OUT OF SIGHT, FRONT OF MIND

THE ADULT CHILD–PARENT/IN-LAW RELATIONSHIP

QUESTION:

Recently, my in-laws started giving unsolicited advice about how we're raising our children. They've criticized everything from our educational choices to how we discipline the kids. While I understand they may be offering guidance based on their own experiences, it's starting to make my wife and me feel like we're being judged. My wife doesn't want to upset her parents, but she's also feeling undermined. How can we respectfully handle these critiques and set boundaries without causing tension, especially when we don't feel that they fully understand our choices as a couple?

RABBI GRUEN RESPONDS:

I want to mainly address the couple writing this letter, but I'll preface my response by pointing out to parents what it looks like on the other end and how wrong it is for parents to give this kind of feeling to their children. As we discussed in other articles, there are smarter ways to deal with your children making poor choices.

Somebody recently shared with me that when he started marrying off his children, his *rav*, who's a well-known *gadol b'Yisrael* today, told him, "When it comes to married kids, just keep your mouth shut." He followed that advice, and *baruch Hashem*, he has a wonderful connection with his *eineklach* despite having had to bite his tongue many times over the years.

Now back to the questioner.

1. You're being judged. Now what?

You write that you're feeling judged and that your wife doesn't want to upset her parents. I'd venture to say that you're being judged; it's not just a feeling that you have. Generally, if someone is very critical of your choices and voicing it, then, yes, you're being judged. And it's normal for your wife to not want to upset her parents.

Nobody likes feeling judged. Hashem created us with a desire to find favor in others' eyes. This is for our benefit, although we often misuse this desire. A lot of the good that we do is because of the instinctive desire to find favor in people's eyes.

Chazal tell us that when somebody is doing something bad, they say, *"Halevai shelo yirani adam"*—nobody should see me doing the wrong thing. Hashem created social pressure, which helps us make the right choices. We ask every day, *"V'nimtza chein...b'einei Elokim v'adam."* Wanting to find favor is a good thing.

On the other hand, when we're only concerned with our image, it can cause us to do the wrong things. We're supposed to want to find favor in the right people's eyes and for the right reasons, not to look to find favor in the wrong people's eyes.

It's normal for married children to want to impress their parents. Parents are people we look up to; we appreciate it when they like what we're doing and when they think highly of us. Here too, finding favor in their eyes when it's by doing what's right is a great desire, one we should fulfill.

So whenever you feel judged and don't want to upset someone, think: *Is this person somebody I should be looking to impress? Is the pressure that I'm feeling*



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pushing me to do what's right? Do they want me to do things that are good for me and my family or the opposite? Is this someone Hashem wants me to impress in this way? Or is it just my own ego, my need for nods of approval, that's driving my choices and feelings?

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Children who are looking for their parents' approval should contemplate with an honest, objective mindset: *Should I put aside my need for space and independence to meet these standards, or should I follow what feels right for me and my family even if it means going against those expectations?*

2. What changed?

The way to decide if this is something you should take seriously or not is to introspect and try to figure out where the criticism is coming from. Often, when people see a problem in a relationship, they get stuck on what's bothering them—in your case, the unsolicited advice—and they don't think about what brought it about.

You started off your letter with the word "recently." Now, it seems like you already have a few children, and perhaps it's only recently that your in-laws have been saying comments about how you're raising your children.

Nothing happens in a vacuum. If something changed, it's good to think about what may have caused the change. Maybe it's not just because they're judging you. It could be that your parents are criticizing your choices because things have changed lately.

Could it be that you started making certain choices, and that's when and why they started getting more critical? Maybe you were following a certain path that changed, and that's causing them to feel a little uneasy. Maybe there were certain mistakes you made that became more obvious to them.

It's very possible that none of the above are true; I'm just suggesting some ideas.

I've seen situations where couples have a certain idealism when they get married, and the marriage starts with a certain *mehalech*. They behave with humility and respect for their parents and what they were taught. As they get older, they get smarter, more arrogant, more self-sufficient, or more comfortable doing things they wouldn't have done previously. This happens subtly, and instead of noticing their own changes, all they notice is the fact that their parents are "mixing in."

It's not that it's right of parents to mix in, but sometimes it's a wake-up call that you're doing things differently and there's somebody watching. Like I mentioned earlier, Hashem gives us the need to impress others to keep us on track when we may be losing our way. Essentially, it's your parents who care about you and your family most.

Here's another idea to think about when you notice a change. Perhaps the cause is a shift in your relationship with them. Could it be that in the past you were more open with them, and they felt more in the loop? Maybe it's a certain attitude or line of communication that changed that's making them feel the need to meddle in your life to be a part of it.

This doesn't mean that you're wrong and they're right and you caused the trend of criticism. But once you understand what set off the recent development, you'll know how to change it back, or at least which critiques to take seriously or how to make things better going forward.

You may conclude that it's totally uncalled for and that your parents' lack of fulfillment or occupation or simply their old age is what's bringing about these unreasonable comments, and there are ways to deal with that too. But if you don't investigate, you may be missing something deeper.



3. Communicate effectively

One of the biggest keys to resolving almost anything is the power of communication that Hashem gave us.

Effective communication, especially in sensitive areas, starts with thinking: *What am I trying to communicate? Which point would I like to give over? What is (and what isn't) this person capable of hearing? How can I express myself in a way that will be taken well?*

Just by thinking about that, you'll often be able to figure out what to say.

In this situation, it may seem easiest to not communicate. Because you're feeling judged, you likely want to pull away and start communicating even less than before. That's usually a mistake that only makes things tougher.

Even those who decide to talk often make the mistake of debating and explaining their position. They try to prove why they're right, why they should be allowed to make their own decisions, and what the parents don't understand.

Not communicating and trying to win a debate are two things that probably won't solve your problem.

How about clarifying your position without justifying anything? For example, you might say, "Tatty, Mommy, I love hearing from you, and I know you mean our good. We made these choices after discussing the issue with our *da'as Torah*/mentor/*mechanech,* and that's why we're doing things this way. We feel that this is what we need to do for our child. We wish we could always do things in a way that you approve of, and we'd love it if you can respect our choices." Maybe hearing your confidence or the fact that you were guided by someone will help them understand it better.

Another thing you might want to communicate is how you feel. They might not realize that you're feeling put down and judged by what they're saying. Try telling them gently, "I'm sure you don't mean it, and I might be taking it the wrong way, but the comments you made are making us feel very judged."

Respectful and clear communication makes everyone feel somewhat better.

4. Keep calm and connected

Perhaps none of my first three points are relevant at all. Maybe nothing changed on your end, you're all good, and your parents are simply going through their own stresses and struggles, which are causing them to behave the way they do. And let's say you already tried communicating effectively with them to no avail; they get more irritated the more you try to communicate with them. Still...

When one set of parents is meddling, the first thing you want to do is make sure it doesn't get between the two of you. Your connection with your spouse is crucial.

It's too easy for outside factors like this to cause fighting between the husband and wife.

As I read your letter ("I understand..." "My wife doesn't want..." "She feels..."), my first thought was, *I hope this couple is together in this.*

I don't mean that you should join forces and fight your parents as a united front. It's an old mistake to think that unity is about sharing the enemy equally. It's about not letting anyone get between the two of you, ever.

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Being on your wife's page doesn't mean that you agree with everything she says or does or feels or thinks. If you have a different view—for example, you feel your in-laws are right in their criticism—you can get your own guidance on how to deal with that.

Sometimes, whether consciously or subconsciously, the very fact that it's her parents who are getting in the way is already something that gets between the couple, leading to unnecessary comments about them and about how much to care or please them.

And sometimes it's because they notice that they can wedge their way between a couple that parents try and get at least one of the two to agree with them and want to please them. When your in-laws realize that the two of you are on the same page, that you're respectful to each other, and that you're confident but respectful to them, they may just let you be.



Rabbi Shimon Gruen, author of the bestselling book *Get Along with Everyone*, consults and guides individuals in the areas of *shalom bayis* and *chinuch* through classes, workshops, teleconferences, and one-on-one counseling. He specializes in guiding and counseling based on a very deep understanding of personality assessment. Many of his classes can be found on TorahAnytime.com.

Are you on either side of the adult child-parent/in-law relationship? Feel free to share your thoughts by contacting Rabbi Gruen at rabbigruen@thevoiceoflakewood.com. Your correspondence will be kept anonymous and identifying details will be changed to protect your privacy.