Natural Childbirth; Drunkenness; Science: 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 respondents to questions posed by the Jewish Press newspaper.

Is having a natural birth advisable, inadvisable, or a value-free decision?

Natural childbirth generally refers to going through labor and delivery without aid of medications and pain relievers such as epidurals. Each woman needs to decide what would be best for herself. Prime consideration must be for her own health and the healthy delivery of her baby. For some women, natural childbirth is a wonderful experience, especially if they had taken suitable classes during pregnancy. Others, though, will prefer to benefit from the advances in medicine that diminish pain.

Natural childbirth classes generally want the father, as well as the mother, to prepare for the upcoming birth. It is advised that the husband be with his wife throughout the labor and delivery.

Although some have raised halakhic objections to a husband’s presence, Rabbi Haim David Halevy, late Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv, offered halakhic justification (Asei Lekha Rav 4:58). Modern research has found that the husband's presence can indeed be helpful to his wife during delivery. Although our mothers and grandmothers were perfectly able to have children without their husbands being present, it is possible that contemporary women may feel the absolute need for their husbands to be present during delivery. Without their husbands there, the women of today may feel that they will suffer greater pain and will be

in greater danger. Therefore, for women who feel this way, Rabbi Halevy believes that the husbands should be present in the delivery room since this is a matter bordering on pikuah nefesh, saving another person's life.

Is it ever appropriate to get drunk?

The Talmud (Megillah 7b) quotes Rava’s opinion that one must become drunk on Purim so as to be unable to tell the difference between “cursed be Haman” and “blessed be Mordecai.” But the same passage goes on to report that Rabba and Rav Zeira became so drunk on Purim that Rabba slaughtered Rav Zeira with a knife. The latter was revived only by a miracle. When Rabba invited Rav Zeira to a Purim celebration the following year, Rav Zeira wisely declined.

Some people read this passage but stop right after Rava’s opinion that one must become drunk on Purim. Others correctly read the entire passage and recognize that the anecdote is a blatant refutation of Rava. The Talmud’s lesson is: don’t get drunk; terrible things can happen if you become intoxicated.

Drunkenness is a shameful state. Maimonides (Hilkhot De’ot 5:3) states: “One who becomes intoxicated is a sinner and is despicable, and loses his wisdom. If he [a wise person] becomes drunk in the presence of common folk, he has thereby desecrated the Name.” In his section on the Laws of Holiday Rest (6:20), Maimonides rules: “When one eats, drinks and celebrates on a festival, he should not allow himself to become overly drawn to drinking wine, amusement and silliness…for drunkenness and excessive amusement and silliness are not rejoicing; they are frivolity and foolishness.”

Not only does drunkenness impair one’s judgment, it demeans a person in the eyes of others and in the eyes of God.

Should a frum Jew believe the sun goes around Earth if the Rambam says it does?

In his “Letter on Astrology,” Rambam taught a vital lesson: “A person should never cast reason behind, for the eyes are set in front—not in back.” He insisted

on the pursuit of truth. As a philosopher and scientist himself, Rambam brilliantly applied the best knowledge of his time to the understanding of Torah.

Our knowledge today has been dramatically enhanced by centuries of scientific advances. We now know that the earth orbits the sun, as do the other planets. We now know that the earth is a tiny planet in a vast galaxy, which itself is only one of many galaxies in the universe. There is no credible controversy over these facts. If Rambam were alive today, he would not cast his reason behind; he would embrace new knowledge with the alacrity of a brilliant mind.

I think Rambam would be deeply embarrassed by those who posit that the sun goes around the earth based on Rambam’s own writings. Such obscurantists lock themselves into medieval scientific thought rather than opening their minds to the ongoing advances in science. One of the great dangers for religion—and for human progress in general—is for people to cling to discredited theories and outdated knowledge. Those who cast reason behind, thereby cast truth behind. And Truth is the seal of the Almighty.