, although I think we would expect a “frum” person to have a more modest sense of personal dignity.

Rabbi Eliezer Papo of 19th century Sarajevo wrote a classic musar volume, the Pele Yoetz, in which he offered the following sensible advice: Follow a middle standard in clothing. Do not wear elaborate and expensive outfits even if you can afford them. Moderation in clothing is proper. One’s clothing should be neat and clean.

We need to remind ourselves not to participate in the rat race of one-upmanship. When we really know who we are and have confidence in who we are, we gain a fine sense of our own freedom. We can be strong unto ourselves; we can stop playing games of who has more, who has better, who has control. When we are free within, we have the confidence to live our own lives, not the counterfeit lives

that others would impose on us; we are free of the real or self-imposed rat race.

We don't need to be "super stylish" in order to be super good.

Is the music at frum weddings too loud?

According to the Deafness Research Foundation, about one in three cases of hearing loss in the United States is not about aging—but purely about noise! And much of the noise is self-inflicted. We literally are making ourselves deaf! Noise can cause permanent damage to our ears when it reaches about 85 decibels. A typical rock concert is around 120 decibels.

Music at “frum” weddings (and also at “non-frum” weddings!) tends to be excessively loud. The musicians think that this is what people want…and many people do seem to want very loud music. They think it adds to the joy of bride and groom. They don’t seem to mind that they are damaging their hearing and are making it difficult (impossible?) for people to carry on conversations.

At the wedding of one of our daughters, the band was playing overly loud music as is customary. We asked the band leader to lower the decibels, but he said that people wanted loud music. Fortunately, our in-laws agreed that the music was too loud, so our cousuegra (the Ladino equivalent of machatenesta) also asked the band leader to quiet down the music. He again refused. So she told him: if you want to get paid tonight, you’ll lower the music. He did!

It’s up to the hosts of the weddings to set the rules for the band…not to be victimized by “what everyone does” or “what everyone wants” and not to be coerced by the band leader.

One can have lively music for dancing and everyone can have a wonderful time…even when the music is at a moderate and healthy decibel level. During the meal itself, the music should be soft background music so that guests can actually speak to each other…and hear each other.

Is it appropriate for young men and women from more sheltered backgrounds to attend singles events if they haven't met their bashert after three or four years of dating?

I would like to frame this question in a different way. We are discussing a decision to be made by young men and women who are of marriageable age—who will be trusted to establish their own households, deal with their own finances, have children etc. The question is: why shouldn't such individuals have the right—and responsibility—to decide for themselves whether to attend whatever event they deem relevant? They are adults! Even if they have been raised in "more sheltered backgrounds," doesn't a time arrive when they must take responsibility for their own lives? And isn't approaching marriage such a time?

It seems to me that religious young men and women should have wholesome occasions to meet each other and socialize within a group of like-minded individuals. Opportunities should be created where young women and men can meet in a natural, respectful and religiously appropriate context. "Singles events" of this nature can be valuable for participants.

While attending "singles events," even those of a religiously appropriate nature, can be a source of anxiety for "sheltered" young men and women, they have to grow up some time. They must develop the social skills of responsible adults and not see themselves—or be seen by others—as infantilized individuals.

The late United States Supreme Court Justice, Benjamin Nathan Cardozo, once observed: "Three mysteries there are in the lives of mortal beings: the mystery of birth at the beginning; the mystery of death at the end; and, greater than either, the mystery of love. Everything that is most precious in life is a form of love."

We pray that men and women who are looking for their bashert will experience the mystery and preciousness of love in the near future.