Rabbi Marc Angel Replies to Questions from the Jewish Press

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Rabbi Marc D. Angel, Director of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, is one of the rabbinic respondents to a bi-weekly column in The Jewish Press.
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Is it proper, *l'chatchilah*, for a young married couple to apply for government welfare programs like food stamps and section 8?

Rambam wrote (Hilkhot De'ot 5:11): "*The way of sensible men is for one first to establish an occupation by which he can support himself. Then, he should purchase a residence and then, marry a wife…In contrast, a fool begins by marrying a wife. Then, if he can find the means, he purchases a house. Finally, late in life, he will search for a trade or support himself from charity."*

Rambam assumed that a couple will first be sure that they have the financial wherewithal to manage their married lives. This was—and remains—excellent advice. In situations of genuine poverty, though, it may be necessary for young couples to receive support from family and friends.

If poor couples are genuinely without financial resources and are legally entitled to government assistance, then they may draw on this aid as a last resort.

I have heard of cases, though, where young couples live in a nice home, drive a nice car, dress and eat very nicely…and are supported generously by parents or others. Their personal earnings are below the poverty level, even though they definitely do not live in poverty. The government welfare system was established to assist the genuinely needy; to take these funds on any other basis is fraudulent. People say: others exploit the system, why shouldn't we? The answer is given by the Torah: ve'asita hayashar vehatov; the Almighty commands us to do that which is upright and proper. Any other behavior is an affront to the teachings of Torah.

Is it proper for a Jew to propose on one knee?

The practice of a man proposing marriage by bending on one knee seems to be a fairly modern phenomenon. We read of medieval knights who bent onto a knee in reverence to their beloved, and this old practice may have spilled over into more general society. But until relatively modern times, marriage proposals (Jewish and non-Jewish) were more business-like. Shadchanim and parents often arranged the "proposal."

The image of a man bending on one knee to propose marriage has been a feature of modern romance novels and films. If a couple wants to follow this pattern, that is entirely up to them.

Couples will decide for themselves when and how to commit themselves to marriage. It's proper for the rest of us to mind our own business, and not worry whether the man bends on one knee or not.

Let brides and grooms rejoice, tirbena semahot beyisrael.

At what age would you advise parents to allow their children to have a cell phone?

I would advise parents to use their own judgment. They know their children best. They know if, why and when a cell phone is important to their children. They know if their children are responsible enough to use the cell phone properly.

Often, the child's first cell phone is granted because the parents want to have a ready line of communication. They want their children to be able to contact them promptly in case of an emergency.

There are various cell phones available, with various features. Before obtaining a cell phone for their children, parents should choose the age-appropriate phone that meets the specific needs of each child.

From a hashkafic perspective, is it important for a Jewish man to have a beard?

It really depends on one's own hashkafa. Some men feel that beards are a sign of being more traditionally religious; some grow beards because that's what is expected of men in their community. Some men feel more comfortable without a beard. Let each man decide for himself.

Over the years, I have known many fine Jewish men with long beards, short beards and no beards. I have also known many less than fine Jewish men with long beards, short beards and no beards. What is important is not the beard, but the person. A fine Torah true Jew is a wonderful human being, with or without a beard.

My late father-in-law, Rabbi Paul Schuchalter of blessed memory, used to quip that it's better to have a rabbi without a beard than a beard without a rabbi. It would be even better if rabbis were not judged by their beards (or lack thereof) but by their Torah learning, compassion, love of their people, love of humanity. Judge rabbis by their words and deeds, not by their beards. What's true for rabbis is true for Jewish men in general.

It is important to avoid stereotyping men based on whether they have full, trimmed or no beards.

How does one let go of a grudge against a person who harmed him or her egregiously?

Many years ago, my father—alav hashalom—was involved in a business transaction with a man he had known all his life, both being members of the same synagogue.This man cheated my father egregiously, causing him serious financial loss.

Years later, I received a call from my father. The man who had swindled my father was planning to be in New York for Rosh Hashana. My father asked me to arrange a seat for him in my synagogue and invite him to lunch. I was stunned. I asked my father: "This

man cheated you and betrayed you. Why would you want to extend any kindness to him?"

My father replied: "What's past is past. It's no good to carry grudges. Life is too short to waste our emotional energy on anger or holding grudges." And so, I arranged a seat for this man in my synagogue and invited him to lunch.

My father taught me an important lesson. Carrying grudges is not productive, not healthy, and not necessary. Grudges hurt the "grudger" more than the "grudgee."

Rambam taught (Hilkhot Teshuva 2:10): "When a sinner asks forgiveness, one should grant it with a full heart and willing soul. Even if the other had sinned greatly against him and caused him much anguish, he should not take revenge or bear a grudge."

My father taught that one should not bear a grudge…even if the culprit doesn't ask for forgiveness. I might have thought this was an impossible expectation. But my father proved it could be done…and should be done.