Discussing Politics on Shabbat; Military Service in America; Tuition/Day Camp Expenses: Rabbi Marc Angel Replies to Questions from the Jewish Press

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Rabbi Marc D. Angel is Director of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

Is it appropriate to discuss politics at the Shabbos table?

Response of Rabbi Marc D. Angel, Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals

Ideally, Shabbat should be sanctified by devoting ourselves to religious fulfillment. We are to avoid discussing business and other mundane matters. To engage in conversations/debates about politics would seem to be in the category of *divrei hol (*secular matters) that should be avoided at the Shabbat table.

However, political discussion often is interrelated with moral issues e.g. abortion, assistance to immigrants, anti-Semitism. Since we are deeply affected by the political process, we feel a need to discuss relevant issues, to gain new insights, to learn more details about projected laws. If such conversations are carried on in good faith as a means of exploring moral implications of various policies, then these are not strictly in the category of *divrei hol*.

The problem with talking politics in general—as well as on Shabbat—is that people may come to the discussion with strong opinions. Instead of useful conversation, the discussion becomes acrimonious. Arguments about this candidate or that candidate can quickly deteriorate into name-calling and other unpleasantness.

It is fine to discuss moral issues that are impacted by the political process, as long as the conversation is for the sake of gaining clarity and sharing views. But if discussing politics ends up being a shouting match, then this clearly crosses the line of what is appropriate on Shabbat (or any other time!).

Torah observant Jews need to understand political issues that impact on our religious way of life. We have the right and obligation to discuss relevant issues in a responsible way to clarify our thinking and determining how we can best promote the ideas and ideals for which we stand.

Should a parent encourage a child who wants to join the U.S. Army?

It has long been observed that parents must give their children roots…and wings. We want our children to be deeply attached to our traditions, our family's values and ideals. We also want them to grow into strong, healthy human beings who will live as responsible adults.

If a child has reached the age and maturity level where he/she wants to join the U.S. army, parents would want to know what has motivated this decision. Is it from idealism and patriotism? Is it due to peer pressure? Is it an escape from current life patterns? Has the child given full thought to how army service will impact on religious observance?

It is right and proper for parents to have candid discussions with a child who wants to join the army. It is important to listen to the child…and listen very carefully. It is important to share one's pride, concerns, and fears. But ultimately, it is important to let the child make his/her own decision.

If after serious thought the child has decided to join the army, parents should be supportive. American military history includes many Jewish soldiers and officers who have served their country with distinction and courage. They have brought honor to

their families and to their country.

Grown children have the right and responsibility to make decisions that will impact their own lives. We pray that they will be faithful to their roots and family traditions; and that they will spread their own wings in ways that will bring blessing to themselves and others.

Is it proper to send your kids to sleepaway camp if they receive tuition assistance?

It is proper to be an honest, upstanding person, who provides as best as possible for the upbringing of one's children.

Parents are faced with many challenges in raising their families, including the enormous financial pressures relating to yeshiva/day school tuitions and the high cost of sleepaway camp. The ideal from a practical and religious point of view is to live within one's means. Children need to understand the possibilities—and limitations—of their parents' financial situation.

If parents are in fact financially unable to pay full tuition so that it's necessary to apply for financial aid, then they are not in a financial condition to afford sleepaway camp for their children. The children need to be given affordable options e.g. day camps, summer groups, summer school. Yes, there are social pressures to send kids to sleepaway camps—but parents and kids need to overcome these pressures and do what is financially appropriate for them.

There are cases, unfortunately, where people live well beyond their means but then apply for tuition assistance and expect charity dollars to cover the difference. Aside from being a morally and financially problematic practice, this is unfair to all others who struggle to pay full fare. When it becomes "normal" to evade full payment, then the whole system suffers. People falsify their financial records in order to let others defray tuition and/or camp costs.

It would be best if tuition and camp costs were kept at reasonable levels so that most people could actually afford to pay full fare without going deep into debt. It would also be best if everyone paid what they honestly can afford, and not apply for tuition or camp assistance unless absolutely necessary. If the day school/yeshiva/camp system could rely on everyone living up to the highest religious and financial standards, life would be better for all families…and for the entire system.