Forgiveness, Piety, Tolerance: Rabbi M. Angel Responds to Questions from the Jewish Press

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Is it proper to tell someone you forgive them if you don't mean it?

In his “Laws of Repentance,” (2:10), Rambam writes: “When a sinner asks forgiveness, one should grant it with a full heart and willing soul. Even if the other has sinned greatly against him and caused him much anguish, he should not take revenge or bear a grudge.”

Rambam expects a lot of us! How can we forgive someone with a full heart when that person has wronged us grievously? How can we be expected to act in such a lofty, saintly manner?

The answer is: when we harbor grudges, we infect ourselves with negative emotions. We are expected to offer forgiveness not only for the sake of the sinner—but for our own sakes. If a person has the courage to apologize to us and admit past sins against us, we now have an opportunity to rid ourselves of negative, self-destructive feelings.

What if we cannot reach this high level of forgiving? Then we should forgive anyway, even if not sincerely. At least this is a step toward reconciliation with the offender. And it is also a step toward self-purification.

Is it good to fill one's sentences with "baruch Hashem," 'iyH," and "bli neder." How about when talking with non Jews?

Genuinely religious people feel the presence of Hashem. They naturally and spontaneously offer blessings. They know that future plans are contingent on the will of Hashem. They often use such phrases as barukh Hashem or im yirtseh Hashem…and these are sincere expressions of a religiously sensitive person.

If these phrases are used “for show” or to impress others with one’s religiosity, then these phrases are counterfeit. Instead of reflecting genuine piety, they reflect hypocrisy.

Whether speaking with a Jew or non-Jew, one should use such phrases carefully and appropriately. One should neither flaunt one’s piety nor be ashamed to mention blessing and gratitude to the Almighty.

We learn from religious role models. My grandfather Marco Romey, of blessed memory, used to say “bendicho el Dio” (Ladino for barukh Hashem) on many occasions. When he said it, though, he tended to pause a moment so that the words were said with concentration, not merely mumbled as a formula. He set a good example that all of us would do well to follow.

Should parents encourage children to be tolerant of opposing political opinions?

Parents “encourage” their children to be tolerant and respectful by setting the example themselves. Children learn more from their parents’ behavior than from their preachments.

Unfortunately, we face growing divisions within society. The level of vitriol and outright hatred has risen dramatically in recent years. There is a tendency to stick to one’s own views, political or otherwise, and not give careful attention to those who differ. Instead of thoughtful discussion and dialogue, we too often are confronted with hostile shouting and name-calling.

Those who foster extreme divisiveness are part of the problem; we should strive for ourselves and our children to be part of the solution. The issue isn’t merely tolerance of opposing opinions, but actually listening to what the opponents are

saying. If they have any truth on their side, admit it. If they are wrong, then refute their positions respectfully.

Some people are so opinionated, it’s not possible to discuss things with them in a calm way. So it’s best to articulate one’s own views without wasting time in useless arguing.

We want our children and grandchildren to grow into responsible, thinking and respectful citizens. Don’t preach at them: set the proper example.