Conflicting Customs, Young Children in Synagogue, Listening to Wagner's Music, Keeping up with the News - Rabbi Marc D. Angel Answers Questions for the Jewish Press

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Rabbi Marc D. Angel is Founder and Director of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. He is one of the rabbinic respondents to questions posed by the Jewish Press in a bi-weekly feature.

How tolerant should a person be of a son-in-law's desire to keep his own *minhagim* at his (the father-in-law's) *Yom Tov* table.

It is always desirable for a person to behave with good manners. It is especially important for a religiously observant person to be a model of excellent behavior, thoughtfulness, and respect for others. Derekh eretz kadmah leTorah.
Among the Jewish people, many minhagim have developed over the centuries. When people with different minhagim sit at the same table for a Shabbat or Yom Tov meal, it is important for all to conduct themselves in a spirit of harmony.

>As a general rule, it is proper for guests to follow the custom of the host. “Wherever you are, follow the local customs” (Shemot Rabba 47:5). Rabbi Eliezer Papo, in his classic Pele Yoetz, advises: “Do not sit when everyone else is standing or stand while everyone is sitting. The main principle is to do what others are doing as long as this does not transgress a prohibition.”

A son-in-law at his father-in-law’s table should follow the father-in-law’s minhagim, unless there is a strong halakhic reason that prevents this. For example, an Ashkenazic son-in-law should not eat kitniyot on Pessah at his Sephardic father-in-law’s table. But neither should a Sephardic father-in-law serve kitniyot to an Ashkenazic son-in-law. Mutual respect is vital.

If father-in-law and son-in-law foresee possible conflicts in minhagim, they should speak well before Shabbat or Yom Tov and come to a satisfactory accommodation so that there is no ill-will at the Shabbat or Yom Tov table. *Gadol HaShalom*.

Do young children belong in shul?

There is an extensive halakhic literature on this topic. Many have ruled that small children should not be brought to synagogue because they are likely to disrupt the prayers of the congregation. Others have pointed to the example of the Talmudic Sage, Rav Yehoshua, who was thought to have become so great because his mother brought him to the Study Hall even as an infant (and even when she was still pregnant with him!) It was believed that an infant absorbs holiness and wisdom by being in the proper surroundings. This would apply to places of prayer as well as places of Torah study. There is something beautiful about babies and toddlers absorbing the tefilot as a natural part of their upbringing.

As a synagogue rabbi for many years, I had to deal with this issue first hand. Before I came to our congregation, children under age five were not permitted to be in the sanctuary during services. This policy may have been good for maintaining decorum, but it discouraged parents of young children from coming to services. We addressed the issue by setting up child care and youth group programs. We also told parents that they could bring their young children into the synagogue during services, as long as the children did not disrupt the prayers of others. Once children become restless or noisy, it is up to the parents to quickly take the children out of the sanctuary.

I definitely feel that young children belong in the synagogue. But I also definitely feel that it is an obligation of parents to see to it that their children do not disturb the prayers of others.

Should the music of any composer be banned because of his/her private moral failings? Or should the music stand on its own merits, regardless of the personal life of the musician?

Throughout history, and including our own time, great musicians have composed music that has provided inspiration, elevation and joy. When we listen to or perform their music, we are engrossed in the music itself; we are not concerned with the personal lives of the composers. If we could only listen to or perform music composed by sinless individuals, our musical experience would be vastly impoverished.

But music does not exist in a vacuum. If we despise the composer/musician, it is difficult to separate our emotions from the music itself. Whatever the merits or deficiencies in the compositions of Richard Wagner, his reputation as a racist, anti-Semite hovers over him. His music was glorified by the Nazi regime so that it is difficult, especially for Jews, to listen to Wagner without also feeling his malevolent presence in his music.

Those who have strong repulsion to anything connected with Wagner should not listen to his music. For them, his music causes distress and pain. Those who know nothing or care nothing about Wagner should judge his music on its own merits. If they like his music, they are free to listen to it.

How important is it to be informed about political and world affairs? Or is it important? Should the average ***frum*** **Jew read the newspaper (or a news website) every day**

The real question is: how connected are we to the society in which we live? Do we feel that news is about “us” and not just about “them”? And if it is about us, don’t we have a need and a responsibility to be informed citizens? However, if we feel disconnected from general society, living in our own self-enclosed world, then we may see little point in devoting time to news about “them.”

Why do readers of the Jewish Press subscribe to the newspaper? On one level, it is to access the news, gain information, inspiration, guidance, etc. But on a more fundamental level, it is a way of connecting to a larger community that we see as “ours.” Each subscriber, knowingly or unknowingly,

is indicating a connection to the larger readership of the newspaper.

The same holds true when it comes to reading general newspapers or news websites. If we subscribe or click on to the news, we are not merely learning about current events that affect others. We are indicating, knowingly or unknowingly, that we consider ourselves part of the community of readers of the news…part of general society. What affects “them” also impacts on “us”. We want to know what’s going on so that we can be responsible citizens, vote intelligently, engage in activism when relevant etc.

If the “average frum Jew” sees him/herself as a full member of society, he/she will want to be an informed and responsible member of society.