OUT OF SIGHT, FRONT OF MIND

THE ADULT CHILD–PARENT/IN-LAW RELATIONSHIP

QUESTION:

My parents have a real open house—people are always coming and going and kids drop by at all hours. Growing up, my grandparents lived nearby and were frequent visitors to my and my cousin's homes. We were one big happy family.

When I was still a *bachur*, one of my older brothers got married, and we quickly realized that his wife was very stiff. She couldn't handle all the comings and goings and wanted people to call her before visiting her house. I felt bad for my brother and also for my parents, who ended up with a strained relationship with her.

Then I got married, and my wife is a wonderful hostess, but she gets flustered by uninvited visits. I tried reassuring her that my parents aren't judgmental and they don't care how clean the house is, but she still gets really stressed. During the week it's not so bad and she usually handles it, but on Shabbos, my parents sometimes walk over while she's sleeping, and we sit together and have a good time. When she finds out, she gets upset. "How could you do that? How can you host when I'm not there?" she says.

I explain that I want a casual, warm relationship with my parents and that she shouldn't feel she has to host, but she asks me to wake her when they come.

Now, every Shabbos, she's tense, worried my parents will come, and if they do, she's even more tense. I keep telling her they don't care but it's important to my parents (and to me) that our relationship is open and connected. How do I handle this? Do I speak to my parents or my wife?

RABBI GRUEN RESPONDS:

1. *Two-way consideration*

Truthfully, I think this is more of a *shalom bayis* question than a parent-child one, but let's start with the parent-child aspect, which is our main objective in this column.

The common theme in many Upgrade articles is the idea of consideration: parents being considerate of children and children being considerate of parents. It's clear that this situation requires consideration on both ends.

We'll start with what I think is the more obvious side: parents should always be considerate of married children before visiting unexpectedly.

If you're a parent who's okay with having an open home, that's wonderful. But even if your family is used to this closeness, don't impose this visiting style on your children-in-law. It's important to realize that they come from different backgrounds and cultures, each with their own attitude and personality.

I don't mean to imply that these parents are inconsiderate. There are people who don't ask before visiting not because they're inconsiderate, but because they're more spontaneous people, as is the case here. But the parents do need to know: it's fine for you to be that way, yet you can't expect others to operate the same way.



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And don't assume that your daughter-in-law is okay with it because she and your son haven't said otherwise. Err on the side of caution. It almost never hurts to give notice before popping in.

It's on each of us to work on our own end and not on what the other person should be doing

Interestingly, erring on the side of caution also takes consideration. It doesn't mean that you say you'll come just because you might show up. Expecting someone who doesn't show up can be very upsetting to some people, and it sounds like this daughter-in-law would be bothered by this as well. She may have prepared a cake for the visit or given up a nap; she may be waiting for you.

We must be considerate about how others are feeling, what they expect, and what they appreciate.

At the same time, the daughter-in-law should be considerate of the parents' style and attitude and try to work with them as well as she can, even if unexpected visits to a less-than-perfect house irritate her. It so happens that usually, the pop-in kind of parents are the ones who care less about how the house looks and are in general lower-pressure people. But even if it weren't so, consideration is important.

To the daughter-in-law: we all have our own sizes of personal rubber bands which can stretch only a certain amount, but if at all possible, both for your in-laws' and for your husband's sake, try to stretch your rubber band just a little bit more to be understanding and accommodating of what's important to them and what they appreciate.

Consideration goes both ways. We should all be considerate of the people who care about us most. It's on each of us to work on our own end and not on what the other person should be doing.

2. Don't make it personal

Let's transition from the parent-child relationship to the husband-wife one, as this question connects the two. It's not uncommon for the relationship between parents and married children to affect *shalom bayis*.

While we discussed in the past how important it is for parents to never cause a strain on their children's marriage, it's on the couple as well to make sure the relationship with their parents isn't getting in their own way.

Every couple needs to learn that there are two ways to approach any stress, issue, or challenge: it can either be dealt with as an independent issue, or it can turn into a marriage issue. Problems can so easily roll over into the marriage and become what I call a "me-you" issue. *I want this, but you said that... Yeah, because you don't care, and last time I wanted, and then you did, and why when it's me not, and you always... Because you're not home enough... You never listen... You care more about your parents than about me...* (Sound familiar?)

A better way is to depersonalize the challenge and make sure that whenever you're talking about it, it's only about the issue as it is. Instead of creating stories about the problem, tackle the problem itself.

A conversation about the parents and when they come, how they come, the stress they cause, or whether they did or didn't notice the mess can quickly escalate. That's why it's so important for the couple in this scenario to make sure that his parents' visits never become a "me-you" issue. And the same is true for many of life's challenges: It's best to isolate and depersonalize the issue. Break it down and tackle it as a team.

It may not be easy to be so objective and technical when dealing with a challenging situation, but when you think about it objectively, is it all that complicated? Your wife gets stressed out about her



in-laws' visits, and you like when your parents come over. Okay, so far so good. This can be resolved by talking to your parents, by coming up with a schedule, by negotiating the details of hosting, or with another idea.

When you see it as an objective issue to solve together, there are so many possible solutions.

3. Solutions

One word that I get caught on is when people use the term "explain," when looking to resolve a conflict. Let me explain (pun intended) why I get stuck on this.

I hear it all the time. "How do I explain this to my teenager?" "Help me explain that to my wife." "I'm looking for the right way to explain to my employer that..."

"Did you try to explain this to them yet?"

"Oh, sure, a hundred times" is the most common answer.

So you're looking for the right explanation that's going to click, as if that's really what was missing. If you tried explaining something many times, I would assume that you said something sensible at least once.

Explaining to somebody why what they're feeling is wrong or why they should care less or respond differently is almost never helpful

Interpersonal challenges generally have nothing to do with logic and therefore won't be resolved with explanations. When people are aggravated, disturbed, hurt, or frustrated, it's emotional, not logical. Explaining to somebody why what they're feeling is wrong or why they should care less or respond differently is almost never helpful. Your explanation could be 100 percent correct, but you're using the wrong tool to resolve the issue.

Using logic and explanation to resolve an emotion is not only useless, it often aggravates things because now the other person feels more misunderstood and invalidated. And if your explanation is really good, they're probably feeling stupid too (something they won't admit but can sometimes project on you as *I know you think I'm stupid, unreasonable, stubborn, etc.*). The more explanations you come up with, the more defensive the person usually gets. Understand that the resistance is emotional.

You write that you tried explaining to your wife that your parents don't care how the house looks. It's reasonable to try explaining something once, just in case they're really missing something, or even twice. But if it's not going anywhere, drop it.

By the same token, I doubt you'll accomplish much by explaining to your parents why your wife feels the way she does either. People feel differently. They don't always understand each other's sensitivities. It's okay.

You can validate the feelings on both sides, and people will be more open to hearing your ideas and suggestions.

As an aside, talking about emotions versus logical reasoning, warm words might help ease the tension. For example, you can always tell your wife, "My parents said such nice things about you. They love coming here. They feel so welcome, and they so enjoy seeing the kids."

You asked who you should address, your parents or your wife. Once you drop the explanation piece, it may become easier to understand who you should speak to. You might want to share with your wife how you feel and how you'll appreciate if the two of you can come up with a feasible solution that works for both of you. Or you can choose to tell your parents that it would be appreciated if they gave advance notice before dropping in.

When you're trying to explain things, you look for the person who's being less reasonable to explain it to. When you're looking for solutions, you look for the person who's easier to work with and more receptive.

4. Yours, mine, ours

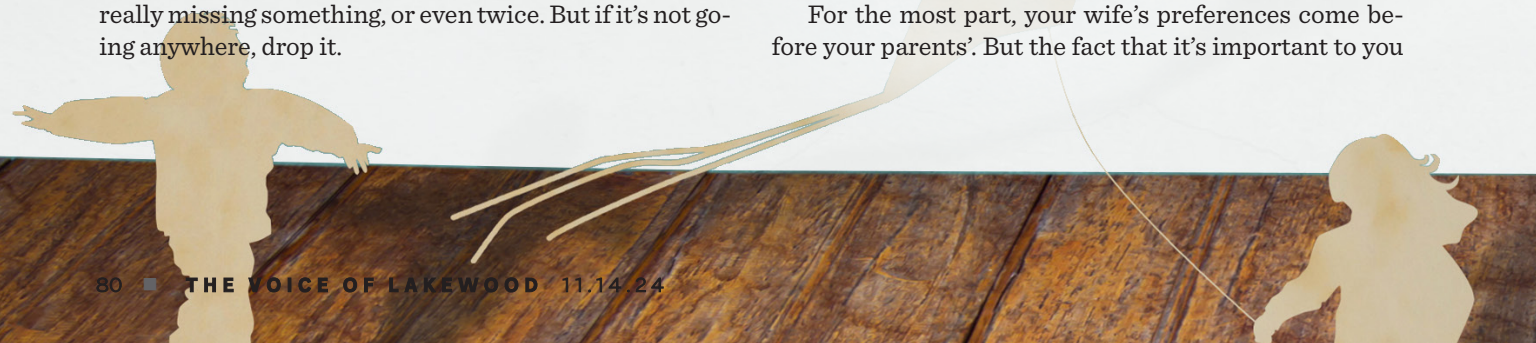
With this last point, I'm going to enter sensitive territory. At the risk of being called old-fashioned or formulaic, I'll share a structure that helps people navigate relationship issues. I elaborate on this approach in my book, *Get Along with Everyone*.

All issues in a relationship can be categorized as *mine*, *yours*, or *ours*. There are things that pertain to me, to you, and to both of us.

It's important for people to be very conscious of what belongs to the other person, where they're entitled to make their own choices, and where the couple should make a joint decision.

You write, "It's important to my parents (and to me) that our relationship is open and connected." The words in parenthesis are the clincher.

For the most part, your wife's preferences come before your parents'. But the fact that it's important to you



personally is very relevant. There's no reason you need to put that on the side. Hosting is something you want to do. It makes you feel good; it's what you feel is right. You're entitled to that feeling.

When it's about looking to please someone else, it looks like a competition. When it's for you, it's more understandable. You're entitled to want to be with your parents regardless of whether your wife wants to be woken up to prepare something. She has her preference, but as much as you want to please her, you're entitled to please yourself too. You can try your best to avoid her stress, but her feeling a certain way doesn't necessarily obligate you to do things accordingly.

If she isn't telling you that you can't connect with your parents and all she's asking is that you wake her up, that's fine. You may not like that she's tense, but her tension about this is her issue, not yours.

As long as nobody is controlling anyone else and telling the other person how they have to do something, it's all good. Sometimes, the more you try to solve a problem, the more credibility you're giving to the issue and the more it seems like you're obligated to resolve it.

Of course, there's the "ours" part, which is that you're hosting someone in a home that belongs to both of you. I don't think hosting your parents should be done completely on your own, especially in ways that impose on her. She should definitely be taken seriously, and a joint decision should be made. It's just that your preferences and wishes don't need to be shoved aside due to someone else wanting something else.

I hope these Shabbos-afternoon visits become more pleasurable for everyone soon.



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.

