Rabbi M. Angel Replies to Questions from the Jewish Press

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Is it proper for one to be overly familiar and casual with his/her parents?

Jewish law and tradition emphasize the honor and respect due to parents. Being overly familiar and casual with parents e.g. calling them by their first names, is a breach in proper conduct.

When I grew up among the Sephardim of Seattle, it was expected that children would not only act respectfully to parents, but that we would be deferential to elders and teachers. The traditional societal structure encouraged a hierarchical system, where the younger generations were imbued with a sense of respect for the older generations. We were not “equals.”

As time has moved on, there has been an increasing societal pressure toward “egalitarianism,” where the traditional hierarchies have been challenged. We now find children addressing parents, teachers and elders by their first names. This isn’t only about names; it’s about an attitude: we are all basically equal, and no one has to defer to anyone else. While some loosening of the old hierarchical system has positive value, too much loosening leads to an erosion of respect for authority in general.

For a family—and society—to function optimally, it is vital for children and parents to enjoy positive and warm relationships. Austere and authoritarian parenting is not in the best interest of either parents or children. But neither is overly casual and informal parenting to be desired.

Maintaining a proper balance is not always easy…but it is the best way of fostering healthy families and a healthy society.

Is it proper for a husband/father or wife/mother to leave their family for an extended period of time (say, over a month)?

Ideally, parents and children should live happily and peacefully in harmonious households. Extended separations from family are generally not in the best interest of the parties involved.

But we don’t live in an ideal world, and various non-ideal situations arise that may necessitate separations from the family unit. It sometimes happens that one must travel on extended business trips in order to maintain family financial health. While it would be nice to earn a living without having to travel, not everyone can manage this.

In unfortunate cases of physical or emotional abuse, it may be necessary for the victim to separate from the abuser until the situation can be ameliorated. Separation in extreme cases is not only proper, but absolutely necessary.

It is best to follow the advice of Hillel, as recorded in the Pirkei Avot: Don’t judge others until you find yourself in their same situation.

Is it proper to give an aliya to one who has a seiruv issued against them by a reputable beit din?

And generally how should one interact with such a person?

When issued a summons by a reputable beth din, one is obligated to show up. If the beth din ultimately issues a seiruv, the person should face communal disapproval unless there is good reason behind the refusal to appear. Each case needs to be evaluated on its own merits.

When it comes to the area of gittin, a “get” should never be used as a bargaining chip. Once a marriage has broken up, both husband and wife must arrange for a “get” promptly. Their issues of contention over children or property should be settled in a beth din or civil court.

A man who is summoned by a reputable beth din to issue a “get” must comply. If he refuses and the beth din issues a “seiruv,” the man should be treated as though in “herem.” He certainly should not be given an Aliyah or any communal honor. In my view, he should not even be allowed into a synagogue. He should be shunned in business and avoided socially.

It is especially painful to learn of men who attempt to extort money from their wife or her family before agreeing to give a “get.” Such reprehensible behavior not only reflects on the corrupt nature of the man, but casts discredit on the halakhic system that allows or tolerates such corruption.

The “agunah” problem could be ameliorated if all couples are required to sign a binding pre-nuptial agreement that stipulates that both parties will agree to a “get” if, Heaven forbid, the marriage ends in divorce. A recalcitrant party will face heavy and expensive penalties. There are halakhically approved pre-nuptial agreements available from the Rabbinical Council of America and other responsible rabbinic groups.

If you have children of marriageable age, please make sure they insist on a pre-nuptial agreement before their wedding. Much suffering could be avoided if proper precautions are taken early.

Is it proper to spend time on social media?

Assuming we live to age 90 and sleep an average of 8 hours per night, we spend 30 years of our lives asleep. We spend many additional years at work; and other years on our basic bodily needs, waiting on lines, shopping, going to the doctor

and dentist, dealing with illness etc. If we spend one hour a day watching television or on social media, that’s another 1/24th of our lives gone.

Time is our most precious commodity. It is limited and irreplaceable. If we keep this in mind, we will be very careful in how we utilize the time that the Almighty grants us.

Having said this, it is important for each person to decide for him/herself how much time to devote to social media. In many cases, people use social media to stay in touch with family and friends who live far from each other. Without this means of communication, these relationships would suffer. In other cases, people turn to social media to keep up with news, communal events, and items of general interest.

While each person should not squander precious time by overusing social media, neither should anyone decide what is or isn’t proper for anyone else. Each person has the right—and responsibility—to use his and her time in the way that seems best in their personal judgment.