BETWEEN FRIENDS with ESTHER EtiQuette

Dear Esther,

I set my table formally every Friday night and Shabbos day. I have seen people lay out cutlery and glasses in many different ways. What is the "correct" way to set a table?

Elegant Elkie

Dear Elkie,

I doubt there is a "correct" way, as you put it, to set the table. My mother sets her table one way, my grandmother another. As long as your place settings look neat, consistent and clean, where you place your teaspoon (above the plate or beside the soup spoon) does not matter. Setting a table is a matter of personal style and preference. Make it your own!



Dear Esther,

My friend has a bad sheitel (wrong color and style, old, balding, dry; in a word: ugly). Is it okay to offer to help her spruce it up or to suggest she replace it with something better? In general I have a gift of knowing little improvements that can drastically change a person's look (for the better, of course!). Sometimes all it takes is a better shaping of the eyebrows or going up a size in clothing. Is there a polite way to offer these suggestions?

The Fashion Police

Dear Police,

First of all, people only accept advice from those who truly care about them, so don't go around policing acquaintances.

When it comes to family and close friends, it's all in the way you say something. You said you have the gift of a good eye. Does it trickle down to your tongue? Here are some tips for the "gift of gab."

1. Start with a compliment. Instead of saying, "Honey, your eyebrows could use some help," say, "You have such great eyebrows; do you get them done?" Then you can point out where your friend's eyebrow shaping went wrong, and make your suggestions.

2. Don't say, "I hope I'm not hurting your feelings" or, "I mean this in the kindest way." Those types of comments are condescending and only make a person wonder, "Is she hurting my feelings?" If your tone is friendly and natural, you will not be offensive.

3. When you finish your mini-makeover, move into another conversation. Don't allow fashion or beauty advice to be the only words exchanged. Doing so would leave a person feeling like a pathetic project rather than a cared for friend.

Dear Esther,

What is the deal with regifting? Are there gifts that are off limits to pass on even if I never use them? Last year my sister-in-law bought me a headband that I would never (ever) adorn my sheitel with. I gifted it right on to my flamboyant friend who enjoys walking around town looking like she is about to take off. I was happy, my friend was happy and my sister-in-law saw red when she bumped into my feathered friend. I was in hot water with my sister-in-law for a long time. She was really offended that I passed on her gift. Was I wrong?

Straight Laced Lakey

Dear Lakey,

Regifting is okay to do with impersonal presents. Let me explain. When an out-of-town guest comes to stay at your house and brings you a present, that present was not picked especially for YOU. The out-of-town guest does not know you, and was definitely not walking up and down the aisles of Crate and Barrel picking just the bowl she thought you would like. That bowl is not a personal gift, it is a courteous gift and the giver would never know (or care) if you passed on the bowl for whatever reason (it is not your taste, you needed a gift and had no time to go to the store, etc.). The gift was a thank you and accomplished the purpose.

However, when someone personally close to you, like a sister-in-law, buys you a gift out of affection, the effort and consideration that goes into the purchase is half the gift. To pass it on makes the giver feel like her time, effort and display of friendship means little to you. Think about what happens when your child makes a picture for you. The picture may be terrible, but you hang it up because you appreciate the love that went into it. A gift from a loved one is similar. To publicly pass it on is to disregard the love that went into the purchase.

Dear Esther,

Living in Crown Heights, we have many opportunities to host guests for Shabbos and Yom Tov. While I enjoy having guests, sometimes it bothers me that many guests don't offer to help serve or clear the table, let alone bring a bottle of wine or flowers. I'm not sure how to address this. Should I just ignore their behavior or try to educate them on how to show their appreciation?

In addition, I have had several guests who linger for hours after the meals and get insulted when I give hints that it's time to go home. Even if I say I'm tired and bring them their coats they won't budge. What is the polite way to ask guests to leave? I'm hesitant to invite these guests again because of this issue.

A Harried Hostess

Dear Harried,

I don't think you need to educate your guests (at least not formally), nor ignore the behavior. Try asking your passive guests specific requests. For example, before you begin clearing, ask a few guests, "Would you please help me collect the soup bowls?"

I have a friend who is a pro at this. At the end of the meal she says to her (regular) guests, "Okay, folks. If we all pitch in, the cleanup will only take ten minutes." Everyone gets to work.

As for the lingerers, stop hinting! Be very direct and say, "Thank you all so much for coming. I'm exhausted and going to go to bed now. I know you understand. May I walk you to the door first?" My father-in-law's famous line is, "Please stay as long as you like, but you know where I'm going!" Most people don't want to hang out without the hosts.

Note to all guests:

When you are invited to a meal in someone's home, know that your host is spending all day cooking and preparing for you. It is proper to show appreciation with a gift. The gift can be small; it is the gesture that is significant. Some guests call on Friday and ask if there are any errands needed. At the meal, help out! Stand up and make yourself useful by serving, clearing, or helping to prepare the salad. Most hosts do not have a staff of waiters on hand to wine and dine you, so don't act like you're in a restaurant.

