Modesty at the Beach, Respect for Elders, Adoptions, Rosh Hashana Customs--Rabbi M. Angel Responds to Questions from the Jewish Press

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Is it proper to go to a pool, beach, or boardwalk where both secular women and men are in bathing suits that are not tznius?

Each person must take responsibility for his/her moral life. We live in a society where many men and women dress and act immodestly. This is true not only at the beach, but almost everywhere in public. Whether walking down the street or shopping in stores, one is likely to run into people who are dressed very far from proper standards of modesty. We necessarily must develop inner moral resources that enable us to block out unwanted distractions.

Religiously observant people will try to avoid situations that will lead to improper thoughts or feelings. Different people have different thresholds for what they can or cannot tolerate.

It isn't uncommon for religious young people to go on "shiduch dates" walking on the boardwalk at various ocean beaches. There are many non-tseniut people on the beach and the boardwalk…but these couples concentrate on their own conversations and are oblivious to the non-tseniut people. This is true of other religious people who enjoy a healthy walk on the boardwalk and do not get distracted by the presence of non-tseniut individuals.

While it isn't proper to put ourselves in temptation's way, it's also not proper to restrict our lives unnecessarily. Each person must know where best to draw the line when it comes to his/her decisions.

Is it proper for children to call their parent's friends or other adults by their first names?

In traditional hierarchical societies, children are taught to respect their elders. Children defer to the authority of adults. They do not exhibit undue familiarity by calling elders by first name. Such behavior is considered to be very bad manners. Calling someone by first name assumes an equality of status.

When I grew up, we never referred to elders by first name—even if they were close friends of our parents. We would call them "uncle" or "aunty" or just not call them by name at all. It would have been unthinkable to call an adult by first name.

But those days of my childhood are long gone. General society has moved away from the traditional hierarchical model. Children grow up thinking that it's fine to call everyone by first name…even their teachers, and sometimes even their own parents. While I bristle at these things, I also realize that society has become increasingly "egalitarian" where everyone feels entitled to equal treatment and equal respect.

I personally believe society is better served when children learn to refer to elders respectfully, not by first names. There should be social boundary lines between children and adults.

However, it is ultimately up to parents to teach their children proper behavior. In some circles, people feel that it's fine for children to call elders by first name. They think that a more egalitarian spirit should prevail in relationships between children and adults.

While we each have our own opinions on the topic, it is really up to each family to determine what is most appropriate for them.

Is it proper to adopt if you have biological children?

Each situation requires its own analysis.

As a general rule, it is a great mitzvah to adopt an orphan and provide a loving home. If a couple has children of their own, it is all the more praiseworthy for them to extend their love to a child not of their own. Before making such a significant decision, the couple obviously has to consider many things relating to family dynamics, finances etc.

The question becomes more complicated when there are childless couples eager to adopt…but when there are very few children available for adoption. In such cases, it would be proper to give precedence to childless couples. But even here, it would have to be determined what would be in the best interest of the child that is to be adopted.

Whether or not couples have biological children of their own, the decision to adopt is not simple. The overriding concern should be for the welfare of the children who are to be adopted.

Is it proper to use new *Simanim* on Rosh Hashana?

The Talmud records the opinion of Abayyei: "Since you hold that symbols are meaningful, everyone should make it a habit of eating the following on the New Year: black-eyed peas, leeks, beets, and dates." It is told that when the Babylonian scholar Hai Gaon left the synagogue on Rosh Hashanah, his students brought him a basket filled with different fruits over which he recited blessings and biblical verses.

Sephardim still follow this practice, generally before the evening meals of Rosh Hashana. Before tasting each item, a passage beginning with the words "yehi ratson" is recited, along with the appropriate blessing. This ceremony generally features delicious foods including dates, pomegranates, apple dipped in honey or sugar, pumpkin turnovers, leek patties, beets, black eyed peas. There also is a "yehi ratson" said over the head of a fish or lamb. Some Sephardim make a "soup of seven

vegetables” that includes symbolic foods for a happy, peaceful and prosperous New Year.

Is it proper to add additional simanim? For us Sephardim, we already have plenty on our plates! Most others also have symbolic foods for the occasion, including apples dipped in honey. If they wish to add appropriate simanim that add joy to the occasion, why not?

The “yehi ratson” passages and the symbolic foods are a happy way to inaugurate the New Year. We pray that all of us, and all Israel, are blessed with a happy, healthy New Year. Tizku leShanim Rabbot, Shalom al Yisrael.