Animal Extinctions, Pride in Non-Observant Jews, Taking Selfies--Rabbi Marc Angel Responds to Questions from the Jewish Press

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Should a frum Jew care if an animal species is endangered or goes extinct?

All human beings, including (and even especially) religious Jews should be concerned about the extinction of animals. Scientists have indicated that extinction is a natural phenomenon, with a normal rate of one to five species per year. They now estimate that the extinction rate is up to 1,000 times higher, with as many as 30 to 50 percent of all species heading for extinction by mid-century.

The vast majority of threatened species are at risk due to human activities…destruction of natural habitats, pollution of the seas, unsustainable use of natural resources etc. If species are disappearing at an alarming rate, this indicates that earth's ecosystem is increasingly unbalanced. This is not merely a threat to endangered species: it is a threat to human life!

The Almighty, in His infinite wisdom created nature to function as a balanced system. All the myriad plants and animals play a role in the overall health of our world. Mah rabbu maasekha Hashem. "How great are Your works, Hashem, You created all of them with wisdom, the earth is filled with Your possessions."

For purely practical reasons, all people should be concerned about the health of the world's eco-system. From a religious point of view, we should be concerned not to destroy the natural balance that Hashem created. It is taught in Bereishith Rabba (10:7): "Even things you may regard as superfluous to the creation of the world such as fleas, gnats and flies, even they are part of creation; the Holy One

carries out the Divine purpose through everything—even a snake, scorpion, gnat or frog."

Out of respect for Hashem's creation, and out of concern for the future of our children and grandchildren, we must care about the earth's eco-system and the ongoing threat of extinction of so many species.

Should a frum Jew take special pride in famous people who were Jewish but not frum and whose achievements have no evident connection to Judaism (e.g., Walter Rathenau, Richard Feynman, Danny Kaye, Bobby Fischer, Milton Friedman, Jascha Heifetz...)?

The Torah refers to us as children of Israel. We are part of one family, going back to Abraham and Sarah. When a person converts to Judaism, he/she joins the Jewish family and is now identified as a child of Abraham our father.

Our family of Israel has a religious covenant going back to the Revelation at Mount Sinai. We have a mission to follow and teach Hashem's word. Ideally, all family members should not only feel kinship with each other, but should also adhere to the lofty ideals and commandments of the Torah. But whether all Jews act ideally or not, they are still family—unless they actually repudiate both their Jewishness and their Judaism.

When a Jew—whether religiously observant or not—commits a crime, we instinctively feel upset. When one member of the family acts shamefully, it reflects badly on our entire family.

So when a Jew—whether religiously observant or not—distinguishes him/herself for positive deeds, we also naturally take pride in the achievements of a family member. When we contemplate the incredible contributions of Jews to the arts, sciences, government, literature etc., we are indeed proud that our tiny family has contributed so vastly to humanity.

We look forward to the fulfillment of the Torah's teaching that the nations of the world will say about us that "surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people" (Devarim 4:6).

Is taking a selfie proper?

It is proper to let individuals make their own choices on this kind of personal matter. For some (including me), selfies are irrelevant and not part of one's life. For others, selfies are a way to memorialize a special moment. And for yet others, sharing selfies is a way to maintain contact with loved ones and friends. Let each person decide for him/herself what is most suitable.

A problem arises when people find themselves taking selfies very frequently, rather than on rare special occasions.

Some psychiatrists and psychologists who have done research on selfie usage have suggested that "selfitis"—an obsessive compulsive desire to take photos of one's self and post them on social media—is a mental disorder. Chronic selfie-taking may be a sign of lack of self-esteem or exhibitionism. Even people who take selfies only several times a day may be reflecting deeper emotional and psychological issues.

Those who take selfies need to reflect on why they do so, on whether selfie-taking is beneficial or detrimental to their self-esteem, on whether they are taking selfies too frequently.

Perhaps the most powerful selfie is: looking into a mirror! See and think about who you really are. Once you come to terms with self-identity, the selfie issue will almost resolve itself.