

Studying Alone; Wearing Face Masks; Judging Others; Bar/Bat Mitzvah Presents: Rabbi Marc Angel Responds to Questions from the Jewish Press

[View PDF](#)



Rabbi Marc Angel Replies to Questions from the Jewish Press

Should a person who enjoys learning on his own force himself to find a *chavrusa*?

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.

We won't be asked if we learned on our own or with a havruta.

The goal is to study Torah regularly and effectively. We need to be able to set times for study, and to have the mental framework for gaining most from the time we devote to our studies.

For some people, having a havruta is an effective way to advance in Torah. Since two or more people are involved, it's necessary to set times to meet. A havruta system enables the partners to struggle through texts together, to share knowledge, to challenge assumptions.

But for others, learning on one's own is preferable. A self-disciplined person can often accomplish a lot more by oneself. While one loses the give and take of a havruta arrangement, one gains the ability to approach topics and texts as he/she thinks best and on his/her own schedule.

No one should feel compelled to find a havruta. If one feels that one can learn best with a learning partner, then one should choose a suitable havruta. If one feels that one can learn best alone, then study alone...but, either way, be sure to study!

If a person believes based on medical expert advice that wearing a mask on a quiet sidewalk is unnecessary, should he wear it anyways because of the *chillul Hashem* it will cause in some circles if he doesn't? Does the answer depend on his motivation (convenience vs. making a

political statement)?

As responsible citizens, we are obliged to follow the laws of our government. We are currently required to wear masks and practice social distancing when in public, in order to lessen the impact of the covid 19 pandemic. These practices have been mandated for the health and well-being of all of us.

Those who do not follow the rules, regardless of motivation, are thereby endangering the health—and possibly the lives—of themselves and others. When people obviously identified as Jews spurn the regulations, this casts a bad light on themselves and on the Jewish community as a whole. In a recent example of a throng of Hassidic Jews attending a funeral, the Mayor of New York made unfortunate comments—not just about the scoff-laws, but about the “Jewish community.” Kol Yisrael areivim zeh lazeh, we are all responsible for each other; our individual actions reflect on our people as a whole.

If one is walking in an area where there are few or no other people nearby, it should be fine to remove the face mask since no one is endangered by this. However, when one is in a public setting where multiple other people are present, one should certainly wear the face mask and observe social distancing.

The consequence of violating the rules is not only a matter of hillul Hashem; it is possibly to endanger the health and lives of oneself and others.

When bad things happen to *someone else*, is it appropriate to speculate why?

It is appropriate for everyone to mind his or her own business; it is inappropriate to speculate about why bad things happen to others.

Tanakh makes this clear in the book of Iyyov, where Iyyov's friends “speculate” that he is suffering because of his sins. Hashem states that only He knows the ultimate reasons for things. Speaking to Eliphaz, Hashem says: “My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of Me the thing that is right, as My servant Iyyov has” (42:7). In other words, leave judgment to the Almighty who alone understands why things happen as they do.

In the Pirkei Avot, we read the words of Rabbi Eliezer: “Let the honor of your fellow be as precious to you as your own” (2:15). Just as you would not want someone to judge you in a manner that casts aspersions on your honor, so you should not judge others in a manner that diminishes their honor.

It is religiously and morally repugnant to suggest theological reasons to blame victims for their sufferings. People who are not prophets should not arrogate to themselves the right to proclaim that they know Hashem's will. They don't.

We have the right and responsibility to judge ourselves and to self-reflect when we deal with adversity. We don't have the right or responsibility to stand in judgment of others. As we all learned from our parents, if you don't have something good to say about someone...don't say anything at all.

For bar mitzvah boys: Should you give them a *sefer* in Hebrew, which they may not be able to read for another five years (or perhaps ever), or should you give them something in English?

King Solomon, the wisest of men, taught: “Educate each child according to his way” (Kohelet 22:6). Every child has his or her own strengths, weaknesses, aptitudes, interests. When considering a gift for a bar or bat mitzvah boy or girl, one needs to think about what would be most suitable for that individual child. If the decision is to give a book of Jewish content, then one needs to think carefully about what book/s would be most appreciated.

Making the right choice requires a lot of thought. Ideally, one should know the child very well so as to have a good idea of what book/s would be relevant. Giving an impressive set of Hebrew books might

be of interest to the giver: but would these books be of interest to the recipient? Or is it reasonable to assume that the book/s will indeed one day become relevant to the child as he/she grows up?

Before giving a book or set of books, first think of what would be most appropriate for the child. Then consider whether the child already has the book/s or is likely to receive them from other bar/bat mitzvah guests.

My general suggestion for someone who is uncertain as to what book/s to give: buy a gift certificate from a Jewish book store and let the child choose for him/herself.