OUT OF SIGHT, FRONT OF MIND

THE ADULT CHILD–PARENT/IN-LAW RELATIONSHIP

New message

To: rabbigruen@thevoiceoflakewood.com

Subject: personal experience

When it comes to the relationship between children and parents or parents-in-law, there's so much room for misunderstanding even when people truly mean well. Remember: getting insulted is a choice. Things will happen. People will say things. It's up to you to decide how to interpret each statement or action. Will you be insulted or hurt, or will you look at that comment or event with objectivity and accept the lesson it's supposed to teach you?

Many times, statements can be interpreted in two ways. Often, it just depends on who's saying it. When you realize that from certain people it can have a good meaning, you can give yourself that narrative—*this is what they meant, they meant no harm, they're concerned about me*, etc.

As a personal example: My mother-in-law told me that my *sheitel* could use some touch-ups. I was schmoozing with a friend after Shabbos and asked her what she thought about my latest *sheitel*, mentioning my mother-in-law's comment. Her reaction was, "That's so tactless! Aren't you insulted?"

That left me wondering: Why does it need to be taken that way? Why can't this statement be interpreted to mean that she would love for me to look my best? Does anything she says automatically need to be translated with a negative slant, as in "She thinks I'm a slob"? She just said my *sheitel* could be improved.

When I would call my grandmother to let her know of an upcoming mazel tov, she would inevitably ask when I found out the good news. If it was too long ago for her liking, she would say, "Oh, so you told me late!" That would be followed by, "When did you call your other grandmother? Was it before you called me?"

It's easy to get annoyed by these statements, but really, the above rule can be applied here as well. She can rejoice with the good news or dwell on the technical details of when and to whom it was delivered first. One can always find a reason to be upset.

One more point: Even when it's not an interpretation issue, you can be *dan l'kaf zechus*. It isn't about being extra holy, it's about making your life happier. If someone tells me something hurtful, I rationalize it in my head. *She's obviously upset about something, and I happened to have been the first person to cross her path. She definitely wasn't trying to hurt me. I know she loves me because she always looks out for me/helps me, etc. so it must be something else.*

I can assure you, it works.

Send



RABBI SHIMON GRUEN
FACILITATED BY CHAVA BEER

RABBI GRUEN'S TAKE

Letting go and choosing to view things positively is a recipe for better relationships and more happiness

Agree

HAPPINESS IS HOMEMADE

I'll begin where you ended. Your last point was well put; people who have a positive outlook on life and judge others favorably have a happier and higher-quality life. On the flip side, those who focus on the dark side and bear grudges suffer, sometimes needlessly. As the quote goes, "Resentment is like taking poison and hoping the other person will die."

If only people would overcome their bad feelings toward others, even just for selfish reasons, they would give themselves the gift of happiness, contentment, and peace. Let go of the buts, as in "but they shouldn't have," "but they're wrong," and "but how could they?"

Viewing others favorably is doing yourself the biggest favor.

A set of mechutanim weren't getting along because of their difference in opinion regarding an important decision for their married children. Mixing into their children's choice was wrong in and of itself, but on top of that, a tremendous fight exploded. Time passed, and the children made their decision. The mechutanim wanted to move on but claimed they couldn't do so without the help of a third party, in this case, a rav.

"What are you hoping the rav will do?" I asked.

"We want the rav to hear us out and say who's really right and who's wrong. We don't see how we can make peace if we don't iron this out."

How foolish. The decision had been made; who cared if you were right or wrong? Getting stuck on the principle of the matter, especially when it's irrelevant, is a waste of time and energy. Letting go and choosing to view things positively is a recipe for better relationships and more happiness. Isn't that what we all want?

This is certainly the case in the example you mentioned, where a comment could be interpreted in two ways. It's easier to stay positive when it isn't even clear that someone had ill intentions in the first place. For some, it's easier and more natural to judge favorably and take things in a positive manner, but even for those who find it difficult, offering someone the benefit of the doubt is often doing yourself the biggest favor. And yes, very often, people really didn't have negative intentions when they said something that was somewhat offensive, and it's up to you to take it as it was intended and perhaps even appreciate their love and concern for you rather than getting insulted due to the fabrications going on in your own mind.

Disagree

WORK ON YOURSELF, NOT OTHERS

You say that getting insulted is a choice. But is it really? Hashem wired people differently, and there are some people who are intrinsically more

sensitive than others, as discussed at length in my book *Get Along with Everyone*. With their personality package, these people have less of a choice about how insulted to get when demeaning words are thrown at them. If you're able to ride above your ego and view insults objectively, hats off to you. But to impose these standards on others isn't fair.

You successfully neutralized what could have been understood as an intruding comment. But judging your grandmother for not having the sense, ability, or emotional stability to do the same is wrong. I'm not saying that it's right of her to get all worked up by the late notification of your *simchah*, and the way she expressed it may have been out of bounds. Still, how can you judge her and think that she could have done better?

Don't get me wrong; this isn't a carte blanche for all those who become easily offended not to work on themselves and keep dwelling on the wrongs done to them. However, to those out there who have been blessed with the tools, wisdom, and ability to recover quickly or even not feel the sting of a biting comment, while you're certainly blessed and perhaps deserve credit for investing energy and self-work to get there , make sure to apply those standards to yourself only; don't look down at others who can't or don't do as you do.

Rule of thumb: We should judge others favorably and work on ourselves. We shouldn't expect others to judge us favorably and work on themselves.

In relationships and in life in general, it's not an even deal; we should have double standards. We should work on ourselves and at the same time try to make it easier on other people. Be super-sensitive to the feelings of others and take care not to hurt them, but when they hurt you, judge them favorably and forgive them for having wronged you.

This is what Dovid Hamelech said in Tehillim (112:5): "*Tov ish chonen u'malveh yechalkel devarav b'mishpat*— Praised is the man who is generous and lends (to others) while reserved and calculated (when it comes to himself)."

This reminds me of...

NO OFFENSE, BUT...

Anyone on the receiving end of a hurtful comment should definitely learn to judge favorably and interpret things correctly whenever possible. But this doesn't excuse anyone for saying something insensitive.

There are people who have a knack for making statements that have dual connotations. Since these statements can be interpreted both negatively and positively, they never assume responsibility for offending others. After all, "That's not what I meant!"

It's often up to the listener, the recipient of the hurtful comment, to detect the good that lies within the words

Hashem, who sees into the recesses of our hearts, knows our true intentions and will judge us accordingly, even when the words we spoke aren't overtly forbidden. One should never say these kinds of comments with the rationalization that people should be *dan l'kaf zechus*.

Parents of married children sometimes take the liberty of saying comments with the subconscious excuse of "Well, I'm a *bubby*/mommy, so I'm allowed to say this" or "I only meant your good; why would you take it the wrong way?"

It's very important to be honest with yourself and judge your comments both based on how someone else might take them and based on what you really mean. Often, we do mean to criticize and say less-than-pleasant things with the face-saving factor of having a ready line of defense, i.e., "I didn't mean it in a derogatory way."

Don't rely on the fact that something could be rationalized or explained better later. If your words can be understood in a negative light, keep the comment to yourself.

I would add...

FIND THE LOVE

While we're on the topic of properly interpreting or accepting comments or actions, a particular cringe-worthy incident rises to the surface of my mind.

When I was learning in yeshivah, I once sat at a *shiur* delivered by the *rosh yeshivah*. Among the *talmidim* sitting around the table were top-level learners, average *talmidim*, and weaker students who were drawn to the *rosh yeshivah*'s *shiurim* thanks to his warmth and charismatic personality.



There we were, in the middle of a *shiur*, when out of the blue, a 20-year-old *bachur* seated to the right of the *rosh yeshivah* planted a kiss on the *rosh yeshivah*'s cheek.

We were taken aback by this uncalled-for display of awkward "affection," which seemed highly inappropriate and completely off-key.

A split second after the initial gasp, without a flinch, the *rosh yeshivah* spontaneously smiled broadly and remarked, "He loves me."

By choosing to focus on the positive aspect of that awkward public kiss, the *rosh yeshivah* successfully diffused the tension. What amazed me most was how he pulled it off on the spot in such a natural, casual way. It goes to show how one can take something others would have totally misinterpreted. That lesson left an indelible impact.

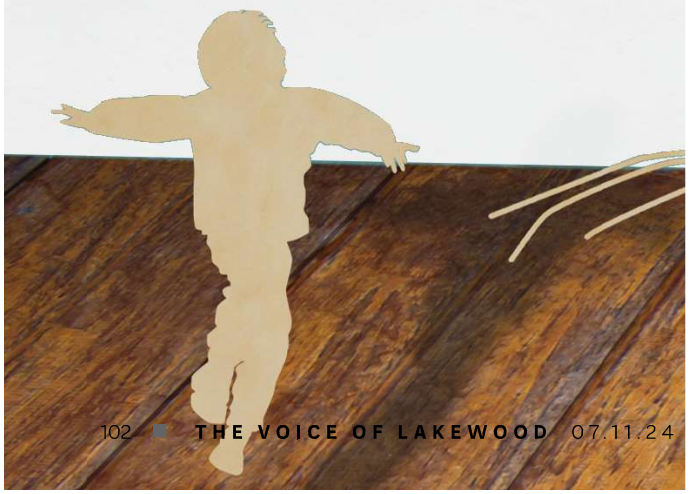
In general, when people say things, they usually don't have a single intention, whether negative or positive. Do they only mean to hurt us? No. Are they just trying to show how much they love and care about us? Perhaps that's not either 100 percent true. It's often up to the listener, the recipient of the hurtful comment, to detect the good that lies within the words.

Remember, by finding the love within a comment or action, you'll make a happier life for yourself and for those around you.



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.
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