Video Games; Luxury Cars; Talking in Synagogue: Rabbi M. Angel Responds to Questions from the Jewish Press

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Is it proper to play video games? What about young children?

A recent survey found that respondents spent an average of 16.5 hours per week with video games. While the numbers were high for children, especially teens, the numbers were also surprisingly high for adults. Three-quarters of those aged 44-64 reported that they spent about 16 hours per week on video games.

While it is fine to spend some time on amusements such as video games, it is difficult to avoid overdoing it. Those who play these games often become “addicted” and keep playing one game after the other. Time flies by.

If one wishes to play video games, or to allow children to play, one needs to be quite disciplined. First, one needs to decide what games are proper and which are not. Then, one needs to fix time limits and stick to them. More importantly, one needs to calculate risk/benefits of playing video games altogether. Is the recreational benefit I or my children gain from these games greater than the risk of wasting an inordinate amount of time that could be spent on more constructive things?

Within careful limits, video games can provide recreational value for children and adults. It is important to establish proper limits…and keep to them.

Is it proper to buy an expensive luxury car?

The question goes beyond expensive luxury cars, but relates to the general category of conspicuous consumption. Should people live in huge mansions, wear expensive jewelry, have multi-million dollar summer homes etc.?

On one level, people can buy whatever they can properly afford. On the other hand, no one should feel the need to go into debt in order to buy luxuries beyond their means.

Some people buy luxury cars/homes/jewelry because they see these things as signs of “success.” They wish to impress others with their wealth. It’s a classic stereotype of the “newly rich” that they want to flaunt their riches. It’s not so much the luxuries that they want—they want public recognition. While some may be impressed with such ostentatious displays, others will see these things as highly pretentious and vain.

Our religious traditions stress modesty, moderation, humility. These are values that promote inner strength and self-reliance…the ability to stay true to oneself without seeking to call undue attention to oneself, without needing to show off to others.

The things we buy—cars, homes, clothing, jewelry etc.—are reflections of who we are. When we make our choices, we should make them wisely.

Is it proper to stop someone from talking during davening?

Who would be so brazen as to come to a place of worship…and engage in chattering? How could anyone, with even the tiniest sense of reverence, profane the holiness of a synagogue with idle talk? Surely, observant Jews fully understand that the synagogue is a place of kedushah, a place of prayer to the Ribbono Shel Olam.

Surely.

The problem is that in spite of what I just wrote, synagogues and minyanim often are places where people do indeed chatter. They talk with friends and seat-mates. They discuss the latest news in business, sports, current events, shul politics. They socialize.

But what if you really want to pray with full heart and concentration? And you can’t pray properly because the person next to you or behind you is talking.

If you chastise the talker, he/she gets angry or annoyed. If you give a “be quiet” signal, he/she thinks you’re being rude or self-righteous.

You complain to the rabbi, who makes an announcement for people to refrain from talking during services. And the people keep talking.

You have a sign placed on the eastern wall: “If you come to shul to talk, where do you go to pray?” People smile…and keep talking.

Obviously, people come to synagogue not only to pray…but to socialize.

Yes, if someone is talking during services, you should signal your disapproval. If you were at the opera or theater, wouldn’t you hush chatterers who were ruining the experience for you and everyone else?

Perhaps all synagogues should have a separate room for chatting. In the sanctuary, no extraneous talking allowed: if you wish to socialize, please do so in the adjoining room where you won’t be disturbing fellow congregants…and won’t be offending the Almighty.