OUT OF SIGHT, FRONT OF MIND

THE ADULT CHILD–PARENT/IN-LAW RELATIONSHIP

QUESTION:

An issue has arisen in our family with regard to the lack of support we feel from our parents. This isn't just speculation. There have been many individual conversations as well as all the siblings together discussing this topic in a solution-oriented fashion.

I'm one of the sons-in-law. At times, I can lend a certain objectivity. At other times, as a human, my personal emotions and baggage can unfortunately cloud and darken my perspective as well.

It needs to be stated that my in-laws did financially support almost all the couples at the onset of their marriages. There were many strings attached and controlling behavior that came along with this support.

In my opinion, there are many missed opportunities for the parents to give a small sense of support, for example, child and in-law birthdays. On the flip side, there are multiple reminders about our parents' birthdays, with set expectations and anticipatory disappointment.

This feeling of disappointment isn't spoken about to our parents, but it's a regularly surfacing perspective of the children and in-laws. At the end of the day, it is, of course, up to the parents how to spend their money, time, and efforts. Yet due to missed opportunities, old, unfulfilled promises, and regularly unmet societal norms and expectations, we, the children and in-laws, feel quite unsupported by our parents.

Most of us try to be flexible, but our parents continue to express the emotional effect their children's distance and inflexibility causes. They expect us to work around them, while we're all struggling with young children, building careers, and significant financial limitations.

We'd like our parents to make us feel that they're putting us first or at least as a high priority. Instead, we feel that our parents force us to work around them. Our parents continue to emphasize their demands. We, in turn, are left feeling unheard and almost dispensable except in the way our parents want.

Everyone can handle what they can handle, but there are facts. Our parents don't have children living at home anymore. They own a large home and have access to millions of dollars as well as a large annual income. They're self-employed and have greater flexibility than they admit.

It should also be noted that we, the children, really want things to be better. It seems each time our parents take a small step forward, they also take two giant steps back.

RABBI GRUEN RESPONDS:

I hear your story, and I feel for you. It isn't easy to feel taken advantage of without getting what you believe is coming to you. Since you're the one writing this letter, I assume you're open to hearing my feedback and advice, and I hope my thoughts will be helpful to you. So here goes:

1. Subjectivity and perspective

Every person will always see things from their subjective angle, and there's almost always a certain amount of accuracy to each perspective. However, each person focuses on how they're made to feel and what the situation means to them, which is automatically blinding. Even just being aware that we all have our subjectivity and that from another vantage point it looks different can defuse the stress of the situation to some extent.

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In your situation, what comes to mind is the Yiddish expression *"Ver es hat di me'ah hat di de'ah"*—whoever has the money has the say. The fact that this concept is often taken out of proportion, leading to resentment to the point that the recipients lose their interest in the money, doesn't change the reality. This is the attitude that Hashem implanted in the world, and it's something one must contend with, especially if the parents helped the children in the beginning of their marriage.

Although much time may have passed since those early days, along with its fair share of unfulfilled expectations, it seems they're still feeling this reality. Add the fact that essentially, there must always remain an element of appreciation just for the fact that your parents helped you back then, and they're naturally harping on this part of the equation more than their children.

Without entertaining right and wrong, simply acknowledging another perspective may help you deal with the current dynamics.

2. The dynamics of the parent-child relationship

Toxic, lopsided relationships, in which one side unrightfully takes advantage of and is less considerate of the other, do exist. However, when it comes to the parent-child relationship, it's important to remember that this relationship is naturally and inherently lopsided. When children are young, their parents nurture them without getting anything in return. That's totally fine; it's the default situation and the definition of *child-rearing*. If this is not enough to demand an ongoing appreciation thereafter, regardless of how things move ahead in the later stages, add the Torah perspective, which is that children must remember that parents don't owe anything to children and children always owe everything to parents. To see this relationship as others that should be built on an equal give-and-take is simply wrong.

It's sad when children feel taken advantage of and abused, yet it's important to realize that because parents are parents, things just have to make that much less sense. It's not about the money they give or promise; it's not about the help they offer; it's all about their superior position as parents. It doesn't have to be equal, and perhaps it should never be. When it comes to other lopsided relationships, it's a different story, and it's sometimes telling of how unhealthy things are and that it's time to make a change.

One needs *da'as Torah* to advise when they are obligated to keep on complying and taking orders from their parents even if they feel they "don't deserve it." There are situations where one will be guided that for the sake of their personal life and/or their obligation to their spouse and children, they can't continue the way things are. It's not about right and wrong, and certainly not something to debate with your parents about, it's simply what the Torah instructs one to do at any given time. It's extremely important, though, to remember that being respectful is a must at all times.

While in other relationships, giving in and working along with someone who's behaving unreasonably can be wrong and damaging, with parents, doing so is simply fulfilling the Torah obligation, which is tremendous. And if it brings side benefits, that's great.



RABBI SHIMON GRUEN
FACILITATED BY CHAVA BEER

3. Acceptance of reality

People often cling to unrealistic hopes that keep them harping on feeling hurt. They feel that the only way to have any relationship with the other person is by hoping that things will improve, because otherwise, there won't be anything left.

I write the above assuming you've tried to communicate with your parents in a calm and respectful manner and have not been successful. There might be room for improvement, but I write the following based on the assumption that there really isn't more to do, as is sometimes the case.

You may have reached a point where there's nothing for you to do other than accept the reality for what it is.

Surrendering and accepting a reality isn't hopelessness; it's being honest and working with what's reasonable instead of hoping for something that isn't. Sometimes, one is dealing with people who, unfortunately, are very self-absorbed or self-entitled and have very little people skills. However many attempts they make to better the situation, they don't see it going anywhere. If this is the case for you, perhaps it's time to accept the fact that while your relationship won't become the one you want it to become, it can still remain a civil and respectful one where you fulfill your obligations of being respectful to your parents/in-laws, even though you're giving up on a more meaningful relationshiop.

Sometimes, you could enjoy a mediocre relationship more when you accept and make the most of what it is instead of constantly trying for more and settling for even less. Interestingly, it's this acceptance that helps many relationships improve.

Remember: the One Who gave us the mitzvah of honoring our parents is the same One Who knows what's best for us. Doing our best to fulfill His commands will ultimately bring us happiness and *brachah* in this world and the next.

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4. Choosing between right and successful

I have no way of knowing whether your parents are actually as aggressive and manipulative as you make them sound. But being that such personalities do exist and it can take an awful lot of introspection for someone to realize how they come across, I think this is an opportunity for anyone reading this to stop and think.

Almost nobody sees themselves as egotistic or narcissistic, and people can generally justify their attitudes and positions, especially parents, who, as pointed out, are owed so much. Still, a general rule in relationships is to contemplate how other people might perceive your actions and behaviors. They may be wrong...but maybe not.

Sometimes, what you think looks reasonable and normal could come across to other people as manipulative and controlling. You might even be happy with the results of getting people to do things the way you wanted and not notice how resentful and uncomfortable they're left feeling.

We all want our children to love us, and at times it has nothing to do with being wrong or being obligated to do things differently. It's about what brings the love and connection we all ultimately want. If it's a choice between being right and successful, rather be smart and successful.



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.

