Studying Talmud in English Translation; Preserving Yiddish (Judeo-Spanish etc.); Owning Dogs--Rabbi Marc Angel Replies to Questions from the Jewish Press

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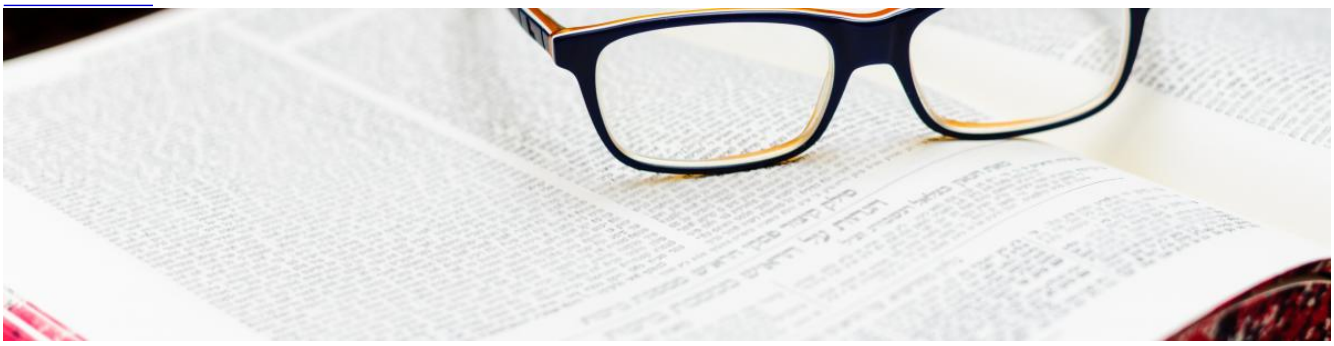

Should a person feel guilty for using an English ArtScroll Gemara (as opposed to struggling with the original Aramaic)?

The Talmud (Shabbat 31a) cites the opinion of Rava about what we will be asked when we eventually come before the heavenly court. One of the questions is: *kavata itim leTorah*, did you set aside fixed times to study Torah. Regular study of Torah is expected of us, and we will have to answer for ourselves in due course.

Torah study can be in any language one understands. The important thing is to understand what we read and to connect our study to service of Hashem. Over the centuries, Jews have studied Torah in many languages—Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, Arabic, Spanish, German,Yiddish etc. I hope and assume that none of those Jews ever felt guilty for studying in the vernacular they understood.

When one studies Talmud today, it's fine to use editions that provide translations and explanations in the vernacular. The goal is to understand what we read. It is hoped, though, that one will eventually become proficient enough to study the original text on its own.

No one should ever feel guilty for studying Torah in the vernacular. Guilt should only be felt if we fail to set aside times for Torah study each day. The heavenly court has its question ready for us: let us be sure to have our answer ready.

Should we try to preserve Yiddish as a living language in America or Israel?

Over the centuries, Jews developed languages such as Yiddish, Judeo-Spanish, Judeo-Arabic etc. These languages reflected Jewish societies that were largely cut off from the larger societies around them. Jews spoke their own languages, ran their own schools, published their own books and newspapers.

For most Jews today, the sociological reasons for maintaining a distinctive Jewish language no longer apply. Jews speak the language of the land as their mother tongue. Sociological realities relentlessly undermine the need for a distinctive “Jewish” language.

Yiddish remains a living language among Chassidim and others who seek to insulate their group from the “outside” society. For them, the language is alive and well.

I grew up among Sephardim of Judeo-Spanish background. My grandparents’ generation spoke Judeo-Spanish as their mother tongue. My parents spoke the language fluently to their parents and elders…but spoke to us in English. We understood our elders when they spoke Judeo-Spanish…but our mother tongue is English. My generation is the last to hear Judeo-Spanish as a vibrant, living language.

There are efforts to maintain vestiges of the language and tradition…prayers, folksongs, proverbs etc. But it is highly unlikely that it will ever again be spoken as a mother-tongue. Instead of lamenting this fact, we should be striving to derive lasting lessons from Judeo-Spanish civilization. The same is true for Yiddish outside Chassidic circles. Instead of lamenting the decline, let us draw on the treasures of Yiddish culture to enhance and enrich the Jewishness of ours and future generations.

I wrote a memoir about growing up in the Sephardic community of Seattle, and how the Americanization process has impacted on us: *A New World: An American Sephardic Memoir* . It can be ordered on this link: https://www.jewishideas.org/new-world-american-sephardic-memoir-rabbi-marc-angel

Is it appropriate for a Jew to own a (non-violent) pet dog?

The Shulhan Arukh (Hoshen Mishpat 409:3) rules that it is forbidden to raise a “kelev ra”-- a bad, ferocious dog—unless it is chained down. The Rama notes that it is permissible to raise tame dogs and that in fact this was a fairly common practice.

Since it is halakhically permitted to own a non-violent dog, each individual can decide whether or not to have a pet dog. No one else has the right to pass judgment on whether it is or is not appropriate for a Jew to own a pet dog.

Dog owners should realize, though, that some people are afraid of dogs, others are allergic to dog hair, and yet others are simply uncomfortable in the presence of dogs…even tame dogs. Owners should be sensitive to the needs and feelings of those who visit their homes or who are met while walking their dogs. Even good dogs can seem to be “bad” in the eyes of those who have an aversion to dogs.

If Jews want to own non-violent pet dogs, they are welcome to do so. If they want to own guard dogs, they need to be sure that these dogs are kept under proper control so that they do not harm innocent victims. Dog owners should be highly sensitive to the concerns of others who are not “dog lovers” and who may be frightened or displeased to have a pet dog bark at them, jump on them, or lick their hands.

The Turkish author, Orhan Pamuk, observed: “Dogs do speak, but only to those who know how to listen.”